

Dr. Radke-Moss Women's Oral History Collection

Alice Hale - Life Experiences

By Alice Hale

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Oral Interview conducted by Monique Minetto

Transcribed by Monique Minetto

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Brigham Young University- Idaho

MM: I am Monique Minetto interviewing my grandmother Alice Hale on January 3, 2005 about her life and significant events pertaining to World War II. Let's start by introducing yourself to me.

AH: I was born in Horseshoe Bend, Idaho on August 6, 1916. I was the fourth of seven children. I had three older sisters and three younger brothers. When I was young we moved to Boise. I don't remember a lot about my early years, but I had some nice memories of Boise. I remember looking out the window and having snow banked up to the windowsills. I can remember crawling up into the apple tree with a salt shaker and eating green apples. But most of all I remember our Saturday night baths. Mom would bring out a big wash tub into the kitchen and set it in the middle of the room. She would have boilers of water bubbling on the old wood stove. Nell started the rotation. She would have the first bath. Then it was my turn, then after me, my two brothers. A little hot water would be added to the tub after each one stepped out.

MM: Nell was your sister?

AH: Yes. Nell was given to my parents as a newborn baby. Mom had given birth to a still born baby boy and a month later she was told of a woman who had a baby out of wedlock and wanted to give it away. Mom went to see the woman, and after a short visit she was given the baby. Since Nell was not legally adopted, my mother and father became concerned when her natural mother began writing letters to them expressing a desire to see Nell. Because of this, our family decided to move to Oakland, California.

MM: Did you stay in Oakland long?

AH: After about three months we moved to Taft, California. My mother had a sister, Millie, and a brother-in-law in Taft. My father found a good job on an oil lease as a Pumper. The lease was about twelve miles out of Taft, and five miles from a small oil town called Fellows.

MM: Tell me a little bit about your childhood after you moved to California.

<Interruption>

AH: Where were we?

MM: Childhood activities.

AH: Childhood activities were mostly things we could do at home or in a huge lot since we lived on the top of a hill on an oil company's piece. We furnished our home. We got water, heat, electricity, and gas were all furnished, plus gasoline for my father's car. We loved it out there. In those days we could wander all over the hills and my parents did not have to worry about us. It was lots of fun; I still have very good childhood memories. I had three brothers that I played with quite frequently. We played kick the can and rubber guns which were made from little strips of tires and my father would make wooden guns for us and we'd slip these pieces of tire over the gun and push them off one by one. So we had many fights with rubber guns. I enjoyed many hours working with my father out in the garage. We would make kites, wagons, anything that we

could ride up and down the hill, or especially down the hill where we fell off very many times and got skinned knees, but it was just lots of fun. I really have fond memories of my earlier days. The Depression sort of sneaked up on us a little bit. My father had his job, paid 210 dollars a month which was very good wages in those days. We had many of our relatives moving in and out because they were out of work and they would come live with us. So, but we didn't realize the Depression was as bad as it was because it didn't seem to affect us too much.

MM: Do you have any favorite memories you would like to share?

AH: We went to a school in a little town called Fellows, California, which was about five or six miles from our home and at that time it was surrounded by oil wells and considered one of the most...had the most money of any school in the United States because of the oil. We rode the bus to school every day and they brought us home. We had to walk a mile to get on the bus. When we graduated from grammar school, we went to high school in Taft, a town about 12 miles from where we lived. The bus picked us up at seven in the morning and we had to be at school by eight. We had a wonderful time in high school, it was just the greatest. Enjoying the football, basketball, all the sports the school had. My favorite memories were going down into the ravine down the hill from our home and taking spoons, or small blocks of wood, anything I could find, to make roads and the little canyon that was down below us. Other things I enjoyed was in the first part of June we would take a bottle and tramp over the hills and try to catch June bugs and see which one of us could catch those June bugs. Or just to sit and think when you were alone or with the others. It was very nice to be alone and be able to think although I was quite too young to think about anything that would be interesting.

MM: Would you say that high school and young adulthood is pretty much the same back then as it is now?

