

Interviewee: Aileen Frazier Boggs

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 14 November 2002

Location: living room of the Boggs home, Woodbury, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, February 2003

Aileen Frazier Boggs was born on 15 June 1918 in Des Moines, Iowa. She attended local schools, graduating from Des Moines East High in 1936, and then spent several years doing housework and childcare in private homes; Aileen also worked some months as a clerk at a local Woolworth's. In 1939 Aileen married Mel Boggs; the couple purchased their first house in 1941, and welcomed their first child in 1942. In early 1943, concerned that he might be drafted, Mel instead volunteered for the US Army Air Corps; he spent the time until late 1945 in service, more than a year of this overseas as pilot of a B-24 Liberator bomber.

For Aileen, the period 1943-45 was a period of adjustment: to being a single mother managing a household. She dealt on a daily basis with rationing, shortages, childcare, and worrying about her husband on active duty in a war zone. In 1944 Aileen invited a friend of hers, another Air Corps wife, to move into the house; both women benefited from sharing experiences of husbands overseas, and gained moral support. "It meant a lot to me," Aileen said.

Following Mel's discharge from active duty in late 1945, Aileen was a stay at home mother until the early 1960s, when she worked at several secretarial jobs. After 1968 she helped manage a plumbing contracting business that Mel started, retiring in 1995. At the time of this interview (2002) Aileen and Mel Boggs lived in Woodbury, Minnesota.

Very good discussion on the challenges of being a single mother during wartime, with a husband in a combat zone (bomber pilot in Europe).

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

A = Aileen Frazier Boggs

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is the 14th of November 2002 and this is our interview with Aileen Boggs. First, Aileen, on the record, thanks very much for taking time this evening to speak with me.

A: You're welcome.

T: We've been talking for a few minutes and here is some of what we already know. You were born on the 15th of June 1918 in Des Moines, Iowa and you were the youngest of two children. You attended local schools including graduating from East High in Des Moines, class of 1936. After high school you were not successful in finding a job outside the home and were at home. You did some childcare and housework in private homes in Des Moines, and later you were a clerk in a local Woolworth's, and I've learned that was a job you did not like. You married Mel Boggs in 1939. You and Mel were in the same high school graduating class, is that right?

A: Not exactly. I graduated in January and he graduated in June of 1936.

T: That's right. In those days there were two graduating classes.

A: Yes.

T: So you could both say you were class of '36, even though one January and one June.

A: Yes.

T: You two were married in 1939 in Des Moines and you purchased a home in 1941; your first child, a son, was born in 1942. During this time you were working as a homemaker. Mel enlisted in the service in 1943, meaning you were a homemaker and mother by yourself until Mel was out of the service at the end of 1945. After that you continued to live in Des Moines. About 1962, with your children both grown--your daughter was in high school by that time, you worked outside the home at a couple secretarial jobs including in the chaplain's office at the Methodist Hospital in Des Moines. In 1968 you and Mel moved to Iowa City, where you started a contracting firm; you were an integral part of the work in that contracting

company. In fact, you were half the firm as I found out. You kept that business until 1995, is that right?

(1, A, 51)

A: Yes.

T: You spent some years in... a couple years in Florida, and now are residents of Woodbury, Minnesota. One thing I wanted to ask you about growing up in Des Moines in the 1930s during the time of the Depression: You already mentioned that you had taken some clerical, secretarial courses in high school hoping to find a job when you got out of high school. How tough was the job search when you went out looking for a job after high school?

A: It was really hard. A lot of people couldn't find jobs. So they just stayed home and worked and helped their friends or whatever, and not very many of my... oh, this was before... I was trying to think what year that would have been. 1930 would have been six years before I graduated from high school. If you want to know about my dad's work...

T: Yes. Please.

A: He always had a job. He worked for a dairy. He was a dairy salesman. He delivered milk. Before he delivered East Des Moines business route, he just delivered home routes. But he always had a job. I don't know... in those days you didn't know how much your parents made.

T: Right.

A: But he always had a job. My mother was very frugal and she made drapes, and she made over clothes for me, and she even made sheets for the beds--which you could make cheaper. Then my folks, we had a big older home and they made apartments out of the upstairs and we lived in three rooms downstairs. We rented out the rest to make up for what my dad didn't make.

T: I see. Was the entrance for those apartments through the same front entrance of your house or was there a separate entrance?

