

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
VIRGINIA S. O'BRIEN  
Homefront, World War II  
1997

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**O'Brien, Virginia S.,** (1926?-). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Virginia O'Brien, a Madison, Wisconsin native, shares her experiences in Madison with home front war efforts during World War II, including work as an operator and involvement with USO dances. O'Brien recalls hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor while babysitting and states after that "everything became a war effort." She touches on stamp drives, scrap drives, Red Cross classes, food and shoe rationing, and prom being cancelled. While still at Central High School, she describes working at a telephone company as an "A-Operator." With so many young women working, O'Brien says it seemed "like everybody had their shoulder to the wheel." She remembers crying when she heard musician Glenn Miller went missing in action. As the writer of the music column in her high school paper, O'Brien recalls doing interviews with musicians, seeing shows in Madison and at Truax Field, and spending time at places like the Campus Soda Grill where servicemen spent free time. Too young to be an official USO hostess, O'Brien describes slipping into the dance halls anyway to dance and talk with servicemen. She states, "I think more than anything they talked about home." She says the biggest rule for hostesses was no dating, but that friendships developed through the exchange of telephone numbers and writing letters. She speaks of meeting Marvin O'Brien, an Air Corps mechanic, while he was home on furlough, being courted through exchange of letters, and planning their wedding while he was in the service. She says he would often talk about a night when he went to town and returned to find the plane he normally slept in had been hit and men he knew were killed. After her husband's passing, she talks about standing up to Veterans Affairs to get "Air Corps" put on her husband's grave instead of "Army". O'Brien details her involvement in a group of hospital entertainers that performed shows and radio broadcasting for the VA hospital.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Draft transcript by David Berberick, n.d.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Susan L. Krueger, 2010.

**Interview Transcript:**

- Mark: Okay, today's date is April 18, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veteran's Museum doing an oral history interview. It's noon, is it morning or afternoon? This afternoon with Virginia O'Brien of Madison, a civilian and an entertainer in the Madison area during World War II. Thanks for coming in this afternoon, I appreciate it.
- Virginia : The pleasure is mine.
- Mark: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?
- Virginia : I was born and raised right here in Madison, Wisconsin.
- Mark: East side or west side?
- Virginia: East side and I can even remember very, very well December 7, 1941.
- Mark: Now at this time you were how old?
- Virginia: I was a freshman in high school and I was babysitting. I can even remember the song that was playing, isn't that something? That's how memorable it was with me. I was babysitting a little guy who was 15 months old. His parents had a photography studio here in Madison. They were originally from the south and they had this photography studio which demanded a lot of time away from home. Because I was very good with their little one and I would come in on weekends and so on, and so this Sunday, I had music on as I always did, WTMJ. All of a sudden it came over. It was before noon, and I was listening to the Andrew Sisters and I can remember the song they were singing, it was "Lean to Me" and it was one of those moments that I guess most of us will remember what we were doing and where we were and so on. But I can remember being so frightened, I thought, O Glory Be to God, where, you know, but now. It wasn't long before Dudley's parents came home, I think that it was within the hour that they were rushing home.
- Mark: They heard the news too?
- Virginia: They heard the news too.
- Mark: So as a teenager, you were, what, 15 years old? Did you see World War II coming? Is that the type of a thing that a 15-year-old girl thinks about or?

Virginia: Oh, yeah, the funny part of it is we had a class called POD, Province of Democracy, and of course we had a teacher that was really on top of things. We were exposed to a lot of things that were going on in Europe. I can remember when he took over Poland, when Hitler, I thought well how horrible. Of course the ominous cloud was over Europe, well '38, '39 already. Not that I was that aware but you can't help but you are hearing these things, and the news broadcast and so, and so yeah, I can't say that I wasn't utterly surprised at the attack on Pearl Harbor. In looking back, you kind of put things in perspective, and you think about them.

Mark: So how did things change as a result of the attack and America's entering into the war, I mean in Madison?

Virginia: Oh, well everything became a war effort. Everything. School changed, almost immediately we were having stamp drives. I can remember, of course this was a little later, but we didn't have a prom because of the war. It was a little difficult to feel this frivolous and I can remember our annual was almost cardboard, almost cardboard, well not cardboard, what am I trying to say. It was not a hard cover. The one thing that I remember is that and I have my handle yet today and I get very nostalgic every once in a while especially since my husband is gone, that I look over these things, and how many of our class did not graduate with us. They had already gone into the service.

