

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Phyllis Crook – Life During WWII

By Phyllis Crook

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Box 4 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Sara Crook

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham February 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

SC: An interview with Phyllis Crook by Sara Crook on February 15, 2004. How old were you on December 7, 1941?

PC: I was sixteen years old. I was a junior in high school. I was a teenager.

SC: What do you remember about that day?

PC: That day? Well, that was before we had TV's, we just had a radio. It was a Sunday afternoon. I remember I was out in my mother's kitchen. Sun was shining in the back door. And all of a sudden that news flash came over the radio about Pearl Harbor had been bombed by the Japanese. And that's all we did the rest of the day and night was listen to the radio.

SC: What did you think about when you heard the attack, heard about it?

PC: Oh my goodness, we already knew about the war going on over in Europe. That was mostly, you know, in 1940. But this attack on Pearl Harbor really took everybody by surprise.

SC: That was on our own soil too, on Hawaii and stuff. Did you meet or make any new friendships during the war?

PC: Of course. I met lots of soldier boys. I made lots of new friends during the war? I'll tell you about that later.

SC: What was your image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirioto during the war?

PC: Well, like I said we didn't have a TV, but we'd go to the movies at least once a week and we'd see the newsreels. They always had a newsreel before the movie came on. And so, that's where we saw all the news that was. Just like we do nowadays with our TV, only we could see it there at the movies and it'd be on the great big screen. So we knew what was going on over there.

SC: Did they show actual footage, like war footage and shooting?

PC: Oh yes, yes. They had war correspondence over there.

SC: What is your opinion of Japanese and Germans now?

PC: Nowadays? Well it wasn't the ordinary people who were so much involved. We didn't hate them. We just hated those leaders for what they were doing.

SC: When did you first hear about the German concentration camps with the Jews?

PC: Well, it was in those newsreels that we saw how awful things were over there.

SC: Did you ever know anybody that had survived those concentration camps?

PC: No, I never knew anybody who had been a prisoner of war.

SC: How did your life change as a result of World War II?

PC: How did my life change? Wow, I was a teenager, you know, when it started. That's how I got out here to Utah, was because of the war after I met your Grandpa. I'll tell you about that later.

SC: How did your religious beliefs help you cope with the war?

PC: Well, I had always; I went to the Methodist Church in those days. But we went to Church every Sunday. I was religious. That helped us through it.

SC: How did you contribute as an individual and in your community to the war effort?

PC: Well, I was in high school and I belonged to a club. I can't remember what the name of it was? But I remember now that whenever we met the club, probably once a week, instead of doing anything else we'd just sit and roll bandages for the Red Cross. They'd bring the supplies and we'd spend that much time making bandages and then the Red Cross would take them to wherever they needed, wherever the government needed them.

SC: So, like doing humanitarian aid stuff?

PC: Yea, kind of like that is nowadays, but my mother. See we lived, I lived in New Jersey. We were right on the east coast right close to New York City, Washington D.C. And so we were really a target if they ever tried to invade, the enemy if they tried to invade. We had air raid warnings and black out drills and everything where I lived. My mother and a neighbor lady across the street they became volunteer airplane spotters. Where I lived it was all kind of mountainous territory, woods and everything so there was a shack up on the highest peak in our town. I think it was only one night a week my mother and this other lady would go there and probably be there two or three hours and they'd watch for enemy airplanes. There weren't that many planes in the sky in those days like there is now. So that's what they were airplane spotters.

SC: Did they have binoculars?

PC: Probably did. I never went in the little place where they used to go. But that's what they would do. That was an official duty with the government.

SC: What did you do to entertain yourselves?

PC: Oh my goodness. Well, in those days we didn't have TV like I said so we did our own entertainment anyway. We'd go most of the time we didn't have a car. And if we did there wouldn't have been much gas available. So Sunday afternoons was mostly

going for a big long walk. You'd go along and stop at two or three people's houses and say "We're going up in the woods do you want to walk up with us?" So, a whole bunch of us would be walking up through the woods. It's beautiful in the fall, you know, with the colored leaves and everything. And then if it was a rainy Sunday and we couldn't go out my mother, up in the attic, she had a box with old postcards and old pictures of our ancestors. We'd bring that big box down and just sit there all afternoon and just look at pictures. That was our entertainment. We didn't have TV and all that stuff to watch. We made our own. And then during the week we'd get to together at somebody's house and play games. We had lots more social times in those days.

SC: What kind of games did you play?

PC: Oh we played one called Cootie bug. Play it with dice, and draw a little bug as you got the different things on the dice. That was one of the favorites. Can't remember what else we played. Monopoly took too long.

SC: Even today it does.

PC: Sometimes we'd just go visit people. Just go and sit and visit for just an hour or two.

SC: Just talk?

PC: Yea talk. I remember most of the people visited, you never left until they put the kettle on and have a cup of tea or a piece of cake or something.

SC: Quite a social event huh? What kind of food did you have?

