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Ronald Mohr, A Reflection of the Great Depression, World War 2, The Korean War and their impact on society

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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Eden Garmon

Student Interviewers name: Eden Garmon

Interviewee name: Ronald Mohr

Time and Location of Interview: 2:30p.m, Chattanooga, TN

About Ron Mohr:

Ronald (Ron) Mohr was born in Lincoln, Nebraska on November 7th 1934. This interview covers his memories of the great depression, WW2, Vietnam, the Korean War and the hardships that these events brought about. It was conducted on October 20th 2016, at his home in Chattanooga, Tennessee with his wife Kay Mohr also present.

Interviewer: Eden Garmon (EG)

Interviewee: Ronald Mohr (RM)

Spouse of Interviewee: Kay Mohr (KM)

EG: Okay, so lets start with a little background, when were you born and where were you born?

RM: Well that's pretty easy, I was born on November the 7th which I thought was going to be on election day every year, every year that they had an election I thought it was going to be on my birthday, hot dog (chuckles), anyways I uh was born in Lincoln Nebraska which is where Union College is.. And uh..now (pauses) what else?

EG: What year?

RM: Uh, what year? 1934, that why I can remember some things from the depression because that was a long ago

EG: What did your parents do and how did that affect your upbringing?

RM: Well, the first thing I really remember was when they had purchased an old grocery store across from Union College and uh, it certainly was not a very big one, it had two checkouts, anyway, actually, yeah um I can remember when they first bought it how much cleaning up they had to do. They even had to wash down the walls of the place and my mother got into lot of extra work that way. My dad was involved in it too but you don't often think of the mother having to work going into an old store and scrub the walls and shelves. She used to always make sure I remembered that.

KM: (chuckles) She made sure he remembered a lot of things

RM: Yeah that's true. Anyway uh, I can remember very definitely remember, I was so glad because when they first bought the place and were first working in it I spent a lot of time up in the, well they call it the back room, the flight of stairs into kind a

small attic but I got to spend a lot of time there and one day they found out since the city library, city? Well, the building itself was about as big as this house but uh the city library and I got to spend a lot of time in the city library. The librarian and I were almost like family friends...always what else?

EG: Many stores went out of business during the depression, because your father owned a small business how was he affected when the great depression occurred?

RM: Well he, I don't remember when he first went into business I think it was the 30s, he spent a lot of time working, didn't have a whole lot of employees or anything. He had his brother for one, but his brother had to go to the army and he was just barley getting started on his being an owner type thing. It's hard for me to remember that much but we didn't have a lot of luxuries.

EG: Okay, what do you remember from the great depression era how was life and society in the late 30s early 40s?

RM: Well if it will tell you anything, I can remember during the latter years of the depression when we for Saturday night entrainment would go down to Lincoln and sit parked in front of Lincoln's biggest department store which was called Gold's of Nebraska and uh we watched other people shop, window shop. On Saturday nights they were closed and uh the people, we sat and watched the people and discussed all the things that they were doing in great detail, and I still like to go do that every now and then. Sometimes she even leaves me (looks at wife and chuckles) but uh yeah it was fun. We didn't have the money to spend because money was kinda hard to come by, for just about everybody. Mr. Gold the owner of the store, was a Jewish man and he had pretty good access to money and uh we always liked to think that maybe one day Mr. gold would, uh, change his mind his about things and do a lot more sharing with us. But other than that I can remember out in College View where we lived, watching the dust from the dust bowl days come blowing down the main street of our part of town. I never ever thought I'd be remembering watching all that dust blow down that main street, down through town, but now looking back at it I can say that was interesting. I got to see something a lot of people don't understand, I mean they talk about the dust bowl a lot and I saw it. My parents lived down in...my grandparents lived down in Kansas, and every now and then we go down there and as we traveled along the road I would think, hmm, boy all that dust blew away from down here because you could actually see how skinny the land looked, so to speak and I knew that people were doing without a lot of things. My grandfather was a barber, my mother's father was a barber there in college view and the haircuts, boy they were cheap compared to what we see now, and uh now I know why, after all prices of anything were not anything like they are now its because people just didn't have the money to buy things with. Except for the people who did their shopping without having to go window shopping. Anyway, uh, is there anything I can tell you about, oh yes. I can tell you about, we had a wonderful, oh what is that, what is that uh, park Mark and Mike use used to like to go to?

KM: Estes Park?

RM: No, no.

KM: In this area or in that area?

RM: The, all you have to say is park and they'll remember, its where they liked to go test out the rides and stuff, they have one in Atlanta and one in...(pauses)...

EG: Carowinds, was it Carowinds?

RM: No.

EG: Six Flags?