Mark: I was going to lead into that area actually. Now as the war went on, you went out and braved another graven road, so by the time the war ended---

Virginia: I was working at the telephone company.

Mark: So you were finished with high school by then. I am interested in watching the war progress and then perhaps as teenagers, did you discuss it? You know, are you going to get involved, or what are you going to do?

Virginia: Oh yes, I can remember one of my contributions was to, and I can't remember what they called them, it had to do with air raids and so on and how you were trained.

Mark: A warden?

Virginia: A, yeah, under a warden, but I mean it was a gathering of people that were interested. I can remember taking a Red Cross class that was very war associated because, that's when I started working at the telephone company because communications being as important as it was, and many of them getting into the war effort and going away, we were trained. Gosh, was I a sophomore or a junior when I started working at the telephone company?

- Mark: While you were still in school?
- Virginia: Yeah. Seems like everybody had their shoulder to the wheel. It was just such a combined effort on everybody's part. So many of the young women whose husbands were in the service and so on took jobs. There were many places right here in Madison where they could work toward the war, toward the war effort and so a lot of our contributions for those of us that weren't old enough to work in these places, we babysat. You know, set them free to go to work.
- Mark: Now as a woman, you weren't subject to the draft and inscription and forcibly to be sent off to the service. But the young boys as they reached a certain age are, was this ever a topic of discussion?
- Virginia: Oh yes, yes, as a matter of fact, I can remember there must have been about three or four of us that had decided that we were definitely the minute we were old enough to either become WAVES or by this time they had the WACS and the WAVES and so on. I can remember at the time thinking I was definitely going to be a navy nurse. Don't ask me why, but I thought that was just the branch that I had decided that I wanted to [coughing]. But anyhow, I think the war was on our minds constantly as even as students. It made such a difference. Of course the scrap drives, they were conducted right in Central High School where I went to school. We had scrap drives. We all conserved up paper and I think it was such a time that the war effort was utmost on our minds. We were doing everything we could to be a part of a better tomorrow.
- Mark: I don't get the impression that there were too many people trying to evade some of this. I grew up in post-Viet Nam period, you know, its always a controversial period of history and during that conflict of course, a lot of young men went to great lengths not to go into the service. I don't detect any of that from what you are saying.
- Virginia: None. None. As a matter of fact, it was amazing. I can remember in my neighborhood alone how many Blue Stars, you know what I am talking about?
- Mark: That's a son in service, or someone in the service.
- Virginia: Yeah, someone in the service. That happened literally over night. Almost every window had a Blue Star. So like I say we felt it.
- Mark: Now in terms of the rationing and that type of thing. How much of an impact did that have on you and your family?

- Virginia: Oh a great deal. My mom raised six of us alone and of course the sugar rationing, the meat rationing. You sure planned differently.
- Mark: How is that?
- Virginia: Well, you were very careful. I can't remember now.
- Mark: You mean like in getting ingredients to bake cookies or something? Or would you even bake cookies? Was that too much of a luxury?
- Virginia: No, not too much. I think baking did go by the way-side as a part of that, because sugar was rationed. Shoes. Well you took care of your shoes because I can't remember now right off hand and yet I have got it at home. I still have some of the ration, kind of a clipper in the savor, and I still have some of the ration stamps. And partly it was because of the shoid, some of them were given to me, that showed what I am talking about of the 40's and the same \_\_\_\_\_ which was a labor of love really. Gave me a chance to go back and look at all the things that went on. I saved newspapers, BJ Day and so on. I can remember I was working at the telephone company, BJ Day. The crowds here on capitol, you know on the capitol square here.
- Mark: Did you work on the square here somewhere?
- Virginia: Yeah, I worked at the telephone company.
- Mark: I have been in Madison nine years now.
- Virginia: Oh, the telephone company used to be up there, the entrance was on Fairchild Street. I'm trying to think of the address, its right across from St. Rafael's parking lot. That was the telephone company. We were extremely busy.
- Mark: Well, that raises an issue which we should probably discuss and that involves working during war time. Now, of course, before World War II there was a Great Depression. A lot of people couldn't find work. Now during the war, you were a teenage girl working. The war produced a lot of jobs I take it.
- Virginia: Oh yes, yes. As a matter of fact I can remember a comment being made that I thought was a terrible comment, but it said it took us out of the Depression. And I thought, what a way to cure a problem. It takes a war to make us, you know, to cure an ill? I think another thing that we made our own good times. Music helped. The Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman dances were of great therapy for us. And of course having Truax Field here, and the Maple Dreaming school, that meant that

