

Interviewer: June 17, 2005, and I'm here at the Raytown Historical Museum in Raytown, Missouri. And I'm here to interview a lovely, lovely lady. Her name is June Neal, and this is the story of her experience through the years of World War II as she worked for the Department of the Army.

[0:00:28] My name is Shirley Whitman, and I'm doing the interview today. Hello, June. How are you?

Respondent: Hello, how are you, Shirley? I'm pleased to be here.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you very much. What was your maiden name?

Respondent: My maiden name is June Elizabeth West, W-E-S-T.

Interviewer: And what is your age?

Respondent: I'm 79 yesterday.

Interviewer: 79 yesterday. Where were you born and raised?

[0:00:54]

Respondent: In Hiawatha, Kansas. Brown County. We were on a farm, so they didn't usually use the town. But Hiawatha would have been the closest. And we were close to an Indian reservation. Because my grandfather donated all the land for the Powhattan Cemetery. So that's something that I'm kind of proud of too. If you ever get up in Brown County, Kansas, visit the cemetery. It's really different.

Interviewer: Well, thank you for telling us. That was the next question I was going to ask. Can you tell us something about your family background?

[0:01:27] And you just did.

Respondent: Yes, and I was from a large family, by the way. And it was the Depression time when I was born, 1926. It was almost Depression time. So we, 11 children, survived that Depression. We thought we were going to starve to death, but we didn't. And my parents were – they had a big farm that my father farmed, and it was called the Old Food Farm because the people that owned it – of course it was not us.

[0:02:02] So when they asked where I was born, it's always been the Olsen Farm in Brown County Kansas. And my father was a sharecropper. So I really recall that we felt we went hungry every night to go to bed, but we lived, anyway. My mother was a terrific cook, and she took the most meager of supplies and made a meal.

[0:02:29] We never missed a meal, especially breakfast and supper, they called it. But we all survived that, and I went to high school up in Horton, Kansas. And I

was in the tenth grade when World War II started. And before that time, before I graduated, the war started then. They started in 1941.

[0:02:56] So they came to the school, a couple of people, and gave civil service tests. And myself and my friend Marie Bowman both passed the test. So that meant we were qualified to go to work, even though we were juniors in high school. So we got on a bus out by East High School, and we rode the bus after school. They let us off an hour early at school. And we rode down to Ninth and Hardesty on the bus.

[0:03:25] And my job was with the Army Effects Bureau, and the Effects Bureau inventoried and took care of all of the personal effects that were found on the soldiers. I mean, they went out on the battlefield and picked up their things off of their body and put them in little bags they called grave bags. So these all came into the service center in a big carton, about one or two cartons a day, and we're talking about thousands of dead soldiers.

[0:03:56] Because we were the only effects bureau in the United States.

Interviewer: Oh really? I didn't know that?

Respondent: Yeah, so we had soldiers' effects from all over. Our position was to inventory those. And if you have a dog tag, you make a note of all these things. And then we cleaned them up. I'm talking about maybe a watch, a ring, or something personal. And I worked there for about a year, and I became what they called a line leader.

[0:04:28] That means I was kind of like a boss, but it was just a title. But the job itself was really depressing to me.

Interviewer: Oh, I imagine.

Respondent: But I knew that somebody had to do it. And before the war ended, they were just making plans to bring the actual bodies back to that building, and then ship them on home.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

[0:04:54]

Respondent: It was a really big operation. This building we were in on Hardesty had ten floors, and we were in the tenth floor, our work project. And like I said, it was a job that wasn't one you looked forward to, like you did a lot of jobs, but it was a very effective thing. And I worked for the government long enough to get my senior grade so that after I was married and a widow, I went back to work for the government.

[0:05:29] And so that worked out fine, because they gave me five years' credit when I went to work.

Interviewer: When were you married the first time?

Respondent: The first time, I was married on my 20th birthday, 1945.

Interviewer: June 16, 1945.

Respondent: Uh huh.

Interviewer: That was right after the war had ended?

Respondent: No, I must have the date wrong. Yeah, it's 1945.

[0:05:58] Because I went to the hospital for an appendectomy, and I met this young doctor, and we fell in love and got married within two or three weeks. [laughs] So it was quite romantic, but he was killed in a car accident in 1952.

Interviewer: Aww. And how many children did y'all have?

Respondent: Well, we had three together. I was eight months pregnant with my third child when he was killed in the car accident.

[0:06:27] He was on a house call. We lived in Oklahoma at that time, in a little town named Buffalo, Oklahoma. And he had built a clinic down there, and he was out on a house call at night, and he didn't come home. So the police came to my door and said they'd found a car down in the canyon, and they thought it looked like my husband's car. And they said, is he here? And I said, no, he isn't.

