

LOIS BREITBARTH ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewees: Lois Olhoft Breitbarth

Interviewers: Erin Mead and Benjamin Vennes; Eldor Breitbarth (husband)

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Lois Breitbarth was born in 1927 on a farm in Wheaton, Minnesota. In addition to her farm chores, Lois worked part-time at a grocery store during the war, where she remembers the impacts of shortages and rationing. After the war, she attended Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, then pursued a teaching license at Concordia Teachers College in Seward, Nebraska. Lois married her husband, Eldor, in June 1948 in Wheaton. They continued to live on a farm in Antrim Township, Watonwan County. Eldor passed away in 2008 and Lois passed away in 2016.

Summary

In this interview, Lois recalls her time as a high school student during the war. She discusses her parents, the farm, growing up in a small town, and life after college. She also recounts how being a part of a small community allowed her to connect to local patriotism and recognize everyday war efforts. She also remembers stories of people who were drafted, what it was like growing up during the Great Depression, and how they navigated food shortages. Lois's husband, Eldor, joins her in the interview, and he also shares stories of the draft and life on the farm.

Keywords

high school, farm, teaching, draft, Victory Garden, defense plants, rationing, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wheaton, Minnesota

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: The Start of the War [00:12 – 02:55]

[As far as] the war, I remember quite vividly the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. That was December 7, 1941. And I was in high school, and it really shook everybody—it was a surprise attack. You know, we had been following what had happened over in Europe with Hitler taking over the various countries. In high school, in history class, that was a big item and we talked about that a lot.

But everybody was really surprised by the attack on Pearl Harbor, and then that war was declared then right away after that. I remember President Roosevelt on the radio—because there was no TV then yet [*laughs*—and I remember sitting by the radio and listening to him declare war on Japan the day after. And then following that—I don’t remember what day that was then—we declared war on Germany and Italy, too. I think what I wrote down here is, [*looking at her diary*] “December 11, war was declared on Germany and Italy.”

And the thing about, that I remember mostly about the war, people really pulled together. It wasn’t like it was in the Vietnam War; that was such a dividing thing. But people—there was mixed feelings, I am sure. My grandmothers, both of them came from Germany, and my paternal grandmother especially, she didn’t like the idea that we were going to fight against Germany—you know, which is understandable. She didn’t think at that time that Hitler was that bad a person, which is understandable. And she had family and relatives yet in Germany. She didn’t really at first like the idea that here the United States was going to fight against her homeland,

which is understandable, too.

So, I think, again, that people really pulled together when war was declared after it all, after people realized what was going on.

Story 2: War Bonds and Saving Materials **[06:50 – 08:25]**

The things I remember, I was in high school, so savings bonds and stamps were a big thing—each class trying to outdo each other buying the savings, the stamps. We had stamps that you pasted into a little book—I wish I had one of those [*laughs*]*—*and then bonds were sold, too. Well, they called them war bonds at that time, and there was a big incentive for which class was going to sell the most or buy the most savings bonds.

And then we had, after the war [*started*]*—*this probably didn't happen right away—but then we collected scrap iron. I remember our scrap metal; we collected all kinds of scrap iron, all kinds of metal—copper, tin, aluminum, and iron. I remember our school yard, we had a big, big pile on the yard of scrap iron. And that was for the war effort, the scrap iron pots, the saving the metals.

And then we saved oils too, like fat—we saved a lot stuff. Paper, I think, was saved. But the big thing was the scrap, the iron they saved. I think they did that around here, too.

Story 3: Supplies During the War **[08:32 – 10:52]**

I was employed in a grocery store. I mean, that was a hassle [*laughs*] because it changed so much—I don't remember what these are all for [*looking at wartime ration books*]. Every month you got a book. And then the grocer—I worked for a little store, Strong's Grocery was the name of it, on Main Street of Wheaton. And besides the price of an item, when people came into buy, you also had to take stamps out, too.

You know, that got to be really—especially the meat was hard. And people would come in and buy a little. You had to weigh it up and then figure out how many coupons you had to take out for the meat and coffee and sugar. I can remember my grandma hoarded sugar. [*laughs*] I might just well say it, and a lot of people did.

Nylons were the big thing for ladies. You couldn't buy them. And you know, I don't know if other places did this, but I remember—I don't think I ever did—girls would buy, it was kind of like a lotion that you put on your legs to make your legs look brown like you had nylons on. They actually did that. [*laughs*]

What else was hard to get? I know nylons or any kind of stockings were hard to get. I can't remember, let's see—well, any kind of machinery. Now, my folks built a house during the war and they had to get a permit, probably, for every piece of lumber. Lumber was hard, too;

anything like that was hard. I know you couldn't hardly buy tractors, I don't think, during the war. No, or automobiles either. All of those type of things were hard.

Story 4: Women in the War
[15:34 – 16:45]

Yes, the women were really—you know, that was kind of unheard of, women in the service. But I had a friend, a good friend, that was in the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service]. That was the Navy. And then the WACs [Women's Army Corps], I didn't know anybody personally in the WACs or the Air Force. And there were others, but I don't recall—I think the Marines, there were women Marines, too, but I don't recall what they were named. There were some in the women's Army Nurse Corps.

And then a lot of them, you know, we talk about Rosie the Riveter. [*laughs*] I had a cousin, Cousin Alice, she right away left—because she was sister to those five in the service. She right away left and went to work in a defense plant in Ogden, Utah. And I know I would write to her. She worked in a defense plant; a lot of women did, would go. And if the farmers, if the farm boys had to go to the service, a lot of women had to do more farm work.

Story 5: Music from the War
[19:46 – 20:42]

I got sheet music yet from the war. [*shows sheet music*]

BV: *Oh, really? Did you notice a lot of things being more turned towards the war?*

Oh yes, like music. This [sheet music] is “Bell Bottom Trousers.” I wish I had some more. I remember some other ones as “Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else But Me.” And I wish I could remember more of those. “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” that's another one. [*laughter*] If you want to just look at the words of that—. [*offers sheet music*]

And there was a lot—of course, this is just things that I heard. The USO [United Service Organizations], a lot of the big stars were going overseas and entertaining the troops. There was a lot of that going on, like Bob Hope did a lot of that, Marilyn Monroe. [*laughs*]

Story 6: German Prisoners Helping with Farms
[42:05 – 43:24]

EB: *I can remember during the war, during harvest, they shocked oats and threshed it. We had some German prisoners—German prisoners helped us thresh.*

BV: *Do you remember how they allocated those? How did you receive these prisoners? Was it something set up by the state, or what?*

EB: *Well, they [got] whatever state they got. This was right from the state. It was in Fairmont; that's where it was it. And they could only work, say for instance thresh, for you one day—just one day. And the next day they had to go someplace else. I can remember that we had a sheet of paper, that one guy, he was really nice, that we wanted him to come back the next day. By golly, he did come back.*

But they were good. You know, I'm German, and I could talk a little German—now I can't hardly talk it. But then, years ago, my mother talked German to us and we would answer in English. But my grandmother, she come from the old country. She felt bad, too, when all that was going on.