A: No. There was a stairway going upstairs. They had a separate entrance.

T: Did the people who rented rooms also have board, have meals, at your house?

A: No. They just rented and most of them worked. They didn't have any meals.

T: When you were in school, what did you especially like about living in Des Moines at that time, as a young person?

A: I guess I really didn't think about living in Des Moines, but I really liked school. Mostly I liked music and I sang in the a cappella choir at East High. We would get to go to other schools and other places to sing. I really liked the music and I liked the shorthand. I liked the secretarial work that we did. Those subjects.

T: When you couldn't find a job after high school, were you ever tempted to leave Iowa and go somewhere else to try to find a job?

(1, A, 105)

A: No. That never entered my head.

T: So you were content to live with your folks and try to make ends meet and maybe things would get better later?

A: Yes.

T: Where did you meet your future husband, Mel? Did you know him in high school?

A: I knew him in the junior department at the church. We would have been like twelve years old. In those days they'd have the Sunday School classes separate with the boys and girls, and then they'd all come together and the boys would sit on one side and the girls would sit on the other. I just knew that he was there and I knew his name. That was it. We weren't going together or anything.

T: Did you know him in high school too?

A: Yes. Then as we got older, they had church activities and we both sang in the choir. Then they had what they call Christian Endeavor every evening after church. No, it was before the church service. Young people would meet together and we'd have a program and fellowship and refreshments, and then also we'd have picnics outside during the week. Picnics and things. He would come and I would come, and we got acquainted that way. We didn't really start going together until eleventh grade in high school.

T: So you've known each other...

A: For a long time.

T: It sounds like about seventy years if you first met around 1930. You were married in 1939. How hard was it to find an affordable apartment when you and Mel got married?

A: Actually it wasn't too hard. We looked at several but there was only this one that we really liked. People were renting out rooms in their homes. Some of them were

really funny. One of the houses that we looked at we had to go through the kitchen and then they had a little kind of a stairway that you went upstairs. When you got up there, there was a big room and maybe a little bathroom or something. That's the kind of things that people rented out.

T: Really just rooms in their home.

A: Yes. Just rooms and no matter how, you could get there. But then we saw this one that had... it was in an older home, and it was the front part of it. It was like a big sitting room. It was an older home with bay windows and it had a back and front entrance. We had a garage and a nice kitchen. We shared a bathroom with another lady. That was really funny, because sometimes she'd leave the door to our place locked and sometimes we'd leave the door to her place locked.

T: You each had separate entrance doors?

A: Yes. We'd go in from this side and she'd come in from her side. She'd be knocking on our door, I mean on the wall. As soon as we heard that knocking on the wall, we knew, and we'd run and open the bathroom door.

T: Were you pretty happy with that place?

(1, A, 153)

A: Yes. We were in love and it was wonderful (*laughs*). It was nicely furnished. Well, I say nicely furnished—it was furnished comfortably. Nothing fancy. A library table and a great big living room. It was a rather new davenport [sofa] and it made out into a bed. Then there was a small closet. Then the kitchen had a kitchen cabinet, if you know what that is. I think the oven that I had was one that you, maybe you haven't even seen these, but you set it on top of the burner when you use it and then that heats up the oven part.

T: Don't think I've seen one of those.

A: You've just got a metal thing there and you set it on top of the thing. I think that's what we had.

Husband Mel Boggs (*from across the room*): They were quite common then.

T: How was the adjustment for you from living with your folks to being really the person in charge of the household?

A: When I lived with my folks I did a lot of cooking and that sort of thing. When my mother wasn't very well I practically took care of the house. She cooked but then I learned to cook too. I did all those things.

T: So I hear you saying it was an easy adjustment to make.

A: Oh, yes.

T: You were not working outside the home at this time, right?

A: I still was working some. I would... this lady that I worked for on the West Side, she was very nice, and once in a while I would still go out there and help her. Then I decided I wanted to be home all the time after we got married, so then I gave that up.

T: And Woolworth's was already in the past.

A: In the past. I went from Woolworth's back to working for more of the ladies out on the West Side.

T: Was it a more pleasant work environment, or more money, or both to work out in private homes?

A: You mean rather than the dime store?

T: Yes.

