

KATE MCKEE

Amthor: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in 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 October 28, 2008, and this interview is being conducted at the Nodaway County Historical Society Museum in Maryville, Missouri. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley. The interviewee is Kate McKee and her birthday was September 24, 1921, and she lived during the 1940s and this interview is her story of life during this time period, including World War II.

Amthor: What we're going to discuss is the home front occupation and some of the activities during that time period. First, we're going to start with some biographical details, like where and when were you born?

McKee: I was born in Craig, Missouri, September 24, 1921.

Amthor: Tell us about your parents' occupations and how many brothers and sisters you had.

McKee: My father was a hardware merchant, but in those days, the hardware business involved undertaking, furniture, hardware, implements and cars, so it was not like our typical hardware today. My mother did not work outside the home. I had a half sister and she was ready for college when I was born, so we never lived together, but we had a close relationship with one another.

Amthor: Tell us about your life before 1940, prior to World War II. Like your family, your education, your occupation. Were you rural or town?

McKee: We lived in town, I've never lived in the country, however my mother owned a farm, and her brothers owned farms, so I went to the farm frequently, and enjoyed going out to the country, and the animals, and all this and that, that we didn't have in town, and my father's people lived in towns around Craig. I remember going there on Sunday; it was always a big thing to go to one of the aunt's house for Sunday dinner. Chicken and noodles was my father's favorite dish, and they would always prepare it for him. When it got – when the roads got bad, in those days there were no paved roads – we'd go on the train. We'd leave Craig about ten-thirty, and you'd get to Bigelow where they lived, and come back at four o'clock on the train. So that was a big adventure and all, but I think our life in those days was very happy, and it was spent primarily with family members. We were all close to each other and did many things. My father and mother both belonged to the things in the community and were active but there were not as many clubs and things as you have in today's world.  
[My father served on the Board of Education and on the city council for many years.]

Amthor: Do you have any other family members who participated in the War?

McKee: Only cousins. The rest of my family was not in the service. Not in World War II, at least.

Amthor: Next we're going to discuss some of the propaganda at the time. Were you aware of the propaganda in the U.S. by foreign countries, and of our own governments?

McKee: Well, my father and mother both listened to the radio, which was our big source of information, and they read the newspapers, so of course, we knew that there were troubles, but yet I think we hoped against hope that there wouldn't be war. I remember very vividly I was home with them on Sunday, December the Seventh when Pearl Harbor was bombed and we immediately thought of two boys that had once been our neighbors that were serving on a ship that was stationed in Pearl Harbor. It was Wilbur and David Wright. We worried about were they safe? We soon learned that they were, but Wilbur was upset; he'd lost his match collection in the bombing of the ship and we always thought, gosh, he did escape with his life, why worry about a trivial thing as that! That was Wilbur.

Amthor: How did the U.S. portray the war and the Japanese? Please explain.

McKee: Well, of course, remember, I was living in a remote little country town and I don't suppose old people had opinions, but they were not always the best of opinions. They didn't have any use for the Japs as they called them, and you know, we're ready to get them off the face of the earth and all, but yet we were upset because of the fact that many of the young people, or the men, of course, had to go to war, and it left very few in the community. A few as I remember that lived on farms could go before the board and you know, say that they were needed, or their families would say that they needed them to support the family. They needed their help on the farm, but my family, no, was not affected, for we didn't have any boys.

Amthor: What did you know about the war in Europe or in China?

McKee: Probably very little. When you're a teenager you have other interests, and that really didn't interest me all that much. Not until the bombing of Pearl Harbor did we really realize that our nation may be was in danger too. Sort of wakened up to the fact that war isn't a trivial thing.

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

McKee: On the radio. It was Sunday, and my mother and father were glued to the radio all day long, and word came that we were at war. They knew what was ahead, I suppose, I really didn't. It didn't leave that much of an impact at that moment but later of course, I realized that it is a very serious thing.

