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Oral History Project/Mary Fitzsimmons

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Mary Fitzsimmons was born 1925 in Bolivar, New York, there she had a normal childhood going to school and hanging out with friends. Mary went to a school that starts from kindergarten up until graduation. Mary received the best education she could have gotten and went off to Ohio State University. There she studied English as a major, with this major she did radio and news editing. Later on Mary married Michael Fitzsimmons and had three children, two boys and one girl.

Mary enjoyed her life both in Louisiana for 30 years and another 30 years in Crossfield, TN. Her and her husband both love Tennessee unfortunately Her husband Michael passed away due to illness but together they lived life side by side.

Student Interviewer's Name: Indira Strachan

Interviewee name: Mary Fitzsimmons

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions on Oct.27th, 2015 and Nov.4th, 2015 and lasted approximately two hours in total. It was conducted at Morning Pointe Assisted Living at Greenbrier Cove in Ooltewah, TN. Only Indira Strachan(interviewer) and Mary Fitzsimmons (interviewee) were present.

About Mary Fitzsimmons:

Mary Fitzsimmons was born in a small town named Bolivar, New York in 1925 and has spent her life living in two places; Louisiana as well as Crossfield, TN. She did not fight in WWII but she was able to experience some of the effects of war back in her small hometown. This interview covered topics ranging from life as a teenager in New York and rationing to growing old with her husband, and was conducted on November 4, 2015 at her home in Ooltewah, TN.

Interviewer: Indira Strachan(IS)

Interviewee: Mary Fitzsimmons (MF)

IS: When were you born?

MF: I was born on April 22nd 1925

IS: Where are you from?

MF: A small town of about 3,000 people in Bolivar, New York it is a little south of Buffalo, New York (trails off about the snow she played in and the seasons she did and did not like)

IS: Growing up in the 1920's what was it like?

MF: Well Bolivar, New York is on the Pennsylvania border and it was very prosperous because of the industry in oil which they rationed. Life was not as bad as many people may make it seem. We could go out and be out until ten o'clock and be perfectly safe playing and getting into trouble.

IS: Which war do you remember being a part of?

MF: I did not serve in the war at all but I was in my last year of high school about to leave for college during the war.

IS: Did you go to high school in Bolivar?

MF: Yes, my high school was the only school to go from kindergarten up to high school graduation, it was also called a central school.

IS: Was it a small high school?

MF: About 50 graduates or so, wonderful top grade education even during the depression.

IS: Which college did you attend during the war?

MF: I went to Ohio State in the city of Columbus

IS: Were there a lot of kids working at a young age?

MF: Well if they had to girls would mostly babysit, boys had more options like delivery, paper routes, or in a grocery store.

IS: Being from New York did you have many Immigrants move into your neighborhood?

MF: In my small town there were about four Italian families and one of my good friends Tony was Italian and also went to war when he had the chance.

IS: What did you do for fun as a teenager?

MF: Well at the time I would go to a Movie House and see Matinées on the weekends.

IS: Did you work during the war?

MF: During the war I was just a student that's all I did. I graduated in 1948 and by that time the war was over.

IS: When you graduated where did you work?

MF: I worked in a radio station in New York, It was WHDL and I was on the air every day. It was just chatter and entertainment for a half an hour. It wasn't much pay but I loved it and did it for three years.

IS: Did you work anywhere else after the radio station?

MF: Well I worked in a newsroom for 10 years, I was a general well round reporter. I loved that job too.

IS: Do you remember what the environment was like during the war?

MF: Well of course I was ending my senior year of high school and going to college so the environment I lived in men were either coming back from the war or leaving to serve in the war. In college there weren't many men on campus and while I was in high school boys were anxious to get out of school and sign up for the military.

IS: Did you have any siblings that went to war?

MF: No, I had two younger siblings and I am the oldest by the time the war ended they were just going into high school. I did have a cousin who was in WWII that I can remember. Coming from a small town there was just about six men that I knew personally that I grew up with who eventually died in war

IS: Did you know anyone who served in WWI?