[0:06:55] I'd just heard on the radio right then that they'd found his body, and I had not even heard it, see?

Interviewer: Oh my heavens! What a way for you to learn.

Respondent: And so naturally, I guess I went into shock, went into labor, anyway, with Diane. And my husband's friend was a doctor that was going to deliver my baby, so they had us both go to Alva, Oklahoma, to the hospital. And so I was in the hospital when they had the funeral.

[0:07:27] So they had the funeral down in Buffalo, Oklahoma. That's where our clinic was.

Interviewer: And when did he die?

Respondent: 1946.

Interviewer: Did you have a supervisor?

Respondent: Uh huh. He was Joe Smith. He was a neat guy, too.

Interviewer: You already told me about the type of work that you did.

[0:08:01] During the time that you worked there, you ended up going back to work after your husband died. Was there a childcare service at work? What did you do with your children?

Respondent: Well, I got a young lady that lived on our street. We moved over to Alva, Oklahoma, in the meantime. And I had a young lady that was right out of high school, very dependable, and she was my nanny.

[0:08:28] And she kept care of the children and lived with me.

Interviewer: Oh, so she came to Kansas City, then?

Respondent: No, I was still in Oklahoma, then.

Interviewer: Okay, but when you went back to work, did you come back to Kansas City?

Respondent: I sure did. I came back to Kansas City. And then when I went back to the government, I worked for the Internal Revenue as a tax examiner for 20 – I had 27 years' service with the government.

[0:08:55] But the majority of those were with the IRS.

Interviewer: But they didn't have unions or anything like that?

Respondent: No. Well, we had a union called National Treasury Employees Association, but it wasn't like the unions per se now. I think the union basically protected our rights, get raises and so forth. So we didn't work like a union really works.

[0:09:28]

Interviewer: Well, tell me how you ended up on the front page of the Kansas City Star back in 1945.

Respondent: It wasn't easy. Oh, yes it was.

Interviewer: I want to hear all about it.

Respondent: Well, okay. I was working at the Quartermaster Depot down on Hardesty, and we got word that the war was ended. Oh, and everybody was screaming and yelling, the war's over, the war's over. And my girlfriends too said, come on, June, let's go to town.

[0:09:54] So we had a streetcar available out there, and everybody piled on the streetcar, my bosses and everybody. I don't think we ever closed shop. We just went. And we were down around 12th and Main, I think, and my god, the

confetti was flying all over and people were screaming and yelling. And of course a lot of these servicemen, they just got off the trains and came on down to celebrate. And so we did a lot of kissing, and we didn't care. We kissed. [laughs]

[0:10:28]

Interviewer: The guy who you kissed, did you know him?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: The one that put you on the front page of the Kansas City Star?

Respondent: No, I realize now that he did look familiar. No, he was not familiar, it's just that everybody got to kiss. And he was a good kisser, so I hung on to him for a while. And then next thing you knew, somebody approached me, said, who are you? I told him my name, which now you wouldn't do. And they said, where do you live? I said 23rd and Spruce.

[0:10:55] So that was the end of that conversation. I didn't know it was a reporter at the time.

Interviewer: You didn't know someone was there taking pictures?

Respondent: I had no idea until my mother hit me in the face with that picture. [laughter] I was 19, and we lied about our ages, because we thought if we lied and said we were 20, we could drink a beer and nobody would give us any problems.

Interviewer: Did you?

Respondent: No, we didn't have any. I'm surprised some of those people didn't have booze, but the war ended so quickly, though.

[0:11:26] I imagine there was plenty of celebrating going on in other places. This was right on the streets of Kansas City.

Interviewer: Around 12th and Main, you said?

Respondent: Uh huh, yeah. But was an exciting evening, and then finally we gave up and got on the streetcar that took us out to 24th Street. That car was packed. The reason I didn't get home until two or three o'clock in the morning was because we couldn't get a streetcar. So my friend and I pulled out the duvet in the living room and conked out, went to sleep.

[0:11:58] And next thing you knew, my mother was hitting me in the face. Wham! She was going, what are you doing?

Interviewer: Basically hitting you with a rolled up newspaper.

Respondent: Yeah, what are you doing downtown on 12th Street kissing guys? And I said, I don't know what you're talking about, Ma. Well, here, see it. So she was very – she's not like the mothers now. She was very strict. And so I was on her list for quite a while. And then I was really on her list because I had two younger sisters at home.