Amthor: How did you learn about progress of the war?

McKee: Through the newspaper and the radio.

Amthor: This section is on the home front during the war; life on the home front. Tell us about the selective service, service alternatives, like farming or teaching, and about women's roles in the war.

McKee: Well, we weren't aware of women playing a big role. I can't recall anybody in our community that went into the service, or any women, but of course, the young men were all enlisted and had to go to service, and we were concerned about them, and the churches tried to keep in touch and we sent packages to the boys and tried to do things like that. Then some of us were involved – I was home at that particular time. I had spent two years over here at Northwest in school, and teachers were –there was a shortage of teachers, and so got the bright idea of not finishing my degree about going home and teaching and earning money; that's always a big thing when you're young. My parents said, alright, if that was what I wanted to do, so I was teaching school there but it was a very serious concern even then, and I think we realized that things were wrong. I can remember even in our little town we would have blackouts, and then there was always some of us that had to go up and down the streets to make sure that everybody's blinds or curtains were drawn so that no light would appear. We were between the air base in St. Joe and the one in Omaha. They always warned us you know that planes returning could drop bombs or something, trying to get rid of them before they got to their base. I think we took it very seriously.

Amthor: Describe your role in civil defense; like rationing, price controls, scrap paper and metal drives, and blood drives.

McKee: Well, as I said, I was teaching school at that time, and so I remember working to get ration books to the public. They would come I guess, and request a book, at least we issued them from that point, and so I did that. I also helped roll bandages and do whatever needed to be done; we pitched in and did it. Of course there was nothing much else to do in those days either because everything sort of was at a standstill. Other than going to church on Sunday and praying that everybody would get home safely, there wasn't a lot of fun things going on in that era.

Amthor: Describe what you did for entertainment before and during the war; like listening to the radio, going to dances, etc.

McKee: Well, we listened to the radio, we went to the dances, and we spent Saturday night; that was a big night in the little towns, you know. We'd go to town, and we'd go to the movie, and then we'd go in the drug store and have refreshments that I'm sure were ice cream or a coke or something, and then we'd parade up and down Main Street, walk and walk and I don't know what we were searching for, because there wasn't anything there but that was how we spent most of our time, you know, doing dumb things like that. We were happy; we didn't know the difference. Once in a while we could get to another town, like Mound City, or Tarkio, or some place, and we always thought they had better movies than we had at home. We did have a very good offering of movies, though.

Amthor: Explain the effects upon your family created by gas and food rationing, price controls, such as luxury goods used in clothing.

McKee: Gas was not a big problem because in Craig you could walk anyplace you needed to go. We would save the gasoline so we could visit Dad's family, and we went to a rural church, and we always had enough gas to go out there, but we did not travel very far either. We could go to St. Joe on the train, so instead of driving we would get on the train and go to St. Joe to shop and

do things like that. I think we spent a lot of time, of course, with family. That was probably one of the big things in our lives; the aunts and uncles would invite us to their home, and we'd have them and all. Life was simple, but we were happy. We didn't know any different. We'd go to the movies, and there were other entertainment in town sometimes. Some of the members of town would put on a play, or something and we'd all go. The churches would have dinners, and things like that, and we'd go to those. Life was much different than it is now. We entertained ourselves- we didn't have to be entertained all the time. We played with each other in the neighborhood.

Amthor: Explain how you got the news about the progress of the war. Was it through the radio.  
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McKee: Through the radio. You did ask how rationing – I can remember hose was an item that they were just as scarce as could be, and we would just hold our breath that we didn't get a runner in the stocking, because there were no non-runs in those days. Then I think sugar was probably the next one that affected our family greatly, because Mother canned and she made jams and jellies and all, and there was very little sugar to use and all. I always had long, narrow feet, and shoes were hard to come by. I had to take very good care of my shoes as soon as I got home from school or someplace, Mother would say "Change your shoes, now!" so that my good pair of shoes would remain decent to go to church. That was – you had to really watch and my Dad didn't need as many shoes as I did, so he would give me his shoe coupons and you had to help each other in those days.