A: Oh, no. I made more at the dime store, but the funny part... I think I made twelve dollars a week at the dime store and on Saturdays you'd work until ten o'clock or so. You'd have to restock your counters and you had to work until that was done. You didn't get any extra for it. So before I started to work there permanently I made really more money, because I came in and worked just one or two days a week but I got more because I worked by the hour. When you worked full time you had to stay if they wanted you to stay that night to work late, to help with something. You had to do that. And then Saturday night it would be ten o'clock or so before I'd get off.

T: Full time jobs were not easy to come by, so I guess they felt that they could do that at that time.

A: Right.

T: Aileen, once the war started things might have changed, and I want to talk about that a bit. The US entered the war on December 7, 1941, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I'm wondering if you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

A: We went to church with my folks. We visited this church. They were having a special program or something and my folks wanted to go, so we took them and went. That's where we were. I had no idea what was going on or anything about it. I think a lot of people didn't. I didn't know... I knew something drastic had

happened, but I didn't know what. That was a process of learning after that, day by day.

Mel Boggs (*across the room*): We'd never heard of Pearl Harbor. We didn't know where Pearl Harbor...

A: So it wasn't a big impact. We just knew something was in the air, and we wondered what.

T: Once it became clear that the US was at war, were you a person who had followed the news and wasn't surprised that we were at war, or would you say you were surprised when we actually got into it?

A: I don't really remember much about how it really... It became more clear to me when I saw our friends being drafted and going to war. Then I knew really what was going on. Then when we started to wonder if Mel would be called, too. When it began to affect the lives around you, then you begin to know what's happening for sure.

T: Very good point. How soon... how long was it until you started to think that it might impact your family directly? That is, your husband Mel.

A: I think when some of our friends were being drafted and going. Of course, everybody, all the young men, were talking about it and wondering what they should do and everything. That's when Mel decided that he'd rather enlist than be called, be drafted, so he could do what he wanted to do.

T: How did that... did you talk this over with Mel, this decision to enlist or not to enlist? Was that something you both talked about?

A: We had to, because I had to sign the papers or he couldn't have gone.

T: What kind of papers were those? As the wife?

A: Yes.

T: Is that right?

A: Yes.

T: This is something new and interesting. The papers were so you could give consent in a way?

A: That's right.

(1, A, 232)

T: So you were involved in the decision then.

A: Yes.

T: Were you convinced he was doing the right thing, or did he have to convince you?

A: Well, he's always been one that knows pretty much what he wants to do, and I respect that. And when he said he wanted to do that, I knew that's what he wanted to do.

T: So you signed, and Mel enlisted. Now Mel didn't go into the service until 1943. I'm wondering how your life may have changed, and I'll talk specifically here about some things before that. The city of Des Moines is obviously far from either coast, the Pacific Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean. Did you notice anything visually about Des Moines that began to change? Were there signs in storefronts or more flags that seemed to be flying or anything that you noticed that seemed to indicate a difference?

A: One thing was that as anybody in your family left for the war, you put up star in the window. And you'd see stars and more stars in the windows. That was one thing.

T: So you could really see by walking through neighborhoods almost...

A: Oh, yes. We put them right up in the window where people could see them. So there were getting to be more of those.

T: Living in your house, do you ever recall any kind of blackouts or air raid sirens or anything like that?

A: After Mel left there was. They had... I can't think of the name they called it... Civil Patrol or something. Do you remember what that was? *(pauses three seconds)* But anyway, you were supposed to have your shades so that when you pulled them it was black. You couldn't see through, the light couldn't get through the windows. Then every once in a while they would have people, they wore armbands, and they would walk through the neighborhood and they would look at everybody's... If you could see light through your window, then they'd come and tell you and you'd have to fix it so they couldn't see the light. Through the neighborhood. Check on that.

Mel Boggs *(across the room)*: Aileen, did the streetlights stay on? Did they keep the streetlights on?

A: Probably not if they had a raid. I don't remember that at all. I don't remember that.

T: But you remember this blackout. This drawing the curtains and things after Mel left.

A: Yes.

T: Which means after 1943.

A: Yes.

T: Very interesting. Think of the women you knew, either friends or relatives, were people going out, were women going to work that you knew that maybe hadn't worked before?

A: A couple of my friends did, and that was after their husbands left for the war. One friend, she had her family that took care of, she had a baby and the family took care of him, the boy. Another friend of mine had her sister-in-law lived there, and they went to work. But I didn't. I didn't want to go to work. I figured that our little guy [our son]... Mel was gone. He needed me twice as much. So I didn't want to work.