we had a lot of men to dance with. I think that did make a difference especially here in Madison and the close area. And that was the one thing in talking to this USO hostess, is that I mentioned that I knew they were anxious and they had very strict rules. You didn't date them, you were there to dance, and you know show them a good time. I am trying to think of some of the places that, it's called the American Legion, that was over there near the post office. But there were a couple of places there on State Street, but that what I remember a great deal to is Memorial Union. They always had live bands and so on.

Mark: I want to come back to those types of things. I want to talk about your job a little bit more. At the telephone company, what was it precisely that you were doing? Answering the phone or?

Virginia: I was what they called an A-Operator. I was the one that, they had cords, they were called 608 cords.

Mark: Just like in the movies?

Virginia: Just like the movies, right. The secret there was to be very careful you follow through. You went in and said "number please?" and a light would come on your board and you would answer with a back cord and you connect with a front cord. Like I say, it was a very busy time. You, I think you had a feeling of doing something worthwhile. You felt very necessary.

Mark: To the war effort?

Virginia: To the war effort.

Mark: In what sense?

Virginia: Well, because so many of the older people were getting involved in more jobs. Believe it or not they lost a lot of the men to the war effort where women were taking over their jobs and the traffic department and so on and so on. Which left us young people to answer, to be A-Operators and B-Operators and so on.

Mark: So you were freeing someone up, to free someone up to go fight.

Virginia: That's right.

Mark: Was it unusual for a sixteen- to seventeen-year-old woman to be working at the time?

Virginia: No. You had to get permits. You had to get work permits.

- Mark: I don't get the impression they were difficult to obtain.
- Virginia: No. Not at that time. Like I say, it was a time that everybody put their shoulder to the wheel. They really did. They felt that this was part of being American.
- Mark: So you go to school by day and then you had to go home for supper or something, and then work?
- Virginia: Half of the time I would go right to work from school. You could grab, they had a cafeteria right there, you could eat there right at the telephone company. It was a wonderful place to work Mark, it really was. Again you talk about people putting their shoulder to the wheel, they were so concentrated in getting their all, I think we all do.
- Mark: I suppose we can get on to the entertainment aspects of your World War II years. I get the impression that you have always been interested in music and theatre and this type of thing, why don't you just sort of set the stage for me. How did you start getting involved in this, was it like in high school, for example, were you in, even in grade school, were you in the play? Like, I was a mushroom or something in the third grade. How did you get started in all of that?
- Virginia: Well Central High School had a wonderful music department and unfortunately I couldn't get too involved because I worked after school, even prior to the war, taking care of this little one. I had to be there at their house, I got out of school at 3:20 p.m. I had to be there for 4:00 p.m. This didn't give me a lot of time to get into the after-school sports and the theatre groups and so on. But I certainly enjoyed what they did. Like I said we had a wonderful choral director and they just used to pretty great things and I enjoyed it from a spectator's view point. But my interest in music, I wrote the music column for the high school paper which gave me an excuse to listen to all this wonderful music and of course I never heard a record I didn't like, but I was really, Glenn Miller was so great. When he went into the service I thought that was an example to set for everyone. I can remember crying the morning we heard that he was missing. I think about it, oh there had to be at least a dozen of us that our eyes were red for the rest of the day because I guess we just kind of knew. He was such a, he represented, I don't think anybody can hear "In the Mood" that they can't reminisce, I'm talking about our age, not yours, [chuckle] today that can't remember something that happened I mean as far as what was going on in the world.
- Mark: Now, Madison is not a large town but with the University and everything I suspect it got its share of some of these bands maybe coming to town. See



I was wondering if they were doing around it anymore, it takes gasoline, and services?