[0:12:28] They were probably 14 and 15, and the soldiers overseas, when my picture got in Life magazine, they picked up on my name. And then I don't know how they got my address, except they started writing letters to our house. And I opened a couple of them, tore them up, and next thing you knew, I wasn't getting anymore letters. But my sisters were intercepting the mailman, and they were taking the letters and answering to the soldiers.

[0:12:56] They had me engaged to three soldiers. [laughter] I was so mad. I still hold a grudge against them. But one of those soldiers came back, and of course we were listed in the telephone book and he called me and he said, well, when are we going to meet? I said, who is this? Oh, this is Wayne, or whatever. And I said, well, do I know you? Well, yes, you told me you'd marry me. I said what?! [laughter] So after the war, it was a lot harder on my life than before, I think.

[0:13:28]

Interviewer: Now, did you live at home? I'm trying to remember. Did you say you lived at home?

Respondent: Yeah, I lived at home then. At 24th and Spruce. Right next to Jackson. But that's about the size of it, as far as I know.

Interviewer: How did you feel about the war? Were you worried about how it would turn out?

Respondent: Yes, I had five brothers in the service, all at the same time.

Interviewer: You did?

Respondent: Mm-hm. And my mother wrote a letter every day except Sunday.

[0:13:58] She took turns, all the names on the letters, so that they all heard from her regularly. Yes, we were very worried.

Interviewer: Did you lose any of your brothers?

Respondent: No, I sure did not. They all came home.

Interviewer: Oh, that's wonderful.

Respondent: I wish I had – I could probably dig up a picture of them. My father was a supervisor down at [unintelligible], and in the business magazine, they had a picture of the five of them with the stars around it.

[0:14:31] Very like a memorial, but they came back alive. They sure did.

Interviewer: And you said they couldn't be stationed together?

Respondent: Mm-mm.

Interviewer: Because that was after the Sullivan boys, right?

Respondent: Right, after the Sullivan boys died. I think two or three of those boys died and President Roosevelt said no more brothers staying in the same place. At one time, two of my brothers were in Kodiak, Alaska at the same time.

[0:14:57] But they shipped Rex back, and he went to Germany.

Interviewer: Did they get to see each other?

Respondent: Oh yeah, when they were up there, they sure did. They enlisted at the same time, or were drafted, whatever, and they both went – when they went into the service, they were stationed together for a couple of years. And I think that was kind of a neat move on President Roosevelt. Of course, everybody worshipped him and still do, I guess.

[0:15:27]

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: He was a wonderful man.

Interviewer: Worshipped him for more reasons than one.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me some of the first changes in your life after the war started?

Respondent: Hmm, well, a major change was the fact that everybody could work, that we didn't have any unemployment. And if you couldn't get a job, it was your own fault, because there were plenty of jobs available.

[0:15:58] And so then the next change was the fact that they started rationing food and supplies. So we had, what do you call it? Food stamps? What were the tickets you went to get your groceries? Rationing?

Interviewer: I thought they were food stamps. They weren't food stamps?

Respondent: They might have been called food stamps, but they rationed things.

Interviewer: Yes, you could only have so much sugar.

Respondent: Yeah, it was like commodities, only you paid for the produce.

[0:16:29] They were given out in certain ways. I don't know if it was in the family or what. But that rationing was kind of an inconvenience to a lot of people.

Interviewer: Did they have any USO clubs here in the area?

Respondent: Oh yes, I was a star there. [laughter]

Interviewer: You were a star there? Oh, tell me about that.

Respondent: No, we used to go to the USO on the weekend.

Interviewer: I was wondering what you guys did on the weekends.

Respondent: Yeah, Shirley and Peggy and myself.

[0:16:55] And it was so much fun. It was out on Main, about 29th or 30th and Main. And they had a dance and a big name band every weekend. Like Glenn Miller and those. So my dad got so tired. He'd say, where are you going, June? To USO. We'd go hop on the streetcar. In those days, teenagers didn't have to be practically tied up to be safe. So my dad said, my god, he said, I'm gonna have to get a special bus or streetcar named June's USO Club. [laughter]

[0:17:31] Yeah, but we did. We went to the United Service Organization, USO.

Interviewer: Yeah. Now, you went with your coworkers too, didn't you?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Now, you got married during wartime, didn't you?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: Or shortly thereafter. Was the war over when you got married?

Respondent: No, it was still wartime.

[0:18:00]

Interviewer: Well, one of the volunteers here at the Raytown Museum, she's in there listening to our conversation. She just informed me that she was a USO hostess during the Korean War in Baltimore, Maryland.

Respondent: No kidding. Great. When we get to it, I told you, I have a typed thing about some of the years during the war that you might be interested in reading.