PC: During the war? I can't remember that our tastes changed very much. I mean there was the rationing. But we still seemed to have enough meat and sugar. I know we made sugar; we made cookies to send to the boys in the service. So we must have had plenty of sugar. But we had the stamps and so that's how we got by.

SC: What's the process of getting a stamp, like what's the process of going through and getting a stamp and going to...?

PC: I think those ration books were just issued to everybody in the family. I suppose, I can't remember like I say I was a teenager. I didn't pay that much attention to everything. I guess my mother took care of it. She must have gone some place in town where you pick up your ration books. Some people call it ration books I don't know which is right. I still have a copy of one. Still has some stamps. You had to have stamps for everything, anything that pertained to the war effort. Even to buy a pair of shoes. You might have had plenty of money to buy a pair of shoes, but you had to have a stamp to go along with the money. So you took care. I remember papa, there was a shoe maker in town. You didn't discard your shoes when they wore out. You could buy rubber soles that you glued on when your shoe got a hole in the bottom. You could glue these one.

Sometimes you'd be walking along and the glue would come loose and you'd flap along with the rubber on the bottom of your shoe.

SC: That's like some of the little kids today walking around with their worn out shoes. What do you remember about rationing, like what kind of foods were rationed?

PC: Oh, there was coffee and sugar. Oh dear, I can't remember all the things. I didn't do the shopping. I guess my mother did all the shopping. Sometimes teenagers don't do anything. But, gas was rationed. I can't remember everything that was in the book.

SC: How did the war affect your community, the town?

PC: Oh boy. Things sure changed. My mother for years had worked in the local rubber factory. They made ace combs. Those are still on the market. But Momma polished the combs. That was her job all those years. But then when the war broke out the government forced the factory to convert to government priority things. And I remember Momma used to do something with radiator batteries. They'd...I don't know what they did with them. That was her job at the mill. And then in the community, I remember along Main Street there was a great big sign that had all the names of the boys that had gone from Bloomingdale into the service.

SC: Did you know any of the young men who did not return from the war?

PC: Yes, I knew a few who didn't come home. There was one especially who was a good friend of ours, he used to...I never had any real boyfriends, you'd call them but, a bunch of us kids all grew up together and they'd come to the house, you know, and play games and so forth. And one of them, his name was Thorn Bender. He went into the Navy when he got out of high school. And he was sent up to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and he was only there maybe ten days and he got spinal meningitis. And they didn't know too much about it in those days. It was so contagious that he was quarantined and they burned all the clothes and everything that he had. And so he died. But when his body was sent home they had a closet casket. And when I'd go to his folk's house to visit, they had a picture of him sitting on the end table there. A picture of him and his white sailor hat sitting by the picture. It was so sad and of course they had a gold star hanging in the window. That's how it was during the war. Anybody who had somebody in the service in your window you'd have this little banner like with a blue star for how many boys you had in the service. Or if one of them got killed or died it would be a gold star.

SC: How many houses around you had flags?

PC: Around town? Oh my goodness, there were lots. I don't know. You'd go up and down the street and see a thing hanging in their window.

SC: Well, you didn't have one in yours.

PC: No, I didn't have any brothers.

SC: How did their families cope with that, who had lost their sons?

PC: It was just part of life. You knew that when they went off to war they might not come back and some of them could cope with it and some it was really hard on them.

SC: How did the community change when half of their boys didn't come home?

PC: Well, they had a local draft board that the boys had to report to when they turned 18. They had to go and sign up for the draft. If they didn't pass the physical and so forth then they were classified 4-F. Some of my friends, there was one special friend, his name was Oliver Kayheart. He was a 4-F. But his family had a farm, and I don't whether he had a physical problem or whether he was not called because of his work on the farm. Sometimes those things were just as important as being in the armed forces. Then there was another fellow. Charley Jones was Oliver's friend. And the two of them were 4-F.

SC: What was it like to have all the young men gone off to war?

PC: Oh boy it was hard when you were a teenager and non boys to date. There was a song that was popular at that time. It went "There either too young or too old. There either too grey or too grassy green. The pickin's are poor and the crop is lean. There isn't any gravy, the gravy's in the Navy." And there was something about, "I know they'll never harm me because they're all in the Army." I can't remember all the words to it, but it was a popular song during that time when there weren't any young men there.

SC: Did you have a friend, father, brother, or boyfriend who served in the military?

PC: Not any close ones like that. I didn't have, I said I had all these boys that I grew up with of course were good friends. But, later on I met your Grandfather and he got to be my boyfriend.

SC: Did you write letters back and forth?

PC: Oh, yes. That's all we could do was write letters. I mean, they were so far away when they went overseas. And the letters, it got to be, we didn't have email like we do now, so the letters they'd. I don't know how they did that. They must have microfilmed it or something, the letters. And they put them on v-mail. They were about; well I showed you, what the v-mail looks like, just a little 4x5 paper. And sometimes when the fellows overseas would write, say something about where they were, it would be cut out when you got your letter. They censored everything. Everything was censored.