MF: My father and his two brothers (her uncles) served in WWI and my father taught me many war songs that they would sing.

IS: Did many men talk about the experience of war?

MF: A little bit but not too much was said. One story I remember my uncle telling was him getting gassed by the Germans with mustard gas. That was the only war story I heard from my father many of them may have been kept because it was not talked about.

IS: You mentioned your dad would sing old war songs to you and your sisters, do you remember how it went?

MF: Oh yes, it is things you young people have never heard before. (begins to sing) *Pack up your troubles and your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile. While you oh Lucifer light your fag, c'mon boys that's the style. What's the use of worrying it never was worth the while, so pack up your troubles and your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile.*

IS: Did you make any contributions during WWII, for example rationing.

MF: In WWII the women in my small town would gather at a place called the American Legion Hall and they would roll bandages and other things for the military then they would send them off to a larger city where it would transported to the men in service. There were also blood drives once a month. Once in a while my mother and I would go down to the Hall and help roll bandages. In my small city the industry was mainly oil so that is what people rationed the most. Ration cards were given to help limit the oil(gasoline) used each month.

IS: In your home do you remember rationing any particular foods?

MF: Well, we tried to ration all foods but I remember sugar and meat being rationed the most as a little girl.

IS: How do you feel about the United States being in war? Were you ever scared thinking the U.S. might lose the war?

MF: At times I did wonder what would happen if we did lose the war but the war made little impact on me I didn't worry about it much. I felt like it was important for the U.S. to go to war but the constant worry of friends being in the war was scary.

IS: Was there advertisement before and during the war for recruitment of men.

MF: Oh yes I remember seeing lots of slogans, the most famous one I remember is Uncle Sam pointing his finger and saying "I want you". There were radio programs too playing patriotic songs and urging people to do their part in the war and join.

IS: What was the worst part of the war?

MF: Worrying if my good friends would come home was the worst part I believe. If you don't get letters it was a constant worry if they died or not.

IS: How often would you write letters to them or them write to you.

MF: Sporadic because the letters sent from the guys would sometimes take months to reach home. They called this mail "V" mail (victory mail).

IS: Were you able to write back to your friends in the war?

MF: Yes, but even if I didn't get a response I would send one every day because it was important for them to receive the letters and to hear good things.

IS: Do you remember the homecoming of any of your friends from the war?

MF: The ones that did come home it was like nothing had even happened, we sort of took off where we left before they went to war. No one talked about what happened in the war, I am sure they did that among fellow veterans but never with us.

IS: Would you say life was better before or after the war?

MF: Well of course life was better, because there was still recovery from the Depression but the war brought prosperity and after things settled down, postwar was better than prewar as I am sure many people would agree.

IS: Did you ever get married?

MF: Yes, after the war in 1953 I married an amazing man his name was Michael Fitzsimmons.

IS: How old were you when you and Michael got married?

MF: I was 27.

IS: Was it common for women to get married young?

MF: Not as young as you may think but 27 was considered old (for marriage) in my day.

IS: Did you have any children?

MF: I have two sons and one daughter. The oldest is Thomas, the second oldest is Patricia, and my youngest is Michael like his father.

IS: What made you move to Tennessee?

MF: It's a long story but after Michael and I married we both decided to stay in our hometown of New York and we bought a house in Bolivar. Then my husband was offered a job in Louisiana and we loved it there except for the kids of course. They were born in New York and like it there more. My husband and I loved it there but the climate was horrible. We stayed there for 30 years. Then we decided to shop around for another place and we heard so much about Crossfield, TN from our friends we decided to visit and ended up loving it we stayed for 30 years in Crossfield too. Michael got sick and we had sell the house and move to Ooltewah. We loved that house, Tennessee was the best move because its spring when spring actually comes. (Chuckles)