

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

RUTH RAY LUTKEN

This is Vivian Bloomfield. Today is Sunday, September 21st, 2003. We're at the Fredericksburg High School. This is during the Symposium on the China, Burma, India area of World War II. I am interviewing Ruth Ray Lutken. She was a college student at the outbreak of the war and we're going to talk about changes in the home front during that time. The address that I have for Ruth is 638 Highway 604, St. Joseph, LA 71366. And I'm going to turn the microphone over to Ruth right now. Tell us basically your full name and where you were born, where you were living, the names of your parents, your home town, that sort of thing.

MS. LUTKEN: Thank you very much. I appreciate being asked and I'll try to do the best I can. Actually, I was born in California. My parents were both raised in Mississippi and had moved out there with the cotton business to Imperial Valley and lived in Calexico right on the border but I was born in San Diego. Then they moved up to Los Angeles and up to Fresno where we lived until I was ten and then we moved back to their home town. That was in the middle of the depression.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What was the name of the home town?

MS. LUTKEN: Canton, Mississippi.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Canton, Mississippi. Canton?

MS. LUTKEN: Yes. It's about twenty – twenty-five miles from Jackson which is the capitol. It's a very pretty county seat court house square and all that and both of their families had lived there as long as they could remember. It might be interesting to say that my mother had worked in Washington, D. C. in the 1st World War as what was called a "war worker" to take the place of a young man who was going to war. She stayed with her aunt and uncle and lived up there. Came back in 1921 and married her long-time sweetheart and then they moved to California.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What did she do; was she like a Pentagon staff position?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, there wasn't a Pentagon. She worked actually in the department, it was a government department. It was not the Department of State but may be like the

Department of Agriculture or something like that and she just did secretarial and clerical work.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Did she replace some military man?

MS. LUTKEN: Yes, somebody who left their job and she enjoyed it a great deal in Washington. She was there, you see, when the 1st. World War was declared. That was in '17. She had gone up just a few months before so she stayed. When this happened and this is just a side line that I happened to think of but she got her Civil Service reinstated and began work for the Selective Service during the 2nd World War. They had a little office in Canton so they interviewed and registered all the young men in Madison County. I was in school. It was the end of the first semester of my junior year so I was pretty far along.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What college was that?

MS. LUTKEN: University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. A group of us had gone to church and came back to have lunch at the cafeteria when they came in and told us about Pearl Harbor so I remember that distinctly. It took a little while for this announcement and what happened in the next few weeks to take hold but there were many students who were, of course, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. A number of them were in a group called the "Flying Rebels". They were learning to fly airplanes and that summer and the next year and summer many of them left and went to Canada to join the RAF when we got in the war. I say many, several, maybe a dozen.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: And these were classmates of yours?

MS. LUTKEN: Classmates at school. The summer of '42, I guess I'm right on the date, I'm not sure but they started up the registration for ration books and I helped at home in Canton to register everybody in Madison County to get ration books for sugar, gasoline, tires, shoes, candy, all kinds of things.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Had you left college to do that?

MS. LUTKEN: No, just in the summer, June, July, August. I went on back and finished school. Lots of people didn't. Lots of people quit; some of them got married 'cause they were planning to get married so they just quit and didn't come back to school. We had a unit of some sort, it wasn't B-12's but it was some kind of army group that came from some other country coming to study. We had a big ROTC unit. I think they had five

companies. So, of course, a lot of them graduated and went on into the army and these young men came from different other places under a new program for ROTC.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Were they European countries?

MS. LUTKEN: Some of them were; most of them were. And they had those at the University of Mississippi and many schools in New Orleans particularly had two or three because they had lots of navy people and Tulane and different schools around there. So, anyway, I decided to finish and get my degree and I went home and went to work in Jackson, Mississippi, which is the Capitol. I went to work at the U. S. Attorney's office. They had a good deal to do with anything brought up by the FBI and they had sections of court in five different cities so we went around to the different cities.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What is your degree in?

MS. LUTKEN: In English, minor in history.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: So you were working inside the legal department?