Amthor: What songs or movies do you remember during the war?

McKee: Well, let's see. We went to movies. Someplace I thought I had that written down, but let's see. Gone with the Wind; it came out in 1939, but it didn't get to this part of the country until the 40's. I remember going to that; The Philadelphia Story; Kitty Foil; Yankee Doodle Dandy; Sergeant York; Mrs. Miniver; Casablanca; For Whom the Bells Toll; Going My Way; Mildred Pierce; Gaslight; A Tree Grows in Brooklyn; were some of them that I could remember. Movies were big thing, and I think that on Sunday it was 25 cents, but during the week it was only 15. That was our cheap source of entertainment. I know the movies were good in those years. Or at least - there was not violence and sex and all that you find in some of the movies today.

Amthor: How about the music? Do you remember any special?

McKee: Well, we had band concerts every summer, and I can remember I played a French horn, and we always looked forward to Wednesday night because that was when we would have band concerts and we'd get to go over to town and everybody would come in from the farms around and the townspeople would all come. Usually they were in the park. We had a stage or a bandstand in our park, and so that was a big thing that we always looked forward to. We just made our own entertainment. We'd go to people's houses and do things. Life was simple, but we didn't know the difference, so we were happy.

[Our church had a choir and also a band. Mother played the organ at church]

Amthor: The next section is the end of the war; people coming home. How did you learning about D-Day, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Japanese surrender?

McKee: On the radio, or course. I was over here [at NWMSTC] at that particular time. Since I'd not finished my degree when I should have. I came back summers and I came back one whole year to finish it up. It was during that time that the war ended and the veterans came home. I was offered a job to teach at Northwest, after I got my degree, to teach in the Horace Mann School, and one part of my contract was that I live at the Residence Hall and be the night chaperone. Girls had to be in at 10:30, and I was to lock the door at 10:30. Weekend nights they could stay out until 12 and oh, they did they think that was a special thing. I had to stay up until twelve o'clock to see that they all got home, you know, but movies were the big thing that we had for entertainment. There were dances; finally, when the boys came home you could have dances again. Not during the war years, unless girls wanted to dance with girls, and that wasn't too much fun.

Amthor: How were the veterans treated upon their return home from your perspective?

McKee: I think they were treated well enough, but you'll have to remember it affected different ones in different ways. Some were very angry, some came home with a wound of some kind, and they were older than the girls in college, and they presented some problems because they knew far more than the girls and they were more worldly than the girls so girls were easily led astray I think by some of the veterans as they returned. It was difficult when you had to work with them, you know, try to get them to see they have to be careful what you do.

Amthor: After the war, were you and your family worried about the international spread of Communism and the Communistic government?

McKee: I don't think we were too worried about it. We were aware, yes, that it would happen but I think we just hope against hope that we would be safe, and nothing like that would occur. I don't remember that it was a big thing that we worried about.

Amthor: Were there concerns about the economy, inflation?

McKee: Yes. Times were very, very hard, and as I had said previously, Mother's brother lived on the farm, and it was very difficult for them to eke out a living because the price of the crops that they grew was very, very cheap. I can remember that my father always had a salary and he would lend them money to buy seed to plant the next year's crops. Times were hard, and many families had to be on welfare. Of course, our family was not, and we tried to – Mother would make food and we'd have some extra, she'd send it to some family she felt was in need. She was always good to share clothing that I'd out grown with others, and all. Both of my parents were generous with what we had. I don't mean – we did have a new home; it was built I believe when I was two years old. We were very comfortable, but both of my parents were concerned with the people in our community and tried to help out the best they could. I can remember in that day, the hardware store had caskets and things, and they had a man that was the embalmer in the community, and a little baby died, and they family could not afford a casket, and my father said

“this child is going to have a Christian burial.” He was always willing to share what we had with somebody else.