AH: No. We had more freedom then than kids do now. We would take knives to school and play games out in the lawn, I can't remember the name of it, but we would stick them in the grass. High school was simpler then, very simple. Well, I don't know the regulations now, but we could leave the grounds and go to town. It was very close to the school. We were in a very wealthy school because all the land was owned by the oil companies. Kids were not as rowdy then and they dressed neatly, not as kids do now like the boys with their pants hanging down, very sloppy. I went out for sports and I played ground hockey, basketball and volleyball, but my favorite was hockey.

MM: You sewed a lot right?

AH: Yes, from the time I was young I sewed on one of the first electric Singer sewing machines. I started making dolls out of clothespins and bottles and anything else I could find. I would get cigar boxes from a neighbor to hold the clothes and would play for hours dressing my dolls. I made a cousin a dress when I was in fifth grade. I took sewing in school and did a lot of sewing at home. I was making some of my own clothes by the time I was in the sixth grade. Sometimes I made shirts and pajamas for my brothers from sacks that cement or flour had come in. While raising my children I did a lot of sewing for other people as well as the children. I enjoyed that.

That was my favorite activity was the sewing part. It brought in quite a bit of extra money we needed badly, some spending money, besides that fact that it was very, very enjoyable to me.

MM: What was the cost of things when you were growing up?

AH: When I was growing up, we could buy a big candy bar for two for a nickel. Milk was ten cents a quart and school lunches were twenty cents. A can of soda pop was less than a nickel.

MM: Tell me about Grandpa Tracy and when you got married.

AH: I got married in 1938 to Tracy Wardell. We had a very good marriage. He worked in a bank so of course at that time it was very frugal pay, but we managed to get a loan okay. We had two children, two girls and we were very happy the first few years of our marriage. I loved the children and did not work much of the time until they were older. Later I divorced my husband and married a high school and college sweetheart in 1971 and moved from California up to Washington. I love Washington very much, it's beautiful here.

MM: Grandpa Mike had a good retirement, right?

AH: I haven't had the problems that a lot of women have because Mike had a good retirement. Of course his widow gets 60 percent of his retirement after he passed away and he also had his army and marines pay. And I also have my social security so I have...fairly good. It's nothing to rave about but it's better than a lot of women have now. I feel so sorry for some of them who try to live on three hundred or four hundred a month. It seems impossible.

MM: Grandpa Mike was in the Marines?

AH: Yes. He was in the war and worked over on the islands that the United States occupied. I can't remember the name of it right now. He helped send out supplies, but I don't know very much about that.

MM: Did you hear about this later when you were reacquainted with him?

AH: Yes. Later he was Lieutenant Colonel in the Army, but back then when he was married to his first wife he was just lieutenant. He seemed to really enjoy the natives there, but I just can't remember the name of the island.

MM: What was the draft for the war like? Did they just take all of the men?

AH: There was an order to the draft. They first took the single men, then those who were married but did not have any children. Then they took volunteers and the last were men with families or those whose wives were pregnant. When Pearl Harbor happened I was pregnant with Karen, but she was late so Tracy did get only a six month deferment. He was taking his physical the day Karen was born but didn't have to report for duty for six months. If she was born on time, he may not have been drafted. But that's just how it turned out.

MM: Did you have to go to work when Grandpa Tracy left?

AH: When Tracy left to join the Navy, I had to work to make house payments and pay other bills. The government did send a check each month, but it wasn't much. Tracy's mother and father came to stay with me in Bakersfield and his mother took care of Karen and I went to work. My father-in-law and I both went to work at Vega aircraft in Bakersfield which was probably...I guess you could call it a satellite for a big aircraft manufacturing place in Los Angeles. I knew that Vega Aircraft had converted an ice skating rink in Bakersfield into an airplane plant and was hiring so I went to apply and when they heard that I had worked as a dressmaker they hired me on the spot. I guess they figured I knew how to use a pair of scissors so I cut out the deflectors for the wings and I fitted and riveted them into place. The wings were on the floor, and there was a lot of bending, but I enjoyed the work. It was very easy for me. We made wings and cockpits. That was very interesting work. To me it was little upsetting because so many people, especially the man that worked along with me as a partner complained constantly and it nearly drove me crazy, but it worked out. I don't know if he wanted to be out fighting in the war or if he didn't like working with all us women, but he was unhappy about something. But I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the work, but [was] quite concerned at that time about the war. I actually made more working there than Tracy did at the bank before he was drafted. The plant was about one mile away from my home and I walked to work and home again at 11:00 p.m.

