BETTY JO HOWITT

Amthor: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in the 1940s* program. The Nodaway County Historical Society Museum is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and with support from the National Endowment of the Humanities. Today's date is February 3, 2009, and this interview is being conducted at T. J.'s Café, in King City, Missouri, in Gentry County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley, and we're here to interview Betty Jo

Howitt: Howitt.

Amthor: Howitt and her birthday is July 27, 1929, and she lived during the 1940s and she's going to tell us a little bit about what life was like during that time period, and so we'll go ahead and begin. Betty Jo, can you tell us a little bit about your background first? Tell us where and when you were born, something about what your parents did your family?

Howitt: Well I was born in Andrew County in the community six miles west of King City called Empire Prairie. It's a rural community. My mother was an elementary school teacher; she was one of the few her age that had a college degree and my father was a farmer, but when I came along she quit teaching. So I was raised on a farm and grown up with all the wonderful activities of farm life that were fun. I went to a country school all my life – or my early life and then I went to King City High School and when I was in the seventh/eighth grade and a Freshman/Sophomore in high school that was during the Second World War, so I was a teenager when that came about. I don't know – that's early life.

Amthor: Did you have any family members that participated in the war?

Howitt: Yes, my brother; my only and older brother who was in the Navy. He chose the Navy so he said so he would have a clean place to sleep every night instead of a fox hole. [Laugh] He had finished college and had been married one year when he had to go into the service. And he was fortunate though that he had a college degree because they did send him to Harvard, and Boston, Massachusetts where he after his basic training and he came out an ensign there and was in communications, and then he was located on the Admiral's Navy ship in the communications department, so he had it better than some, but it was a long time to be on the water – three years.

Amthor: How - did you – were you aware of the propaganda at the time? What the United States were saying about the war, or what the information was like coming back from Europe? What were they saying?

Howitt: My parents, I'm sure, were aware of some of the things that were going on. As a twelve and thirteen year old I was not aware too much.

Amthor: Where were you and what were you doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Howitt: I was at a family reunion. I had a cousin that was home on furlough from the Marines and they had warned that he might have to come back early, and they had the radio on during the reunion and the attack took place at that time and he had to leave that evening to go back to his service. So that's where I was – at a family reunion.

Amthor: Can you tell us about what life was like during the war with the shortages and the rationing and that type of thing?

Howitt: Well, of course, somebody has probably mentioned the sugar rationing, and my mother cooked with honey and with white syrup to replace the sugar. Then we had other food shortages, and gasoline, and of course on the farm we were allowed a little more gas for tractors, but we still – it was still a shortage. I know when I was in high school my freshman/sophomore year we hardly had any activities at night because of the shortage of gas. There was a shortage of paper and of cloth and in high school we didn't even have yearbooks for four years we were without yearbooks, and that was the four years that I was in school because of the paper shortages. They did come and take our school pictures and we could buy like of the pep club and the football boys; we could buy a copy of that for a quarter a piece.

Amthor: That's neat.

Howitt: But we had the food stamps for shortages, and certain colors meant for certain things, and I believe coffee was one that we were short of. Anything that they used in the military, we were short of because it all went to feed them, and to clothe them, and a lot of paper work, of course, with the government. So that's where – and the gas for their machinery.

Amthor: What did you do for entertainment or fun activities?

Howitt: Oh, living on a farm, if we'd have company we'd get the pony out and ride him and bicycling, and played a lot of games; croquet in the yard in the summer and dominos and Kareem and things like that. That was different days. People – the neighbors got together a lot on Saturday night or Sunday afternoon and pop corn – that's another thing we did a lot. We entertained ourselves. We had a radio was all we had but we did get information about the – what was going on in the world on the radio, but it might be two or three days after it happened, you know.

Amthor: You mentioned putting the flag in the window. Can you tell us about that?