MS. LUTKEN: Yes, legal secretary. I also had gotten enough credits in typing and shorthand to get a Civil Service. We had to have a Civil Service to get this kind of a job. It was a great job and I enjoyed it and especially they had lots of new cases involving the government. There was a Jackson Air Base which was right near Jackson, Mississippi, and any problem that came up out there with any of the men or the property lines or any sort of legal problems came to this office.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Were these all legal problems, civilian legal problems?

MS. LUTKEN: Civilian legal problems but when we went around they also had criminal cases; not many of those, but they had a few. They went to Vicksburg, Meridian, Hattiesburg and Biloxi. Biloxi had a huge air base. It's still there and a lot of Navy and they had cases a few times but they never got as far as court. We didn't know this before we got down there, but there were German submarines, U Boats, in the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi coast is right in the middle of it. They just saw a few and looked at them but they never did have a case in the courtroom, never the less, to secretaries that was exciting. They also had what they called alien registration and anybody who was over here as a legal living immigrant had to register if they hadn't gotten their citizenship. You understand?

MS. BLOOMFIELD: I understand.

MS. LUTKEN: There were several stores and shops in places in Jackson and many other places in any of those towns that had German citizens. We had a group of nuns who came in every month from Vicksburg and signed up and did what they were supposed to do with different shop keepers and people in any kind of business.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: And these were immigrants from any country, it wasn't just the Germans, Italians, Japanese because we were at war with them, it was from all countries.

MS. LUTKEN: Anybody that was not a citizen. I think I'm right. It has been over fifty years.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Sounds like a precursor to Homeland Security Department, doesn't it?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, it does. It was nice and another thing in connection with the war was that we had a group of air force men from Java who were Dutch and Java. I've forgotten which year now, I guess '43 maybe, had been taken over. The Dutch East Indies, Indonesia had been taken over by the Japanese so there was quite a large number of these young men that were brought to the Jackson Air Base with wives and children. They had few orphans and just other children that they wanted to be taken care of and they were taken in by the Methodist Orphanage. I used to teach one little boy in Sunday School and he was the brightest boy in Sunday School. He had the best education; this was fifth and sixth grade. I was much too strict with him and with all of them. The air force men cut a wide swath in the society in Jackson because so many men were gone. Here all of sudden were all these very fine nice young men and one of the girls I was working with married one of them and went back to wherever they went after the war. I had another good friend, I hope I'm not rambling on too much but you said...

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Yes. These men were Dutch and they had been on the island taken over by the Japanese in Dutch Indo China. And they were brought over and lived at the base there in Mississippi.

MS. LUTKEN: Not Indo China though.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: In Java, I'm sorry.

MS. LUTKEN: Indonesia. Anyway they were not prisoners or anything. They had been fighting the Japanese in an air group and that's why they came to the airfield. They also had a large prison camp for German prisoners that they had brought over there. I

happened purely by accident to take the place of the U. S. Attorney's secretary who was out of the office. They called me in; they were taking depositions of this young German prisoner for the paper, not long after they had come. It was actually in Clinton which was about 20 miles from Jackson and he was very fluent in English, very polite, very young and knowledgeable and handsome and agreeable. He responded to everything quite well. They had the editor of the paper and I don't know who all else there and they asked him a question, if he would support the United States. If you're an American citizen you agree not to take part; it's treason to support any other government. So they asked him this question about supporting the United States government. And he said, "Of course not, no." They would not but they would help us in a future war if we needed them.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: How interesting.

MS. LUTKEN: It was a big surprise to everybody there but he thought it up.

I worked in this office for four years, almost five altogether I guess, until after the war was over. And there were many, many nice old large homes in Jackson took in boarders; this is an old timey custom. They had six girls in the house where I stayed and they had different kinds of jobs, a couple of teachers and two or three of them worked at the air base and different things. What I was getting around to is one of those girls left to join the WAVES, you know the Women's Naval Auxiliary, and ended up in Honolulu and married a captain or somebody in the navy. I guess it's not captain, is it? Whatever, another one actually didn't work in Jackson but I'd gone to school with her. We were in the same class at the University. She went with the Red Cross to Italy and met a British soldier and after the war he came back to see her in Tennessee. She married him and he is now in the Parliament in England. So all these unexpected interesting things just made it different because of the war. My senior-year roommate moved to Washington. She was a very quiet girl and she had gotten a Master's in English and foreign languages and so she moved to Washington worked for the Signal Corps. After the war she ended up in Nuremburg helping translate the evidence into French and German, either or both or however it was, and stayed in Germany and married a young man in the army over there and he worked in the German radio broadcasting system after the war. They had to get things back different from the way they had been and she helped arrange the new school

