

Memories of Mayfield, Kentucky During World War II: An Interview with Mrs. Frances Bennett

Megan Dobrose

Megan Dobrose: This is Megan Dobrose. The date is September 11, 2016, and the subject is World War II. My interviewee is Frances Bennett. Mrs. Bennett, do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

Frances Bennett: Yes, you do.

Megan Dobrose: Can you give me some background information about your life during World War II, such as where you lived and how old you were at the time?

Frances Bennett: Okay, when the war started it was about 40, they started drafting of course in 41, but the war didn't actually start until 43, I'm thinking.¹ And, uh, yes I was between my junior and senior year in high school, and when we heard about Pearl Harbor being bombed, I remember how sad because I just felt like if they was bombed that our whole world would just nearly come to an end because I wasn't familiar with the war type of thing. But, um, a lot of the changes that it made, so many women had to go to work and leave the home and go out because women back in those days worked mostly at home, they didn't work outside, but women had to go to work because the men had to go to the war, you know, go fight, and the rationing that we had, there was so many things that we couldn't get, not only food, but clothing. Because they used a lot of the materials, like they had to use elastic, I guess to, to make, um, parachutes and things like that and then we couldn't even get that even put in our underwear, you know. We had to use, what they did was they made the underwear and they put buttons on the sides of them, and some things like that, that I remember that was very, I mean it was hard for us because we had never been used to anything. It'd be like you today having to go, you know, into things like that, you'd never been used to having to do. And, um, they were needing some people, Mayfield had a clothing factory, and they got a shipment, no, an order from the government to make overcoats for the soldiers in the wintertime, and they was needing some help, so I worked during my junior and senior year and helped make wool overcoats, and those things were heavy

¹ Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. The next day members of the United States Congress voted to declare war on Japan. Leaders of Germany and Japan declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941. A US declaration of war against Germany and Japan soon followed.

and thick. I don't believe you could run and punch a knife through them, you know, they were so heavy and big, but I was happy to do that because I felt that way I was helping, you know, in some part.

Megan Dobrose: Right, well that was really nice. And so you've lived here in Mayfield your whole life?

Frances Bennett: Yes.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, and so what were you thinking when you first heard about the war? Like before even Pearl Harbor and all that, when you just heard about it going on overseas?

Frances Bennett: Okay, I felt that, the United States was strong enough that we would be, I didn't really think that they would whip us or beat us or whatever you call it in the war. Uh, because I felt like the United States had some that were strong enough. They didn't at the very beginning, but they started preparing ahead of time when they first heard of it, and I felt good toward, not toward the war, but that the United States would come out a winner.

Megan Dobrose: Okay so, you said that when you first heard about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor, you thought that that was it?

Frances Bennett: At the time, I had never heard of anything like that before, and I really thought well, back in my mind, I guess really I thought that we would survive, but it was so many casualties, just so many people killed, and it was a real sad time for me because I knew so many lives had, course we were getting reports, you know through the media, well, really not television, it was a radio, how many of our soldiers were getting killed and how many got wiped out at that one time, but then, I thought the others that had training, and course Fred² was in our neighborhood, he and his brother, and I knew that they were there in the war, I knew they had been, so I was just hoping that maybe, you know, we could come back at them and kill them out first, instead of them taking all our soldiers.

Megan Dobrose: Right, so, your opinion about the U.S.'s involvement in the war, were you supportive of the United States troops being involved in the war or did you think-

Frances Bennett: Yes, yes I was.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so you thought that was a good idea?

² Fred Bennett married Frances after the war.

Frances Bennett: I was supportive of the troops. That was one of the reasons I went to work, and that was one way I thought well, I could help. And they were asking a lot of women to help in different ways that they had never helped before because they had to take the men, a lot of them had to go farm, you know, help make a living, and but I worked helping to make their, I don't, I just worked between my junior and senior year of high school, so that way I didn't work a long time, but I remember those big old heavy overcoats.

Megan Dobrose: Alright, so how much about what was going on overseas did you know about, or were you kind of oblivious?

Frances Bennett: Well, we started school and we had our teacher, and we studied about everyday about where the United States, where they were stationed, at what place, and what they were going to plan on, because we could get news, you know, and he could, well I don't know how he could get in more than we could, other than he took other kinds of papers that they had sent, and he would know, and we would try to keep up with where the boys were, and the certain battalion that was going to strike next, and things like that, that's how we kept up with the war.

Megan Dobrose: Oh okay. So your teachers were, they were teaching about the war, as it was going on?

Frances Bennett: Yes, yes.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, that's interesting. So were you afraid? For yourself and for the soldiers that were over there? Was it scary?

Frances Bennett: Not actually. I mean, I wasn't. I don't remember being afraid. I was sad, you know for so many that was getting killed. But, as far as being actually afraid for my life, I don't think that I was. Of course, we kept, everytime you'd hear a airplane go over, you'd wonder, you know, if they was coming over to bomb the United States or whatever, in our vicinity. But, Mayfield and surroundings is small enough and doesn't have that many great gatherings to get, what they were after was a whole lot of people at one time like when they hit Pearl Harbor, so I really don't think I was afraid.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so you thought that if they were going to attack the United States, they would go somewhere other than Mayfield?

Frances Bennett: Yes, other than Mayfield.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so Mayfield is a pretty good place to live in that sense. So, um, what was the local public's opinion about the war? Like did they think that it was good for the United States to be over there, or were they thinking that the United States' troops needed to come home or?

Frances Bennett: You see, the war is what brought, helped bring us out of depression. We were in a great depression, and the war starting, and, uh, so many men, you know, going to the war, and that way they were working and making us some money, not a whole lot, but according to what they were getting paid back here, cause my dad said he worked for 15 cents an hour back in those days. Well, they paid them I think maybe about 21 dollars a month is what Fred got paid when he first started in the service. But, it did create some money, started money to flow, and that was the good part about it, but the bad part was that, you know, so many of our soldiers, our boys got killed.

Megan Dobrose: Right, so good and bad? The opinion was?

Frances Bennett: Yes.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, and how was your family directly affected by the war? So you said, did any of your family members have to go?

Frances Bennett: Not in World War II, they didn't. There weren't any in there. The only way that I could feel that we were affected was by the rationing of the foods and different things that we had to have.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, that's what I was going to ask you about next. So, today we can go to the store and get pretty much whatever we need or want. So, what can you tell me about a time when certain things weren't available for you to go to the store and get it because of the rationing? Can you talk about that?

Frances Bennett: Okay, so I think the things that bothered most people were coffee and sugar because most of the stuff that we used, we could raise on the farm, but we did not have any, we didn't have sugar and coffee raised here, it was of course over seas and sent in, so those were the two things that I remember rationing most and cocoa, you couldn't get cocoa. There was lots of things you couldn't get because they couldn't ship it in, and America didn't grow enough of those type of things, but as far as vegetables and meats and things like that, well we had plenty because my father, he killed hogs, and we didn't have beef and things like that, and they didn't at the grocery at that time because the cattle was scarce, but we had plenty. You know, my mother and daddy raised a garden, she canned, and she didn't freeze it because there wasn't any freezers back

in those days, but she canned a lot, and so that way, and the only thing that I can remember that, well, there was lots of things too that we couldn't just go get like we usually do, but sugar and coffee were the two main things that were rationed that people couldn't get. And just a lot of canned stuff that would come like pineapple and things, you know, that course that was rationed. That would be one of the things that it said in this book, cans, they didn't name pineapple exactly, but just whatever, some canned something that you wanted that if you had the coupons in your book you could get, but it was rationed.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit more about the book, the rationing book?

Frances Bennett: Well, I was looking this book over last night. Okay, it says 55 spare, and what I get by that if you were going to buy something and you needed, well right here it says coffee 41, so there's, I had a lot of coffees left on mine because we didn't, none of the children drank coffee, my dad didn't either, but my mother did. And the way that I remembered it was that whatever we bought that was, some of these I don't know what that stood for. That was, I bet that was pineapple because it's got pineapple on the picture, it kind of looks like. And canned stuff that we had to get, but other than that, they would just go in and tear out, I don't really think the people that was using it, you know, like my mother or dad would take these. They wouldn't know. They would just hand it to them and they would take out whatever they wanted to or needed to with what we had bought, and if we bought something and we didn't have any coupons in here to cover it, well we couldn't get it.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so say whenever your parents went to the store, they would just bring in their book and then all their children's books all together? And then they would just get everything that they wanted or needed and take it up to the cashier, and then hand them the book, and they would say oh you can't get that or you can, then tear it out?

Frances Bennett: Yeah, we had, we had, like I said such a large family that we had several books, you know, to get coupons out of, I guess each one had. I did notice one, just one coupon, right here, sugar. And that's the only, I think it had coffee on the other side, but that's the only one that I had in here left of sugar, so I guess we used most of them. We used a lot of sugar ones unless we gave them away to a family that didn't have them, if they were needing it. And then this spare, I don't know, I guess they had this something, whatever the grocery did, but they had to take these spares out too because see, there's they've been taken, some of them, but I don't really know, just exactly. But I do know that we had a bunch of coffee there. I do know that, I'd been with my mother and daddy at the grocery, and we'd just gather up what we needed and take it up. You couldn't hardly buy bread either. I guess people mostly made their own bread. And there wasn't, well I can't remember, I remember after the war, but during the war, I think bread might have been one of those things that wasn't available. And then, anyway, they would just give

them the books, and they would just take out, you know, whatever they needed. Or if she knew that they wouldn't need over two of the books, she would just give them two of the books. And so that's kind of the way that I remember the way this was.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so each person in your family got a book? It didn't matter how old you were? Everyone got a book?

Frances Bennett: Everyone got a book. Everybody in our family. And I think at this time, they just had five children, so we had seven books. And that way we, our family, was able to, you know, get what we needed.

Megan Dobrose: So, you were pretty well off then, compared to some other people?

Frances Bennett: Yes.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, very cool. Alright so, you said that none of your family members went into the war, but did other people you knew go to the war? I know you said your husband was in the war, but you weren't married yet?

Frances Bennett: We weren't married yet when he was in the war, no.

Megan Dobrose: Can you tell me a little bit about what maybe he had told you about how it was over there?

Frances Bennett: He said that, uh, he said once that they got in real danger, that they thought it was going to be, well he said it was a miracle that they didn't get killed because there was a ship on either side of them, and it hit both the others and theirs was spared. He said he felt like that was a miracle, you know, that theirs wasn't hit. But he, uh, Fred, didn't seem, he was an officer, later on, but he wouldn't get commissioned as a higher officer because he didn't want to make a career out of the army. If he had gone any higher, he would've had to make it a career, and he didn't want that, he wanted to get out. He was in there, though, for almost five years. He went in before the war started, and he had to stay until after the war was over with.

Megan Dobrose: Wow. And you said that his family had to send one of their children?

Frances Bennett: Yes, they had the two boys that was registered that they had called up to go, but because Mr. Bennett was a farmer, they could leave one boy to help on the farm to raise food for the people that was left here because most of the men had to go, and there was nobody to tend the farm, just the older men. But, Mr. Bennett said he couldn't make that choice between the

two boys because he felt like if he sent one and he got killed or something, you know, he said he couldn't do that, so that way they just took both of them.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so what did you think when you first heard about the U.S. dropping the atomic bomb on Japan?

Frances Bennett: Well, I have kind of a mixed feeling about using atomic because I feel like that wipes out so many innocent people. But, still I felt like that they were going to do anything they could to the United States to kill all of us out, so why not, we had to stop, you know, we couldn't just stay and let them, you know, wipe us out and them not. But, I really, I hated to see them do it, but I guess that was what they had, of course war, there's nothing good about war, I don't think because it tears up so much and kills so many innocent people. But, um, I felt afterwards, that was what they should've done was use the atomic bomb to try to kill out where we could, you know, at least come out ahead of the war, and not let them come over in our country and start killing people. That was my fear, that they would come on over in the United States. I'd rather it be fought on foreign soil than here.

Megan Dobrose: Right, so you thought it was a good idea in the long run?

Frances Bennett: In the long run, I think so.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, what do you remember about when the war ended? Like was there celebration?

Frances Bennett: I remember a bunch of happy times. Yes, and in Mayfield, they had a parade. And what we did, we just, all the people would come and, you know, just blow horns and drive around the court square is mostly what they did for the celebration. Well, there was some on the streets, you know, celebrating and all. But, what I did because I was afraid, I was a senior, I guess then by that time, and a bunch of us junior and seniors came to town and just drove around, but some of them were pretty rough, so there was drinking and carrying on, you know, that's their type of celebrating, which it wasn't my type of celebrating. So, that's what we did. We just came to town, but it was all just so happy. Of course, we was singing and having a good time in the car, but we didn't get out. We stayed in the car and just drove around the square and blew the horns and all that.

Megan Dobrose: Okay, so it was a really happy celebration then, nice. What is something that you can tell me that you remember most about the war? Like when you hear World War II, what do you first think about?

Frances Bennett: What do I first think about? I think about drafting. See, I had never been in a war. They'd had World War I, but of course I wasn't living, but I had an uncle and two or three of my uncles had to go, but anyway it was the first time that we had actually had war, and uh, the first thing that I thought about and what I had missed most, I guess, was so many of the people, you know, that I had known, the boys that age, not any from our school because they weren't old enough to go, but then the older ones like Fred, he was the next step up, so many of them gone. There wasn't any younger men like that, I don't care where you went, well there was a vacancy there of that age of a person because they was, you know, in the war. And most of them that I knew got to come home. There was a few that I knew that didn't, but most of them got to come home.

Megan Dobrose: Well that was good.

Frances Bennett: But they were afflicted one way or another. Some of them had bad trouble with their nerves, you know, and some of them committed suicide. They just couldn't adjust back.

Megan Dobrose: That's so sad. Um, let's see, what, what was different during the war that you haven't seen again since then. Like the rationing?

Frances Bennett: The rationing, I haven't seen it since then. And um, I don't know, it seemed like the war, it tore people to the point that they didn't have the togetherness that they did before the war. I don't know if it was the war people that came back and when they started their families, and there was a sadness there or something in their life that they couldn't really get back, and get real close to people like they had before. Because before I know in our neighborhood, we used to have all kinds of, uh, get together and pan suppers and things like that, then after the war, it seemed like that just vanished away. And that was one of the things that I noticed that it seemed like people didn't get together as much as much. Maybe just the one family, the local family, you know, just like my family would be, but they didn't, you know, go and visit and mix in like they had before.

Megan Dobrose: Wow, that is interesting. I wonder why that, I wonder why that would be.

Frances Bennett: I don't know why that would be unless the, course the boys that were in the service, they had got married and started their family, and I figured it started from them, you know, cause they just felt like they, they didn't like that closeness, course they had been in the army, all close together, you know.

Megan Dobrose: Oh right, so it kind of reminded them of the war. Okay, what do you remember most about the months directly following the war?

Frances Bennett: Seems like I remember it being a happy time because all the boys were coming home. You know, they had been in the service, and their families would be happy and getting together and getting their family back together once again. But then at that age it didn't stay that way because either they were married and then they had their own families to go to or else they got married and left home and it still left that vacancy in that home. But, uh, I think it was happy times. Everybody seemed happy. You know, and glad everybody was back, and not worrying about who was going to get killed today, you know, or something like that.

Megan Dobrose: Well, that's nice. Yeah, alright, how do you think the experience of living through this major event in history has impacted your life as a whole?

Frances Bennett: Well, I think as a whole it has, uh, it helped my life. I think it did. Because, you know, everybody has some bad and good, and that was the bad, but the good overwhelmed it. I mean, you know, the good came out on top. So, I think it helped my life. And to know that we could get by on things that we thought we had to have, and we didn't have to. We could've really done without the rationing books, I guess, because I didn't do anything but just get fat because I ate so much sugar, pies and cakes and things. So, uh, I think it taught lessons, I really do. And most of them was for the good.

Megan Dobrose: Good. Alright, well that wraps up our interview, so thank you so much for your time and for this interview.

Megan Dobrose is a student at West Kentucky Community and Technical College.