

Growing Up in West Kentucky during the Great Depression and the Early Days of World War II: An Interview with Thelma Powell of Carlisle County

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Vickie Beasley: This is an interview of my grandmother, Thelma Powell, about growing up in the Great Depression and the early times of war.

Thelma Powell: 1930's

Vickie Beasley: Yes. So, her name is Thelma Powell. She was born on June 24, 1924, and lived in Carlisle County. Grandma, do you understand that this is being recorded? This is a recorded interview.

Thelma Powell: Yes, I do.

Vickie Beasley: Okay. Alright, let's start with, how old were you in 1933?

Thelma Powell: 9 years old.

Vickie Beasley: 9 years old. And how many siblings did you have?

Thelma Powell: Five.

Vickie Beasley: How many girls and boys?

Thelma Powell: There were four girls and two boys.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and did you have electricity in your home when you were that age?

Thelma Powell: No.

Vickie Beasley: So, you had um, what, oil lamps?

Thelma Powell: Kerosene lamps.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and how did you travel to get to town?

Thelma Powell: Well, we either walked or we went in the wagon. If you were lucky enough to have one. We didn't get to town very often, believe me.

Vickie Beasley: And, how about, the food that you ate? Did your family have enough food to eat?

Thelma Powell: Oh, we always had food to eat, but it would be beans and cornbread, wild duck, um poak salad, stuff like that.

Vickie Beasley: How about your meat?

Thelma Powell: Well, that would be a turtle or a rabbit or a squirrel or a fish.

Vickie Beasley: So, you hunted for your food. Okay, did you ever hear about other families struggling to get their food?

Thelma Powell: No, you didn't ah, unless they lived real close to you. You didn't get to see them, because you just didn't have the transportation.

Vickie Beasley: Right.

Thelma Powell: Unless they lived real close to you. Of course, the ones that did live close to us had just as hard time getting food as we did.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and did all you kids go out and pick berries and nuts?

Thelma Powell: Oh yeah, we'd go out and pick strawberries if you could find someone that had um. We'd pick blackberries, and uh dew berries, and canned um.

Vickie Beasley: You did a lot of canning?

Thelma Powell: We done a lot of canning.

Vickie Beasley: Okay.

Thelma Powell: Can green beans, you name it. Cause we didn't have refrigerators back then. We had to can it if we wanted it.

Vickie Beasley: And, how did your family earn money during that time for, you know, stuff other than food?

Thelma Powell: We didn't get much other than food. About the only thing we got, momma would buy material up there at Webb's Dry Goods, Webb's grocery up here at Cunningham or uh, Denver Hammons his office is.

Vickie Beasley: mmmm.

Thelma Powell: Well, that was a big grocery store and dry goods store at that time, and momma would go in there and buy material and make our dresses and our bloomers.

Vickie Beasley: Where did she get the money? How did your family earn the money to buy those things?

Thelma Powell: Well, we usually get that stuff in the spring, or early summer. We'd pick strawberries.

Vickie Beasley: What did your dad do to earn money?

Thelma Powell: He done anything that he could do. He a, he would dig wells.

Vickie Beasley: Would he work for other farmers?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, he would get a dollar a day work'en for, and that was from sun up, daylight to dark. It wasn't just eight hours.

Vickie Beasley: And how about alcohol? Did he ever sell and make alcohol?

Thelma Powell: Yes, he did. He made alcohol, and he sold it. He was lucky he didn't never get caught, but he didn't.

Vickie Beasley: And, I know that during this time, the government had programs to put people back to work. Did he ever help make the roads out here?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, he worked. I think it was WPA is what it was called. And he ah, worked when they was building that road. Concreting the road from Bardwell to Wickliffe, he worked on that. He would dig cisterns, dig wells, or do anything he could do to make a dime.

Vickie Beasley: Did you consider your family poor?

Thelma Powell: Well, we didn't know any different back then. You know, we didn't know anything about be'en, having plenty of money and stuff and we went only had one pair of shoes a year. In the summer we went barefoot. Even to school. And when it'd get cold, we'd get that one pair of shoes, and they had to last us all winter.

