

Interview with Evelyn Cieslick  
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Winneconne, Wisconsin  
Interview by Jeanne Keiler

Jeanne Keiler: ...in Winneconne, Wisconsin. We're discussing Evelyn's experiences during World War II. You were fairly young when World War II started in Europe in 1939, you would have been what, about 12 years old?

Evelyn Cieslick: About 13, yeah.

JK: What kind of discussion do you remember hearing about it, either at school or at home or, was there much going on at all at that time or were you unaware of it?

EC: I think there was some discussion but I don't think it made an impact on myself, I'm sure that the newspapers and it and radio, but at that time that would be it, and I don't think parents discussed as much of the political or issues in front of the children at that time, so they sort of let them grow up worry free. But as I grew older, it became more important.

JK: Ok. Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor there was a group of Americans who strongly favored staying out of the war. Do you remember any of this movement or any of that feeling in the country at that time? Or again, was there any discussion?

EC: No. No, I think I was still a little bit too young to have that feeling and I don't think it was as strong as it might have been in the Vietnam years or the other protests, so therefore, and I don't think the media picked up on it as much as they might have in the other years, so I don't remember feeling that way at all, that there was a big protest group going against the war.

JK: Tell me what you remember about Pearl Harbor, where were you when you heard the news and what you can remember about that.

EC: I don't remember where I was, but I do remember, I think it was, of course it was a Sunday morning when it happened, so it was a weekend, and it was shocking to the country, I think, my parents had all the news broadcasts turned on and we were all listening to what possibly could have happened, I think more in shock that that could have happened to the United States than anything else at that time. The problem with that was, at that point in time, was now the boys that were over in Germany would not be able to come home, they might have to go over to the Pacific to fight another war, or to continue fighting war, and that probably was the biggest concern of all the people in the area, in the neighborhood, that I lived with.

JK: What effect did the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America entering the war have on your family in particular, was this the point when your brother joined the service, or shortly after?

EC: Yes, I believe it was, because that's when he got into it, and he was sent over to the Pacific in the Navy, and that's when everyone was concerned, but prior to that, my brother was three years older than I am, so he would have been, um, 17-14-no, 13... 16, so by the time Pearl Harbor came he was just out of high school, and that's when all of his friends were joining the services, not necessarily all in the Navy, but Army, Air Force, and just prior to Pearl Harbor one

of the boys across the street from us, and all of my brother's friends were almost like family because they spent a lot of time in our house, he was shot down over Germany and was a prisoner of war, and we were all concerned about that young fella, and then not to have the war end, but Pearl Harbor continue, it was a lot of stress on the neighborhood.

JK: Did any of, your older sister or any women friends that you knew of work in any war-related industries, were there any, uh –

EC: Me.

JK: You did?

EC: I worked in a battery factory, in the summer when I was 16 years old, and we filled the acid that went into the batteries to make them work, and there weren't enough boys around, so the girls took the summer jobs and filled the, you know, the factory. We worked in the factory and felt that we were doing our part in, for the war, along with everything else that was involved with giving up sacrifices for the war.

JK: Was that factory near your home, or...?

EC: Mmmhmm. I had to take a bus to get there, but it was, um, southeast of our area, so we would take a bus and get down there in the mornings and, of course, work all day long, it was a summer job, and, like I said, all of us young people felt that we were doing our part by helping out.

JK: Now what were these batteries for?

EC: The name of the company was the Signal Battery Company. I'm sure they were for walkie-talkies, and radios, and, you know, for the war.

JK: I've heard a lot about rationing during World War II but I don't understand much about it. Can you tell me about it and how it affected you and your family? What sort of things may have been rationed?

EC: Gasoline was rationed, and if you didn't have a job that needed gasoline there was barely enough to go do grocery shopping and go to church, and, along with that, the meat was rationed, you could only have so much, so many pounds of meat per person per month, and you had to turn in your ration tickets when you bought the, made the purchase. Uh, silk stockings weren't there, and people painted, the women painted their legs during the war, and then they would draw with an eyebrow pencil the line for the seam on their legs. Did you know that?

JK: No.

EC: Yes.

JK: What did they paint their legs with?

EC: Make-up. Tan make-up so that they wouldn't look white, you know, they'd look like they were nylons, and they did that a lot, so then they would go barefoot, you know, into the shoes but they looked like they wore stockings. Plus, that's when nylons started to come out because prior

to that it was all silk stockings, so then after the war the nylon parachutes, they didn't make that many more of them, so they turned them into nylon stockings, and that's when nylons, and they wouldn't run like the silk stockings did.

JK: You were talking about not using your automobile very often, was public transportation real good at that time?