book curriculum because if you recall they had gotten rid of so many books; just got rid of them. So Carolyn and Tom did all that after the war for several years. She came back to Washington and worked at the library, not the Library of Congress. All these people were just very good close friends of mine. They had gotten involved in all situations.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Might not have gotten as far away in the world and, if the war had not broken out, you may have had the same job and it probably wouldn't have been as interesting.

MS. LUTKEN: That's right. I might have been a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher but I never did try it except volunteer things.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: You were still on the college campus after the war broke out, other than people leaving, you know, fellow students and all and I'm sure most of these young men enlisted or were drifted, how did things change in your day to day life when rationing started and that sort of thing with school?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, I don't remember hearing complaints about it. Everybody was eager to help in any way they could. They'd have drives for paper and aluminum foil and all kinds of things, and do any kind of work that was available. Not too many actually left immediately, I didn't mean that, but some of them didn't finish their senior year or they got into some kind of service. Quite a few got in Red Cross and that sort of thing, but while we were there school went ahead. Two of our professors were drafted because I guess they were young and didn't have any family. I remember my philosophy professor and my psychology professor were drafted. They finished out their year but they had to leave. I tell you one thing the railroad took everybody everywhere then. They didn't have all the airplanes, had some airplanes but not a lot especially not from big cities; only from big cities. So everywhere we went they had priority seats on the trains and on the buses and when we went around to these court meetings you had go get in line. They'd say, "Is this trip really necessary?" They took all the servicemen first. We were going with a group from school to Chicago and we managed to get on alright but that was a big issue whether you could go someplace or not and get home. Nobody much had cars at that point; couldn't have cars at school unless you were a senior, a law student or had a doctor's commission. You wouldn't know it now, everybody has a car.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: This is interesting because during the wartime then for the civilian trains instead as of now where focus members were waiting standby, the civilians were standby and let the military...

MS. LUTKEN: They got first priority in that according to rank because I know my husband, whom I didn't know then, was supposed to report somewhere for duty and he got bumped off or whatever the term is because captain somebody got there but that's just an interesting thing. It wasn't terrible but it was just something that we had to learn to take our place in line.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What did your parents say about how their life might have changed or your siblings if they had to do this about face at home or anything along that line?

MS. LUTKEN: It didn't really affect them all that much except my father was working for the gasoline tax administration. They transferred him to New Orleans because they had a lot of navy supplies and fuel so he went down to New Orleans for two or three years '44 to '46, maybe two and a half years. Then my mother got her WWI Civil Service, I had mentioned that, so she got transferred down there and went, too, and worked in the customs house. Everybody we knew went to see them 'cause everybody likes to go to New Orleans.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: She was able to pull out her previous war experience to get the right to go.

MS. LUTKEN: She was a clerk. He was examining and checking on tax, so it was interesting for them.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Did you have any family members in the service, like cousins or...

MS. LUTKEN: Oh, I had some cousins. I don't have any brothers and sisters but I had a very fine wonderful first cousin who was about a year or two older than I am. He was in the service. He was a B-29 pilot and he crashed in China so that's the closest one I had. I had some other second cousins or third or close friends. We had three boys from our high school at Pearl Harbor and were lost. My husband's aunt, this is very interesting. It's his aunt who was a school teacher in Honolulu, and she was fine, but we have a notebook of how the children reacted in Hawaii. One thing was they had a Japanese gardener and the children were crazy about the gardener but he disappeared. I don't think

anything happened to him, he just left, went home. So Aunt Tom has kept this little booklet about what happened for a few weeks or month or so after.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: This pilot you said was shot down over China, was he lost?