Howitt: They came out with the idea and they had – it's about the size of a piece of typing paper or larger and it had a blue rim around the – these were cardboard. You could buy them or you could make your own. On white – on the edge, rather, around it, and then they put a star in the center. It was a blue star if you had someone in your home in the service. It was a silver star in the center if they were overseas, and it was a gold star, of course, if that soldier had been killed and you hung it in your window, and you'd go by down the road and you could see these in the windows and you knew exactly they had – and sometimes they would have several blue stars meaning they had more than one boy. Then my mother – they sold little pins; little tiny pins of that same way – little white with blue ridge and a star in the middle.

Amthor: You brought with you a quilt. Can you talk about what that was like and what significance is behind it? It would be fun.

Howitt: During the war your chicken feed and other farm feed would come in colored sacks because we couldn't go to the stores and buy very much material to make things - of course in those days most of the people made a lot of their clothes; especially the women. And so we would have to get them – they were about 36 inches each direction – each square, so you'd have to have about three to make a dress. So people would trade sacks. You'd go to the merchant, and if you saw two alike, you'd get two and then hope next time you had to buy to get the third one. Or you would trade with your neighbors and everything on this quilt – actually it's a comforter, it's not a quilt – but every square is made out of material that was a feed sack at one time, on both sides. Here's where it's tied on this side. As I told you earlier, I can point out some of the dresses I had and pinafores and we had table cloths that – and also some kitchen curtains Mother made. I wasn't the only girl that wore them to school; everybody else had them too. [Laugh] But it was a big help, it really was, and I have one sack at home that we never did use and I kept that just as a souvenir or the World War. It was red and white check. It was good for a little card table, or something like that.

Amthor: Similar to that one right there?

Howitt: What?

Amthor: That red and white checked one there.

Howitt: No, it was a bit larger than that. This big flowered one was white materials with these big flowers. My mother made me a housecoat and I wore that to college.

Amthor: So that was – there was – that was the fashion because there was no fabrics?

Howitt: Yes, and you had to wash them several times to get the feed odor out of them. We'd wash them several times and then – but I especially in my eighth, ninth and tenth grade a lot of the girls wore them, if they were rural girls that had feed sacks.

Amthor: How about did they have – did you go to dances, or the skating rinks, or what other types of entertainment- of course you lived on the farm?

Howitt: We did have – we couldn't go very far because of the gas rationing.

Amthor: Okay.

Howitt: But we had ice skating on the ponds, you know, we'd get together and sledding if there was snow down the hills, we did that a lot.

Amthor: Did you marry someone that was in the war?

Howitt: No, I'm single.

Amthor: So do you remember any of the songs or the movies at that time period that stand out or the dances or anything about that time period?

Howitt: Well, I've been a music teacher all my life and I have stacks of war music at home. A lot of "Don't sit under the apple tree" was a good one, "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," "Bell Bottom Trousers," oh, I could go on and on. "White Christmas" came out kind of at the end of the war; it was about military men, and "Going My Way," by Bing Crosby was another one that was a good one. There are a lot of them; I probably can't remember, but a lot of the music was really good. "Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose," "White Cliffs of Dover," all of those are - I expect I have thirty pieces at home. [Laugh]

Amthor: You said you're a school teacher. When did you become a teacher, and could you tell us about what life was like as a teacher?

Howitt: Well, I went to Tarkio College. It was a Presbyterian Church related college and my brother had gone there and he liked it so well that that's where I went and I had a music degree so I taught public school music and started out one year in Sidney, Iowa, and then I came here to King City – they were in need of a teacher and taught six years and Aleta over there was a senior in high school and then I taught three years in Savannah in strictly elementary music and then they came after me from King City again and asked me to come back and I taught here – I taught a total of thirty-five years and then that lapse of time, there was a lot of time, there was a lot of differences in our life, our structure of our life, the new inventions that came in. Instead of a radio in 1951 we had our first TV and just about the time I was quitting teaching the computers were becoming popular and man went to the moon; all of those things were different and we had yearbooks. [Laugh]

Amthor: So what year did you finish your college education?

