

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ROSE A. KERSTETTER

Stenographer, Women's Army Corps, World War II

2019

OH
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2146**

Kerstetter, Rose A., (1918–). Oral History Interview, 2019.

Approximate length: 39 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to the original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Rose A. Kerstetter from Oneida, Wisconsin, discusses her service with the Women's Army Corps from 1943 to 1946, where she worked as a stenographer at Camp Hood, Texas.

Rose Kerstetter grew up in Menasha, Wisconsin. Her father worked at the paper mill and she attended the Catholic school in town. She discusses her parents attending the Carlisle Institute where her mother studied botany and her father studied carpentry before returning to Oneida and getting married.

She graduated from Flandreau Indian High School in South Dakota and then attended the Haskell Institute in Kansas where she took a commercial course and learned shorthand and stenography. Kerstetter enlisted in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and trained in Des Moines, Iowa, before going to Camp Hood, Texas. She discusses living conditions in the barracks, her daily routine, and what the women did for fun. She explains her general tasks as filing, taking dictation and working in an office. She describes how the mood changed once the war was over and everyone got to go home. When she left the Army, she returned home and got married. She reviews how the experience in the army helps young people understand each other better and how she got through hard times.

Kerstetter describes at length her work with Iroquois pottery. She discusses being inspired by a pot she saw in a museum and attending the Art School of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She explains how she developed a habit of researching and creating Iroquois pottery and what it means to her. She is currently writing a book on the revitalization of Iroquois pottery.

Biographical Sketch:

Rose A. Skenandore Kerstetter grew up in Menasha, Wisconsin, and attended the Flandreau Indian High School in South Dakota and the Haskell Institute, Kansas, where she completed a commercial course. She joined the Women's Army Corps in 1943 and worked as a stenographer at Camp Hood, Texas, until her discharge in 1946.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2019.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2019.

Reviewed and edited by Luke Sprague, 2019.

Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2019.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2146.Kerstetter_access]

Halaska: Today is January 24, 2019. This is an interview with Rose Kerstetter, who served with the Army from 1943 through 1946, during World War II. This interview is being conducted at the veteran's home. The interviewer is Rachelle Halaska. And this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veteran Museum Oral History Program. Other people present for the interview are Tiffany Koehler. All right. So, we're going to begin. And I just want to ask you, when and where were you born?

Kerstetter: Sept—when?

Halaska: Yes.

Kerstetter: September 5, 1918.

Halaska: 1918. Okay. And where were you born? Where were you born?

Kerstetter: Oneida, Wisconsin.

Halaska: Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Oneida, Wisconsin?

Kerstetter: I don't know what to say. We—I grew up in the Great Depression. And things were very hard for my family, but somehow we lived through it. That's all I have to say.

Halaska: What did your parents do? What did your parents do?

Kerstetter: My father was a mill worker in Menasha, Wisconsin. And my mother—they both went to Carlisle Institute in Pennsylvania where she studied botany, and he studied carpentry. But he didn't graduate. He—when she left school, he left also. They left school together, came back to Oneida, and got married.

Halaska: Okay. And then what kind of work did your mother do? You said she had a degree in botany?

Kerstetter: She stayed home. She was a home person.

Halaska: And did you have brothers and sisters? Brothers and sisters?

Kerstetter: There were nine children. But only five of us lived. The rest were either stillborn, or never really lived. And I'm the seventh of nine children.

Halaska: Can you tell me about going to school, and growing up?

Kerstetter: When I was a child, I went to—my father was Catholic, and so, we went to Menasha and lived, while he worked in the mill, paper mill, And I—I went to a Catholic school. And for high school I went to the Flandreau Indian High School in South Dakota. And after that, I didn't know what I wanted to do. So, I waited around a few years. And then I went to Haskell Institute, and took a commercial course [post-secondary school], which you had to be out of high school to take. It wasn't residents college, it was post-secondary. But that's what got me in the Army. That's what got me into my staff sergeant work. When I was in the Army, after I got out of the Army, I didn't know what I wanted to be. I just didn't know what I wanted to say. Someone said, well, be this, be that. I just could not think of what they were suggesting.