SC: So you wouldn't want to write anything private in there?

PC: Well, personal you could write, but not anything relating to where they were and anything with the military.

SC: What are some of the most vivid memories of World War II that stand out?

PC: I remember, now after I got out of high school I went to work in that rubber mill. But I worked in the chemistry lab. I just did routine tests that they did there. But since there weren't any boys or men around to date, on a Friday night when we got paid we'd get on the bus and go to New York. It was only an hour's drive from where we lived to go to New York City. So we'd go down to New York and go out to a nice restaurant and have supper, and then go to a show. Sometimes it was Radio City. Sometimes it was the Roxy Theater. So that's what we did. And then maybe on a Saturday night if Oliver and Charlie Jones could get enough gas to put in a car, Oliver had a motorcycle that he rode around most of the time, but if they could get enough gas to put and use in the car they'd pick up a bunch of us girls and take us maybe 5 miles away to an old barn where they held square dances. We'd go square dancing on a Saturday night. Since there weren't very many fellows sometimes we'd have to dance, our partner would be another girl.

SC: Kind of like school dance now, Mormon dances. There's 2-1 always.

PC: We survived. We had a good time.

SC: How did you meet Grandpa?

PC: I told you we lived in kind of a mountainous, not like these mountains here, it was mostly woods, a wooded area. But there was a CCC camp up along the highway. And when the war broke out the government turned that into a branch of the military. It was for the signal corps to come there and train. So, this bunch of fellows came. And on Sundays, well the only way they could get out of camp was to get a pass. On Sundays they allowed them to go downtown to one of the churches that they wanted to. I sang in the choir there. And my girl friend's father was president of the Sunday school and he had two boys in the service so he knew what it was like. Anytime there were servicemen there to church, he'd invite them to come back to his house for Sunday dinner. And I quite often went to their house with my girlfriend. One Sunday that's where I met your Grandpa. He was one of those servicemen that was invited there. I don't know I guess it was love at first sight or something. After that, he came to church as often as he could and we just got to know each other. If he could get a pass from camp he'd come to our house and visit. So I knew him, let's see, I only knew him, August, September, October, November, about four months, about three or four months and he was scheduled to be shipped overseas. It was in November, I was, it was my birthday I would have turned 18 and he gave me a diamond ring on my birthday. So, we got engaged. But then he got sent overseas and I never saw him again for 3 years until the war ended. All we did was correspond with our letters. Then when the war ended he came back, he got, he came back, well...He went England, he got sent to England for some training then they went to Germany. And when that war ended then he got sent to the Pacific. And so he stayed there until the war ended there. Then he got sent, after the war ended, he came home, but he got sent to the West coast so he stopped in Heber first, got on a train, came back to

New Jersey, only saw him a couple of days and we got married. Boy, I don't know how it lasted almost 60 years. Sure didn't know each other very well.

SC: It was a long engagement though.

PC: A long engagement, but there wasn't much to it. So anyway, we're still married, and her you are.

SC: Yea, here I am.

PC: When he got sent overseas there was another popular song, it went "When the boys come home again all over the world." Let's see, I forgot how that went. Oh, when the lights, see over in Europe it was all blackout. "When the lights gone on again all over the world and the boys are home again all over the world; when rain or snow is all that will fall from the skies above, a kiss won't mean goodbye, but hello to love. Then we'll have time for things like wedding rings and free hearts will sing, when the lights gone on again all over the world." Oh there were lots of songs in those days that you know about the war and about people. Well, that about it?

SC: I think so.

PC: Oh I remember it was a tradition at our high school we were so close to Washington D.C., the graduation class always went to Washington for 3 days for their graduation trip. But when I graduated the war was on so we didn't get any graduation trip that year. Oh, I remember too, there were lots of lakes where I lived in that area, you know, up in the woods and so forth. And while all the men were gone, my girlfriend and I worked as lifeguards a couple of summers at one of the lakes. That's how I got all these spots on my face. The big thing then was to see who could get the nicest suntan, you know, with no hats or anything. Now I'm paying for it.

SC: Yea, skin cancer and all that. Did you guys have suntan lotion back then?

PC: I guess there was suntan lotion, but I never used it. I just got the tan. And, also, I don't think nylon stockings had been invented then, but we had silk stockings with the seam up the back and everything. Well, you couldn't get those during the war so that's when this liquid makeup came on the market. You painted your legs to look like you had hoes on and then you had somebody draw that line up the back of your legs to make it look like a seam. If you got out in the rain the stuff would wash off, but I always had a nice suntan so I didn't even have to use that. Well, I guess that's all that I remember about the war. Sure changed my life though because then after I married your Grandpa we came out here to Utah to live. I left all my family. I left my religion. I got converted to the LDS Church. My whole life changed.

SC: Would you say the war had good outcomes?

PC: Well, I guess it did, I got you.

SC: Well, I think that's it.