

IRENE FOSTER

This is a portion of the Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri of the 1940s Program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today's date is April 16, 2009, and this interview is being conducted at the Nodaway County Historical Museum. The interviewer is Emily Schmeltz and the interviewee is Lula Irene Foster, birthday Nov 6, 1918. She lived during the 1940s and this interview is her story of her life during this time period including World War II.

Schmeltz: Okay. Do you want to start out and tell us where and when you were born?

Foster: I was born November 6th, 1918, on the Bilby Ranch southwest of Quitman.

Schmeltz: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents, their occupations, if you had any siblings?

Foster: My father was a farmhand at this time on this Bilby Ranch and my mother was an at-home mother with 11 living children.

Schmeltz: Can you tell us a little bit about your life in the 1940s before World War II?

Irene: Before World War II? We lived in a big two-story farmhouse on the Bilby Ranch. And it was during the Depression that I mostly remember. And I went my first year to a rural school house that was just probably a block south of where we lived. That was my first grade. And then in the second grade I went into Quitman to the grade school there. And my father was paid to transport us to school in a Model-T Ford. And I don't remember how many of my brothers – I was number 4 between 7 boys. And then later there were three sisters in our family.

And then in 1940 or '41, I think, we moved to town. The Bilby Ranch was taken over by an insurance company during the Depression when everyone lost their farms and everything. And we lived in Quitman – no, it would have been 1935 when we moved to town and I graduated from Quitman High School in 1936. And then I went to, in 1938, I think that's when it was - I went to Maryville to live and work. My mother needed me at home, but I felt I should get a job and that would be one less mouth to feed. I have wondered many times how we kept from going hungry, but we didn't. There was a big garden there, many wild animals that my brothers killed, meaning rabbits and squirrels, and we ate those and fish, and there were fruits that we, my dad, and my brothers picked – gooseberries, wild strawberries, mulberries. And I remember my mother used to can gooseberries in half gallon jars without sugar because she didn't have enough sugar to put in the jars when she canned them.

Now Mr. Bilby had a store at the ranch house which was across the section from us and my dad would go and buy flour, I know, in 50 pound sacks and sugar – I don't think they were 50 pound sacks, but let's say probably 25 pound sacks and any other things that we

needed. And we also had a cow which furnished us our milk and butter and we had chickens and we had eggs from the chickens and we ate lots of chickens, young and old, and then Mr. Bilby gave us hogs to butcher. I think he gave us 6 or 8 every year, but we didn't have any beef. Mr. Bilby didn't raise any beef then. So, that's about so much for that era. Then, do you want me to go on?

Schmeltz: Yeah, that's fine.

Foster: Well, the 1940s, that's where we are today, followed the Great Depression. And these times were trying for everyone. We were in World War II and everyone was very concerned and were doing everything possible for our soldiers. And I think nowadays we should be doing that now, which we're not. We're enjoying our lives here while they're fighting for our freedom. There was rationing of food and many other items. My, then, boyfriend was in the Army Air Force, Carl Foster, as were my four brothers. One brother was in Africa and Italy, one in the Pacific, one in North Africa and France, and one in the states. They all returned and we felt very blessed and very lucky.

My first job was in a home and I received \$2/week. I then later worked uptown at Superior Cleaners in Maryville and my salary was \$7/week. I remember going to the grocery store. I had a little apartment on South Buchanan and my little kitchen was in the clothes closet of that big two-story house and I would buy a piece of meat for 10 cents.

Maryville was quiet and myself and five other women went to Kansas City and I got - I was employed in an office on Southwest Boulevard and my salary was \$75/ month.

Carl and I were married in 1943 and I went to live near him and at various ports and always found a job wherever I went. He was in a truck accident in Mobile, Alabama, in October of 1943 and spent 14 months in army hospitals recovering from a broken back. He was in hospitals in New Orleans, Jackson, Mississippi, Macon, Georgia, and Louisville, Kentucky. When a load of wounded soldiers came back from overseas, he would be sent elsewhere, making beds for them. Carl went back to limited duty in Alabama and our servicemen returned to Maryville in late 1945 or 1946.

We then purchased a home on the corner of 5th and Walnut St for \$4,500. We tried to make it livable, but were happy and so glad to be home. We also purchased a 1934 Plymouth 4-door and I don't remember how much we paid for it. We didn't have much money, but everyone made the best of what they had.

We opened an automotive repair shop on North Main in the late 1940s and were there almost 30 years. This business required hard labor, but we were successful, and on many jobs the labor charge was a dollar or 2 dollars, plus parts. My father-in-law, Charley Foster built the building for us. The 1950s came and all was better.

Schmeltz: Okay, can you tell us a little bit about what it was like being a woman during the war? What your goal was when your husband was gone?

Foster: Well, I was usually working because he was – I don't remember at that time – I think a private made either \$16 or \$20 a month and I worked and I got along fine and I had no trouble getting a job wherever I went because- you know - the men were all gone and help was hard to find.

Schmeltz: Can you describe a little bit about rationing and price control and stuff like that?