Virginia: Well, yes, exactly, this was king of the, well, I'm not going to say the ruination, but this was the certainly the down-sizing of the bands were losing their lead musicians right and left. So of course that made a difference, different arrangements, different, they had to have the leading sections I mean that I am talking about trumpets and all their lead trumpets, their lead man would be going and so on and so they had to fill in. See, I never had the opportunity to getting to the Airogon or the Triagon which is Chicago, and of course this meant they used to always get the big bands and so on. But no the Madison theatres used to, Orpheum Capital especially would bring the big bands here. Writing the music column I had the opportunity of having to interview a couple of them, which I thought this is big stuff you know.

Mark: Do tell, like who did you get to interview first?

Virginia: Well, for example Luke Jordan was here and he was very gracious and wrote up his column, I mean wrote that up in the column. A lot of times I would always give my opinion of what when on and it as always, I don't think I ever did a negative column on who came in the music and so on. And the singers of course, the big records were the André Sisters, Les Brown who I think made every military camp, and that was another thing, they were so good to the service men and so on. I mean as far as going to the camps. I can remember my husband telling me that, Mark telling me that he got to see Veronica Lake, and this was when he was overseas and their efforts as far as bringing home entertainment to them.

Mark: So when these bands came to town, where would they play? Would they play at Truax for example, or would they be downtown at the Union or something like that?

Virginia: Well, for the most part they were at the Orpheum or the Capitol. Truax had their own band. That's another thing, I had the opportunity of singing with the Truax band at one time. I was 16 years old and so I couldn't be there without an adult along, but that was wonderful. That was just great. And then I sang with a band that played out of Truax, this was later of course, but Truax went on for quite a few years after the war. There was a big band, Dusty Rose, I think he was using about 10-12 pieces at the time, and I felt very good about that.

Mark: So, you sort of touched on something I wanted to get to anyways. As a teenager, at the time, were you allowed to go on many of the places the bands were playing. How did that work?

Virginia: Yeah, they didn't, I don't think they were as stringent as they are about it now. Of course a lot of these places would be divided, the dance section from the bar section. I think that made a difference too. It seems to me that we were going to the American Legion to dance and it seems to me again that the bar was completely separate from the dance. Part because I can remember going there and never being stopped. The musicians, a lot of them would be from Truax or even from the Naval Training School. I can remember meeting a trumpeter, his last name was Tarantino. Isn't that funny, that much I remember. Exceptional, exceptional trumpet that would sit in with the bands that were playing.

Mark: So who was attending these concerts? Would they mostly be servicemen and young girls?

Virginia: That would come to the theatres? Oh no, that would be everybody.

Mark: See, I'm wondering who is on the home front watching them. On the Madison, the Truax field and Naval Training Center, I imagine there were a lot of young men in uniform who would come down State Street to see some of these shows.

Virginia: Oh, yes, as a matter of fact, and for the most part, I don't think there were that many problems, at least I wasn't aware that there was. It just seems like there was enough for them to do, dance halls, and like I say the Memorial Union was always buzzing. Good music and a great hall was a wonderful place to dance, and down at the Rathskeller, part of that was blocked off for dancing and so on. Out on the, I don't know what they call it, the Terrace, there was always music out there. It was great! If it had been more years it would have been more difficult. Linda Ellerby used to have a program on the air and that's what she used to, she did one entire month and she was on once a week. She and Gandolf, I can't think of his first name. They used to do this show--

Mark: Oh, I seen that. It would focus on one particular year and bring in the headlines and--

Virginia: Yes, and that was her one comment. She honored her father who was in the military during the war and she talks about how he always said that someday he would go back to Paris because he was part of the liberating forces, and she says he never made it. But I went for him in his honor. I still have that one, I have that one taped, if you are ever interested, I would love to share it with you. It's a beautifully done piece. Of course you have to have a Beta to show it on.

Mark: Oh, I know we don't have that in here. My parents might have one around some place. Now you mentioned that you were too young for the USO,

why don't you just describe the rules of the USO and I'm interested more generally in specific USO presence around town, was there an office, a place down town where you could gather? What sort of things were they doing?