EC: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And almost everybody used it, um, most of the people were, instead of paying a fare every day, would buy a pass, it was like five dollars for the week, and you could transfer on any corner and you didn't, you know, didn't necessarily have, you could get on and off at any place, so it was just a weekly pass that you could go, and everyone used it. I went after I was out of high school, when I went to work in west Dallas and we always used the bus, we didn't, my father worked in there, too, and he never took the car, it was to stay at home just for personal use, not for business or work at all. Plus, um, talking about rationing, then we all had to save, we were saving papers for paper drive, we were, when we had canned goods, you'd open up the can and you'd open up the top and the bottom, slip the two lids inside, and step on it, and you'd save all of your canned good, you know, cans depressed, they didn't want them whole, and everybody was doing their part for the war effort, so they were recycling all of that then, and then after the war people just gave up on saving papers and cans and thought it was great not to have to do it, but now we should be doing it all over again. We never should've gotten out of the habit of it.

JK: How did, how were the ration tickets distributed, was that something that, by size of the family and...?

EC: Yeah, by the size of the family, and that was all.

JK: Did you get them in the mail, or did you have to go to a...?

EC: You had to go sign up for them. I don't know, some bureau.

JK: That took care of that sort of...?

EC: Yeah.

JK: So almost all of your high school years were during the war, is that right?

EC: Right.

JK: What effect did that have on school activities, like dances and sporting events, did those things still go on pretty normally, or...?

EC: Yeah, and the high schools had a lot of paper drives for the war effort, and, uh, except the senior years, when you found more boys that were probably 18 and would enlist, so that's when you noticed much more effect on the senior class, it wasn't just, an \_\_\_\_\_ for vacation, like my brother's girlfriend, Grace, and our girlfriend, and our, all of our friends, their boyfriends were in the service, so what we did was, we would rent a cottage, there were four or five girls, for a summer vacation for a week, and we'd rent a cottage and we'd spend a week at the cottage, and we did crazy things like get up at four in the morning to go see the sunrise and then we'd all

go back, row back across the lake and go to bed for a couple of hours, get back out in the sun in our bathing suits, and there were a lot of, um, love songs and, you know, war songs, and that was like “Paper Moon” and “Paper Doll” or, those songs were things that you related to someone at a distance, it wasn’t, uh, anything close, so there was a camaraderie among women just to pass time, and that’s how we did it until the guys came back, the problem with going out like that was, my boyfriend would write me every single day, when I got letters it was a pack of them, and my brother wasn’t a writer so he wouldn’t write Grace that often and she’d kind of rag at him in her letters, “how come you don’t write more often?” so that’s how the guys had to cope with that, but I, uh, Dad was a terrific writer, and he would, you know, explain where he was, and what they were doing, and at that point, of course, I know further down you’ve got a question about some kind of censoring, well, there were many times in his letters, they would just cut it out, whatever place they were at, they, all of his letters were censored, and they would cut it out. He could name the place, if he did they cut it out. So he didn’t realize how much was cut out of his letters, but so, I knew what was happening but I didn’t know where it was happening.

JK: Now, you said you got all of his letters in one bundle, was that, the delivery service wasn’t that good, or...?

EC: Oh, no, no, and he would, the same, because the ships would travel, and his address was a P.O. Box, so it would, they would just transport it to one spot, and when they’d get mail call, then, see, I wrote him every day, so then when he’d get all of his letters, if you didn’t get letters for three weeks then he’d get 21 letters, and of course he was the envy of everybody else because nobody else wrote that often, so he got a lot of letters and he in turn wrote a lot back, but we, that’s the only kind of correspondence we could get by with, so that’s what we did.

JK: When you met your future husband was he in the service?

EC: Yeah. He was in the Navy, he was just out of boot camp, and we met at a teen dance, which was a Wednesday night, and he had met some fellas in boot camp that were dating my sister, and they knew that we would be the dance and so they got together and this one fella said, “I know some girls that’ll be up at the dance, so let’s go there.” And so that’s how we met. And the teen dance was just for teens, and they sold no hard liquor, it was just soda pop, no beer, and it was just a neat place for young people to gather, and it would be great if they did things like that now, because they don’t always have to have that liquor, and it was at the Eagles ball room, and it was a big, big place where lots of people could gather, and it was just the “in” place to be then.

JK: Were there people, other service men there?

EC: Oh sure, oh sure, they knew that the teen girls would be there, and where else, but teen boys were going to be where the teen girls are, and being at that age, the liquor wasn’t that important anyway, it was just a place to be. And you had to take the bus to get there, wherever you went we always took the bus, and nobody minded taking the bus at that time. Teenagers at this stage of the game all gotta have a car, but we took public transportation and thought it was great.

JK: Was there a band or a type of music?