T: But you do recall other women actually going out and getting jobs who hadn't worked before.

A: By this time my friends that wanted to work probably were working, because the job market was better during that time. I do remember my sister-in-law went to work at an arms plant, or something like that. I don't know what they were making. Her mother worked at a place where they were making airplane parts. She worked at an aircraft place, an aircraft company. Come to think about it, there were women that were working then.

(1, A, 278)

T: And these were people who hadn't worked before the war maybe?

A: My sister-in-law hadn't, no, but her mother had. She always worked someplace.

T: But they were both involved in defense related jobs at this point.

A: Yes. And I did know some other people, ladies, too, come to think about it, that went to work at some of those defense plants.

T: Did anybody ever approach you about coming to work at a job like that?

A: No.

T: Any of your friends ever say, Aileen, you could earn good money if you came out to work?

A: No.

T: They knew you didn't want to?

A: Right.

T: I am wondering about some things that may have been on your mind as a homemaker, things like rationing or shortages of certain things.

A: Yes. We had quite a bit of rationing. You got little slips, or little coupons. Sugar was rationed. Shoes were rationed. I believe canned fruit, too. And gasoline. Everybody got these coupons. But my parents lived in Des Moines, and they were a big help to me. I would give them my gas. I think you got gasoline coupons even if you didn't have a car, so that if you rode with somebody or something. So I would give my gasoline coupons to my parents, and then my parents, they would give me their shoe coupons. After [our son] Steve got to walking he'd need new shoes more often, so they would give me their shoe coupons. Then I would give them my sugar coupons, because we didn't eat that much sugar. We'd trade back and forth that way.

T: So there was trading of these coupons.

A: Yes.

T: Did you trade with anyone other than your parents?

A: No.

T: For you, of the items that were rationed in the household, what shortages impacted you the most in your daily life as a homemaker?

A: Rationing affected me none.

T: It didn't?

A: No.

T: Would you say you always had enough of the things you needed?

A: Right.

T: How might that have changed? For a while, before Mel left for service, you had coupons for three, right? When he left did the coupons go to just two people?

A: I don't remember that we had coupons before he left. That was after he left.

T: I see. So the coupons you had after he left were then just for you and your son.

A: Yes.

T: For two of you.

A: Yes.

T: When you went to the stores, say you were shopping for groceries, did you notice things that weren't always there as often as you would have liked? Groceries, I mean.

A: *(pauses three seconds)* I don't remember anything.

T: For example meat. Do you recall meat being in good supply?

A: You might have even had coupons, I believe we had coupons for meat. Of course, our little guy and I didn't... He was eleven months old and I didn't eat a lot of meat. If it was meat, I gave them [the coupons] to my parents. Nothing that I wanted wasn't there.

T: Outside of groceries, were there other products, clothing items? You mentioned shoes already that were rationed and weren't always in supply. Were there other clothing items that may have been not always available?

A: I think silk stockings were hard to get, at least that is what my husband Mel says, but it seems like I always had plenty. I don't remember that... Nothing that ever bothered me or was a big sacrifice.

T: Before Mel went away to the service, how did you imagine the changes that would come? I mean, what did you imagine would be the biggest change or the biggest problem you would have?

A: I don't remember that I had really a lot of time to think about that. I was busy taking care of our little son and taking care of the house and everything. I know that Mel, it impacted him in the fact that we had a coal furnace that you had to put chunks of coal in the furnace and he always fired the furnace. He wanted to put in a stoker, a furnace that wouldn't have to be stoked. You know what a stoker is?

T: You have to throw coal in yourself, right?

A: Yes. It sends the right amount of coal into the hopper, and then I would have to take out a big clanker maybe once a day or something. But it feeds itself as it needs it. So he had that put in before he left.

T: Once Mel did leave, what did you notice were the biggest changes for you? That's a daily task there as far as worrying about stoking the coal stove and cleaning out the ashes and the cinders, and it's dirty work. That's one thing that you had to take care of now. What other kind of things were suddenly your responsibility?

A: We always washed the windows in the fall and I remember I did that myself. I think I mowed the yard. I don't remember that I mowed it all the time, but I remember I mowed the yard.

(1 , A, 354)

T: Being in charge of the household—doing the finances and paying the bills, was that a new thing for you, too, or had you always done that?