MS. LUTKEN: Yes. A long time later, his mother my aunt, of course, his father was my mother's brother, and they were very close but they lived in Baton Rouge and he was at LSU. I don't know his exact outfit. I guess months and months later my aunt finally got a dog tag that a monk in China had brought back to somebody and turned in a handful of dog tags from this plane crashed landing. So that was the closest but I had a first cousin, a girl, who worked and went to Germany after the war. You know they had a lot of, what what did they call it? Not the army of occupation but the people who went over to help after the war, civilians, yes, she was also a legal secretary. She said there were a lot of close things but I don't think anybody else was actually in the fighting except this good friend and the boys in high school. They were about my age, maybe a year or two older, they would have been eighteen or nineteen.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: You said you were living in an antebellum home with several other young women. How did you get information about the war news at that time?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, that's a good question because there wasn't any television and the newspapers had news everyday, of course, but not nearly as much as they have now. You didn't keep up at all on day to day things. You'd hear about some big thing like the Battle of the Bulge or whatever, but only a week or so after it was over or a few days after it was over.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Was there any on the radio?

MS. LUTKEN: Oh, yes.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Things at the movie theatre?

MS. LUTKEN: They had the March of Time, they called it, and RKO had two or three different kinds of newsreels, they just called them newsreels, at every picture show. They were probably the most up to date and I can remember the map pictures of Germany increasing almost like something moving in Europe.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Showing the occupation?

MS. LUTKEN: It sounds silly but that's what it looked like. It came across to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and every week they would show how much farther they had

gotten. That was frighteningly far, too. I don't know anything more directly but it did change everybody's whole direction sort of, but there were lots of people that volunteered for ambulance service and Red Cross. All the girls at the house went down to the Red Cross once a week. We folded bandages and knitted socks or something like that. It sounds silly but they wanted to do something.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: You talked about the aliens that came to register when you worked at the registration office. Was there any animosity towards the people?

MS. LUTKEN: No, not that I know of. Of course, I was just sitting there. They were respectable citizens but they were not naturalized Americans. Most people, of course, after a few times we recognized them and they just came in and signed in and said what the questions were. We didn't have any trouble as far as I know. The nearest thing I ran across, except for the pilots and airbases, was the submarine in the Gulf but nothing happened, at least not there, but you know it came over towards Texas, Florida and all.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: You said you had substituted for a legal secretary one time when a German POW was being interrogated? Did you ever hear anymore on any stories from friends or maybe that lady you replaced or were they just simply taking their stories and as prisoners stayed until they were released?

MS. LUTKEN: They stayed and they had very good relationships. I don't know how to put it but they made friends with the people and they did that in Texas, too, I understand and kept up with some of the people actually at the camp. I think Mr. Sullens, who was the editor of the paper, just wanted to write up something about this young man who was there and what they were thinking. This one didn't seem to be angry or anything. He just said what I told you. They admitted that they had lost, at least their group had taken a loss, and they were very well treated. The people were nice to them. They would not do anything to help America but later they would help us in another war if we needed them. That's what he said. The U. S. attorney and the editor and this other man were pleasantly surprised at his attitude. Of course, some of them may have, I don't know. They had a lot of security things around the Mississippi River, of course, and Vicksburg was a big place because of the bridge and port up and down but down in New Orleans and Baton Rouge even more lots of factories and things like that.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Tell us how you heard about the war ending? Was there any kind of a celebration?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, this is unusual. My mother and father were in New Orleans and it just happened that I was down there when VE day happened. All of a sudden there must have been two or three hundred young sailors. It was just like a wave of white coming up Canal Street throwing hats in the air and everything. That's just where I happened to be on VE day. There were big celebrations everywhere but the next one, of course, was the Atom bomb and then the surrender and oddly enough I was in New Orleans again because I was downtown with my father and we just walked by and saw these huge headlines. Bomb equal to 20,000 tons of TNT something, something, something and so I was in New Orleans again. The first thing they did in New Orleans was have parades and parties and celebrations at the drop of a hat.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: You picked a good place to party for this occasion.

