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Oral History/ Betsy Babb

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Student Interviewer's Name: Natalia Peña
Interviewee name Betsy Babb

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session on November 3, 2015 and lasted approximately one and a half hours. It was conducted at Morning Pointe in the room of Betsy Babb in Ooltewah, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Betsy Babb:

Betsy Babb was born in Jackson, Tennessee in 1933 and has lived most of her life in Tennessee. She went to college to become a teacher, but had to drop out because she became ill. She then became a telephone operator and substitute teacher. She married Charles Babb in 1945. Together they had 3 sons. This interview covered Betsy's childhood during World War II, and was conducted on November 3, 2015 in her room at Morning Pointe in Ooltewah, TN.

Interviewer: Natalia Peña (NP)

Interviewee: Betsy Babb (BB)

NP: Let's start with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. What can you tell me about that?

BB: Well let's see, I was seven years old. Being seven it's hard to remember that far back. What is that sixty-six years ago? (Laughs) But uh, we always listened to the news and of course we always took the paper, I still take the paper because you can read in the paper what you don't hear on TV. You get editorials; you get letters to the editor that people write in information that sometimes you've never heard of. That's the reason I take the paper. The paper is silent. I read all the letters to the editor on Sunday. But, my grandfather was very patriotic. He was my daddy image because my father deserted me, that's who I looked to be the man in my life. That was one impact from him. We tried to learn everything we could about the war. You can't tell little children too much, it gets them sad. Until I got up to the fifth and sixth grade and we had current events more, that's when I really got into that war and we always had to bring in a current events we had heard on the radio. We didn't have TV, so it was a real different time; it was a time of darkness because everything was rationed during that war. Your coffee was rationed, your sugar was rationed, your shoes. You only got three pairs of shoes a year; a child only got three pairs of shoes a year.

NP: Where were you when you found out about Pearl Harbor?

BB: I was at home, it was a Sunday morning, we were eating breakfast and we had the radio on.

NP: How did your grandfather react?

BB: He left the table and went outside.

NP: What about your mother?

BB: Uh, I think she just told us this is something bad. This is what's happening to our country. 'Cause see my sister was only a year older. She said we'd be listening to the radio. At that age you just really don't understand it. I can't really remember. But we read the paper. They taught us. I learned to read before I ever went to school because you see my sister was a year ahead of me and she taught me to read. We still followed it and all of a sudden all the boys in our neighborhood, there were no young men there. They all were gone. Floyd was gone, Joe, both were in service. Marvin went to work in a defense plant and the cripple boy was the only one left. He ran the grocery store. He was the only young man around there. Other boys all through the community, I can't remember all of them, Curtis Young¹ died there.

NP: Tell me what happened to Curtis Young.

BB: They don't know how he died. One boy said he was standing there with some ice cream in his hand and then he looked and he was gone. That's the only person that ever told them anything and darling, he was just exploded in it. I don't know. They had a funeral for him when he finally got home. My grandfather and grandmother and mother, went to the funeral. I did not go. They kind of shielded us from going to sad things.

NP: Talk to me about the rations. Last time we talked you said you didn't even have gas.

BB: Uh uh. We couldn't even go to church. The board would not give us enough because we lived three miles from the church. They wouldn't give us money to go get gas to go to church. Jackson had a board they'd give my granddaddy enough money to go to town once a week and go to work. It was a tough time. But he would save enough. He'd figured out we'd have enough gas and we would go to the little local theatre and uh, we would go to the movies and I think he did that to get our minds off of what was happening. Then you would see the news of the war at that and uh, my mother would explain to us where that was and as we got older, then of course the war ended in 1945, so I was twelve years old and I had kind of remembered where those places were and then having that teacher, the European war, with the big map there.

NP: What movies did you watch?

BB: Oh there were a lot of them. Still on today! Uh, Clark Gable movies and uh, John Wayne I don't think was a movie actor right then, but Clark Gable and Robert Young. You know he had a show on TV years and years ago. Dana Andrews,

¹ Curtis Young was a young man from Betsy Babb's town

Lon McAllister was in, he was a young actor. Gary Cooper! All of his movies you'd like.

NP: What was your favorite? Do you remember having a favorite at that time?

BB: Ah, I've always liked musicals. I didn't like sad movies. Being a child. (Chuckles) We would go to the musicals and we walked, my sister and I. When we'd go with my granddaddy we'd finished our chores on the little farm and we'd go back. We'd go to the movies for twelve cents and they didn't even have a popcorn machine and were trying to get one and the war effort took them all to the servicemen. The did our boys right then though, I rather have the boys have it than us, now that I'm an adult and can think in that way. We'd go and there were no candy bars. There were no candy bars in the stores, because the sugar was rationed and didn't have that. My grandmother would give us a cookie if she'd made some cookies to carry into the movies. That's all you had. You worked. We weren't pampered children in that wartime like children are today. Children wouldn't go to a movie like that today, now would they? (Laughs)

NP: Before the movie were there cartoons?

BB: Oh yes you had the roadrunner. I loved the roadrunner! (Laughs) Daffy Duck, you know, Daffy Duck, Donald Duck. I can't remember all of 'em. Honey it was so many years ago. We always loved the roadrunner when they had that. They played before the movie and then on Saturday you could go to the movie and you could go to a double feature. If you went in at one you could stay till five. They had a double feature and it would be another older movie they would bring in, you know, play and we'd go sometime on Saturday afternoon in the summertime, but see we didn't have any gas to go anywhere! (Chuckles)

NP: How far was the movie theater?

BB: It was about two miles. We would go there. But you see he would save on gas every way he knew. And uh, so uh, we finally, they gave him a little, I guess towards the end of the war. I guess it was after the European war ended they gave him more gas and we got to go back to church. But we didn't get to go to church.

NP: You mentioned gas, shoes, and sugar were rationed. What else was rationed?

BB: Shoes, uh gasoline, some kinds of food were. I can't remember what all. There were no Coca-Colas. You didn't drink Coca-Cola the whole war. Now you could go to the drug store and they allowed them to do fountain drinks, a certain amount, Coke was a nickel. But we didn't buy Coca-Cola like I do. I got a whole bunch back here. I think about that a lot of times.

NP: Do you remember missing anything else?

BB: Uh, you missed the shoes because I was a fast growing child I grew tall. But you see my sister would hand me down her shoes and then uh, if she needed mine to get a new pair... (Trails off) You just worked with the system you had to. My aunt, when she left and went to Louisville, Kentucky she bought dress shoes, when she got flat shoes, she would wear them and I remember I wore a size six in the sixth grade and she would just mail us a box of shoes and people swapped out, when we outgrew our shoes, if there was someone else that needed them we would walk down the road and give it to them, because we knew, if they had a big family. I know my grandfather, he got three pairs a year and he bought work shoes and he could get buy with two pair and he would take his and give one of us to get shoes.

NP: Where did you go to get the shoes?

BB: Most of the time JC Penny's. You had to have your little coupon. You didn't dare lose 'em. (Laughs)

NP: They mailed you the coupons?

BB: They mailed the family the coupons. You applied every year. They'd send a thing out to you and you had to tell them how many and the sizes you know, so they know how you were progressing. The only blessing, a lot of people got jobs working at those boards doing things like that, mailing. You know 'cause we'd just gone through the Depression and kind of recovering from that, so it had a blessing that way. But I made it; we just went barefoot honey. We were country people (laughs) that's why I got a big old number nine now.

NP: How did your family react when they dropped the atom bomb? Where were you?

BB: We heard it on the radio when they dropped it on Hiroshima. I don't know how many Japanese people were killed. When I heard that I remember I thought, "I wish wars would end forever", and I was just twelve, and look at how many we've had since then. I thought, now that I'm an adult Natalia that had to be the hardest decision on Harry Truman's heart. See he had the final say to drop that bomb and don't you know his heart was heavy to know. But we had to win that war; it would've never ended and they've never dropped bombs like that since then.

NP: Did your mother or grandfather tell you anything about that? How they reacted.

BB: They just told us sometimes that it's necessary to win a war. My mother told me you'll read about other wars and you just have to do things to win the war and it did end the war.

NP: Do you remember talking about it in school?