A: I had done some of that, yes. Oh, that was another thing. When he left there was a... it was a law that if you were making payments on a house like we were, paying thirty dollars a month for the house, that after... if you had a husband that left, that you only had to pay the interest. So I called up the man that owned our house and told him that I couldn't afford to pay that and that, so I think the interest was nineteen dollars. So I just had to pay nineteen dollars a month until Mel came back.

T: So the government managed mortgages in a way, to freeze the principal and only leave you responsible to the bank for the interest?

A: Yes.

T: I didn't know that either. So the financial impact was slightly reduced because of that. So you were paying less per month.

A: Yes.

T: Did you get an allotment or any kind of money from Mel every month?

A: He got seventy-five dollars when he was a cadet [pilot], and he'd send fifty dollars of that home to me. I didn't have a lot of things to spend money on, and so that did okay.

T: That fifty dollars was enough?

A: Yes.

T: In 1944, once Mel went overseas, you took in someone to pay rent in one of the rooms.

A: Yes.

T: What prompted you to do that?

A: Ginger was my friend, and I was getting pretty lonesome there staying by myself. Evenings were really hard.

T: If you think about it, when you think about the decision to take in a renter, would you say it was more financial or more personal?

A: Oh, it was personal, because she paid such a little amount. Then she wanted to do this, and then she would pay so much if she'd eat with me. Like if she'd eat supper she would pay... I forget what the amount was. It was a meager amount.

T: Now she was... she had no children at this time. Is that right?

A: No.

T: What kind of job did she have?

A: She's the one that... she and her husband were going to buy this [auto repair] garage, and so she was the one that I was telling you about. She wanted to learn this certain kind of bookkeeping, and so she went and found a garage that did that.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.

A: It was really great to have Ginger there because we had so much in common. Every night we would write our husbands. She'd write her husband and I'd write Mel. It was just nice to have her coming home bringing office talk and things that happened at the garage and everything, and have somebody to eat with. It was just great. We just got to be such good friends.

T: I can imagine that just the companionship and someone to talk to was wonderful.

A: Just being in the house. She liked Steve so much and she'd wrestle with him and have a good time playing with him. Of course by then Steve would have been two years old.

T: He was born in April '42?

A: In 1942 and this was 1944 and 1945. She didn't come until he went overseas, and that was in 1944.

T: Let me ask about contact with Mel. Suddenly he's pretty far away. Basic Training was in three different places, he told me during our interview last evening.

A: San Antonio was the first place and then Houston, Lincoln Field.

T: So places that were far away, places that you couldn't even really go to visit.

A: Oh, no, I didn't visit him. He didn't get home until after he had got his wings. From March to the next January.

T: That's a long time.

A: It was. *(pauses three seconds)* When he first went out there I think there was no way of, I didn't have any way of contacting him, and he couldn't get in touch with me right away. The only thing that I got was some kind of a postcard from the government saying where he'd been sent. So I had no phone number or anything. He was so busy when he first got out there, when he was a cadet, he couldn't even call me. And when he'd go to the telephone they'd be lined up, all the guys would be lined up, so by the time he got there it would be too late.

Like I said, our little guy was eleven months old at that time and he hadn't even had a cold or been sick or anything. He was real healthy. The next week after Mel left he got the croup and had to go to the emergency in the hospital. He was in the hospital then and Mel didn't know anything about it, and I couldn't get touch with him or anything. It was just things like that that happened that you just... you know, you just...

T: You had to deal with them?

A: On your own.

T: Aileen, I'm wondering when you wrote letters, and did you write fairly often?

A: Every day.

T: When you wrote letters, how did you decide what to tell Mel and what not to tell him?

A: I told him everything. There wasn't anything I didn't tell him.

T: So if there was a problem around the house or if you were short of money or the son was sick, you told him all the bad stuff, too?

A: Oh, sure. I don't remember that we were ever short of money or anything wrong in the house. I don't remember any big bad stuff that I had to tell him. I think we pretty well knew each other, and we didn't hold things back.

(1, B, 456)

T: How often did you get letters from Mel? Was he a regular letter writer, too?

A: Yes. Every day.

T: When you got letters, what kind of things did he tell you?

A: Of course when he was a cadet, he was real busy going to school and just told me what happened and what he was studying and how things were going. And he mentioned some of the fellows that were there. Also there was a fellow that was from Des Moines that he met that was a cadet also. So then I got together with his wife.