Interviewer: Oh, absolutely.

[0:18:28]

Respondent: It's called Life on the Home Front.

Interviewer: Yeah, if you come across that, let me know.

Respondent: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Did you worry that our side might not win the war? Was that ever a concern to you?

Respondent: No, it never entered my mind.

Interviewer: Is that right?

Respondent: It never did. And we were all so patriotic that everything we did had some connection with helping the soldiers. We saw that they had cigarettes. This was through the department where I worked.

[0:18:58] But one of our main things was, if we went to the USO, we collected all these things and shipped to the soldiers, and they'd help us package them. We sent cigarettes and certain candies that wouldn't spoil, you know? And the soldiers were on our mind all the time. Here's one of those, Shirley.

Interviewer: Life on the Home Front.

Respondent: Is that Elizabeth Wisdom, or Mary?

Interviewer: Mary Wisdom. Now, who was she?

[0:19:27]

Respondent: My daughter.

Interviewer: Oh, this is your daughter?

Respondent: Yeah, she had to submit that for a college course. Some kind of a life [unintelligible].

Interviewer: You want to go ahead and read this?

Respondent: Okay. This is by Mary Wisdom, who's the daughter of June Neal. World War II was a time of great change for Americans, both economically and socially.

[0:19:59] During the Depression, millions of Americans could not find jobs. The war ended unemployment by putting 12 million Americans in uniform and creating a huge demand for the machines of war. Factories retooled and geared up for defense production. Typewriter factories turned out machine guns. Toaster plants made gun mounts.

[0:20:27] Pot and pan makers assembled and loaded flares. James Macgregor Burns writes in *The Cross Winds of Freedom*, suddenly anyone who wanted to work could find a job. Between 1941 and 1945, the average weekly wages in manufacturing almost doubled. 15 million Americans moved from rural areas to the cities to find good paying jobs.

[0:20:55] Women whose place had traditionally been in the home entered the workforce in droves. Over 18 million women had jobs by 1944. Almost every family had a father, a son, or a brother in the service, and this gave the family a sense of pride. Nationalism rose to an all-time high. The war, according to Burns, set a profound psychological impact on people.

[0:21:26] They felt included, involved, integrated with their fellow citizens. Anyone could participate in the war efforts by tending victory gardens.

Interviewer: Did you have a victory garden?

Respondent: Yes, we did. I'd forgotten about that. We had it in our backyard back there on Spruce Street. Oh yeah, raised tomatoes and green beans and all that stuff.

[0:21:58] And they were very popular. And if someone did not have a victory garden, the ones that did have, shared, and they were glad to share.

Interviewer: Well, that's very interesting.

Respondent: By tending victory gardens, collecting rubber, metal, or paper, turning in cans of fat – we saved our bacon grease and everything – or even just buying war bonds. That was a big thing too. After the bleakness of the Depression, this must have made people feel worthwhile again and renewed their faith in themselves and their fellow man.

[0:22:34] Am I boring you?

Interviewer: No, that's good.

Respondent: Do you want me to read some more?

Interviewer: No, not right now. Thank you. So do you remember how much you were paid an hour when you started to work?

Respondent: Yes. My very first job was an usher in a theater, and they paid me \$1 for every two nights I worked.

[0:22:56] That was \$0.50 a night. That was a meager job. I was a tenth grader in high school, and I was really wild. Now, the war hadn't started then.

Interviewer: When you went to work for Army Effects, what were you paid an hour? Do you remember?

Respondent: I remember a yearly salary of \$1,000.

Interviewer: \$1,000 a year?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: And you worked a 40 hour week?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: Oh my word.

Respondent: Sure did.

Interviewer: Did you think that was good money back then?

[0:23:27]

Respondent: Yes, it seemed to take care of all my needs and buy my clothes. I had two young sisters at home and my father's motto is, if you get a job and go to work and live at home, you pay. So I gave my father so much a week, I think \$25 or maybe \$20, and that helped take care of my two other sisters who were still in school.

Interviewer: You didn't have much more income than \$20, did you?

Respondent: No.

[0:23:55]

Interviewer: What was it, \$40 a week maybe?

Respondent: I don't think it was that much.

Interviewer: I don't think you did, because it was \$1,000 a year.

Respondent: No, I don't think it was that much a month. But we seemed to survive anyway. Like, eggs were, what, \$.10 a dozen? And bread was a nickel? And so no, the expenses were not all that high then. But on the other hand, we didn't consider ourselves being real [fluently blessed] or whatever.

[0:24:30]

Interviewer: Tell me about 1995 and the Kansas City Star. Again, what was on the front page of that Kansas City Star?