Foster: Well, I know very little about it. I do remember when I was in New Orleans, I had a room with a French lady and she would bring me coffee and toast every morning for my breakfast and my mother baked fruit cake and sent to us and, of course, my husband was in the army hospital and he was being well taken care of, so I would go to the store and buy oranges or tangerines and I would eat that fruit cake and the fruit every night for my supper and I haven't liked fruit cake since.

Schmeltz: Were you aware of any propaganda going on in the United States about foreign countries or what the government.....

Foster: No, there was none at that time and the base my husband was on was very, very tight, but I did go there for- a few times, but not very often.

Schmeltz: Can you tell us a little bit about what you did for entertainment during the war? Did you listen to the radio or???

Foster: Well, I had a radio. That's about all the entertainment. I usually went to the hospital every night whenever I could.

Schmeltz: Is the radio – is that how you heard about what was going on during the war?

Foster: Radio and newspapers. And we were in Mobile, Alabama, when the war ended, and I remember I was working in a department store downtown and the office manager and his wife – we had gotten to be real good friends of them – and so he said- the stores began to close and he said, "We'll go out and celebrate tonight. We'll go and eat." Well, my husband had heard about the war ending and, of course, he was either in a cast or a brace, I don't remember which. But we couldn't get anyplace so we just had to go home.

Schmeltz: Did you know anything about the war going on in Europe or the Pacific? Did you know much about that?

Foster: Well, not very much because my brothers would write e-mails or victory letters, I think they were called, and they didn't have their addresses. They were army post offices and so – no, other than what was in the newspapers, I didn't know much about what was going on.

Schmeltz: How did you learn about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Foster: Oh, my. I remember it very well. Now, was that in 1941?

Schmeltz: Yes.

Foster: I think it was. I wasn't married then. Yes, December 7th. Now, I don't remember whether my husband-to-be was there or whether he had already gone to the army. I don't think he had, but anyway, I went with my mother and dad over to Quitman to see my grandparents. And my granddad had a little store up town on the main street of Quitman. And I remember when we went by there, my granddad came running out from his store – it was on a Sunday afternoon and said to us, "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor." And I always remembered that very vividly.

Schmeltz: How - did you ever see how the U.S. or how people you knew thought about Japanese or was there any.....

Foster: Well, my brothers, to this day, especially the one who was in the Pacific area, had no use for the Japanese and he - I remember he wouldn't talk of his war years, but he would not buy a foreign car. And I also remember when he passed away, I didn't even know that he had the Purple Heart until he was gone because he never – he was in terrible battles and he never talked about it.

Schmeltz: Okay. How did you learn about D-Day and the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan?

Foster: Well,

Schmeltz: How did you feel about that?

Foster: I think that was when the war ended and we were in Mobile, Alabama, then.

Schmeltz: Did everyone think it was – did they agree with it?

Foster: I really don't know whether I ever talked about anything like that. I was so glad the war was over because my family had been so involved.

Schmeltz: Okay. When veterans came home like your family and everything, how were they treated?

Foster: Well, I would say very well. It was a glorious occasion. And.....I think - I really hadn't thought about that, but I know that the American Legion was active and my husband joined the American Legion and I joined the Legion Auxiliary and belonged - he belonged to the Legion until he passed away, but I had given it up – being a member of the Auxiliary for a short time before that.

Schmeltz: After the war, were you and your family worried about the spread of Communism? Did you hear about that at all? Or was it just not really an issue?

Foster: I don't think it was really an issue. We were so busy getting our lives back to normal.

Schmeltz: I think I just have one more question. Did you ever go to like the - any big city and see if it was different at all being in a small town like Maryville?

Foster: Yes, I went to Kansas City and worked down there for awhile.

Schmeltz: Was it a lot different down there?

Foster: Oh, yes, it was different from Maryville, as I wrote in my article there. There was nothing to do here and there were 6 gals – five gals and myself, we went to Kansas City and all found jobs. And we worked there and, of course we didn't have very much money, but we did the best we could. Now I wasn't married then, but I didn't want to go to work in a defense plant because I knew that I was going to get married and when I did get married, I'd go with my husband. So, I got a job in an office on Southwest Boulevard and I made \$75 a month. But we girls lived in just upstairs rooms in houses there and we always went places together. And we used to go to the Playmore on Saturday night – or Sunday night it was – and there was a – the Playmore was on the 30th or 31st and Main in Kansas City. And it was a dance hall, a big dance hall, and we would go over there and there were always a lot of soldiers there because there was a USO just across the street from there and, of course, this was close to Union Station and they would go to the USO. So we would go to the dance over there on Sunday night and we walked over from where we lived which was 10 or 12 blocks and then we would ride the streetcar home at 12:00 because we didn't think it was safe to be walking at midnight and I think we paid 10 cents for our streetcar fare. And I loved living in Kansas City, but, when my husband came back, he wanted no part of the city. He wanted to come back to Maryville, and we came back to Maryville.

Schmeltz: Okay. Thank you for your interview.

Foster: Well, thank you.

~~Kelley: Did you ever live anyplace if you were in the South where they had fireworks on New Year's Eve and stuff like that?~~

~~Foster: No. See, they didn't have any...~~

~~Kelley: Mom said they did that in Texas when she was down there.~~

~~Foster: No, they didn't have anything like that. Everything was curtailed. No.~~