Virginia: Yeah, the USO I think you had to be 21, and I think the rule was 21. I know that I couldn't make it as a USO hostess, but I know the place down near the post office, now I'm trying to think of what that place was called. They used to sponsor dances or agree to get the USO. And I am not exactly sure, that's why I wanted these two people that I was telling you about that I did locate for you that were USO hostesses. I'm not too sure that if it was a little work for both of us that we couldn't get them to come down and talk to you because they were wonderful experiences, both of them. They both danced.

Mark: And so what would the USO hostess do?

Virginia: Oh, they would dance with the servicemen. They were down there to serve lunches, just to talk, just to talk. I don't know as though, and I do know that one Christmas, they had dinner, you know, Christmas dinner of course they always did at Truax and that, but this was away from the fields. Away from the barracks and somewhat, but I guess for the most part just to be there.

Mark: Now you did mention that you did dance in GI's. And there were rules and that type of thing. Why don't you just describe that whole situation. IT wasn't USO, and so in what context did they assemble.

Virginia: There were a lot of USO hostesses there, but there were never enough and so, at least I was never stopped. I don't know I just kind of walked through and then we kind of all looked alike. We had our bobby socks, and our saddle shoes and our pleated skirts, and our sweaters on backwards, we all kind of looked alike. Like I say, that music of that era just adapted itself to swaying at jitterbug and all the fun times and you kept it that way. You kept it light and so on.

Mark: And so what were some of the rules? I'm interested.

Virginia: Well, from what I understand, from the two people that I talked to, that I know personally that were USO hostesses, the rules were no dating. You didn't leave the premise with the servicemen. In the first place, they had a curfew. They had to be back at a certain time. Very few of them had cars, the hostesses, we took a bus every place we went. As far as the rules, I think it was just good common sense. You exchanged telephone numbers and that type of thing. I can remember great friendship involved from one of the times, like I say, I'm not coming up with the name of this place. I

know the handicapped used to meet there, it was wheelchair accessible and they used to have dances there pretty often. It was right close to the post office there but I can remember meeting a man from New Rochelle, NY, that was very Irish and we got talking. Jack was his first name and I'll come up with the last name, watch. But anyhow, I can remember we got talking about the fact that his mother raised he and his brother alone. He was the oldest of the two and his father had been a policeman in NY and had been killed while on duty. He just needed somebody to talk to and I recognized that. You know the fact that his father would have been so proud of him and that type of thing. But I can remember writing to him when he left here. And we corresponded for a long time. Then when his mother came to visit him, I met her. As a matter of fact, he couldn't get off the base so I went down to the train to meet her to explain that he couldn't get off base and I can remember taking the cab with her out to Truax. That's the kind of friendships that came out of this.

Mark: I get the impression that that was a little unusual, but you did develop, did you correspond with a lot of young men at the time or?

Virginia: Men from, for an example. Two of the boys that I went to high school with, I was writing to. One was a marine and the other was in the navy. I can remember writing to them, telling them what was going on with people they knew and so on, I would say maybe once a month. Getting letters back and forth, that type of thing. Like I say, this man from New Rochelle, NY, that friendship really developed because his family came here and I was going to say I think he even came after I was married to see my aunt. He and my aunt became very close, he adored her, and she him. He and his mom came back to visit after the war. So those were the kinds of friendships that evolved.

Mark: Now, I think you mentioned earlier that one of the things that you could do for a serviceman, a stranger in town, was just to talk to him, that they just wanted to talk. What sorts of things did you talk about? Did you talk about the war?

Virginia: No, I think more than anything they talked about home. They talked and we could kind of, reminisce. They felt they could share their experiences as far as home, describing for an example, this one that I was telling you about from New Rochelle. I could almost close my eyes and picture the house he lived in. It became anti-moving. Many of them motor homes and let's face it, they were doggone homesick and just to be able to talk about it to somebody that would listen.

Mark: Yeah, that's a lot of young guys, I would imagine, 18, 21. I suspect you got a fairly good geography lesson too, people coming from all different parts of the country.