Vickie Beasley: How did your family get news?

Thelma Powell: News?

Vickie Beasley: Yeah. Like how did you hear about who was president, or running for president, or news of the war?

Thelma Powell: Through uh, I don't know how it got into the community, because there might have been some people who had phones maybe back then. But uh, the way that we'd found it out, Dad would go up to the Cunningham store and sit around and all the guys would sit around there and talk about different things. One would know something that one didn't know. They would just sit there and talk, and that's the way we found out about it.

Vickie Beasley: Do you remember ever having any shortages of any food or goods? Or maybe the prices of things back then?

Thelma Powell: The what?

Vickie Beasley: Prices? Like did you have a hard time getting any kind of goods? Were there goods that maybe you wanted, but couldn't find?

Thelma Powell: No, never had that problem. Cause we wouldn't have the money to buy anything more special than what we bought anyways.

Vickie Beasley: Do you remember how much you sold eggs for?

Thelma Powell: I don't remember, but it wasn't very much. Might have been, maybe ten cents a dozen.

Vickie Beasley: Can you remember maybe how much a bag of flour was?

Thelma Powell: Oh, it was about a dollar.

Vickie Beasley: A dollar?

Thelma Powell: Uh'ha

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and you made your own clothes?

Thelma Powell: We made our own clothes. Panties and the whole yard.

Vickie Beasley: And didn't you tell me one time, that you sometimes made cloths out of old flour sacks?

Thelma Powell: Yeah...yeah, we did. Sometimes the flour would come in flour sacks, and we'd use the flour sacks to make cloths. We'd make dresses. We lived right here on top of this hill between here and Cunningham.

Vickie Beasley: mmhm.

Thelma Powell: Back there where that water thing is. We lived back in there. That's where we lived when my mother died.

Vickie Beasley: Well, before we talk about that, ah, how did you get your medical care? Where was the nearest doctor?

Thelma Powell: The nearest doctor was in Cunningham. Doctor Burk.

Vickie Beasley: And would you have to be really sick to be able to go to the doctor? I mean common colds and stuff.

Thelma Powell: No, ah, I forgot what mamma used. She used something, I can't remember what it was. She would rub it on our chests when we'd get colds. Vicks salve and uh, I can't think of anything else. We used a lot of Vicks salve.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, were you ever denied medical care?

Thelma Powell: No.

Vickie Beasley: What if you couldn't pay for your medical care? What would your family do then?

Thelma Powell: What, if we couldn't pay for it?

Vickie Beasley: Yeah.

Thelma Powell: They would charge it.

Vickie Beasley: They would charge it and you can pay it off a little at a time? Okay, and Grandma, can you remember any black people in your area?

Thelma Powell: Only back in the late 30's and 40's, I got married in 1940. But, we lived at Bardwell, and we did have black children down there, and they were not allowed to go to school with the white kids. Our school was up there where Greg's Supermarket is. And the black school was, ah coming from Bardwell going toward Cunningham, there was a hill there, just as you come out of Bardwell, and the black kid's school was there. But they wasn't allowed to go to school with us.

Vickie Beasley: Did you ever notice, um, could the black people shop in the same places that you shopped? Did they let them go to the same grocery store?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, they did.

Vickie Beasley: So, they kept them segregated, is that correct? Okay, um, did you ever notice if your family bartered goods? Like, would you get. When you went to town, did you bring stuff to sell or trade?

Thelma Powell: Oh yeah, we used to sell chickens and (conversation going off course to a personal matter). Now what was the question?

Vickie Beasley: Bartering goods. Take stuff to trade.

Thelma Powell: Oh yeah, we'd sell chickens and eggs, hogs, calves. One time me and Veal (Grandfather) had a sow for sale. We put the old sow in the back seat of the car. He drove the car, and I sat back there and held the old sow hog down. Mantal had a place here in Bardwell, where he bought live-stock. We took that sow down there and sold her. Didn't get much for her, I forgot how much it was. It wasn't very much. It was a big old fat sow.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, Grandma, I'm going to ask you, um, after years went on, was your family.... were all the siblings able to stay together, and live in the same house?