T: You've mentioned a number of times now contact with other service wives. How important was that contact for you?

A: It was very important. In fact, after a lot of the husbands were gone we, several of us got together and had what you called, we had a birthday club and we would meet every, once a month I think we met, and we'd go out to eat and then play cards at somebody's house. I don't know, maybe it wasn't a birthday club. It was just a little club. It wasn't a birthday party or anything. But that was important. My folks would keep our son; they were very helpful. They lived in Des Moines, too. Not close enough that we could walk, but it was driving distance. They would take care of Steve a lot of times so I could go.

T: When you got together with other service wives, you did have a shared experience which was you had husbands sometimes in dangerous places. What could you provide for each other?

A: We all felt like we were in the same boat.

T: Was it moral support in a way?

A: I suppose. It was just getting together with, to have something to do and to talk to somebody. They had been my friends before.

T: Many of them you already knew, in other words?

A: Yes. It was just nice to get together to visit and find out what their husbands were doing and all that.

T: The subject of where husbands were and how they were doing, was that a pretty prominent topic of discussion?

A: Oh, sure. Yes. What letters they got and what they heard from their husbands.

One interesting thing, when Mel wrote he couldn't say, "I flew a mission today." That was illegal to do something like that. So we set it up ahead of time if he said, "Dearest Aileen," that meant he flew a mission that day. But he couldn't say where. We had that code set up before he left.

T: Did that code system work?

A: What happened was, it was in the Des Moines paper every day, when a mission, what the 8th Air Force did. I would clip, every day I would clip out the mission, where it was and everything, and then I'd save it, and then when he sent me a letter that said the date... He'd have the date up there and he'd say, "Dearest Aileen," then I would look and take that clipping that was that day and put it in a scrapbook. So when he came home I had every mission.

T: Did you really? So you kept a really detailed record.

A: My son has that now, that scrapbook. He took it home with him.

T: I'm wondering, did Mel's being in the service make you a person who paid closer attention to the news in general, and to the war in particular?

A: Oh, sure.

T: Had you been a person who generally read the newspaper every day anyway, or not?

A: I didn't have a lot of time to read the newspaper, frankly. But I kept up on the news. I didn't read the newspaper a lot.

T: But now with him overseas you were looking for those stories?

A: Sure. And then my dad was really good at that. He knew everything about Mel and he'd read the paper. He knew what was going on and he would tell me about it.

T: Among the other service wives that you knew, did some seem to handle the fact that their husbands were overseas better than others handled it?

(1, B, 534)

A: The ones that I knew were... either their parents were... they were living with their parents. This one lady was living with her parents, and the other lady had her parents right next door. The other lady had a sister-in-law living in with her. So I think maybe those things helped.

T: How about the emotional stress? Some people it seems are better able to handle uncertainty, or the possibility of bad news, better than other people.

A: You know that's one thing people have asked me about. They said, "Weren't you just worried sick? Because you knew he was being shot at all the time." And you know, I hadn't thought about it, but I said, "You know, I wasn't, and why I wasn't I don't know. Except God gave me that peace." I never, I was not worrying about his

being shot down. I just figured he was going to come home. Now why I was given that, I don't know.

T: That was one of my next questions, actually, if you were worried on a daily basis.

A: No, I was not. I just felt he was going to home, and I did not worry. Like I say, why... I just was given that peace.

T: Did you attend church regularly at this time, Aileen?

A: Not this time because my little guy... Our church we went to was quite a ways away. It was a downtown church and we lived out quite a ways. He was a big little guy and I couldn't manage getting him on a streetcar. I would have to walk two blocks to the streetcar and then ride the streetcar and transfer and everything, so I did not go to church at that time because I couldn't get there.

T: Did you attend church before this time?

A: Very regularly. Yes. We were brought up in the church, and of course that's where Mel and I met. Mel and I both sang in the choir. Every Wednesday we practiced, and every Sunday morning we sang. Then they had Christian Endeavor in the evening, and then they had church service afterward. With the young people and their fellowship and their activities that was a lot of our life. Church activities with the young people and the fellowship and the picnics and the things that we did. Hayrides and all those kinds of things.

T: A lot of fun the way you're talking about it.

A: Sure it was. We had hayrides and all kinds of fun things that we did.