- Virginia: Wonderful. As a matter of fact the one thing that came across, this was of interest of mine, the different ways they danced. New York danced completely different than the south.
- Mark: How is that?
- Virginia: Wild. I mean they had, because they were exposed to bigger and better dance places, you know. Oh man, I'll tell ya, when you could keep up with a dancer from New York. They could tell you these wonderful things so that is one thing that I became very aware of, the difference in dancing. The west coast was completely different than the east coast when it came to dancing.
- Mark: So you must have finished high school in about '44, '45?
- Virginia: '44.
- Mark: And you didn't go into the WACS?
- Virginia: Again, you had to be 21.
- Mark: Oh, that's right.
- Virginia: Don't think I wasn't heading towards that. That's the thing I wanted to do.
- Mark: And so when you finished high school, did you go to work full time at the telephone company?
- Virginia: Yes, I was still at the telephone company. I was at the telephone company the day that Roosevelt died. And let me tell you that place went crazy. I think it relayed on the board, they couldn't let us off the board.
- Mark: Now I have a note here about the armed air force story. Want to tell me?
- Virginia: Oh, when my husband died, he was so proud of being in the Air Force. Because he was a veteran, I was told, we already had bought our plots at Highland Memory. But we were told that because they were already paid for, that the veteran's affairs would take care of his stone and mine. So he died in February, and when I went out in, I'd gone out several times, but the spring was coming and still his stone didn't have on it, and so on, so I was wondering what was going on. So I went up to Veterans Affairs, and a Michael Jackson of Veterans Affairs was very gracious, and what I wanted on his stone, of course I had to go through the cemetery, but I wanted Corporal Marvin O'Brien, Army Air Force, and dates, etc. and I

was told that I couldn't have Air Corp put on. Because during his service time, there was only the army, navy and marines, there was no air corps. And I said, but he was so proud that he was in the air corps, and he said, well, we could probably put it on, Mr. Jackson, we could probably put it on, but it would probably be an expense to you. I said I don't care. But can you give me an idea of how much. He said I'll do that right now for you. So he got on the phone and the line was busy and they had the line that he wanted to talk to, from Washington, D.C. So we chatted for a little while. Like I say, very gracious man. Anyhow, he finally got through and it had just gone through that they could put air corps, which I thought was pretty acrophogue. So, I'm glad that I mentioned it that I was a little more tenacious than I should have been but that I wanted air corps put on and so that's the way it reads, Army Air Corps.

Mark: Now you met him during the war?

Virginia: Actually I knew Marv in high school. I knew him from afar. He was all conference basketball, you know, big shot. Big man on campus. [Laughter] And he said he knew of me but I mean we didn't really know each other and so he was in the service when we met. He came home on furlough. And we met, really met through mutual friends. And Campus Soda Grill was a big hang-out.

Mark: The campus what?

Virginia: The Campus Soda Grill? Its no longer there either. It was on the far end of State Street right near the Memorial Union.

Mark: What was that just a sort of ?

Virginia: Campus Soda Grill was hamburgers and hot dogs and camaraderie, juke box, you know, and of course the pub was a big place where the servicemen would congregate. Not just servicemen, students and so on. I was still working at the telephone company, of course, and that's how we met. Really met. So anyhow he still had some time in the service, as a matter of fact, there was talk that those that didn't have a certain amount of time, ETO, because you are a platoon leader, were going to have to go to the South Pacific because there were some things that had to be done. Especially in the branch that he was in, so we had talked it over between ourselves that instead of waiting for a big wedding and everything, till he was home, that I'd might go down to, he was stationed at Bear Field at the time and that we could be married in the chapel down there. Within just a couple of days he called back and said you know what, I'm not going to have to go to the South Pacific after all, so we can go ahead and plan our wedding, so we did.