Grandma: No, after my mother died.

Vickie Beasley: What year did she die?

Thelma Powell: 1936, February 22nd. She wasn't but 30 years old. And ah, I had a brother that was, well he was born May the 12th, 1933. And, a sister that was born March the 15th, 1932. And a brother that was born January the 9th, 1931. Well the two little ones, was too young to go to school. So, my mother's sister raised my baby brother, and my daddy's cousin raised my baby sister. My baby brother, we didn't get to see him for, well, he was 14 years old.

Vickie Beasley: So, the two youngest kids had to go to other families, so that your dad could keep up with you all?

Thelma Powell: Yeah.

Vickie Beasley: And you guys could go to school?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, and Jay was just barely old enough to get in school, but we did get him in. We didn't have to let him go.

Vickie Beasley: Alright, well let's move on to, um, when the US was drug into WW II. I understand that you were married then. Okay, can you tell me how you found out about Pearl Harbor being attacked?

Thelma Powell: Well, all the whistles and horns all over the county was going off and we lived out on the farm and we couldn't imagine what in the world it was all about, so Veal, my husband, went to Kirbington and by then they had phones, and ah, he went to Kirbington and found out that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and how did everybody react to that?

Thelma Powell: Grandma: Angry, lots of anger.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, so there were sirens all over the county?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, like in fire stations, in Cunningham, and Wickliffe, and Bardwell, Arlington, and Milburn. You could just hear them everywhere.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and um, when the men heard about Pearl Harbor, were the men eager to enlist in the Armed Forces?

Thelma Powell: Well I guess some of them was, but most of it was drafting.

Vickie Beasley: So, they started drafting immediately after Pearl Harbor happened?

Thelma Powell: Yeah. Getting ready to protect our country.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, and was Grandpa drafted at that time?

Thelma Powell: Not right then. They needed farmers, and he was a farmer. Of course they needed food so, they left him for quite a while, before they drafted him. But they finally drafted him, but he wasn't in there but 3 months and 19 days. He got a medical discharge, and he come back home. Started farming again.

Vickie Beasley: Okay, what kind of medical discharge? What was wrong with him?

Thelma Powell: We never did know. After sent him back home, they sent him to Louisville to have him checked out, but we never did find out what the problem was.

Vickie Beasley: And how about you? Where did you work?

Thelma Powell: During the war?

Vickie Beasley: During the war.

Thelma Powell: I worked at a shell factory. I think it was in West Viola.

Vickie Beasley: A shell factory, like weapon shells?

Thelma Powell: Yeah, uhm, they was for the Navy. I think they were for the Navy. I'm not sure about that, but it was for the Army.

Vickie Beasley: And can you remember how many women they had employed there?

Thelma Powell: Most of the employees there were women.

Vickie Beasley: Right, because the men were drafted into the war.

Thelma Powell: And one woman held the thing to tighten the shell down, and she didn't let go of it, and it got so hot, it blowed up and killed her.

Vickie Beasley: Oh, that's terrible. Um, what other jobs did women do during the war?

Thelma Powell: Well I don't know what other women done. More than likely they made suits for the service men, you know. Somebody had to make them. It was done by someone somewhere, but I don't know that, but I'm sure it was.

Vickie Beasley: How about any of your siblings, were they drafted into the war?

Thelma Powell: No.

Vickie Beasley: No? None of your siblings were.

Thelma Powell: None of um were that old. Now wait a minute, I think Jay was drafted into the Army. But he wasn't in there too awful long.

Vickie Beasley: Okay

Thelma Powell: And Glen volunteered for the Navy, but that was after the war.

Vickie Beasley: That was after the war?

Thelma Powell: Mmhm.

Vickie Beasley: Do you ever recall your father voting?

Thelma Powell: Oh, he always voted, whenever they had a election. Back in those days, women weren't allowed to vote.

Vickie Beasley: Okay. Alright, well Grandma, I think this concludes the interview. I'm so happy that you told me this stuff. It's all so interesting to me.

Victoria Beasley is a student at West Kentucky Community and Technical College. Her grandmother, Thelma Powell, passed away on April 10, 2019.