BB: We talked about it in school. I was twelve. Our teacher told us that war is not good. Of course she followed her husband all the way through it. Everyday we'd

follow her husband, if he didn't move she'd say, "Chuck has not moved". She'd get a letter, you know we had to go by his letters, wasn't like he called her, he was over there. I was glad I had her for a teacher it made me have a greater respect for everybody who served in the war.

NP: Did your mother or grandmother do anything differently during the war? Or were they taken care of by your grandfather?

BB: No, they did things that people did in the community. I'm not sure what they did. I know they knitted socks and they would have the community things that they did, but you see not having any gas you couldn't ride to town to do things. You only could the necessary needs. You didn't have a paper with advertisements like we do today.

NP: Did you have a victory garden?

BB: We had victory stamps and I had a victory garden. I had one; my sister and I had a victory garden. We were eleven and twelve, I guess and you planted so when this ran out you planted to secure your food supply. We had planted the victory garden and the war ended in June so our garden was there. My granddaddy definitely helped us. He got to town and somehow got the seed and the onion bulbs and all the little stuff and we worked it. It was our job to work it. Charmaine and Buddy² had one across the street and we would go help them work their garden and they would come over and help us. We were real proud of that.

NP: Do you remember when the war ended was there an influx of women coming home from working?

BB: Well, most of the women out there did not work except in the mill or teach. But when it was over it was a glorious time. You could go get gas. We could buy our needs without it being rationed. I think it was about a month or two months before they got it all straightened out and you'd get a notification about what had happened, but as a child I didn't get to read the mail. My grandfather and grandmother read that.

NP: How did your family and town react when the war was over?

BB: My grandfather sat on the front porch and he cried. I remember it was the sweetest thing he and my grandmother. They had two big wrought iron chairs and they sat and they said we wont see Curtis coming home because you know when you live through something like that everybody else's child is your child.

NP: How did the town react?

² Charmaine and Buddy were Betsy Babb's neighbors

BB: We lived out in the country and you could hear those car horns from Jackson, Tennessee. (Laughs) My granddaddy was sitting on the porch and we went in for something and he said come out here girls, he called us girls, my mother and us too. We went out there and my grandmother came and you could hear the horns, they weren't real loud but then they started driving out in the country with what gas they had. I think they had planned that, in Jackson, to go out and tell the rural communities. Cars came by just blowing the horns and hollering you know. (Laughs) And everybody was so happy because we knew what it meant. There were still some people who would be sad, but a lot of people would be happy.

NP: Did the town have a parade when it's soldiers came home?

BB: Yes it did. I don't remember how long it was. I can't remember if we went or not. I really can't.

NP: Do you remember anything else that made you think, "Wow, the war is over"?

BB: Well, you could go to Christmas parades. I remember going to that because you could get people to pull floats. We did go to the Christmas parade. You didn't have any enjoyment hardly during that time. So we just played and played games and made do. And you couldn't go and visit relatives. You didn't have any way to do that. You could ride a train but how would you get to the train stations. Trains were very prominent during that time. That's how my aunt came back for Christmas.

NP: What about getting the popcorn machine back?

BB: They started it right after the war. It didn't take but a few months before they started releasing, a lot of the manufactures could sell them. I don't know if the government took charge or they just froze it, they could not sell anything that the service people could use and people were willing to give it up. I don't know whether people are willing to give that up today or not. I think most people are.

NP: After the war ended, what was the overall feeling?

BB: It was a total different atmosphere when we went to school that year. It was a little more freedom, you know. Even as a child it played on my heart a lot. They would show things when we went to the movies about the guys in the hospital so people back home could get an idea of what it was.

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Questions

Where were you when you first heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? How did your family react?

How were the rations? What was rationed? How did it work? What do you remember missing the most?

What did you do for enjoyment? How did you pass the time?

How did your family react when the atom bomb was dropped? Where were you when you first heard about the atom bomb dropping? Did you talk about it in school?

Did the women in your family work during the war? Did they do anything differently during the war?

How did the women in your family contribute to the war effort?

Did you have a victory garden and how was it?

When the war ended, was there an influx of women coming back home from working?

How did your family react when the war was over? How did the town react when the war was over?

How did the town celebrate the war being over? Did they have a parade for the returning soldiers?

What made you finally realize the war was finally over?

What was the overall feeling when the war was over?