- Mark: This is right, is he still in the service, or is this right after the war?
- Virginia: He was still in service when this was going on, you know, when we were contemplating this, but then he got out that March and we were married at that time.
- Mark: That was in '46 then, well then you got married right after he came back.
- Virginia: Yup.
- Mark: So you didn't have much of a courtship?
- Virginia: No. A letter courtship is what it was. Although our telephone bills were a little high.
- Mark: I suppose they did. Now what did your husband do in the Air Force exactly?
- Virginia: He was a mechanic. On a C-47.
- Mark: So it wasn't a combat role or anything, he wasn't in combat necessarily?
- Virginia: Well he was overseas and the fact that they took paratroopers.
- Mark: Oh, well he would be in the plane and drop them off. See, what I am sort of getting at is on the veteran readjustment problems after the war and so in terms of the nightmares and that type of thing, he didn't have any of those sorts of things?
- Virginia: He did in one respect. One night he talked about, this was when he was stationed in England, and I don't have to tell you that our young men were perhaps drinking more than they should, you know it was one of those, in the service, and he admitted it, he said there were times that you know, but he talks about the fact that this one particular, and they slept right on their planes, many of them. He had decided to stay, not to go into town for the night and one of the guys convinced him that, there's nothing to do around here, let's go and see if the, I can't remember and I used to know all this, I'm sure after you leave me I will think of it, but anyhow, at the last minute, Marv's nickname was Chink. Chink decided that he would go into town and got into playing some poker. And, so anyhow like I say at the last minute decided to go in and I guess he got into a poker game that took him longer and so, and when they came back to the field, all hell had broken loose. A plane had come down and had hit the plane that he would have been sleeping on, and of course it burst into flames, and a couple of the guys that were in the plane were killed. And, Marv had a hard time with that because the one man was married and he had two children. He

said, "Why," you know, "Here I was unattached," and you know, he had talked so often to this man and who missed his wife and two children. It took Marv a long time to get over that one. He used to bring that up pretty often.

Mark: Now in terms of, I want to get back to your marriage, not to pry. Usually you have a long courtship and then you get married, you have to get used to your spouse. That's hard enough if you've dated someone over a matter of years. But you hadn't even done that. I was just, you know.

Virginia: But you know, I think we got so well acquainted by our letters. I think Marvin perhaps expressed himself better in his letters. I still have them.

Mark: Things like the GI bill. Did your husband use that at all?

Virginia: No. He had thought about it, and as a matter of fact I was kind of encouraging, I thought we should use those things that were available and it seems like all of his buddies, you know and so on, but he was offered a job. He no more got off the train and he'd been offered a job and he was so eager to get back into the swing of things as a civilian that I think it was a little premature. Had Marv had a little bit more time to think of it, but he went to work for Bollman Dairy and he loved what he was doing. Marv is a people man and whatever he did he did well. He was with them for 25 years, but along with this he got involved in raising animals for research. So actually Marv had two jobs and we had a wonderful family, we had four boys and a girl and he really was a tremendous father. He was involved, the boys were in sports and Marv never had any sisters, he came from a family of six boys and so when his daughter was born, he went off on Cloud nine, he never came back. He really was, he was a tremendous daddy.

Mark: One last area of questions involves veteran's organizations and reunions and that type of thing. As we discussed earlier, your husband maintained some relationships with some of the men with whom he served. I am interested in when he got home did he join the legion or anything like that?

Virginia: No, darn it, and I really wanted him to.

Mark: Why is that?

Virginia: He just didn't feel as though he had the time. Marv was very involved in sports and played softball and was a tremendous pitcher. That seemed to take up his extra and he was gardener, loved his garden. Because he was up every morning at 4:00 there wasn't a lot of nighttime activity that was, anyhow, I really wanted to. In the first place, I was still volunteering



doing the retail volunteer work and I did a lot of entertaining at the VA. There used to be a group called the hospital entertainers, this was a professional semi-professional entertainers that used to--

Mark: Now when was this?

Virginia: This was --

Mark: 50's, 60's?

Virginia: '53 is when we started this. The Oscar entertainers. And we used to do a show from the broadcast room, have you been out to the VA?

Mark: No, I used to live up in Eagle Heights.

Virginia: Beautiful auditorium, just a wonderful auditorium. Of course when the hospital was first built it was predominantly a TB hospital. It had a lot of patients from the Illinois, north Illinois area and we met some great people. We used to do a show from the broadcast room, the radio broadcast room called "Blues in the Night" that would hit all the rooms, they could listen if they wanted to. We used to go up on the floors and it was music and singing and dancing and even on the contaminated floors, where people were masked, and could only sit in their doorways. But we would go up and sit in front of the nurse's station. I can remember as a matter of fact, I got a, it was a plaque from the VA because we did the Christmas show for 25 years in a row. They were a pretty dedicated bunch and we would take entertainment out for New Year's Eve.