Howitt: 1951.

Amthor: 1951.

Howitt: I went directly out of high school into college.

Amthor: So what was school – your high school – what was it like during the World War years?

Howitt: Well, it was basically just going to school and we had one football game a week, and one basketball game a week because of the shortage of gas for buses. We had a few boys that would when they turned eighteen they had to go to the draft, and there were a few that had enough their senior year that they went ahead and gave them their degree. There would be some that if they didn't start to high school right after grade school, which some didn't, they didn't get theirs finished, and that was the sad part, but I can remember one day when a boy that was a senior when I was a freshman I believe – I might have been a sophomore – but we got word that he'd been wounded and that affected the whole high school. Of course we heard of some that

were killed, and that – there were two boys in my class their older brother was killed. It affects the family terribly, but it also affects everyone, you know. It's just a hush over everything.

Amthor: You said your older brother was in . . .

Howitt: Navy.

Amthor: . . . in the Navy. Did you send care packages, or send him quite a few letters?

We wrote a lot back and forth a lot and at Christmas we sent cookies and things like that and his birthday, but his birthday was ten days before Christmas, so we sent two packages so that he would have something. And I don't have any idea how far ahead we had to send that, or how long it took him to get it. One thing I might mention about him. When he sent letters they were – they had to be checked, you know, I can't think of the word I want to use – censored and once in a while we'd get a letter with a black streak in it so that meant his letter had been censored and he was fortunate one time a battle – he was on the battleship and another type of ship – I forget what it was – he had a cousin on it and he was loading food from that onto the battleship and he knew that Byron was on that battleship and they got to see each other for a little bit out there in the middle of the Pacific and that was exciting for both of them. But he couldn't tell us that for quite a while.

Amthor: What ship was he on? Do you remember what ship he was on?

Howitt: Well, they were all named after states, the battleships, and he was on the Iowa, the Alabama, and the Washington; those three - they changed every so often. But I think they took the same crew when they moved. I think it was just to keep a head of the Japanese, because he was on the Admiral's ship. They had a group of ships that were together, and the Admiral's ship was always protected. He was lucky that way.

Amthor: Did he ever meet any of the military leaders?

Howitt: No, he was at Pearl Harbor when they had the peace signed, but even though Byron was from Missouri, he always hated it because they put the Missouri in there that hadn't been in the war to have it signed, but that was because of the President Truman. He wasn't on the ship, but he was in the bay when it was signed and then they had some days and he got off at the Philippines after the war and Tokyo after the war and other than that, he was on the boat all the time.

Amthor: Did he have any stories that he told you that were interesting?

Howitt: He was very quiet. He just didn't want to talk about it he said and when he was older, he did take pictures of the ships, the three ships that he was on and a few other things and put on his family room wall, but that's about all. He just – some soldiers came home willing to tell everything and he said "I just don't want to think of it. I want to get on with my life here."

Amthor: And that is the picture of your brother that you brought?

Howitt: Yes. That's my brother that's in the picture.

Amthor: What type of shows did you listen to on the radio? Did you listen to home maker's shows?

Howitt: Oh, usually things like Fibber Magee and Molly and the Major Beau Show. Now Mother listened to Ma Perkins. That was a soap opera.

Amthor: Now what was that about?

Oh, it was just – just a story that continued and continued and continued and continued you know, about daily lives. Of course we always listened to the news.

Amthor: Was there any threat of after the war about Communism? Did you feel there was a threat of Communism?

Howitt: We talked about it, but I don't remember that you know we were so happy that it was over, and I know we talked about Russia and China, those two countries particularly, but I think we after the war where we'd won on two sides of us we felt fairly safe. I will say that my Mother and Dad together had twelve nephews in the service, so we had a lot of – my Mother wrote a lot of letters. [Laugh]

Amthor: Wow. Did you have any concerns about the economy, the inflation, or maybe diseases, like polio or tuberoses at that time?