MM: Did you feel safe walking around by yourself?

AH: In those days women felt safe walking at night. We couldn't afford a car, plus there was a shortage of gas. There were stamps for rationing gas and when you were out of stamps, you were out of luck. Food was also rationed. I packed a lunch of a sandwich and fruit and made good friends with the other women working there.

MM: Did you have a lot of friends that had to go out and work like you did?

AH: No. My two best friends, they worked at their husband's oil companies. And I hadn't been to church long enough to really know anybody there. Lawrence had a job checking and folding parachutes. Oh, you don't know them. They were very good friends of mine. He was a soldier stationed in Bakersfield at the time.

MM: Did you feel like you were doing your country a service? Were you proud to be working there?

AH: Yes, I was proud to be working there and I felt like I was doing a service and because my husband was in the Navy I really enjoyed it. A number of women had the same circumstances I had; a few children so we had to work to support the family. Everyone that I was around was very nice, except that one man I told you about that complained all of the time. It was a learning process for me because I did not know about airplanes. I learned how they were constructed and it was just very interesting to me. I think in Idaho or Utah there is some kind of group or display showing B-29 Bombers like the ones we worked on. I guess they were one of the best bombers ever made. I would have liked to see that display because I spent so much time working on them. But I enjoyed it very much.

MM: Was it weird to you that you were making these planes that would be used in the war?

AH: I didn't bother me at all. I knew that it was all necessary and I knew that it would help to win the war so I didn't worry about things like that.

MM: Did you work there for a long time?

AH: About a year and then I moved away.

MM: What were the airplane plants like? Did they have assembly lines and things like that?

AH: The parts were sent up to us from Los Angeles and both the wings and cockpits were made at the Bakersfield plant and then the planes were assembled back in Los Angeles. The men in their middle ages or those with families or the ones that didn't pass the physical remained behind and worked in the factories along with the women. They were respectful of us women for the most part, but there was some pride in the plant.

MM: Where did you move to?

AH: My in-laws decided to move to San Leandro, California to be closer to their other children so I rented out my home to my sister and moved with them. Tracy was stationed near Oakland so I was closer to him.

MM: How long was Grandpa Tracy gone?

AH: He was drafted for the duration which meant that he would be in the service as long as the war lasted. Armistice Day was in early August in 1945, six weeks after Kathy was born so Tracy had been in the service a little over two years. During that time he hitchhiked home at least once a month. He was packed and ready to go overseas when it was discovered that he had banking experience so they kept him on the base as an accountant. I was very grateful for that. Many of my friends from school were killed in the war. When Tracy got home, we returned to our home and sold it and moved to the Bay area to be closer to family.

MM: Were you scared during the war that it would last a very long time?

AH: No, I really wasn't. We were very confident that we would win, and I just tried to concentrate on the day to day things. I knew that what I was doing was helping the war and we all were just very confident it would end soon and we would win.

MM: Did you get to stop working when Grandpa Tracy came home?

AH: I returned to work full-time when Kathy and Karen were about nine and twelve for financial reasons, and I worked full-time for the next fifteen years. Even at this time it was still unusual for women to work, especially in my church circle. When the girls were old enough I went to work for my brother-in-law at his dairy. I enjoyed that work very much. I belonged to a teamsters

union so it was a good...good pay, and I never experienced prejudice on the job but was probably paid quite a bit less than the men. In those days, the fifties and sixties, women still did most of the office work and men did the blue collar work. I always felt that the men should have first choice of jobs regardless of ability because they were the main supporters of their families. That was the way more people looked at employment before the Equal Rights Amendment. I enjoyed the work very much as I met with the public and took the payments and the telephone calls. It was different than being home raising the children, but it was fun.