Mark: When did you stop doing that, 25 years from 1953, to--

Virginia: In 1953, when the hospital was built, when the new regime came in. A lot of that organizing of entertainment so it was volunteer. A grand man by the name of Bob Davenport, he used to show the movies and so, was pretty much the nucleus of getting entertainment and so on, but gosh you didn't have to spend too much time on the phone. You could call and say we need such and such on, it seems to me that we did a lot of things on Wednesday nights. We'd start maybe at 6:30 so we wouldn't be interfering with bed time and one of the men that was a patient at that time, I remember he had TB of the bone, and it was affecting his eyes and I can remember going and writing letters for him because he could no longer write his own letters, he would dictate to me and then I would write down what he wanted to say. Some great things, great people, an awful lot of, well I can just sitting here right now I can think of 10 people that are gone that were part of the Hospital Entertainers. And it wasn't just VA, we did Mendota, the long-range those that would be in the hospital for a long time. We felt that was where the need was.

Mark: So I suppose we can finish up here by having you tell me about before the sentimental journey instead of starting behind us, it sort of brings us around.

Virginia: It was something that I had back on my mind and there were so many good entertainers right here in Madison and the surrounding area. It was kind of putting down on paper and bringing out, it's pretty much what I thought about and so what I did, I went to the senior center and said I do need a sponsor to do this thing but I promise to do the script, do the, and I thought I would have to spend hours at the library. I did every bit of research on that. My son, our youngest son had given me a book that he had got at the library, at one of those library sales, paid a quarter for it or fifty-cents. It was called I can't think of the proper name now, at the turn of the century, the first 50 years. I did every bit of research, we there were a few other books involved, and I dragged out some of the newspapers, but there were wonderful because as we talked about, we had a master of ceremonies if you have ever lived in Madison any longer than, you said what 10 years. You probably won't remember this man but Clark Wolf was his name, he was an announcer. He used to help us in the VA show too, was master of ceremonies and read this from the podium. It was the chronological things that were going on in the world and then the stage was set complete with Nickelodeon, yeah, that's what they are called, you know where you put money in and they played the jukebox. And then a piano off to the side, we were all, we had an awful time finding uniforms, terrible time but we had the guys dressed up in army, navy, marine you know and the gals danced the, the gals that were pleated skirts, saddle shoes and the whole thing. And that's he opened it because he talked about, his opening cue to tell the curtain to open was and then came December 7, 1941, and there were so many to meet the effort, so many goodbyes, and our world became a juke box and musical memories, you know, that type of thing it was just a grand opening. So that's when the curtain opened up and the music is going on and the dancing, then the music stops and someone is tinkling at the piano, and the whole crowd gathers around and they are doing songs from that period. It went very well.

Mark: I was going to say, I get the impression it was a hit.

Virginia: It was, a matter of fact, I think we had a hard at that part because my mother had just died and but because this was already, you know, it didn't give me, I didn't have time to grieve, I had too much to do. So, but she was part of it because I used to tell her I was going to do this and going to do that, oh, that sounds great, I like that. So she really was somebody that I could throw this all at and get some feedback and so it was October and very foolishly, it was a one-show, I never should have done that. And we

didn't do the publicity as we should have and it was at East High School because we had to find a place that was wheel-chair accessible and so then we were asked to repeat in the spring and it was two performances. And that was at Oakwood, which the state was much smaller and we couldn't do as much as we wanted to. But we did some great things. We had a beautiful baritone who was also part of Madison Opera. We paid homage to Oklahoma which was the big show on Broadway. For a little while, we could forget we were at a war, you know, they had opened in 1943, and for two years, it ran for two years. But we had a medley from Oklahoma and they were in complete cowboy hats and the whole thing and the stage was set very simply but it sure gave you the idea that that's what was on Broadway. So it was great. I am awful proud of that in case you are wondering. [Laughter]

Mark: I got that impression.

Virginia: Didn't have to guess huh?

Mark: Well, we've pretty much exhausted all of my questions, have anything else you would like to add or anything?

Virginia: No, but I thank you for letting me talk about a time in my life.

Mark: Thanks for coming in. I appreciate it. Glad I was persistent.

**[End of Interview]**