Six flags! I couldn't even think of Six Flags, brother, anyway our Six Flags of that day consisted of a place where people went roller skating, a place where they had little bumper cars, Oo I wanted to get in the bumper cars, and lets see what else did they have, oh a merry-go-rounds, yeah I used to love all that stuff. We never got to go very often but I loved it anyway. So next, then...well I will save that idea for somewhere along the rest of the talk.

EG: So growing up what kind of social issues do you remember happening especially because this was a big time when segregation was prevalent. Do you remember the effects of seeing that?

RM: Ok, the interesting part about this is, out where I was living we didn't know too much about segregation because there was hardly any black people living in the area and sure we'd hear it on the news and I would say on the TV but uh, back in those days I didn't see any TV, but uh...yeah I can remember a lot of... a lot of magazine articles and stuff like that and I remember listening to the news and one newscaster particularly his name was Edward R Murrow and I was so fascinated by the way he told things within the news because he made them so graphic, it was fun to listen to, even if it was bad stuff.

EG: We just listened to him in class the other day.

RM: Oh is that right? I really liked to listen to him, I thought he was about the best newscaster I'd heard. Anyway yeah...yeah there were hardly any problems, all the things we ever heard about were down here, bad things, good things, anything because we just didn't have any black people in the area to speak of.

EG: Did you ever hear Roosevelt's fireside chats on the radio?

RM: Uh, yes I did. Well I'll tell you what; at first I didn't like Roosevelt. But after some time of reflection I decided he was a pretty good man. I'm living on social security right now and uh...he was the one that started that.. I appreciated him. And I thought he was a smart man for doing those fireside chats, so.

EG: What stands out to you from the World War 2 era? And how old were you when it was occurring?

RM: Well I'll tell you I can remember as a kid this is back in, boy I almost tried to tell her what age I was, 19 whatever, but I'm not sure I can give you even the right date but war was going on I can remember the war starting and how surprised I was here we were going to fight the Japanese clear over in near their homeland not near ours and, uh, we had Pearl Harbor and all those wonderful things.

EG: Do you remember the day that you heard Pearl Harbor had happened? What was your reaction?

RM: Only the shock of it, lo and behold we had been bombed. I mean our biggest ship there in Pearl Harbor was under attack and the wave after wave of Japanese airplanes coming over and uh surprising. I can remember (lightly chuckles) in connection with the airplanes, I can remember we had a house that had a nice big tall elm tree a very bushy one and, uh, I, can remember I used to love to climb trees and garages and stuff like that and I'd jump out and I ended up being a veteran of those kind of things because I broke my heels, all because I wanted to be on the winning side. I had one place up in my big tree and I had the biggest and wildest imagination of flying an airplane up there in that tree because as far as I was concerned, was way off the ground and I would be flying, in fact I had a favorite airplane too, a P-48, they had Mustangs and they had Thunderbolts and that kind of things, but oh I loved that P48 I can imagine sitting in that tree flying a P-48 it had two engines and two tail rudders...but one main one the pilot was sitting in , anyway it had to be the thing I thought the best of . But I would sit up there and imagine all sorts of Japanese fighters coming towards us and how all the sudden I'd just dive off this way or dive off that way, I had a wild imagination and I shot down a lot of them, oh you'd never know how many of them I shot. In fact I don't think I had a real idea but I was still doing it, it was fun. Did I say fun (chuckles)? Anyway it uh, lasted long enough that I made a lot of flights up there in the tree, and like I said I used to read a lot of newspapers and I followed the news papers very carefully and listened to Edward Murrow carefully cause he was describing all the things happening. Besides that we were fighting in Europe come to think of it. And uh, it was easy to fight though cause I was up in that tree. What else do you have, would you like to know anything else about that time era?

EG: Yeah that'd be great.

RM: Okay, uh, I can remember very definitely, we had to get food stamps¹ and have to... Oh they had the draft bored and I kept wondering if my dad was going to get drafted. Well because he was the father of a small child and he was in business he didn't get drafted, but I'm not exactly sure why he didn't, but uh... I can remember following all those bad feelings about the draft. There were a lot of feelings about the draft cause there were a lot of young men who were drafted and killed. A lot of families that were broken hearted as a result of the whole situation. Now any... let me think if there's anything else I can give ya.... I said something about food stamps didn't I?

EG: Mmmh, you did.

RM: we had to go in and get food stamps I could never imagine having to get food stamps I couldn't imagine how and why but there was a shortage of a lot of things, a lot of things that uh, people over in Japan and China were raising like rice cotton, stuff like that. We were doing without so much of. And, times were just plain hard, a lot of emotion was mixed in with the things that went on and uh... I cant think of anything else right off hand that I could tell you. Oh yeah there, take it all back, the gasoline problem back then. I remember having to sit in a line to buy gasoline and I can also remember during that time in my life on one of those trips down to my grandparents, I saw gasoline at a price I wish we would begin to see now, 15 cents a gallon. And uh...it was fun to go into a gas station and see how much it would cost, 10 gallons a buck in a half, not anymore. Is there anything else I can think about? Not really, my memory must be getting short.

EG: How old were you when Vietnam happened?

RM: I was old enough that I was sure enough that I would be going to the war front with Vietnam. I was in a quartet in college and the second tenor, I was the first tenner, the second tenor, he was in the service and uh... because he and I were the same age I always wondered if I was going to be able to be in the service in fact I even thought I was going to be in the service and uh by that I had one little boy and so my wife and I had... Do you remember Fran Mohr?

EG: Uuhhm, I think I was too little to remember her.

KM: There's a picture of her on the wall (points to wall).

RM: Yeah that's her (pointing to the wall behind him) she was short and black haired and we were living here when your sister was here, stuff like that. Anyway, now I forgot what I was going to talk about.

KM: You were close to 30 when Vietnam happened.

¹ He is referring to ration booklets and not welfare

RM: Oh yeah she asked me that specifically, I was um, I was I would have been easily Mikes age...

KM: 30?

RM: No I was older than that. Vietnam was far enough along the road I was maybe 39 or 40, besides that I hate to admit my age. Anyway uh, yeah I thought sure I would be going though. Walked into the place where they give you your physical exam they went through all the stuff, checked me out carefully. I was afraid it would be too carefully, I was sure I was going to go. Fran and I would talk about well, we'll see if we can get put some certain area of the whole business. But uh... after all was said and done, I got a letter from the government that I was frankly afraid to open. And I got this letter and I open it up and my teeth fell out, they said 4F, we don't need you. And this was when I was living in Nashville, no not Nashville, I don't know. I was trying to relate that, well now that would have been during the Korean War... Anyway I've seen too many of them. Anyway, but uh when I didn't have to go man it made me feel more patriotic. So, now what else?

EG: What were your thoughts on Vietnam? That was a war that stirred up a lot of conflict here in the US. People had very strong feelings about it, what was your take on it?

RM: Well it involved communism but it involved people. And ever since I was a little guy, even though I was busy up in that tree shooting down zeros and stuff, even though I was a little guy, I had gotten to the place in life where I was thinking about people losing love ones, about war in general. Why in the world would people fight war? I mean they get upset about something why can't they settle it peacefully? I just couldn't figure it all out, I couldn't look at things, after all there were so many people who were injured physically and mentally by these wars. In fact, what'd I do with it (shuffles around) here it is, you'd almost think I planned on that. I get from an organization... from an organization in Wilton, New Hampshire from the paralyzed veterans of America. I uh... decided after I read the information they had have given to me, I decided I wanted to contribute to that because I realized there were a lot of people who are physically hurt who couldn't not do anything for themselves. But uh, here we were still fighting this war, we don't seem to ever give up fighting wars, but I didn't like war. There were a lot of people that didn't like war, I was surprised by the people that didn't seem to get into the headlines that often that didn't like the war period. But the war was an outstanding thing in a lot of minds. So we all had to live with it. Now anything else?

EG: What do you remember about the Korean War?

Actually it was uh, the war that was in-between and the uh... and I cant event think of it...

EG: Vietnam?

RM: Yeah Vietnam, it was the notable kind of fighting. There were little places, wars in places that didn't hit the newscast or newspapers or anything like that as strong as the Vietnam and Korean War. Just those other places involved more people for one thing. And they were all just a sad continuation of bad feelings ever since World War 2. So now, anything else along that line?

EG: Do any people stand out to you from World War 2, Vietnam or The Korean war that stood out to you, that maybe you would hear about on the news? Like Louis Zamperini, did you ever hear about him?

RM: I've heard the name, but I don't remember what the connection was with it.

EG: Mmmhm, okay well do you remember any other people that stood out to you or that were talked about?

RM: Now if you will let me go back to World War 2, sure there was Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin and Churchill and Roosevelt, uh Willkie even a man by the name of Willkie, he ran for president uhh I think... I've about run through them, oh McCarthy, you always heard about the good old general that said "I will return". Uhh mmm there's... I used to know a lot of the senators name but uh, not anymore their kinda going away.

EG: Okay back tracking a little bit to World War 2, what were your feelings about Hitler do you remember how you felt about hearing about the Holocaust?