Respondent: Well, there's a section of that date which I happen to have, because my sister had it in her personal effects. This is 1995, Sunday, March 5, and we're on the front section. No, that's the Metropolitan section.

[0:25:00]

Interviewer: Yeah, you were on the front page of the Kansas City Star, and didn't you receive a telephone call from the Kansas City Star?

Respondent: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: And they gave you the book?

Respondent: No, they sent it out to me, and then they had a price on it. And when I called them about paying the price, they said, well, we're giving you a discount. So I got the book for \$10, which is actually, I think, \$25.

Interviewer: No, it was \$49.95.

[0:25:27]

Respondent: Wasn't that something? Well, they called me. The lady that took the story is named Elaine Adams. She's still with the Star. So in the meantime, she's kind of kept in touch. We talk on the phone.

Interviewer: Well, that is a very interesting story that you told about your experiences working for the Army Effects Bureau. I had no idea that they even – I can see now it was a very, very important function.

[0:26:03] I never considered that they had to get these effects back to members of the family.

Respondent: Yeah, I wanted to mention one other thing. They didn't have just PFCs at Personal Effects. There were important guys. Like one of them was a famous journalist named Ernie Pyle.

Interviewer: Ernie Pyle, really?

Respondent: Yeah, his effects came in a box, a grave bag, with just everybody else.

[0:26:29] Just said Ernie Pyle and his social security number. And that didn't get any special attention. Isn't that weird?

Interviewer: That is weird.

Respondent: And then I'm trying to think. I think Glenn Miller, didn't he serve? There was a musician that was killed in the war.

Interviewer: Did they ever find his body?

Respondent: I don't know, but we had some information on him, an alert to watch for his things.

[0:26:58]

Interviewer: Any other famous names that you can recall?

Respondent: No, I can't recall right now, but there were several that were in the category of Ernie Pyle.

Interviewer: Did you ever meet family members of the deceased?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: It was always mailed out to them, right?

Respondent: Yes, and they were packaged and really cleaned up good and everything. So you couldn't hardly send a ring home with a piece of flesh or something.

[0:27:28]

Interviewer: Oh my, no.

Respondent: Because they go right out on the field and pick that stuff up and put it in those drawstring bags.

Interviewer: So you worked for the Army Effects Bureau for how many years?

Respondent: Let's see, I went to work there – I worked for them about five years. And meanwhile, I got married, and then I didn't exactly resign.

[0:28:01] Some said, just keep it open at the civil service, and then if you ever need those years to add on, you can always add on. That's what I did later on.

Interviewer: Do you feel that time period during that war, that you really grew up?

Respondent: Oh yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: Really matured you, didn't it?

Respondent: Absolutely. And my only regret is that I didn't attend college.

[0:28:29] I went to business school downtown. My father was from the old school. I got a scholarship from East High School, and he said, who in the hell needs a scholarship. He said, you'll just be like the rest of them and get married and have kids. And so I didn't go to college to please him. And I've regretted it ever since.

Interviewer: You did get to finish high school, though, didn't you?

Respondent: Oh yes. Then we got on the streetcar and went downtown to Kansas City Business College.

[0:29:01] I don't remember what it was called then.

Interviewer: How did you feel when the war ended?

Respondent: Oh boy, we were elated.

Interviewer: I imagine you were.

Respondent: Of course we all dreamed that my brothers would be walking through the door or something.

Interviewer: What were you doing when you heard the news? Were you at work, on the job?

Respondent: Uh huh. We just laid everything down we were working on and got our purses and left.

[0:29:30]

Interviewer: Is there one thought about your experience that you'd want to share with future generations?

Respondent: Yes, I think one thought would be, so many are out of jobs and been laid off now, and I feel so sorry for them, because I wasn't the only one that lived through the Depression, but I feel like they need more help to get to work and more help to be independent.

[0:30:01] And when the government, especially the state, started taking away Medicaid, I was really devastated, because so many of those people have to have that to take care of their little families or whatever. And I don't know how that will ever come about. And of course, I am concerned about Social Security benefits, because we're at the age now, that's what we live on.

[0:30:26] And I have mixed feelings about our president, but I try not to express them, because I know there's nothing that – we just have to go with the flow.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that I should ask you that we haven't covered? Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Respondent: Well, I appreciate your having me, and I feel honored. I hope you read my daughter's and my granddaughter's...

Interviewer: Yes, I will make copies of this, and I will send it along with the recorded message. And you will get a copy of that too. I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Neal, for coming in and talking to us today.

Respondent: You're more than welcome.