Helen A. Smith – Life during WWII

By Helen A. Smith

October 26, 2002

Box 1 Folder 22

Oral Interview conducted by Jodi Snider

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham   September 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
JS: The date is October 26, 2002, and I am here with Helen Smith and I am going to be interviewing her concerning her experiences during the World War II Era. Helen, where and when were you born?

HS: I was born in Lehi, Utah, April the 28th 1924.

JS: So by the time World War II had started, how old were you?

HS: Let’s see, I was sixteen years old at the time of the beginning of the war. And twenty-two at the end of the war.

JS: So, what were the effects that war specifically had on your community in Lehi, Utah? I’m assuming you were there during the entire war.

HS: No, I lived in American Fork the entire time.

JS: Oh, Okay.

HS: Well, it was emotionally upsetting for the members of this small community. Fathers and husbands, sons and sisters were leaving home for maybe the first time, to face the unknown, and maybe never to return. There were those who were exempt for going to war on account of maybe health problems, staying home to work on the farms, and those that were employed by businesses where they were essentially needed to produce war equipment. Guns and ammunition, planes and tanks, etc.

JS: Oh, Okay. So, what were the effects that the war had on you specifically, your family, your husband, your friends. Maybe if you have a few stories or something like that.

HS: Well, it was very difficult. For myself, it was loneliness, having only been married less than two years, and being left with a small baby, but I did have the support of my family and my in-laws. I was living in part of my parents’ home. This made it somewhat better for me, a little easier. It was hard on my husband to leave his young wife and baby not knowing when he would return. He did have a furlough just before he left to go over seas to the European Theater. And of course, we had many friends that left, but our very best friend was with my husband during boot camp, and so it made it a lot easier. My husbands’ parents, it was difficult for them, not knowing where or when he would return.

JS: Helen, how effective was the media in bringing information to Americans on the home front?

HS: Well, comparing it to today’s communication, it was hardly anything. You know, a lot of the censorship I’m sure kept it from getting to us. It was necessary to not help the enemy from finding out our strategies, to isolate the victory that they so desired. And, to have a closure to that war.
JS: So, I mean, as far as TVs or radio’s, really the only thing you had was a radio to hear what was going on.

HS: Yes, that was about it.

JS: So you probably knew very little as compared to wars in today’s time where you hear things everyday, and on T.V., and are able to see it first hand. You can be right there in the war because of video cameras, and people right there.

HS: On the spot!

JS: What were you involved in during the midst of the war, as far as your job or school, or home life?

HS: Well, I worked in two grocery stores where merchandise was rationed. And sugar, shortening, soap, and nylons to name just a few of it. And we would take the names of the customers, and call them when the merchandise came in. And meat and gasoline was also rationed. We had red tokens that we would use for rationing.

JS: I don’t know much about rationing, but they obviously didn’t have rationing before the war, so was this a difficult change for you?

HS: Now, we were limited on what we could buy. They had to be very careful of the usage of the merchandise because it wasn’t plentiful. Merchandise was being used to build up the supply of ammunition, guns and tanks and so forth.

JS: So that was where the focus was. The focus was strictly the war. Supplies, efforts, etc. were going towards the war.

HS: That’s correct.

JS: The next question is, were there individuals close to you who were either enlisted or drafted to fight overseas?

HS: Well, my husband, and I had no brothers, but I did have one brother-in-law who was in the navy. Also many of my husband’s friends, but that was about it.

JS: What were their circumstances? Such as your husband.

HS: At the time, my husband was working for the Union Pacific Railroad, and he was a telegrapher, and went into the transportation end of the army.

JS: Was your husband ever overseas?

HS: Yes, he was in the European Theater.
JS: So, as far as combat, was he involved or was it mostly transport?

HS: He was involved in combat, but not right on the front lines. He was mostly in the transportation end of it.

JS: And your brother-in-law? Do you know anything about that?

HS: He was in the navy.

JS: So he was obviously in some form of combat. And how was your family life affected as a result of World War II? What were the changes?

HS: Loneliness was a big factor. Not knowing if my husband would return, and of course missing the growing up years of my young daughter. Not seeing her first steps or calling him “Daddy.” Just the uncertainty of life in general.

JS: It was an everyday uncertainty. You had no idea what was coming next. What was the communication like between you and your husband? Were there weekly letters?

HS: The communication was sporadic. Sometimes we would receive three or four letters, and then it would go maybe for a month, and of course censorship in the letters. We did not communicate with any of the strategy of the war.

JS: Okay, so, it was mostly a “how are you doing?” letter. Just the general stuff.

HS: Yes, very general.

JS: What was the general American attitude of the war or the outcome of the war? Positive… Negative?

HS: Let me tell you one thing on this other question. When my husband returned home, his daughter wanted nothing to do with him. He was a stranger to her, but it didn’t take long before she accepted him. For me, it seemed a little awesome at first, like we were just starting out in married life, but then also it turned into a very natural lifestyle.

JS: So I have another question, what about your daughter? How old was she when your husband left, and how old was she when he returned? Do you remember?

