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Oral History - Mary Fitzsimmons

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

Student Interviewer's Name: Kimberly Robinson
Interviewee name Mary Fitzsimmons

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one informational preliminary interview and one official interview session on October 28, 2015 and November 2, 2015 and lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes in total. The interview was conducted in the assisted living facility, Morning Pointe, the current residence of Mary Fitzsimmons in Chattanooga, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Mary Fitzsimmons:

Mary Fitzsimmons was born in Bolivar, New York in 1925 and lived there for most of her life. Mary was growing up around time of World War II. Mary moved from Bolivar to Crossville, TN in 1993 with her husband. This interview covered topics ranging from rationing to everyday life events, and was conducted on November 2, 2014 at her current residence of Morning Pointe assisted living facility in Chattanooga, TN.

Interviewer: Kimberly Robinson (KR)

Interviewee: Mary Fitzsimmons (MF)

KR: What is your full name?

MF: Mary Sicilia Fitzsimmons

KR: Where were you born?

MF: I was born in Bolivar, New York which is south of Buffalo.

KR: When you were growing up were your parents married?

MF: Yes, they were married in 1923.

KR: Do you have siblings?

MF: Yes, two younger sisters. The second one was Patricia and the third and youngest was Jerry.

KR: Where you close with your siblings?

MF: Yes, in those days I think children were close to each other. There was nothing available like there is now as in television and Facebook and all of that. Your spare time activity was with each other playing, that was it. So,

looking back on it that made us closer than maybe siblings are today. Or maybe it's just in a different way, I don't know.

KR: Where were you living in 1941?

MF: In the same town my parent grew up in Bolivar and I grew up in Bolivar and my parents died in Bolivar.

KR: How old were you in 1941?

MF: I was born in 1925 so I guess I was 16 years old at the time.

KR: Describe the day you heard about the bombing at Pearl Harbor.

MF: My second youngest sister, Pat, and I were headed out the door on Sunday afternoon to go to the movie and on the way past the den my father was sitting in front of the radio and he yelled out at us and said, "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor." And it meant absolutely nothing to me and I said something like "oh" and we continued on our way to the movie. I can still remember how casual I was about that and how meaningless it was to a 16 year old.

KR: How was your reaction after getting back from the movies?

MF: When we got back home from the movie and my father and mother were trying to get everything they could from the radio, news reports of there was no television at that time. The radio was loud and clear so that's all that there was on the radio instead of usually on Sunday nights there were programs that the whole country listened to. Jack Benny and that kind of thing. But that particular Sunday night it was all Pearl Harbor news and President Roosevelt coming on the radio and so forth. I kept dwelling, not at all on the people who had suffered at Pearl Harbor, but I kept thinking of the boys I knew well who were my age and who would be graduating from high school in a year or two and I kept thinking that all of them would be going into the army. That was what hit me about Pearl Harbor, more than anything else to think that there were so many people I knew who faced the possibility of death in war.

KR: Did you know anyone personally or had any family member go to the war?

MF: That went to war? Oh, lots! In a small town you knew everybody. So every capable man was going to war and as close to me having no brothers was a cousin who immediately, after he graduated he went into what was called V12 at that time, the federal government sent eligible people to college to major in some kind of vocation that would eventually help the war effort. So my cousin was out into V12 in engineering and a couple of good friend enlisted because the thinking then was I you didn't enlist you were taken into the army as a private so lot of fellas including these two good friends immediately enlisted

in the Air Core so they could learn to fly because that was the reason they preferred to serve in the military as opposed to just the Army.

KR: Can you describe any stories you heard from the people you knew that came back from war?

MF: None of them talking about it when they had what we called Ferlo, when they came back all they wanted to do was drink, get drunk, and obviously forget about the military. And the last thing they wanted to do was talk about it. And you instinctively knew better than to question them so I know very little about what good friends went through during their actual service in the military, they just didn't talk.

KR: How did having people leave your community to join the war effort affect your community during and after the war?

MS: Oh no, there was very little because this is a small town of only 3,000 people, it was no Times Square, Hoopti do the war is over. It was just a quite acceptance that the war was over, we had gotten through it, and let's go on. And that was the way they handled it.

KR: Did your family, or anyone in your community experience rationing?