T: Let me move on to a couple specific things here. While Mel was overseas, on the 12th of April 1945 specifically, President Franklin Roosevelt died. I'm wondering how you reacted to that news.

A: *(pauses five seconds)* You may think this is strange, but I do not remember that. I do not remember that day. No, I don't.

T: Once you were aware of the fact that we had a new president, Harry Truman, and that President Roosevelt had passed away, were you concerned that we had a new president suddenly, or was this not of great concern to you?

A: It was not a concern. I just figured everything would be all right, I guess.

T: About a month later, on the 8th of May 1945, the war in Europe ended. This was something that did impact you directly, because you had a husband serving. What

do you remember about getting the news that the war in Europe had ended? This was V-E Day.

A: That must have been... I was trying to think...

T: There's V-E Day in May and then V-J Day, the end of the war against Japan. That was in August of 1945.

A: There again, just specifically on that day I don't remember, but it impacted me knowing that he would be coming home. But the details of it I don't remember.

T: Mel returned from Europe, according to his information, in June 1945. Did you see Mel pretty soon after he got home from Europe?

A: He had leave right away. He went on leave as soon as he got home.

T: So you got a chance to see him in June or thereabouts, I guess?

A: Yes. He was home for a month.

T: Then you went to York, Nebraska, because Mel was going to train B-29 Superfortress pilots at a base near there.

A: Yes.

T: Do you remember what it was like to see Mel again when he got home?

A: Some things you can't put in words (*laughs*). Emotions you can't put in words.

T: Words—that's what we're chasing with this oral history project.

A: You can imagine not seeing your husband for a year.

T: Did you know he was going to come or was it a surprise?

A: No, I knew he was coming. But the trains, every time he was coming home it seems like the trains were always late. I'd keep calling the station. "It's going to be an hour late." And then, "Well, now it's going to be another late." He didn't get home until early in the morning. It was like, I don't know, four o'clock or something like that. It was just getting daylight. It seemed like in those days the trains were always late, and it was just wait, wait, wait (*laughs*). Mel says he took a taxi home from the station, but I don't remember. I know I was still up waiting.

(1, B, 616)

T: You didn't meet him at the station because the trains were late?

A: And I had this little guy at home, too.

T: You would have had to take him with you. That's right.

A: That would have been bad. He had to sleep.

T: What was that like? I mean, it's been a year now since you've seen him. What kind of things do you talk about at first? Just mundane details? Or did you want to hear about the war?

A: Of course we had been writing letters every day, so we were pretty well caught up on everything. I think one of the most important things was, I wanted him to see Steve and see how he was, because that was one of the hard parts of him being away. Like his first step—he never got to see his first step. His first words and all that. So I said, "When you get home we're going to have another one so you can see all these things." *(laughs)*

T: When Mel was overseas, were you able to send little notes or pictures that your son had drawn over to him? Little things that he could see?

A: He was only, he was just three when Mel got home so he wasn't, I don't remember that he was doing much. I don't remember that he was coloring or anything like that yet. But I kept a picture of Mel that Steve took to bed with him every night. It was a little snapshot of Mel. He had his helmet on and he was ready to go up into a single engine plane, I think. It was one of the first pictures he sent home, and Steve took that to bed with him. He knew. I'd show him pictures and talk about his daddy.

T: How was the adjustment for your son then, to Mel coming home?

A: Oh, it was wonderful. He just, it was his daddy that he knew about and everything. We had some funny experiences, though, when he was in Liberal, Kansas, for his B-24 training [before Mel was posted overseas, but after he had his pilot's wings]. Steve and I got to go. My dad helped take him on the train. He was still pretty little. My dad went with me and took him, and we were going to get to stay down in Liberal, Kansas, for a few weeks. So there was a gathering place, like a café where it was kind of like old home week there. People would come... They were all gathered around there in this little club... and so I came in with Steve and Steve said, "Guess what? A man stayed with us last night! *(laughs)* That man." I don't know if he said that man. Anyway, "A man stayed with us last night." And Mel wasn't home. He flew a lot at night. So he didn't get to stay home a lot.

T: You were able to visit him in Liberal, Kansas, though.

A: Yes.

T: One of the few times, I think, the way you have talked about things up to now.

A: Right.