EC: Oh, yeah. Big bands, the big band sounds. It was great. The big bands, like maybe 12 –15 piece orchestras. And they played the jazz and the jitterbug music.

JK: Ok, getting back to high school activities, do you think that the young people at that time, you know, having this war going on, felt generally optimistic, or were there some sort of feelings of gloom?

EC: No, no. It was a war to be won, and that was the attitude, it wasn't that we shouldn't be in it, especially after Pearl Harbor and after being attacked, you have nothing but retaliation, and go back and win it. And that was the attitude of the students in school, too.

JK: Was there discussion in school in your classrooms or even in the hallways, was the war a big topic all the time?

EC: Not all the time but it was a big topic. Holiday time there were U.S.O. parties, families would invite the sailors over for Thanksgiving dinner, you would put your name in at the U.S.O. and just how many you wanted and they would send them over, or you could have a cab pick them up or go pick them up yourself, and a lot of people did that. A lot of people did that, especially in the Midwest, and they were all, the servicemen were treated very well, so from Chicago, which was Great Lakes, there were a lot of sailors that came to Milwaukee.

JK: For holiday dinners?

EC: For holiday dinners, for holiday weekends, uh, they'd have dances for them, home parties, they did everything they could to make them feel at home when they were away from home.

JK: You mentioned that a lot of the students in the senior year were leaving to enlist in the service, what about the teachers, were there many teachers that left?

EC: No, they were older. No, the majority of teachers were older, older meaning maybe what, 40s, so they wouldn't be considering going in, you know, the young boys were doing that.

JK: Was there any kind of a reaction when a former student or classmate was killed, did that become an announcement, or, how was that treated in school?

EC: I don't recall that too much of that happened, uh, what has played an important role, I think, was the fact that my brother's friend was shot down as he was a paratrooper, parachuting down, and was a prisoner and he did come back, um, he was caught shortly, I guess, before the war ended in Europe, and so once the war ended in Europe they freed the prisoners and that's when he came home, but everybody couldn't wait to see him come back and listen to his stories as to what happened and how he was treated.

JK: What kind of stories did he have when he came back?

EC: About, you know, the food that they had was probably two meals a day instead of three, and the facilities to wash up were nothing what any of us were used to, it was a bucket, you know, to wash up with, and just like a cell to live in.

JK: And how long was he a prisoner of war?

EC: He couldn't have been, maybe a year. Less than a year or something like that.

JK: Can you describe his condition then when he came back, was he in pretty good shape or...?

EC: Yeah, no, he looked fine. He had lost some weight but he looked fine.

JK: He hadn't been really mistreated or tortured in any way.

EC: No, no, not to our knowledge.

JK: Ok, in 1945 there was, the first victory was in Europe, can you describe the mood of the country, your friends and family on hearing the news of that victory?

EC: Oh yeah, everybody was very optimistic and real happy that that war was over, but the big concern was now are they all going to be sent over to the western front, or are some of them going to get to come home. Some of them did, like I was telling you the prisoner of war came home, but my brother was sent over to the west, Pacific Ocean, and a lot of them were, but I don't know if they requested to go because once they'd won and they were all pumped up to go ahead and finish it and get it all over with, so, you know how that goes when you, you're on a roll, you figure, let's go and beat the hell out of them and come on back home and get back to living again.

JK: Did everyone feel that this was a sign that the war would end real soon, or, was this just a beginning?

EC: I don't know about whether - you mean the war with Japan?

JK: Right. Did they almost view them as separate wars, it seems?

EC: Yeah, yeah, because they were so distantly located, at that time it seemed distant, but now nothing is distant. But it seemed one was at one end of the world and the other was at the other end of the world, but, um, I don't know if they were looking as to how quickly they could end the other one, probably with the extra forces that they had, that they didn't need over in Europe, they could all band together and get it over with, there wasn't a timeframe set but I think there was a feeling that they could end it faster.

JK: What did you know about the development of the atomic bomb, was there any news about that?

EC: No, no, there really wasn't. I think, I don't think, the development of the atomic bomb was given out after it all happened, after it was dropped, that was kept very secret and there wasn't any news on that.

JK: What was your reaction to the bombings in Japan using the atomic bomb?

EC: I think everyone, including myself, had two. It was a horrible thing to have to do it, but it brought things to an end, and so, and I think at the time, I think if it were now I would even be more upset with it, but I think youth doesn't take it that seriously, and I think that made a difference, but I think to settle it, if that's what it took to settle it and get it over with, that's what they had to do, and we didn't, at that point in time, question why they did it, because we knew it

was to end, but I – it was an awful, horrible thing when you, when you read about the happenings and how long it has taken to get that land to be able to be workable, if it ever will be, and all of those details, those people went through an awful lot, I mean, we talk about the cancer scares of food and things like that, but imagine what they had to live with, with that atomic bomb. I mean, dismembered bodies and disfigured faces, and, you know, it's just a horrible thought.