MM: How did you feel about the war? Are there things that stand out to you or that changed your life?

AH: It really didn't affect me too much, and I just sorta went around in like a daze for all that time. It was such a shock to me because when I was in the sixth grade I think, the history teacher told the class that by the time we were grown, there would be no more wars, that people would be so educated that there will be no more wars in the world. And it seems to me that that's just about all that we've had. I remember I believed him, I guess that's why it was such a shock to me when it happened. One thing I do want to say about the war, I was out in the yard mowing the lawn when my telephone rang. I ran in the house and it was a good friend of mine on a Sunday morning and said that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. It was such a shock because the U.S. was not ready for this and they weren't prepared, and I think they had no idea that it was going to happen so it was quite a shock to all of us, the war was bad. I had a cousin who was in the march at Bataan, and he survived when very few of the boys did. He was in the army; this was on the Philippine Islands when the war began. When they got to their destination, the very few that were left, were put on a Japanese boat to take back to Japan as prisoners, the U.S. unfortunately bombed that Japanese ship not knowing a lot of the American boys were on it. Everyone drowned so he was killed although he had survived the march that was supposed to be a very horrible march, very hard on the boys.

MM: Did you know many men that went out and fought in the war?

AH: I had a lot of friends that were lost that I had gone to school with. In fact one of the boys that I had gone out with in Bakersfield was considered one of the first ones killed in Pearl Harbor. He and his brother both were on the ship in Pearl Harbor at the time. At home we had victory gardens, which were planted during the war, practically everyone it seems planted a victory garden and that was to grow your own food so there would be enough to go around and especially for the servicemen. So during the war, everyone dug up their lawn and in a certain spot planted a garden. My father-in-law planted one, we had broccoli, corn, carrots especially, tomatoes, and lima beans and probably several other things. My mother-in-law was living with us and she could just go out there and pick vegetables and make a whole meal out of it for us. Of course I was working and going to work about three o'clock in the afternoon so she would fix me a nice dinner before I went. I just loved the fresh lima beans, and grandpa and I had the broccoli. We had never seen it before in our lives and when it grew up with the little seeds on top of it, we thought it had gone to seed, and we pulled it up and threw it away. It was fun. It was no different from a regular vegetable garden but we just called them victory gardens because of the war at the time.

MM: Did you have to ration more than gasoline?

AH: Yes, shoes especially. We'd get a card with a permit to buy shoes. They were very scarce and bananas. You could hardly get good fruit during the war and Karen always wanted bananas so when Tracy would come home before leave he would bring his ditty bag full of bananas and things we couldn't get in the store so Karen was always anxious when he got home. To get nylons we went out to the factory and one day a week they would open up the factory and sell them to people so there would be a line a number of blocks long to get one pair of nylons. We were always happy to get one because sometimes they would run out of nylons because they got to the end of the line. They would allow you so many gallons of fuel. Getting back to the shoes, every time that I was in the bathtub, Karen would throw her shoes in the bathtub and get them all wet or she would put them in the toilet and swish them all around so I would put them on the floor [of the] furnace to dry them out until they just all shriveled up, they were dried so many times and wet to many times. I had a hard time keeping her in shoes.

MM: Do you remember what you were doing when you heard that the war had ended?

AH: Oh yes. I can tell you. Grandma Nell and I were in San Francisco. Kathy was six months old so we were taking her to her six month examination. We came out onto the streets of San Francisco and you have never seen such a happier group of people. Some people would just walk up and grab me and kiss me and then walk off. Everyone was so happy and hugging everyone. It was very exciting; everyone was out of their minds. It was such a happy occasion. Kathy was born in the Navy hospital. It was something that I will never forget. Those moments...I have the paper that goes back what, 45 or 50 years. The one they put out the day the war stopped. I saved quite a few of different papers, when President Nixon resigned or was booted out, I guess you could say. And other things that other people might be interested in.