RM: Okay Hitler for one thing was a strange man. I had heard, heard a lot of stories, quote on quote about him, about the fact he supposedly had been involved in Christian work, but uh that had to have been when he was just a little guy. Anyway he was so notorious about what he had done to the people in the Holocaust he and his generals I should say, of course Hitler was the one that wanted to do develop a perfect race, the Germans, he was very determined to build a big Germanic people and uh and then I remember Mussolini, going back to Italy he was kinda uh always, he always reminded me... or made me think of anyway, that he was kinda a slippery slimy kinda guy... he wasn't as big on the front as Hitler was and uh I dunno he never impressed me very much, turns out one of my uncles during World War 2 was fighting down in Italy and he'd come home with all sorts of stories and uh he was a tank driver and like I said lots of interesting stories he'd... I don't know how many of them he told were made up or how—I'd hate to think he was making them up but uh... I know how stories can get started. And lets see, I was trying to remember, I cant remember someth-oh I was going to remember about someone by the name of Joseph Stalin, pardon me (emphasizes accent) Joseph Stalin, his rise to power in Russia. See during World War 2 we and Russia well, we Great Britain and Russia were the main allied fronts and uh he we stayed with Truman, being a leader after

Roosevelt died, Truman and Stalin and Churchill would all get together and talk about things. And I just pictured them as being people in the government talking. And one day, while talking to a young fellow that was worker in my fathers grocery store, I was talking to him about the nature of the people, how the people were, the ordinary citizens were in France... Anyway in France and Germany or Austria, which became part of Germany anyway and uh Russia, I was quite surprised when I was talking to this young man he had come to the United States, he had come from Latvia a country you hardly hear about anymore. And uh I was talking to him...no no this wasn't the same fella, I was bout to tell you a story. I was about to put in another Latvian, I'll let you know, only I knew him at a different place. I knew him after I had gotten out of college and was teaching, in fact he was in the same car accident as I was in and he helped save my life and he was the one that told me though that and here's when we still thought Russia was on our side so to speak, he told me that they were afraid of the Germans because of the way Germans treated people but then he turned and said almost in the same sentence, but we hated the Russians because the Russians were even worse. And it was something I had never ever realized cause I had been listening and thinking to understand that uh... Russians were in the same group as us. So after talking to him a little bit about this I could see were he was coming from, how they were treated by the Russians and they were on the good side so to speak. So life took a quick turn for me in my thinking then, it helped me look at things through different eyes and I could see that the world is full of people who want to force other people into doing things and there not always good. So I gained a lot of outlook a better outlook on life just because of these factors, nowadays I don't even like to see the united states helping somebody but it seems practically an established fact that we have to help if we can maintain any kind of peace. So now, did I stray from the question? Okay anything else you wanna see If I can remember? I had some mixed feelings...

EG: Okay, mixed feelings?

RM: Yeah mixed feelings. My name is spelled M-o-h-r my last name, uh my grandparents both came here, were both born in Germany... lets put it that way, so I've got a little bit of German in me and, uh, even though they both were born in Germany, lived there for a little while...they both came to the US from a town in Russia and that also made me do a lot of wondering how exactly these two Germans end up coming from Russia and getting married over here. Anyway, it kinda gave me mixed feelings at times they're both Germans so I had to think of being proud of one side of my family, being the German part, besides that, there hasn't been a lot of famous Germans that uh.. did good things and I had mixed feelings a lot of times when I was up in that tree wondering hmmm, fighter jets, not fighter jets they didn't have those at that time but fighter planes, I was shooting down, I had mixed feelings the fact that I had a German background and yet I was an American. So it uh...imagine there were more than one bunch of people that felt like that, ended being mixed feelings. I forgot one thing, we talked about.. did we talk about the rationing?

EG: We talked about food stamps you didn't use the word rationing.

RM: That's right I didn't use the word rationing, rationing affected all of us, it sure seemed to. It left a stamp on all of us.

EG: What kind of things were rationed?

RM: Everything under the sun food, certain kinds of food were rationed.

KM: Sugar

RM: Sugar definitely and tires, they were hard to come by.

KM: Gasoline of course

RM: Oh yeah, gasoline.

EG: Was there anything that was a special treat when you did get it cause it was rationed so much?

RM: Well...yeah the capability of going down and seeing my grandparents, the gasoline part. I'll tell you what, gasoline and milk products were quite the things. I can remember when eggs were rationed; I think I'm remembering that right. Yeah that was one of the foods that I can remember a lot about...its been fun telling you all this.

EG: Its been fun listening! I love hearing all this stuff from someone saw it first when it happened. Now last question, if you could give one piece of advice to the President about our country in general what would it be?

RM: One piece of advice...Well, I would say look over the way presidents of the past have carried on their activities...(trails off)..