HS: She was nearly a year old.

JS: Okay, so she was just a baby when he left and really had no familiarity.

HS: Yes, there was little familiarity, and of course he was a stranger to her when he returned. But it didn’t take long for them to become acquainted again.
JS: Now, again, what was the general American attitude concerning the outcome of the war? Were people hopeful? I realize you probably only saw what was in your community.

HS: To my knowledge, it was good. Everyone felt that they had a patriotic duty toward ending this war. People were willing to sacrifice even if it meant losing a loved one on the battlefront.

JS: Mostly, Americans were feeling positive. Americans were hopeful that they were going to win the war, and there was never a doubt in their minds. Or was there a turning point? For instance, if the Germans were ever victorious in a battle, was there ever a feeling of...

HS: Well, I'm sure, the Germans had victories and they had defeats, and it really took time and strategy to bring an end to it.

JS: What were your general feelings of the enemy? Germany, Italy, Japan.

HS: Well, we'll go back to Europe, that was my concern, because that is where my husband was, and we know that Adolf Hitler was a tyrant and a dictator and controlled the mind and body of his people. He had a sense of destroying, and whatever he had to do to bring the end, he would have done. And my personal feelings were that I hated him. And I hated seeing how he had manipulated his people, and brought much sorrow to the human race.

JS: It's almost amazing thinking that Germany wasn't considered one of those third world countries. Germany was a very intelligent country, and it was crazy to see how they were so manipulated. Just one person was able to manipulate the minds and thoughts and actions to be so violent.

HS: The thing of it was [that] he took the youth away from the family, away from the parents. He put them in institutions, and trained them very well to make them become what he wanted them to be.

JS: You see all these pictures and movies of young kids and their gathered together in some sort of rally, all of them Nazi’s. And these youth were so brainwashed that they would do whatever he wanted them to do.

HS: Well, it was done from their youth.

JS: And the youth are so easily manipulated. And your personal feelings of Adolf Hitler were just hate and anger.

HS: It was. It was hate and terror and we wanted him to be captured and done away with.

JS: It was probably a relief when he killed himself.
HS: He had such a force behind him, and really this whole force had to be annihilated...the entire regime.

JS: I also have another question concerning Adolf Hitler. Did the media say anything about the way his mind worked? His tactics, do you ever remember hearing anything about that?

HS: I think the American people judged him for themselves that he was totally insane.

JS: So that was the general American feeling, that he was indeed insane and had no concept of reality.

HS: That is correct.

JS: What details were you hearing or seeing concerning the concentration camps in Europe or close to home?

HS: Here, in Utah, I only remember that there were German prisoners who were allowed to work in the orchard in the Utah County area. Actually seeing them, I never did. As to the concentration camps abroad during the war, I can’t remember hearing too much about them. It was after the war that all was revealed as to the treatment of these prisoners. Many books have been written, and movies about this. And we just didn’t have too much knowledge as to the seriousness of the concentration camps.

JS: If you had heard about them, it probably would have changed your whole outlook on the war. Almost ten time worse had you known.

HS: It truly would have been. And today, we would have had that information.

JS: Were the images of the concentration camps as vivid and explicit as they are now?

HS: Well, the images became really vivid and explicit when read in the books or seen in the movies. Now, communication is such a vital part of all of this. And communication today is initially different than it was then. There was just not too much detail because the communication was not there. A lot of censorship.

JS: My next question is, by the war’s end, how had your life changed in regards to your family, your husband, your children, your friends, your job, and your community?

HS: Well, husbands came home emotionally and physically wounded. Some never wanted to reveal what they had seen or what they had been through. Several husbands were killed. There was a change in the family units. Divorces incurred. Some sons and daughters never returned to fill that spot in the loving family. Children were missing the blessings of having a father present in those growing up years. War is a monster, let’s face it. It changes lives completely.
JS: I can’t even imagine your daughter not being able to grow up without a father. None of us in our generation have ever had to deal with anything like that. We have never had to go through a war, so I can’t imagine watching my dad, or brother, or husband for that matter, go off to war. It must have been so difficult for you and your husband and your daughter.

HS: It was bittersweet, to have them go and then have them come home.

JS: The last question I have is what are some of your most vivid memories of your World War II experience that stand out in your mind?

HS: Farewells and furloughs. Deaths, victories and defeats. Patriotism, draft-dodgers, sacrifices that had to be made. The wounded, prisoners, and atrocities that had occurred. The beginning of the war and the victory of the war. The return home of loved ones and the courage of being able to take the bitter with the sweet, hoping never to have to go through this nightmare ever again. But we really have had to do this time again with the wars that have come after. To have freedom, it’s the price that has to be paid for it.

JS: Thank you so much for your time and comments, and I’m going to conclude this by saying thank you one more time.

HS: I hope it has given you a little insight as to what World War II was all about.

JS: It was perfect. Your general feelings were just what I needed. And I truly know more now than I did before.

HS: Thank you.

JS: Thank you.