MM: I know some people thought that the United States should have gotten involved in the war before Pearl Harbor. How did you feel about that?

AH: Oh I didn't feel we should have. I don't feel very nicely about war and think if they can avoid it, they should. I didn't think that at all. I only regret that we weren't better prepared. They should've had better knowledge of the attack.

MM: Was the mood different when the boys came home than in Vietnam when they came home angry?

AH: A lot of people didn't recognize the Vietnam War because they were so against it. Of course, everyone was gung-ho to do anything in the Second World War because that was so forced upon us, all we could do was...do something. As a result they took all the Japanese people here and put them in internment camps. I guess they were treated very well, but it was certainly sad. I worked with a little lady, a wonderful little girl, well she wasn't a little girl, who graduated high school in a camp. She didn't complain about it all, I don't know why, but she got all of her schooling in that camp, and they were fed very well.

MM: How did you feel about women's rights back then?

AH: During the war, women's rights was not an issue. Everyone just felt obligated to do their part to help the war effort so women went to work. It became a little more acceptable for women to work, which was a change from before the war. The country found out that women could do a lot of the work that had previously been done exclusively by men. After the war, when the men came home, most women returned to the home, but the war had shown women what they could do if they had to. Afterwards, I don't really know how I felt about that. At that time I felt that the women should stay home and take care of the children and leave the good jobs for the men who, most of them had families to support. I was just on a fence over the Equal Rights Amendment. Now that I am older, I have found out that women can do a lot of the jobs that men did, but I still believe that the men should bring in the money for the family and the mother should take care of the children. We wouldn't have quite the problems we have today if the women would stay home with the children.

MM: Were you scared during the Cold War that something might happen between the United States and Russia?

AH: I tried to go on with my daily life. I did have some thoughts that we would eventually go into war with Russia, but I didn't think too far ahead. I didn't worry about a lot of things. I don't think about a lot of things that I probably should think about.

MM: Do you have any memories of what happened with Kennedy and Nixon that stand out to you?

AH: I do remember Kennedy's assassination. We were...I was working at the time at my brother-in-law's milk company. I was the hostess and I can remember clearly when it started, someone had heard it announced on their lunch hour so we turned the radio on in the office and we were just all in astonishment all afternoon listening to the reports of it. It was a terrible thing to have happened at that time because he was a very good president. Considering Nixon's resignation, it was something I think that everyone in the U.S. was ready for because he had lied to the people so much and mixed himself up telling lies that the people didn't believe him and felt that it was better. I can remember saying, "Well it isn't so bad, we have a good vice president to take over" and I think within a month after the president resigned, he was arrested for something. At this time I can't remember what it was, so he was not our president and I was badly mistaken about his being a good vice president.

MM: Was it fun to witness the moon landings?

AH: The moon landings were very exceptional. The first one was unbelievable. We sat up practically the whole night looking up at the moon, which we could see nothing of course other than the moon shining, but hearing the story of landing as it was happening was really great.

MM: When we look back on history, we tend to think that everything was such a big deal because we didn't live through it. Is that feeling different for you?

AH: It was just our life. We lived through it and it was all necessary. It's different because most of the men back then were drafted instead of volunteers so most of the eligible young men were just gone, but we dealt with it.

MM: I read a book that interviewed many couples around the post-war, Cold War era, and the women said that even though they wanted to go out and have their own careers, they stayed home and had families to feel secure. Did you feel like that at all?

AH: No I didn't feel I should have a career of any kind or of any significance my whole life. Having a family helped me feel secure and I wanted children. I had two girls and would have had more if it had been possible. I had to get treatments every time I had a child, and it was very hard for me to get pregnant. Plus we didn't have the money to keep getting the treatments. I don't think I wouldn't have had six though. In those days most families had three or four children and the church didn't seem to press it as they do now.

MM: Thank you for talking with me grandma. I really appreciated it and enjoyed learning about your life.

AH: Well I'm glad. My mind isn't working very well right now but I hope you enjoyed it.