JK: At the time, though, I think what I'm hearing you say is that people weren't really aware that those were the effects, so –

EC: Right, right.

JK: It was just a big bomb.

EC: It was a bomb to end a war, you know, so, long-range thoughts nobody had.

JK: So what was the reaction, your reaction and your family's reaction to the final victory, then?

EC: There was a big celebration. Everybody went downtown, and the downtown Milwaukee area was crowded, and everybody was hugging and kissing and blowing whistles, and making noise and blowing horns and you could barely walk down Wisconsin Avenue, which is the main street down there, it was so crowded, and everybody was just thrilled to have it over with. It was amazing. People just, when they heard it, came out of their houses and blew whistles and it was more than a New Year's Eve celebration.

JK: Was your brother and then also your boyfriend at that time, did they come home shortly after that, or did you expect them home?

EC: Well, my brother came home, but my boyfriend didn't. He took another route to take a ship back all the way around, through the locks, Panama Canal, and all the way around to Newport, to decommission the ship, which was a nice trip for him, but he didn't come home right away.

JK: During the war, did you know anything about the Auschwitz and the atrocities that were going on, that were happening to the Jewish people?

EC: No, not really. If there were ever articles in the paper about them, I think they didn't dwell on them. There were just hints instead of facts given. And if anybody questioned them, they weren't sure they were truth, which, you know, I know it sounds difficult to believe, but that, I guess, is what has happened. But, then again, years later, all the stories came out and going to see it, it was, it just, it takes your, you can't imagine what it must have been like to have lived at a time like that, for those people to live in fear.

JK: So you took a trip to Germany and saw some of those places?

EC: Yeah, we saw Dachau. And the ovens, I didn't, I couldn't even walk through the ovens, but \_\_\_\_\_ . And, um, they've got a big art structure in front of the building in Dachau, and it's all of dismembered bodies, and we saw where they slept in racks and racks of beds, how they herded people like cattle, it was just, it must have been awful, just, it must have been awful. After you see something like that, you know that that's fact, I mean, those places existed, and people were misused and abused, it had to be horrible, there were experiments that

went on and, uh, with hot water, cold water showers, noise, what was the highest and lowest noise tolerance people had, um, they were, they were just terrible, just terrible to have to live in stuff like that. And how some people survived it is, it had to be miracles, if they just survived that.

JK: I'm kind of surprised to hear that that wasn't brought up during the war, I guess I had always assumed that people knew that all throughout the war, that that was going on.

EC: Oh no, oh no, uh-uh.

JK: It was just one of those thing that you learned after the fact, then.

EC: Yeah, oh sure. Like I said, there might have been articles that seeped into the paper, somebody saying "we think this is happening," and "that's going on," but the media didn't pick on it and dwell on it, if they had, it might have been disclosed a lot sooner. But the way it got disclosed was by people escaping and coming out and telling the world, so this was all after the fact, you know, not while it was going on.

JK: Were any of your neighbors or friends treated differently because they were, uh, German, for example, or, um, I don't know if there were any Japanese people in your neighborhood, but were there any prejudices surfacing during the war against various groups of people that you were aware of?

EC: I think there's always prejudices and there always will be, but I don't think I ever, I experienced prejudices in my family at all. And if my parents had them, they never showed them to us. I don't know if there was prejudice against Germans or Jews or anything like that, because, like I said, I felt that I was raised in a family that didn't show any. But I've heard other young people talk about them, and so I guess I didn't realized how much prejudice was out there until I got into the work force and just heard more people talk, but as a child I wouldn't have believed that, because people were the same all over the world, as far as I was concerned.

JK: So you've kind of painted a picture of the whole country really coming together and everybody doing their part for the war, a real feeling of unity in the country at that point. What did people feel they were fighting for or, I guess, again, coming from a Vietnam era, which was always the question, you know, "why are we there," there was, it seems that it was much more clear-cut and...

EC: Right. There was no question why we were there. We just didn't want them here. And that was it. We just reached, you know, fight for your rights, and that's what happened. There wasn't a question as to why, it's a question of, let's go and do it, and get it done and over with and then get back to living again.

JK: So there was a feeling that this was a war to end all wars?

EC: Oh, sure. I think all wars are supposedly like that, except some, like the Vietnam War, those people were fighting forever, and they're still not real happy with the whole situation. And, uh, so some people just seem to fight for the rest of their lives, and others want to just get it done and



over with, and I think that's the attitude that we had in this country, but I don't think it prevailed in the other wars. Of course, that was a big one, as they always said. WW2.

JK: Ok, I think that's pretty good, thank you very much.

EC: Well, you're welcome.