

A Family Joins the War Effort



MARY WILDERHAIN

Story by Erika Hodges

I came from a large family. I was the baby of ten children, five boys and five girls, and we all lived at home. Prior to going into the service, my brothers all lived at home, but when war broke out, four of them went into the service. I was a senior in high school, I graduated in the class of 1942. So we were the first wartime class to graduate from Central Falls High School.

Where were you when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

I had come home from an afternoon movie, everybody was around the radio. Naturally, I joined the family in listening to the terrible reports from Pearl Harbor. My initial reaction, it seems to me, was fright. Because we were a large family, I knew we were going to be involved, and my brothers were all at that age, just so very, very vulnerable.

One of them went into the service in July 1942. We never saw him again until August or September of 1945 when the war was over. He joined the American forces in North Africa, came up through North Africa into Italy, and into Germany. We were very, very concerned about him. I had another brother in Guadalcanal. He was a bombardier on an airplane. It was a great strain on my parents, and so we kind of kept those details away from them. One day, we picked up the evening paper and it said that Steve Conroy (my brother) had completed 17 missions over the South Pacific and was going to Australia for rest and relaxation. That was the first time that my parents had realized that he was right in the very thick of the war in the Pacific. A lot of tears were shed, you know, during that time worrying about my brothers. A lot of prayers were said. They both came home, fortunately.

The other brothers were both married and had families they left behind. One was fortunately stationed in California, and he taught radar, when radar was first coming into its prime. He was part of the Navy. Then my other brother was a fireman in the service. He stayed inside the country, primarily in Maryland, and at Quonset Point. We saw him fairly often.

When I graduated from high school in June 1942, I went to work in the biggest defense plant in Rhode Island at the time, Brown and Sharpe. They made machines that created parts for ammunition. I was in the clerical end of it, but it was all in production eventually. Many women were employed at Brown and Sharpe. In those days it was pretty much run by women. We didn't have any automation so there were a lot of women in every job. They worked in the factory on machines because the men were being drafted. So they were replaced by women, and our ranks swelled to a great number. As a matter of fact, at one point during the war, Brown and Sharpe employed 16,000 people. I don't know how that would break down, but a considerable number of them were women out in the factory running the machines.

Was there any discrimination on the job that you were aware of?

No, not at that time. If there was any discrimination, we were not aware of it, because it was all pretty much white women on the job, as a matter of fact, looking back, I can't remember any other races working in the clerical end of it. They did work in the factory, but I did not have a lot of contact with people out in the factory. I'm sure that there probably was discrimination in the fact that none of them were there. They probably were not hired, and if they were hired, they were probably hired in a janitorial capacity.

How many women were let go after the war?

Quite a lot because we were pretty much war production. Then, of course, the men who had gone in the service had some kind of legal procedure where their jobs had to be returned to them. And in fact, they got credit for their years in the service. If they worked there seven years and were in the service for three years, they were considered as having ten years seniority in Brown and Sharpe.

Women left the work force at that time. A considerable number of them left through attrition, and then those who stayed on were eventually laid off. I never was laid off in Brown and Sharpe. We just were in that area where we were not laid off.

Were you interested in dating?

Yes, I was interested in dating, but most of the people I was interested in went off to the service. I used to do a lot of writing. My mother and my sisters and I used to write letters. I'll bet every night someone was writing, especially to my brothers. And I wrote to a lot of young men that I went to high school with who had gone in -- practically all of them went into the service.

A lot of the sailors used to come into Quonset and Newport, but see we were on the other side of the state. We didn't quite get involved with them, but they did have a dance in Pawtucket where they would bring some of the servicemen. We used to go down there and dance and dance. And that was fun! I didn't have a steady boyfriend. We were always interested in dating, we just couldn't find anyone to date!

What do you recall about the newsreels and how they portrayed the war?

Well, needless to say, they did not have the coverage that they have today. We see war. We see what happens the day it happened in war today. The most we had of that was correspondents in the war zones. They would be on the radio all the time, and then we would have newsreels. What we saw was so new to us that it was frightening. Even if it wasn't America being bombed. London had a terrible bombing siege, and that was frightening to me.

Did you feel that the war was for a good cause?

Oh, did we ever! Yes sirree! We were fighting for our country, and we were very, very patriotic. We bought savings bonds. As a matter of fact, we used to have movie stars come to the plant. We'd have a war bond drive, and we would have money taken out of our paychecks every week toward war bonds. We would have big rallies where different stars would come in. I always remember Walter Pidgeon was one of them. Of course, we were attacked in the Pacific, and Hitler was trying to dominate the world. So, we really had causes then.

Do you think the war broadened your horizons?

Oh, it very definitely did. A whole new and different world opened, because heretofore, the Irish married the Irish, and the French married the French. The war changed all of that. There were so many marriages at that time. One of my dearest friends married a girl from Virginia. My brother told me about how wonderful it was in Colorado. So, we wanted to see Colorado. So, it broadened us tremendously. This was positive as far as I was concerned. So the war changed our lives greatly.

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