[00:05:02]

But one day, my husband took the family to the New York State museum, and I saw an Iroquois pot inside the glass, and I was just mesmerized. We cooked in those pots a long time ago. We cooked food in them, and we made them. Well, I couldn't feel that pot. I wanted to feel it. Maybe I could make one and cook in it. I couldn't make it. I couldn't do it cause the glass was always in the way, I couldn't do a thing. I thought I had to go to school. I went to art school at the Institute of American Indian Arts when I was, when I was—well, I graduated at sixty. And—but I found out when I—after I enrolled, they didn't have any instructors that would teach Iroquois pottery. They just taught Southwestern pots. You can't blame them. That was in a Southwestern country. And so, I went to work, and I researched Iroquois pottery. And to this day I'm still researching Iroquois pottery. It got to be a habit. [Laughter] I still have to go through the science. It's quite, quite a deal. But anyway, I have a lot of fun—that's why—that's when I decided what I was going to do with myself was to be a potter.

I walked up to when I was in administrators, I was fifty-eight, I was afraid they'd say, "Get out of here, this is where kids—" And I said, "Would I be able to go to school here?" He said, "Why not? You're not too young." So, I went to school there, and graduated only with an associate degree in ceramics, and three-dimensional design. But I was happy with that, and I'm still happy with it because it's such a wonderful school. The first day I walked into the instructor—the clay instructor's office, he threw up his hands, he said, "I can't teach you anything." I said, "Why are you saying that? What are you saying that?" He said, "I can't teach you anything." I think he thought I was a potter.

Then I didn't go home, I stayed. I said to myself, I'm going to stay until I learn all about clay, of where I can go with this. All about clay. And all about good pots, and bad pots, I mean, design-wise. And I graduated second in my class. I spent a lot of time researching because I was determined to make Iroquois pots. I already

knew how to do a coil, so after school I would go down to the—this was in Santa Fe, I would go downtown and research the laboratory of anthropology.

[00:10:04]

I found out from that, and many other sources all about clay. Where they went to look for clay, and they used anything in the way of clay, it was what they could find. [Clears throat] Excuse me. And I also researched how they made the pots, how you fold, what coil of bubble make it come in, and you fold out to make it wide. And I also found out how you fire it, how they fired pots, and what kind of wood they used. And I just found out everything I could about Iroquois pottery. And I put it in a book. I was working on getting it out now. I wrote the book earlier, maybe ten years ago, maybe fifteen years ago. And I'll get it out. It's not going to help anybody. It was for the potter who didn't have anybody to talk to. I got a grant to go to New York State where the Iroquois people lived, and Canada, where they were supposed to move to. I wanted to see if my pots were laughable, or if my pots were similar, and could be sold or used even. I went up there and pretended I was getting information for a book, and all the time I was looking at the pottery for my own information. And they didn't know I was—what I was—I didn't know I was collecting enough material, detailed material, enough for a book on the revitalization of Iroquois pottery.

And I'm one of three people, I've been reading about, that started about the same time in the 1960s going back, and trying to get to tribes to make Iroquois pottery. I decided to come to Oneida—well, I couldn't come, I had a family in Ari—in New Mexico, and where my husband was to retire so that he wouldn't never again have to shovel snow. [Laughter] But after he passed away, I think it was 1990, I came back to Oneida to live. I said I'm going to teach these people a little bit of what they don't know about their history, and see if I can get them to add on and old tradition. I think—I think I didn't—I think I did, that's why I'm writing a book. We have classes at the museum, we have classes at the schools, we have classes at the recreation centers. And—but we don't cook in them. When, when, when a tradition returns, it's all changed. And so, we changed ours the way of all traditions.

[00:15:07]

Ours changed from a cooking, utilitarian object, to one of beauty. We make them beautiful now. And we put flowers in there. But we don't know how to keep water in them. We have never discovered that. In the writings we haven't ever found out how the early people kept the pots waterproof. I think I have some ideas. I'm not going to do anything about it until someone tests is for me. We now also make pottery for special occasions. Any kind of a special occasion we want to remember, we'll make a pot and give it to that person. Set it out nicely. I don't know what else to say.

Halaska: Well, well let's go back to when you entered the military service. When you entered the military service, when you went into the Army, what made you want to join the Army?

Kerstetter: Go in the Army?

Halaska: Yeah.

Kerstetter: Well, to tell you the truth the guys were all disappearing. There were no young people around, just old people. And so, I went to Minneapolis and enlisted. It's that simple.

Halaska: Okay. And after you enlisted, you went to training? Can you tell me about training?

Kerstetter: Yes. I forgot where we trained. I think we trained in Des Moines. And then I was sent to Texas, I stayed there. I didn't go anywhere. I went from there till I was discharged.

Halaska: Okay. Can you tell me about what kind of training, what kind of training did you do in Des Moines?

Kerstetter: What kind of what?

Halaska: What kind of training? Like what, what did they teach you about what job you needed to do in the Army?

Kerstetter: About what job?

Halaska: Mm-hm.

Kerstetter: I didn't need any training. I just showed I knew typing, and they put me right to work.

Halaska: Okay. So, you did—you were doing that work down in Texas?

Kerstetter: Mm-hm.

Halaska: Okay. Can you tell me about how did you get to Texas?

Kerstetter: By train.

Halaska: By train? Is there anything that you remember about that trip that you want to tell us? Tell me.

Kerstetter: Besides being full of women?

Halaska: [Laughs] Yeah.

Kerstetter: It was nothing special. Just a train trip.

Halaska: Okay. What about getting to Texas? What about in Texas? Where did you live?

Kerstetter: On the, on the, on the—right on the grounds. What do you call—

Halaska: The base?

Kerstetter: Yeah.

Halaska: The base. Okay.

Kerstetter: In a barracks.

Halaska: Can you tell me about the barracks? Can you tell me about the barracks?

Kerstetter: We had two or three barracks full of women. I don't know how the men's barracks were, but these were just simple beds in rows straight down, straight down the aisle. And we had to take our toothbrush and stuff, and go down the street to the place where we took a show—took a show—a show—shower. There was no water in the barracks. But we enjoyed it. We were all young.

[00:20:18]

Halaska: Did you make any friends?

Kerstetter: I had a good friend. She was from Arlington. Arlington, Texas. But she never invited me home. I think Texans are a little wary of people they don't know. But we were very good friends.

Halaska: Okay. So, the work that you did, you said you were doing shorthand and other kind of work. Can you tell me about like daily life? So, when you woke up in the morning, and then where would you go eat breakfast, and what would you go do?

Kerstetter: When I woke up in the morning, we would clean up for the day, and have breakfast. And then we would go out for some training. Some what do you call it? Marching. We marched all over the place. And we did that every day. On weekends we didn't do that. On weekends we had off. And so, the people would go to town, the nearest town. Or some of them take off for Houston. But I never, I

never went anywhere. I spent my life in the barracks. I was sending home most of my check to my parents. Let's see, what else can I talk about? I don't know.

Halaska: What—so, you were doing shorthand, and you were writing things? What were you writing? What kind of paperwork were you doing?

Kerstetter: I wrote letters to parents after they were dictated to me. I kept the files. It's on the [she points to documents about her service] Wait, wait, wait, I gave you—that's your copy. Right here. My 100-year old brain couldn't remember all this, so I dug this out, and I'm reading it. Oh yes, that's right, that's right. But I couldn't remember it. That's why I made that for you.

Halaska: Thank you. Okay. So, you were the secretary to the Adjunct at the Tank Destroyer Replacement Training Center?

Kerstetter: Mm-hm.

Halaska: Okay. So, kept and located the files in the office. Okay, so you worked in, in office, for a particular person. You worked in an office then for a particular person. Was it just one person that you worked for, or were there a few different people in the office that you kept files for? Who else was there?

[00:25:16]

Kerstetter: Actually, I don't think I was in—what happened was I got that position because the girl who was in the position was going to go home because her husband was coming back from Europe. She was being let go. And so, she was training me in all of this stuff.

Halaska: Okay. What—okay, and so you did, you did this job for a few years?

Kerstetter: Did what?

Halaska: You did this job for a few years?

Kerstetter: Something like that. Not long after she left, I don't know how many months it was, the war was over, and I got to go home.

Halaska: Okay, you want to—can you tell me about that?

Kerstetter: What parts?

Halaska: The war ending.

Kerstetter: War ending. The attitude was different. Everybody was happier. And it was so different from wartime. We didn't know how long we'd be there, we didn't know anything, so we just kept working. But once the war was over, we knew that we'd be going home soon. It was a different feeling.

Halaska: Can you tell me what did your parents think about you joining the Army?

Kerstetter: They loved it. But they didn't want me to go overseas. So, I didn't go.

Halaska: That's very understandable. Can you tell me about getting out of the Army and returning home?

Kerstetter: I got married in those years, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I wanted to do something that would—I can't explain it. I wanted to do a job day after day that would not be tiresome. What I mean is that I would not get tired, but—and that was when my husband and I started to look together for something I could do. And I did it.

Halaska: Excellent. Can you tell me just looking back, how did you feel about your military service?

Kerstetter: I think it was a good thing. I did—one of the reasons I did go in was I loved to sleep late, and I thought if I went in, I would learn to be an early riser. It did not teach me that.

[00:30:09]

Halaska: [Chuckles] Did anything about—did anything about your military experience surprise you?

Kerstetter: Well, I don't know if I was surprised or not, but we were called into an office where there was just men working, and they began to talk bad about women in the Army. They began to—it surprised me what they were getting at. I don't want your—you're here just for one thing. Things like that. And I was surprised that, that that happened. I started to go back, I could walk back to the barracks, I started to walk back, but they made me wait, and I had to go back with the—with the rest of the women. I didn't like that. I didn't need that. I can't think of anything that was surprising.

Halaska: Are there any other memorable—are there any other memorable stories that you can think about from that time in your life?

Kerstetter: No. I can't think of any right now. But I remember that, that one things got so bad that just wouldn't—you wouldn't—how long we would be there, we didn't know. I thought of a, a man came to our high school in South Dakota when I was a

student there. And he was from Chappaqua [??]. He was a speaker from Chappaqua and he talked about “stick-to-it-ivness.” I don’t know if that’s in the dictionary. “Stick-to-it-ivness.” And he talked, and talked, and talked until I made up my mind whatever was going to happen, I would stick to it forever. I would not give up.

Halaska: That’s good.

Kerstetter: That was a big thing for me. It took me through Iroquois pottery.

Halaska: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like listeners to know about your military service? Or that you would just like anyone else listening to know?

Kerstetter: I can’t think of anything.

[00:35:04]

Halaska: Okay, excellent. Thank you very much for sharing.

Kerstetter: Okay.

Koehler: She’s going to start recording you again.

Halaska: She’s what?

Koehler: She’s going to record you again. I wanted to ask you a question. If you could give advice to young people, or young women going into the Army or military today, what would you tell them?

Kerstetter: I can’t hear you very well.

Koehler: What advice would you tell young women going into the military today?

Kerstetter: It would be a good thing. It would be nice on your resume, if you can put that on your resume, if there’s a place for it. It, it would help you understand people better. It would help if you went in and came out before you went to college, you would be better prepared for college then if you just went from high school to college. That’s how I really feel.

Koehler: Excellent. Could you—you said that it would help people understand each other better. Can you tell me more about that?

Kerstetter: By that I mean you—I’m very simple in talking. My ideas are simple. But you, you meet different people, and you would be trying to understand a lot more than you just had there at home. [Coughing] Excuse me. You know what I mean? Get

out and do something, and you find what you're looking for. You find fun, you find a lot of things. But get out, and do it.

Halaska: Yeah. Excellent.

Kerstetter: I'd go again if I could.

Halaska: Mm-hm. Oh, I just have—I have one more question.

Kerstetter: Okay.

Halaska: How was the food?

Kerstetter: Here?

Halaska: No, [laughter] in the Army.

Kerstetter: The food? It was okay. It was okay.

Halaska: Was there anything that was particularly not good?

Kerstetter: Particularly not good?

Halaska: Yes.

Kerstetter: No, it's part of that "stick-to-it" thing.

Halaska: [Laughs] Excellent. All right, thank you.

[End of OH2146.Kerstetter access]

[End of interview]