Amthor: How about the spread of polio, tuberculosis and cancer? Was that a threat?

McKee: That was a worry and concern. I did have a dear friend, she’s still living that had polio but she came through with a badly crippled leg, but other than that, she was mentally very alert, and taught school for many years, but that was the only one that I really knew about that had polio. We were aware of it and were cautious of what we did and where we went, not knowing really what caused it.

Amthor: Describe your listening to the radio habits. What did you listen to: Were they homemaking show, soap operas, adventure series, farm markets?

McKee: My mother listened religiously to Kitchen Klatter and Earl May, I think they had a home maker’s program too, and of course, as a child that didn’t appeal much to me, but I would listen to some of the children’s programs, and then we listened to One Man’s Family and other programs that my family thought were worthy of family listening to, you know. That was one of our big sources of entertainment, and we had a radio early on in Craig. Also we had the first electric refrigerator in Craig, and I can remember everybody coming to see it. My mother got so irritated with all the traffic she had in and out of the house. We had things as they became available.

Amthor: Well, was there anything that we didn’t cover that you would like to talk about? Or a special story that you would like to share?

McKee: No, you asked what we did, you know, when I was here in school. We didn’t have food on the campus on Sunday, so we would have to come to town, or walk to town. Nobody had any cars in that day and age. We all just walked and we thought nothing of walking from the campus to the Presbyterian Church or even to the Catholic Church. St. Mary’s was very far across town but we could get there. We went of course the activities on the campus, but we did go to the movies; that was the big thing. Then some of the big bands would come; Tommy Dorsey, and his brother would come and others that were popular in that era. We’d go to that and we’d go to dances. Rock Port, which you’re familiar with, was a place to go to dance. We’d go up to Rock Port on Saturday night. We found things to do all the time. I suppose the young people would think it was boring, boring, boring, but to us it was entertaining. I don’t know, we did more things with our families. Mothers pretty much stayed at home in that day or era and so you know, after school you’d go home and Mother would have popcorn or had made candy or popcorn balls or something. Your friends would come home with you, and she’d plan something special for you to do or something. We were not unhappy, we always had things to do. We went to church and of course that provided us with things. I especially remember Christmas Eve. The tree as I remember it, oh, the biggest tree I’d ever seen; a great tall thing. We’d get a sack of candy, and we always had a little Christmas program. My mother would tell me before we went, “Now don’t you say somebody’s piece!” There was a little girl that was in my group and she would cry, invariably, when it was her turn to say her spiel, or piece, and I would say her part and mother would just nearly have a stroke. I think I did that year after year. I was always going

to help the little girl. Church and all was a big thing in our family. We went to church every Sunday, even though it meant going on dirt roads. Bilby Ranch went clear over by Craig and right in front of Bilby Ranch was a terrible mud hole every time it rained. In the winter, and in the spring thaw, there would be this mud hole. I can remember the men cut willows and put them across the roads so we could get to church. Then the church always had a Sunday School picnic in the summer, and that was a big deal. We'd go out to a grove in the country for the Sunday School picnic and there'd be games for the children, and there was a program. [The ladies sold chicken, potato salad and pie. They always put down – they'd get from the lumber yard boards and concrete blocks and make benches for us to sit on. Oh, yes! The town of Craig always had a reunion . Every year the Craig Reunion. I can remember that we'd have to have so many dresses ready, and we'd compare what are you going to wear this night? Saturday night? What are you going to wear Sunday night? I think it started Friday night, too, but you had to have some special dress to wear to that occasion. It was just typical carnival stuff, and there was a program usually, and the band would often play, so of course that meant we had to go, for we were a member of the band. Life was not real exciting, but it was the best we had, and we enjoyed it.

Amthor: Okay.

McKee: Alright.

Amthor: I'm glad that you came in today. We appreciate it. Thank you for sharing.

McKee: I hope that I've covered what you wanted and all.

Amthor: I think that we covered everything.