Howitt: Polio. I had polio shots; after it was prevalent, we went to the doctor's for shots and I knew a young man who had polio.

Amthor: There was a lot of that going around.

Howitt: Yes, in the area. I think now they can do more for it but at that time there was little they could do.

Amthor: If there was –is there something that stands out to you about the 1940s that you wanted to share with us that we didn't cover?

Howitt: You mean besides the war?

Amthor: Yes, the war – you know, about your life in particular about how things or maybe different; like did you have running water? Did you have electricity? Compared to today?

Howitt: On the farm when I was small and up through high school we had a pump in our kitchen; cistern water, but we had a well just outside. We got running water in the house when I was in college, in the late 40s. We got electricity in our home during the war – REA went through and our neighbors up on the highway had electricity from St. Joseph Light and Power

before we did, but that was a thrill to get, and I can remember my brother coming home on his furlough and we had electricity. So it was in the winter, probably of '43 or 4, long in there sometime. And it was really nice; we didn't have to go to the ice house and bring in ice to the ice box. The only thing we had to do was bring in wood to the stove, but later we of course had other kinds of furnace.

Amthor: So how did cooking change? I mean with the – if you said ice, how did you keep your food cold, and that type of thing?

Howitt: Of course we had the old ice box that we put the ice in to keep it cold, and after electricity, we bought an electric refrigerator, and the same thing – we had a gas stove after we had that big old stove that you had to heat it up to cook with wood. We bought a gas stove. We had that quite a while, and then later after we'd had electricity for a while we changed to an electric stove. So everything in the house was electric, and then it was – oh, it was probably in late 50's or early 60's we put a furnace in the farmhouse so everything was modern. Bathroom facilities came along about '48 and '49, when we had running water then we put the bathroom in.

Amthor: Up to that point you had the outhouses.

Howitt: Right.

Amthor: If there was something significant that you would like to say to college students about that time period, what would you say?

Howitt: Oh, boy! [Laugh] Well, even though we went through hardships, it was a wonderful time to be born and raised because everyone helped each other and we didn't try to outdo each other, you know, and now a days when I – well even before I quit teaching as soon as they're sixteen they get a car, so they don't' stay around in the family or in the homes to have a meal together or they're out shopping and going to other towns, you know. We couldn't do that but we didn't – I didn't feel like we were burden with anything, but I think if they look back they could learn a lot from what we went through and we all – as I said helped each other. It brought us close together and in our community practically everyone went to church and we had – just had a wonderful association with one another. We were just one huge family in the farm/rural areas, and I think we've lost that in our day now, so I would wish the college kids too want to get out and make the biggest amount of money they can, and sometime you have to start at the bottom and work up and they aren't willing to do that now as we were when we were younger.

Amthor: Did you have any questions, Margaret? One last comment: if there is anything else you'd like to say, otherwise I think that this has been a great interview.

Howitt: I'll probably think of things when I get home.

Amthor: This is just so fascinating to know like you're quilt here that you brought. Things like that we just aren't aware of that type of thing and it's great to have those types of artifacts left.

Howitt: Well thank you for having me.

Amthor: Well thank you, and I appreciate your coming. I think we had a great interview.

Howitt: Well thank you.

Amthor: And we've learned a lot.

Howitt: I wouldn't want to relive those war years but the rest of my life would be fun to go back.

Amthor: Well it sure sounds like it. A lot of the people that we've talked to have said that they were good years; I mean happy years other than the war, but so. . .

Howitt: After the war was over – just the war were Depression years so the war did help us get out of the Depression years, and after the war were really good years – early fifties were a wonderful time.

Amthor: It seems like there was more family orientated.

Howitt: That's what we got away from.

Amthor: So those were the good years.

Howitt: Right. Those were the good ol' days. [Laugh]

Amthor: Okay.

Kelley: Wait just a minute and I'll take a still picture of you there, so just look right in here.