MF: Oh everybody was rationed, every single individual had a ration card and when you went to the grocery store, I would have one. My mother would have five ration cards for her family and that limited her to the amount of meat and sugar that she could buy. Those were the items I remember were rationed strictly. That to effect also immediately when the war started.

KR: Was there ever anything, during the war that you had a want for that you could not receive?

MF: Well, gasoline was rationed, you just didn't hop in the car and take a joy ride. Those days were over. You got so much gasoline which was strictly rationed. I don't remember suffering that much, in fact we didn't suffer. The primary suffering was the people who had people in service. And my mother and my father had no one in service.

KR: Do you recall hearing anything about the Germans during the war?

MF: There was lots of publicity about the camps and there were newspaper pictures of the camps and the gas chambers and the bodies and the bodies piled up and all of that. There were also a lot of people who simply did not believe that was going on, they thought it was publicity on the part of our government to show just how bad the Germans were. But most people were horrified by the concentration camps, and interestingly enough, Roosevelt

came out with, I guess you would call it a decree, a whole boat load at one point of Germans Jews came by boat into New York harbor, and Roosevelt made the boat turn around and return those Jews the Europe. I don't remember the end of the story, if they were sent back to Germany or if they stayed in a country like England, I simply don't. But I remember that even at 16 I was horrified to think that they turned those Jews back and what the might face if they got back, especially if they went to Germany.

KR: You mentioned that your community was relatively small, did you have any immigrants perhaps Germans living there?

MF: No, it was a typical New York state community, composed of people like my parents who either worked in the oil business or commuted 18 miles to larger industries.

KR: What type of jobs did your parents have during this time?

MF: My father and his two brothers who lived in town also had an oil lease, so they drilled for oil, produced oil and then it went through a pipeline to a refinery and in those days, that was a very good living and that is what the whole town did. Except for a few who commuted as I say to industries outside of town.

KR: Do you remember your mother working?

MF: No, in those days that was rare. Very few housewives and mothers worked. I don't remember any women that had a family that worked then.

KR: Did you know anyone who lose a loved one in the war?

MF: Yes, there were lots who went of to war that died. In that town it was the cream of the crop that died first. There was a student from Norte Dame who was an Air Force piolet who was killed. There was another student who had just gone into college, he was killed in the Navy. A classmate of mine in high school, enlisted before he graduated from high school and was killed on a ship in the Navy. For a small town, I could count of maybe 5 people who died in the war. Of course it was a small town.

KR: How different do you think your life would have been, had there not been World War II?

MF: I don't think I ever once thought of that. I can't describe it because it never entered my mind.

KR: Describe the day you heard the war was over.

MF: I was in college and I had the radio on for background music while I was studying and the dormitory room and it came on the radio that the war was over. I can remember feeling relieved and happy but it was almost pretty casual because there was no one with me and the dormitory was pretty empty so I sat there and though, "that's nice, I'm glad it's over." On with my life and so forth. There was no big "hoopti do" on that college campus because everyone was in class or studying. I went to Ohio State.

KR: Can you describe the transition of the moral after the war?

MF: Considering where I was, on college campus, in a very large university. And at that time there was only an enrollment of 12,000 which was very view for a state university. Very few men, and almost as soon as the war ended, pow! There were this whole number of men that appeared to go to school right out of the army. They came into the dining room of the dormitory for their meals and it was such an abrupt change from having all these women around and very few men to all of a sudden all of these men appeared. That was the biggest change for me.

KR: Can you describe the transition of rationing?

MF: I don't remember if it stopped completely or it rationing continued. I don't remember meals getting any better but of course I was in a college dorm so who knows. But the biggest thing I remember was a dish called Cream Hamburger. Which was the worst stuff I had ever ate in my life but that was what the dreamed up to do with a pile of hamburger and I am sure they did the best they could with rationing.

KR: Did you get a chance to talk with your family after the war was over?

MF: I would think I would have talked with my parents but I don't remember.

KR: How long after the war ended were you still in college?

MF: Well I went in 1943 and graduated in 1948 so about 3 years. I was about 21 or 22 years old.

KR: Have there been times where you have thought about anything we have talked about today?

MF: I haven't gone back in time in that respect at all except for one thing, I often remember the men who died, the boys who I knew, who left school and never came back. I do remember them quite often. Other parts of the war I don't think about.