MS. LUTKEN: They had cancelled Mardi Gras for the first time in two hundred years for the war. I think, I don't know if it was '42 or '43, so they had a huge Mardi Gras the next year '46. And that was a big celebration after the war. They had the brass bands, parades and everything.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: How long did your parents stay in those jobs?

MS. LUTKEN: They came back in '46. I think he came first and then she came a few months after the war. Then is when it was hard to get a place to live an apartment because they had given up their house and put stuff in storage and gone to get an apartment and had to get someplace. It was '46 and they were waiting until '47 to get a new place. It wasn't long after the war, well a year I guess, six or eight months something like that.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Tell us did you continue to work as a legal secretary then?

MS. LUTKEN: I worked until '48 which was just another year or two, well, I guess three, and quit to get married. I quit in September; that made five years.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: And how did you meet your husband?

MS. LUTKEN: That's an interesting story, it's a coincidence. You know you wonder if fate or providence or something but this was in the first part of 1948 and I was, have you got time for a couple of minutes?

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Yes.

MS. LUTKEN: I just happened to see this young man who had been at the University when I had and he had gone to the war and he and his wife had left right away. She didn't even finish her senior year and they had gotten in the army and gone. That was the last I saw. He just appeared all of a sudden on the corner waiting for the bus and we started chatting. A few weeks or a couple of months or something like that they were having a group to play cards, to play bridge. They were getting substitutes because somebody got sick at the last minute so Pete and I were the substitutes because he had been her brother's roommate at Mississippi State College. She and I were real good friends and her folks at the University so we all knew a lot of the same people because Mississippi schools are very small. We had numbers of mutual friends. We ended up playing bridge filling in for another girl whose mother was ill.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: And then you got married a few months later?

MS. LUTKEN: Yes. And that's about it.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Have you gone back to work as a legal secretary or have you been a homemaker?

MS. LUTKEN: We tried to do a lot of volunteer work and we had four children and three grandchildren.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Have any of your children a military background?

MS. LUTKEN: Our oldest boy was in ROTC and he was in the army for about a couple of years afterwards and as luck did have it, this was '71, graduated in '71, so he was in '72 and he was not ready to go to Viet Nam but it was still going on, so they didn't know what they were doing. The war was over in Viet Nam so he didn't have to go. He stayed in as a reserve for two or three years when it was a requirement, so he didn't actually serve on the battle front or anything. He did well, he got a commission and some recognition as well at the school at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg. Luckily he didn't happen to hit during the war.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: What caused you to move to Dallas?

MS. LUTKEN: Well, my husband was working for a company, I don't know how to describe it. They did all kinds of things. He was the agency manager of an insurance company, Lamar Life Insurance Company based in Jackson, and this other company

bought controlling interests and brought him to Dallas to represent their insurance investment. They had part ownership of several different insurance companies so he came up here. We thought we'd just be here a few years but things kept developing and different other things and we're still there.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Do your children live in the Dallas area?

MS. LUTKEN: Just one, the oldest boy and he's head of a school and teaches and takes children on outdoor trips.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Is it a private school?

MS. LUTKEN: It's a private church school. He loves to do the science things. He still teaches some but he's head of the middle school and takes them on campouts and trips and they do archeological things and astronomy things and telephoto.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Sounds interesting.

MS. LUTKEN: It is interesting and he loves it very much. Our daughter is a doctor and she works on a Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico in Shiprock. She likes that a whole lot. Tom helps build houses and David is an actor performer singer.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Is he in LA or New York?

MS. LUTKEN: Right now he is in North Carolina and I hope he survived the hurricane. He's back and forth to New York and different places.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Well, thank you very much. I have enjoyed visiting with you and we'll send you the transcript if you think of anything else you want to add.

MS. LUTKEN: That's mighty nice. I hadn't really put things together.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: This is nice of you to tell us how things were with a typical college student during that time.

MS. LUTKEN: It was a shock but after you got the idea everybody wanted to pitch in. That was really true, I think, where we were.

MS. BLOOMFIELD: Everybody came together. Well, thank you.

MS. LUTKEN: Thank you.

Edited copy typed April 30, 2008, by Eunice Gary