(1, B, 660)

T: Let me shift back, forward, really. Mel back and really, your life moving ahead after 1945. You remained a homemaker and Mel came back at home to work. For you, Aileen, how did your life after 1945 seem to be different from the time before Mel went in the service? It appears some things were the same, like the house you lived in.

A: Yes.

T: Mel had the same job.

A: Yes.

T: Still one child. Same. You were a full time homemaker. Same. We're looking for what you noticed that might have been different.

A: We just sort of picked up where we left off, really.

T: What kind of a personal adjustment process was there? After all, for really almost a year and a half you had been managing the house by yourself. Mel had been living a very different life. What problems or difficulties did you encounter in getting back to normal?

A: Now this is something I heard other people talk about, and we had no problems like that. It was just, we just went back to living. We were so happy to be together. I didn't care about giving up my taking care of the house, all the details and all that. He was glad to be home and we just picked up and went on from where we were. We didn't have any difficulties or anything.

T: You mentioned a moment ago that you didn't mind giving up taking care of all the house, right?

A: Yes.

T: So those things that you were responsible for when Mel was gone, you did split those things up again when he came back.

A: Whatever it was.

T: Did you split things up pretty much the same way they had been before?

A: I don't know what you mean by splitting things up. Generally he took care, like he'd take care of mowing the yard and he'd take care of tending to the furnace.

T: And those had been his chores before.

A: Yes. Anything like that, outdoors and all. I always took care of the inside of the house. I didn't think that at that time we needed to share housekeeping chores because I was home all the time and I had plenty of time to take care of the house. So there was nothing like that that we shared.

T: How about the grocery shopping? Who did that?

A: We did that together a lot. Whoever. Oh, I remember, in those days they delivered groceries to your door.

T: Did you call in an order, or what?

A: Yes. I think most of the time I did. I called in and they would... you would give them your order and they'd bring it out to your house and put it on your table. But we'd go to the grocery store.

T: You stayed in the same house for a few more years, until the early 1950s, is that right?

A: Yes. Our little girl was getting... she was over three. Three and a half. Then we went to Colorado Springs for two years. [Mel got recalled to active duty during the Korean conflict.] Then when we came back she was older and then they needed separate bedrooms. So then we bought a house, just around the corner. There had been a new addition made, just around the corner from us. So we bought a new house there that had two bedrooms.

T: But you stayed in your neighborhood though.

A: Yes. And the kids went to the same school that they had been. Or Steve did; Donna hadn't started to school yet.

T: When you think about the war years for you, and that's age twenty-three to age twenty-seven, so your middle twenties, what do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life personally?

A: *(pauses five seconds)* I probably didn't realize how it does change you, but I'm sure that it must have a big impact. But you don't really notice that, I think, until you get older. Now as I look back, I wonder how we all got through it. But you just take one day at a time.

T: Would you say you noticed that more now from being an older person who can think back, in retrospect, as opposed to in the middle of it?

A: I think so. I think looking back, it impacts me now to think that he was gone from home for three years or more, and then I guess it impacted me when I see in some of the more recent wars like the Gulf War and when men were gone just three months they just seemed to go on and on about that. I thought, gee, three months—Mel was gone three years! I think if my husband was just going to be gone three months, I would have said hooray, hooray! That's just the way I see it now.

T: And that's where comparison and maybe contrast puts things in a different perspective.

A: But you see, when he left, none of us knew how long it was going to be.

T: Was that hard?

A: No. Because you kept thinking he was going to come home soon. You just looked at it day by day. You just thought, you'll get information it's over. So it's just, you take one day at a time, and when you're busy keeping up the house and taking care of a child and another lady that lives with you and getting their meals and everything, you don't really have a lot of time to think about those things.

T: Was not having much time to think about things probably a good thing?

A: That was good. I was very happy to have Steve. Steve was just a godsend to me, to have him. Just having that one little person in the house. I remember one night another girl who lived in the same area with me, we were going to go on the train. Her husband was a cadet with Mel. And they didn't come after me until one o'clock in the morning because the train didn't go until then, and my folks had taken my little boy home with them to keep him for that weekend that we got to go. And you know, I just couldn't believe how empty that house was. It was just so empty.

T: You noticed it.

A: Just that little guy. That little body gone. Here I was. That was the longest three or four hours I ever spent. Just having him there.

T: Aileen, let me thank you very much for the interview this evening. I really enjoyed speaking with you.

A: I enjoyed doing it.

T: Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW