RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RUTH MONCRIEF

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Hanne Ala-Rami: This begins an interview with Ruth Moncrief in Jamesburg, New Jersey, on October 5, 2007, with Hanne Ala-Rami …

Sabeenah Arshad: … Sabeenah Arshad …

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: … Sandra Stewart Holyoak …

Georgie Anderson: … Georgie Anderson, Ruth's daughter.

SH: Mrs. Moncrief, thank you so much for having us here today and for this wonderful spread that you have provided. Your hospitality is superb. Just for the record, could you tell me where and when you were born?

Ruth Moncrief: November the 1st, 1921, a long time ago, Bridgeton, New Jersey.

SH: All right, thank you. Go ahead, Sabeenah.

SA: Can you tell us a little bit about your mother's and father's background?

SH: Let us start with your father; where was he born and what was his background?

RM: All right. My father, Charles Fredrick Sheeler, was born in Elverson, Pennsylvania on a farm. He and his dad used to come down to the Philadelphia Railroad Station and take horses and ride them back to Elverson and break them in for people to use them on their farms. He was a high school graduate and I believe he had eight people in his high school graduating class. He had Latin and the works.

SH: He had a classical education in this little, tiny area.

RM: In the little, tiny area of Elverson. He had a couple of big sisters. One big sister worked for, and was romantically involved with, one of the Swift and Company executives, so that's the way he got to work with Swift and Company, in meats, and he was transferred to Bridgeton, where they had a big Swift and Company business. He worked there for awhile, until he got his own store, but he met my mother there through a friend that also worked at Swift and Company.

SH: Your mother did not work there.

RM: My mother didn't work, no.

SH: What about your mother's background?

RM: My mother was one of five children. She was Reba Aker. My granddad used to say, "Seven Akers under one roof." [laughter] He was Irish. He went through two years of school, to the second grade. My grandmother taught him to read. He read the Bible, he was very smart, he did everything. He was a checker champ of Bridgeton. He was a glassblower and they were rare in those days, especially if you could blow big panes of glass. He worked near Bridgeton. He

also traveled sometimes, saved his money and, when he came back and was a little older, he bought houses in Bridgeton for rental units and started a little grocery store and just had fun with it.

SH: Did your mother and dad talk more about how they met? Did they meet in school or in church?

RM: I don't know. I think they just had a date, because my mother had met this gentleman that worked at Swift and Company and he introduced my father to my mother. From then on they were two couples and had a good time. My granddad, Joseph Aker, was Irish, as I said before, and he loved music. His children didn't go away to school, the girls went to sort of a one-year finishing school in Bridgeton, but he made sure they had violin lessons. They all had violin lessons and they all had piano lessons, and there was a lot of music in that house.

SH: Did you yourself wind up playing an instrument?

RM: I played the piano and the organ. I wasn't wonderful. [laughter] My mother was wonderful. She had a beautiful voice. She could have sung everywhere, anywhere, and been famous and she sang for my dad and in church.

SH: As a young woman, growing up, you talked about having your Irish grandfather, Mr. Aker, and your English grandmother here in Bridgeton.

RM: … My grandmother, Georgella, had a sewing room and she was addicted. She never did this for profit, she just did it for the family, and my granddad would be downstairs and he would be getting hungry and my grandmother wasn't coming down, because she hated to stop. So, he would go to the refrigerator and he'd take everything out of the refrigerator and put it on the table, and then she'd come down. [laughter]

SH: She never succeeded in teaching him how to make lunch, I guess.

RM: No, and he was a dude. He'd say to us little kids, he'd say, "Well, now, let me see your fingernails," and we'd all show him, and then he'd show us his and his were perfect, you know, and he had a little wave in his hair, and he did it with a pencil.

SH: Oh, really?

RM: I know because my grandmother asked me to do his hair when he died. That was awful. I had never … seen any person; don't record this.

SH: That is okay, but that is one of the customs that has gone from our society now, because it is true, the family used to dress and take care of the body. It was an honor to be asked to do it.

RM: But, anyway, they were such fun to live next-door to.

SH: They must have been.

RM: Yes, they were.

SH: It was not on tape, but you talked about her making fabulous cookies, and then, one day, for a joke …

RM: Oh, yes, the Snowball Club. She had a party and she put alum in the cookies and didn't tell them. She made them beautiful, little cookies, and then she wanted to see the expressions on their faces. [laughter]

SH: What was the Snowball Club?

RM: Oh, it was just a couples' club that she and my granddad had. They were very social, church and friends.

SH: Did anybody play bridge or canasta or any card games or board games?

RM: They didn't. My parents played pinochle and that sort of game, but they didn't play bridge.

SH: What about your father's family? Did they stay in Pennsylvania? Did you get to travel there?

RM: … We visited them periodically, but I never got to know them the way I did living next-door. I had a wonderful family. I lived next-door to my grandparents and my aunt and uncle and cousin lived next-door to them. My other aunt and uncle and cousin lived around the corner, and my "country" cousins lived three miles down the road and I visited there half the time. Nobody knew where I lived, because we were all in-and-out of each other's houses and, every Sunday, the whole family from parts far away (like thirty to forty miles) would come and visit, so I never regretted being an only child. I really wasn't.

SH: I was just going to say, with all that family, that is wonderful.

RM: Yes.

SH: What is your earliest memory of Bridgeton?

RM: The park. We have a park as big as Central Park, truly. The CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] or WPA [Works Progress Administration] worked on our park and they had many, many picnic areas, with picnic tables. They built stone places where you could cook, and we would have picnics in the park all the time, and my dad, who had a panel delivery truck, would take us to school, which was across the creek. It was maybe a couple of miles and we would go on peach baskets. There were maybe five or six neighborhood kids. We'd always go with him when it rained, but he would also take me, early in the morning, on the way to work, and leave me off at the park tennis courts, and my girlfriend would come over the hill, down there, and, you know, play tennis before we went to high school. So, we were lucky to have three lakes and a beautiful park, and we lived in the middle of the farming country. I was an hour from Ocean

City and other shore points and an hour from the city. We thought we had the best of everything (and "the city" is Philadelphia, to us). [laughter]

SH: Did your family travel often to the shore or places like that?

RM: Oh, we would go to the shore a lot. My dad had Wednesday afternoons off and we would go every Wednesday afternoon to "people watch." … I had an aunt that drove, with these "country" cousins, and we would go to the shore a lot, to Ocean City and the Steel Pier [in Atlantic City]. We enjoyed the ocean.

SA: You mentioned your great-grandfather that served in the Civil War. Can you tell us a little bit about him?

RM: Yes, his name was William Wolfe. He was a hundred years old when he died, and I did meet him and visit with him, but he didn't talk about the war. I just knew that he was in it.

SH: Was there any memorabilia around of his time in the Civil War?

RM: I didn't get any.

SH: This was your grandfather in Pennsylvania.

RM: No, this is my great-grandfather in the Civil War, and he was in Bridgeton. He was my grandmother's father.

SH: In Bridgeton, what was the make-up of the population? Were there immigrant families there or had everybody been there for, like your great-grandfather, since the Civil War?

RM: Everybody had been there, forever, I thought. [laughter] We had some; is "blacks" the proper term now? We had some, a few, and I was in school with them, maybe there would be one or two in a class of thirty, and we all loved each other. There was no problem. When my dad was called up to go to the First World War, he failed because he had flat feet, but he sat in-between these two black men and they said, "Oh, we've got a rose between two thorns," and they would joke and they would come into my father's business and everybody got along. There was no hard feeling then, and there was no separation in school. At the dances and the classes, there was no separation.

SH: That is good to hear. What church was your family affiliated with?

RM: Oh, I went to the Methodist church then, but I've gone to other churches since, all Protestant; doesn't matter, they're all good.

SH: I just wondered how involved your family was with the church.

RM: Oh, well my grandparents were very much involved, and so was my mother.

SH: You talked about your father not being able to go into the First World War. Were there other family members who had perhaps experienced that and talked about it?

RM: I'm not familiar with any in my family.

SH: Okay, because I know you have this extended family. What about the Great Depression? What do you remember of that? We understand that there are some areas where, really, life just went on and there was not a big impact, but, with Swift and Company, were there any hardships?

RM: We didn't suffer at all. I know my uncle lost his job as a bookkeeper at a factory and had a problem at that time, but my dad had the store and life just went on. We had plenty to eat and lots of fun, lots of family fun. I know we had a Maytag washer in my grandmother's basement and all three families used the Maytag washer on Monday mornings. We'd have a party every Monday. We would all do the laundry and then have dinner together. That was one thing about the Depression. Family time!

SH: When you all got together to do the laundry, was there a certain job that you had specifically or were you kind of off the hook?

RM: I got to go down in the basement and pick out the relish for the dinner. [laughter] Now, I loved that. They had lots of shelves. My grandmother was a great cook, … but, no, I didn't work.

SH: Were there any, what should I say, crafts, or was there something that young women learned to do at a very early age, then, that you do not see them learning to do now? The reason I bring this up is, there is this beautiful sampler at your door here. Were you taught to do cross-stitch or crochet or knit, any of that?

RM: No, I wasn't taught, but my daughter does beautiful work. She has it all over this house. [laughter] She'll have to show you one; I want her to. What did I do? I can't remember. Lots of cross stitch. And I knit scarves.

GA: You made all my baby dresses, with smocking on the front, and you sewed all my clothes when I was really little.

SH: Then, you had to learn to sew somewhere.

RM: I could sew.

GA: My great-grandmother could sew anything. …

RM: My grandmother, she was a seamstress, next-door, and I would draw her an evening gown and she would make it. We'd go to Philadelphia, on 13th and Filbert Street, and pick out material and she was wonderful. She could make men's clothes and women's clothes, coats, dresses, everything. It didn't rub off, [laughter] but I was able to; yes, I did. I made slipcovers and curtains and, Georgie and I, dresses alike; that's a little later.

SH: Something rubbed off then. I can testify to that. What were some of the holidays, and the customs during the holidays, that you remember fondly? I love the Monday morning wash celebration.

RM: Yes.

SH: Were there others, say, Christmas or New Year's, the Fourth of July?

RM: Well, I want to go back a little bit; when you asked me what I did, now, I remember. I was an only child and everybody said I had two mothers because my father doted, [laughter] and so, I had elocution lessons, singing lessons, tap dancing lessons, anything that was …

SH: You also learned how to play piano.

RM: Yes, piano lessons, and so on, but holidays, oh, I loved, everybody loves Christmas, and everybody came to my grandmother's and I had to be shared. So, my father and I would drive up to Pennsylvania and I couldn't be there that day with the whole family, but we'd get back at night. … They'd always get together holidays.

SH: In Bridgeton, was there a big Fourth of July celebration?

RM: Oh, yes.

SH: With these wonderful parks, was there a parade?

RM: Well, we had fireworks in the park. I remember I couldn't stay up that late so, I would look out my parents' bedroom window at twelve o'clock and see the fireworks, but they had a lot of fireworks. I was allowed "sparklers" and a cane with "caps" in the bottom.

SH: You talked about being doted on, with the elocution and the piano and music lessons, that kind of thing, but, as a young woman in high school, did you know that you were going to go to college?

RM: No, never. My mother, I had a pretty mother, she really was, and she loved hats and she would go to this hat store downtown, and she could model hats. So, my father, I found out, thought he might set me up in a hat store. But, I had a librarian; (I loved to read, forever.) … I worked in the library and the librarian suggested that I try for the State Scholarship, which I did, and that did it, and that's how I went to college.

SH: Let us talk a little bit about your studies in high school, then, we will go into how this comes to be. Were there required subjects for women?

RM: Oh, I took the classical course, which is college preparatory.

SH: Did you have to take some things like home economics?

RM: No. That was an elective.

SH: Was it? Did you pass that up?

RM: No, I took that, too. That was fun. We made an apron. [laughter]

HA: Did you have a favorite class?

RM: A favorite class? Oh, I loved my English teacher and she would get so excited over Shakespeare or whatever she was reading, her head would shake and her hairpins would fly out, Ms. Wilcox. [laughter] I loved that, but I liked all my teachers. … I had a good time in high school.

SH: Were there any of your cousins that you kind of had to help come along in school?

RM: No. My "country" cousins, I didn't get to go to school with them until the seventh grade and then they came to Bridgeton, seventh and eighth and through high school, and we were all in the same class. My aunt did something that everybody would frown on, and I would, too, but it had a happy ending, because she kept one girl back a year, so [that] they could go together. That's why we all three were in the same grade and we had a good time, all the way through.

SH: Were there any activities or sports for girls, or not, for a co-ed school? Was it separated in any way?

RM: No. There was field hockey. … The girls were treated very well, and just as well as the boys. There's hockey, and I played tennis and was on the tennis team. I guess that's about it for girls, isn't it, hockey and tennis?

SH: That is what we are trying to find out.

HA: Were you politically active at this point? What was your family's political affiliation?

RM: My dad was a staunch Republican until the Depression and Roosevelt, and Roosevelt won him over. He really helped the business and he put young people to work, instead of just "on the dole," and so, then, from then on, he was a Democrat. We loved Truman and the "People's Presidents." I don't know what you people are, but I'm still a Democrat, and I can't stand it right now. [laughter]

SH: You said your mother had a beautiful voice. Did she sing in the church choir?

RM: Yes.

SH: Did you also?

RM: That's it, yes, but I was just there, you know.

SH: I suspect you may be a bit too modest for us here.

RM: I didn't have a voice the way she did, no.

SH: The librarian was the one who encouraged you to go for the State Scholarship.

RM: Yes.

SH: Was she a NJC graduate?

RM: No. I don't know where she graduated from. I probably knew back then, but I don't remember.

SH: With the State Scholarship, could you have gone to other institutions of higher learning, or was it just for NJC?

RM: It was just for; I like to say NJC. It was probably Rutgers, but …

SH: No, it is NJC when we are talking here. [laughter]

RM: NJC, Douglass, right.

SH: Was Mabel Douglass still alive when you went to NJC?

RM: No, … I don't believe so.

SH: She had already passed away by then, but it was still called New Jersey College for Women when you went. When you took the State Scholarship exam, did your parents know that you were entertaining the idea of going on to college?

RM: None of us thought about it. I don't know why.

SH: You just came home and announced you had passed.

RM: Oh, well, they were very pleased with me, and I was headed in the right direction, with the classical course. I took all the right courses, so that they must have thought about it, too, so that the doors wouldn't be closed, whichever direction I took.

SH: Did you come to campus to visit, prior to moving on campus as a freshman?

RM: Well, I came, I took a test, and then, I visited the campus, that day, with two boys that were taking it for Rutgers. The three of us went to take the test.

SH: The test was given in New Brunswick.

RM: Yes.

SH: How did you get there? Did you drive, take the train?

RM: One of the mothers took us. I'll never forget it, because they had relatives in Bordentown and she and her son went in to visit the relatives and had lunch and we stayed in the car and they came out with crumbs; I never got over that. [laughter]

HA: Do you know how many other students got scholarships to go to NJC or Rutgers?

RM: My husband had gotten a scholarship to Rutgers. Oh, from my school, I was the only one that year.

HA: Did a lot of your high school graduates go on to college after high school?

RM: Oh, let's see, I would say maybe a quarter. Twenty-five percent's a little high; maybe fifteen or twenty percent.

SH: You talked about taking the classical course. What were the other course options for people going to high school?

RM: Commercial, General, Agriculture.

SH: You talked about how you did not really feel the impact of the Depression, but were there others in your community who did? You talked about an uncle who had lost his job.

RM: … It hit home with me with my uncle. He lived, you know, two doors down and he had a problem, but, you know, they got along and we were just fortunate, I guess. We didn't suffer.

SH: Were there people who would come and offer to work or ask for food or anything like that?

RM: … I remember, we had a garden once. We had a gardener one time to repay the money that he owed my dad. My father said, "Just come and plant a few flowers."

SH: With him having a store, he probably was asked more than once to do things on credit.

RM: Probably. Having a store was different in those days. People ordered over the phone. He had a special person to take the orders and we had a deliveryman and people would just trust that he knew what they liked. They lived in the better part of town. His store was "across the creek." Our town was divided by the creek. I lived on one side, which was the ordinary folk, and then, there were the really rich folk on the other side of the creek, and my dad had his store on the other side of the creek, which was good. …

HA: Is your father's store still around?

RM: No, he sold it and now it's attorneys in the building, just the last few years. It's a long time ago.

SH: The building is still there, though.

RM: The building is still there, yes.

SH: This is great. Talk to us about the excitement that you felt; you had come to Rutgers, and we know you did not get anything to eat, but how excited were you making this trip to Rutgers, to New Brunswick, and taking this exam? What was your daydream or your plan as to what would happen when you toured the campus? Were you frightened? Were you excited?

RM: Well, it was like a fairy tale. You know, I hadn't planned on it, it just happened, in a short period of time, and I must have been nervous taking the test, but I don't remember that.

SH: Did you take the exam in the spring of your senior year and, now, you were going to come in September?

RM: Yes.

SH: Let us talk about coming to New Brunswick, to NJC; what do you remember about that, getting prepared?

RM: Well, I had met my roommate. I found out who my roommate was. She was from Haddonfield and we met. … We went to meet her and her parents, Mary, Mary Evaul and I liked her a lot and we lived in Douglass O. Now in those days, we had NJC and we were a college and there were three campuses, Douglass and Gibbons; Douglass was all these little houses and cul-de-sacs, and Gibbons, the same, and Jameson Campus, yes, that was dormitories. As a freshman, we had to wear placards with our names, in big print, front and back, like a sandwich sign, and big green ribbons and, if anybody met us, we had to sing this song, "I'm a hayseed, my hair is seaweed and my ears are made of leather and they flop in rainy weather. Gosh, oh, hemlock, we're tough as pine nut. I'm a freshman of NJC, tee-hee." [laughter]

SH: That is fantastic.

RM: We had such a good time. …

HA: How often did you have to do that, sing that song?

RM: Whenever we'd meet or talk with anybody that would require it of us. Then, we had Cooper Hall, where we all ate.

SH: Was there a certain color that you had to wear? You said the green ribbon.

RM: Big green hair ribbon and the placards, and that was it. We had class dresses that we wore to formal occasions, and I think they were maroon.

SH: Did you buy these or did your grandmother make them?

RM: We had to buy them. They were all the same, for certain occasions.

SH: What was the initiation like? I mean, other than this song, were there any other rituals?

RM: No. I loved the little houses that we lived in. The seniors, you looked forward to being a senior, because you had an apartment on the top floor. There were two seniors on the top floor, and then, on the other floors, there were representatives of every other class, sophomores and juniors and freshmen.

SH: About how many women would be in a house?

RM: Well, there would be two seniors and two of each other class, so, that's six for a total of eight, and then, we'd have a living room and the boys would come. That was nice, but we had no discipline problems. It was the honor system and the seniors were there to kind of keep order.

SH: What were the rules? What was the honor system? Was it no boys above the first floor or out of that room?

RM: Oh, absolutely no boys in the rooms, absolutely. We didn't even think about the fact that that was a rule. It was just a given, and I believe it was an eleven o'clock curfew.

SH: Could you have boys in the living room every night of the week or was it just certain nights that you were allowed?

RM: Any night, as long as they went home on time, and they were chaperoned by everybody else in the house. [laughter]

SH: Were there facilities to eat in or did you eat in a common dining hall?

RM: We all ate at Cooper Hall. Cooper was a great, big building and girls that needed the money would work their way through school by being waitresses, and it was wonderful, good food and a lot of fun.

SH: Did you have chapel at NJC?

RM: Yes, we had a chapel, very pretty, nice.

SH: Was it mandatory that you go?

RM: It must have been mandatory. To tell you the truth, I can't remember about that, but it must have been.

SH: If I am not mistaken, you had a big sister or mentor.

RM: Yes. We had a big sister when we came, and they would kind of keep us informed on what was what.

SH: Were they seniors or juniors, sophomores? How much older was your big sister?

RM: They were juniors and seniors.

SH: Do you remember who your big sister was?

RM: No. I got so involved, right away, with everybody in my house that I really didn't need a big sister. When I first came there, she told me, you know, what was where, and so on, and I could ask her anything, but you really were involved with your house, if you were lucky. I was lucky.

SH: That is great. Where were the girls from? Were they from all over New Jersey?

RM: All over New Jersey, and a few from states outside of New Jersey, but mostly New Jersey.

SH: Were you all studying basically the same curriculum or were you all different?

RM: Oh, no. I know we had one girl whose course was animal husbandry and, of course, she took hers at Rutgers with the School of Agriculture, and there were some other courses, I can't remember exactly, but there was some interaction with courses that weren't given at Douglass. You would take them at Rutgers and then come back, but … there were all courses in every field.

SH: Did you know when you went in to NJC what you wanted to study, or did you decide later?

RM: I just liked to read and so the easiest thing was an English course. And then, I loved Dr. [George P.] Schmidt, so the easiest thing was to minor in history. Education, I liked the education teachers and I thought, "Being a teacher sounds pretty good," so I took the education courses.

HA: Were you in any clubs or organizations at NJC?

RM: I was in a lot of clubs, you know, let's see, … Spanish Club, the Library Club, a lot of different ones. I was involved. They got most girls involved, you know, in everything related to what they were studying and what their interests were.

SH: One thing, and I know Sabeenah has this on her question list, as a freshman, you were not allowed to walk …

RM: Sacred Path. Sacred Path was up to the main building where you registered and came to see what was going on, the main, central part of the campus, and it had paths going up to the far right and to the far left, pretty big trees, very pretty, but you were never allowed to go on that Sacred Path in your freshman year.

SH: Was there an alternate route? I have always been curious.

RM: On the other side.

SH: Oh.

RM: You know, they were similar, right and left, but there was a big space in-between and, sometimes, it was a little out of your way, you know, not to be able to use this, but it was fun, too, especially when you walked on it the first time.

HA: Did the freshmen follow the rule or did some people break it?

RM: Oh, yes, nobody broke it. To my memory, nobody broke that rule.

SH: What were some of the traditions and rituals? You talked about the initiation, the big green hair ribbon and that wonderful song you sang for us, but were there other traditions that came along with the Sacred Path?

RM: Yule log. At Christmastime they had beautiful celebrations in the chapel and there was a Yule log, and they had a girls' glee club and lovely voices, and they always had a big program for Christmas.

SH: Did you sing in the glee club?

RM: Nope, [laughter] but I appreciated it.

SH: That is what I am, the best audience. Tell us about the Yule log ceremony; what did that entail?

RM: I can't really go into detail with that. It was just formal and impressive. They did it once a year and the girls wore costumes and the carols were sung and it was just a lovely Christmas service.

SH: At any point in the time that you were at NJC, Douglass, did you have a specific role that you played? Were you in a play or did you recite poetry? Being an English major, were you part of the writers' club or did you publish newspapers or anything?

RM: No. I didn't work in the newspaper. I didn't do anything, in that field, for anybody else; sorry. [laughter]

SH: I just did not want to not ask, in case there was something we should know about that.

RM: Well, I had writing classes. We had writing classes. … We had a writing class as freshmen and you submitted something that you had written and they either said you had to take the course over or you could go to another course. So, I went to a higher course. I did like to

write and I could write fairly well. … I can't remember the name of the professor, but she was good, and we wrote a lot.

SH: You had told us your favorite professor was Dr. Schmidt.

RM: Yes.

SH: He was a history professor.

RM: Yes.

SH: What do you remember studying with Dr. Schmidt, because things in the world are really starting to boil, we will say?

RM: Any course that he gave, I took. It was mostly ancient history.

SH: Were there any discussions about what was going on in Europe?

RM: No, no; outside of class, yes.

SH: Okay, please.

RM: But, not a whole lot. See, I was there; well, I graduated in '43.

SH: You would have gone in 1939, if my math is right, the fall of 1939. By that time, Hitler had gone into Poland, England was into the war and everything.

RM: Right. I know, … there were some girls that had relatives in Poland and had closer ties to Europe than I did with my family.

SH: Were there any students, that you were aware of, that were brought from Eastern Europe to NJC to go to school, to get away from what was going on in Europe?

RM: Not while I was there, not to my knowledge.

SH: You talked about all the wonderful dances and things that they had at NJC. When was the first time you were introduced to the men at Rutgers College? Was there a social for freshmen?

RM: The men. Well, there were fraternity parties and I attended a couple.

HA: What were the parties like?

RM: They had dances that were given that would bring the men and women together, boys and girls.

HA: Were they supervised by anyone?

RM: Yes, always, always.

SH: How often did you go home to Bordentown?

RM: Bridgeton.

SH: Bridgeton.

RM: I'll have to tell you about my husband first, because he's involved from now on. He's a lot more interesting than I am, [laughter] and that's how I got home to Bridgeton.

SH: This is what I want to ask.

RM: Yes.

SH: Tell me when you first remember meeting him.

RM: I didn't know him in Bridgeton, which was strange. He was a football hero and he was three years beyond me. He worked before he went away to school, and so, my freshman year, I was wearing a red dress to show people to their seats at a football game and he was parking cars. There were another two boys from Bridgeton that were there and they introduced Bill and me.

SH: Were they also parking cars?

RM: No. I don't know what they were doing. Bill and I had jobs; we were working. So, I got him a date with a girl in my house. It was a big mistake. I never thought I should; I knew it the minute I did it, because I really thought he was pretty cute myself, but anyway, that's when it started, when I was a freshman and he was a …

SH: He would have been a sophomore.

RM: Sophomore, and we started going steady, I guess, my junior year.

SH: All right, we missed a whole two years here. What transpires?

RM: No, my sophomore year.

SH: Your freshman year, you get him a date with one of the women in your house.

RM: Yes, but then I got him back real quick.

SH: Did you?

RM: Yes.

SH: Right away.

RM: Yes, yes. …

SH: Did he call you or did you call him?

RM: Oh, he called me. I wouldn't do that, no. [laughter]

SH: What was your first date?

RM: Oh, I can't even remember, but it wasn't too long before I had his crew pin, and then I had his house, Phelps House, pin. He worked hard. He worked in the tomato factory in Bridgeton the year before he went to school, and then he had a State Scholarship and he made inquiries. … He wanted a career in agriculture and the Phelps House; you've heard of that before, the "Alpha Phalpha" House? They had boys that they helped, boys that were interested in agriculture there. If they lived there and worked on the farm and took care of the cows and other things, they could do that for their room and board, plus thirty-five cents a day for food. There was "no room at the inn" for Bill when he talked to them. But, he saw that he could buy this trailer for seven hundred dollars and he asked if he might come to school in the trailer. So, they said yes. …

GA: Seventy dollars; excuse me, I'm sorry. …

RM: Seventy dollars, oh, yes, seventy dollars, way back then.

SH: Was this the trailer that he had down in Bridgeton?

RM: Yes. He bought it in Bridgeton and he had a car, … we called it "the Blue Comet." It was a little, light blue, old coupe, that pulled the trailer up there and they allowed him to stay.

SH: He started his freshman year in this trailer.

RM: Yes.

HA: Did he have to get permission to live in the trailer from the school? How did that work?

RM: He had to get permission from a lot of people. [laughter] He was there less than a year, but he just slept there and he would go into the house for his meals, and so on, and he was at the Phelps House the same time as Charlie Brown and Stokes Homan. He was one that wrote, [gave an oral history interview], I noticed [on the Rutgers Oral History Archives website]. The McDougall Boys were not in the Phelps House, but they were connected with agriculture, one or two of them, and they had a good time and we had a good time, and they had lots of parties.

SH: At the Phelps House?

RM: Yes.

SH: Who was the chaperone at the Phelps House? Was there a housemother?

RM: I don't think there was. There was none. They were on their honor. … The Phelps House and the Ag Campus were right next to the Douglass Campus and that made it very convenient. [laughter] That was good.

SH: You did not have to go clear across campus.

RM: No. … I had lots of reading courses, because of English, so I would go to the library just about every night and, every night, Bill would come and walk me home and he'd always find me with my head in the book, sound asleep, ten o'clock. He'd wake me up and take me home. [laughter]

SH: Was he a good student?

RM: Yes. He was a very good student.

SH: Was there a particular field of studies that he was studying in agriculture? Was he concentrating on education? What was he looking to do?

RM: I don't know, just agriculture. I can tell you later on what he did with it.

SH: Okay, sure.

RM: When you're ready.

SH: What do you remember about Pearl Harbor, in 1941, December?

RM: I remember all the boys came over to visit all the girls. I remember Bill coming over. He was in ROTC, you know what that is, and so, he was already involved in a lot of training.

SH: He had gone to Advanced ROTC.

RM: Yes, yes, and taking courses in the summer. So, all the boys came over and commiserated with all the girls and talked about it, and it was very upsetting and very exciting.

SH: When had you first heard the news? Do you remember? Was it when the boys came?

RM: Over the radio.

SH: You were listening to the radio when you heard.

RM: Somebody had listened to the radio, I'm sure. The news spread. That news spread like wildfire, you know; I don't know exactly.

SH: Did it?

RM: Oh, yes.

SH: What did NJC do? Did they call the women together to talk to them? Did anything change in your courses? Did they speed up? Did anyone change majors? Was there any of that?

RM: I didn't know of anything. … In the men's school, of course, ROTC was more intense then.

SH: At this point, then, this would be Mr. Moncrief's senior year

RM: Yes.

SH: He would be graduating that May in 1942 as a first lieutenant. Pearl Harbor happens in December of 1941. He graduated in May 1942. He knew that he was going to have to go. Is that correct?

RM: Yes. Well, I didn't think war was so imminent when he was in ROTC, you know. I didn't know that, in our lifetime, in our school time, that we'd have a war.

SH: Really?

RM: Not very realistic of me, but we didn't know for sure, anything.

SH: Did you start making plans right away to get married? Had he already asked you to marry him by the time he was a senior?

RM: No.

SH: I mean, you have all the pins, you said.

RM: I just had pins, which meant you were a girlfriend. [laughter]

SH: Okay, a steady girlfriend.

RM: A steady girlfriend, that's right. No, we really didn't talk a lot about marriage until he graduated and he went right out to Washington State and trained out there, and then he called home and said that it was time that we got married, and he kept putting fifty cents in the box, you know. I couldn't stand it anymore, so, I said, "All right." So, then, that's when we decided. So, as soon as he could, he came home and we did it.

SH: You did it. Do you remember what he was training to do? What was his role?

RM: Well, he was in the infantry and he trained; well, that comes a little later, … if you want me to tell you where he went and what he did.

SH: If you would like to talk about that now, you can. I know one question that we still have hanging was, how often did you get down to Bridgeton?

RM: Shall we go back to that?

SH: Let us do.

RM: That's right. He had this "Blue Comet," and my father would kick the tires. He was worried about it, because it was an old car, you know. I stopped taking the train. There's a train from New Brunswick to Philadelphia, and then, a bus to Bridgeton, and that's the way I would go before Bill. After Bill, it was the "Blue Comet." …

SH: Would it just be the two of you or would you have other friends?

RM: Well, usually, the two of us. He would take me home for vacations, and so on. It worked out very well, but sometimes we would take my roommate, and I remember, we took my roommate's boyfriend, who was Stokes Homan, one time. This was a coupe with room for three across, so somebody had to sit on somebody's lap the whole time, you know. So, we took turns and my roommate was heavier than I was, so I got more turns. Well, anyway, that's how I got home.

HA: Did you have the same roommate all four years?

RM: No. Sad to say, my freshman roommate, when she got tired, she'd go to bed. If she still had to study for a test, she would put it off. She had big brothers, they were maybe ten years older than her, that had gone to Rutgers and they did very well. She was the little sister. She was smart enough, but she just didn't make it. So she transferred to Hood College, I believe, and went right through, but she didn't make it with Rutgers. So, I got another roommate my sophomore year that I dearly loved, Peggy Goewey. We wrote our boyfriends' names around the pipe in Jameson, and I know her boyfriend was Howard Terwilliger, and that was a lot on that pipe. [laughter]

SH: From your freshman year, you went from Douglass to Jameson.

RM: Yes.

SH: Why did you make that change?

RM: Well, you had to. I mean, it's the luck of the draw, where you lived, every year. Otherwise, I would have stayed put. I loved where I was, but I liked them all. They were all good.

SH: Did you stay at Jameson for the rest of the time?

RM: No, I stayed in Douglass, Jameson, Gibbons, Douglass.

SH: You went back to the apartment setting then. Jameson had apartment settings as well, or did it? No, Jameson was the dorm.

RM: … The dorm.

SH: Gibbons had the same house.

RM: Gibbons had the houses and Douglass had the houses.

SH: Did you keep the same roommate?

RM: Yes, Peggy Goewey. I just lost her this year, and that's sad.

SH: She was the girlfriend of Mr. Homan.

RM: For awhile. [laughter]

SH: Were there a lot of men who had cars on campus? It sounds pretty unique.

RM: They were special, those that did. Not everybody did.

SH: Tell us about some of the dances. I know there was a military ball and sock hop. Did you go to those?

RM: I went to all of them and we had very good, famous orchestra leaders, because of being near New York, you know. We had Sammy Kaye and the Dorsey Brothers, and I can't remember the others, but we did, and the dances were wonderful, at Rutgers.

SH: Were you a good dancer? Did you like to dance?

RM: Bill and I were very modest dancers. We loved to dance, but we didn't do the jitterbug. Not like the young people now; I don't know how they get romantic. See, we were romantic. When you danced, you were right there, [laughter] but no more. They dance looking at each other, and do a jig. [laughter]

SH: Were the dances all formal?

RM: Most, but not all. There were all kinds of dances. Bill was in charge of the one for Agriculture and that was a very formal dance. That's the one we had Sammy Kaye play at.

SH: Did you also have costume-type dances, where you were dressed up?

RM: You know, I have to go back. I told you something wrong, because, at the Ag dance, everybody did dress up, and, you know, the boys in their overalls and the girls did the best they could with what they had. [laughter]

HA: Did a lot of people go to the dances?

RM: Oh, they were very well attended, yes, and they were always well chaperoned, too.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: Going back to Douglass, can you tell us about what you did for fun around campus or in the city?

RM: What did I do for fun? Dates; oh, well, … what did I do for fun? We just had a lot of fun. We went to the movies, once in a great, great while. We had a lot of dances. They had a lot of programs for men and women there, joint programs the schools provided. We just had a good time.

SH: Did you go into New York City at all?

RM: That's one of the reasons that I was so anxious to go to this school because they said that New York was our; not bedroom, but …

SH: Backyard?

RM: New York was like, yes.

SH: Right in your backyard.

RM: Yes. New York was where we went to play. So, we did make several trips to New York, and that was fun and we were lucky.

SA: Did you ever meet Dean Corwin while you were there?

RM: Yes. She had all the seniors to tea. In that ten days, when I did everything, I had tea with Dean Corwin. [laughter]

SH: Tell the young women …

RM: … Excuse me, but that was gloves and hats and very formal; no slacks, skirts.

SH: That is what I wanted you to tell them.

SA: How about Dr. Oral Sumner Coad? He was the man in charge of the English Department. Did you ever meet with him?

RM: What was his name?

SA: Dr. Oral Sumner Coad.

SH: Who was the head of the English Department, do you remember?

RM: I remember he had red hair, [laughter] and I liked him and he was good.

SA: Going back to being on campus during the war, can you tell me if there was any general opinion about the war on campus?

RM: … My senior year was when we were involved, so that everybody was upset and excited and had plans, what they were going to do. Oh, Johnson & Johnson was a firm in New Brunswick and they would take us, even for an hour or two. They paid fifty-five cents an hour and we'd come in and package bandages or do whatever. That was one thing. Yes, it was an exciting, nervous, I won't say wonderful, but scary time. It was a time when everybody was wondering what was their part that they were going to play and we were the ones that would be involved, our generation.

HA: Were you involved with the Red Cross at all?

RM: After I was married and Bill was overseas, I did. I joined the Red Cross at home and my husband wasn't too wild about that, because one of the things we did was entertain "the flyboys," he called them.

HA: What were the flyboys?

RM: There was a group of airmen at Millville.

SH: Pilots.

RM: Pilots, and we would be hostesses. That was one of the things, and he didn't think that was necessary. [laughter]

SA: Was there any antiwar or pacifist sentiment, do you know, on campus?

RM: … I wasn't acquainted with any, no, no. Everybody was *gung ho*, because it's not like this war, [the War in Iraq]. I mean, after all, somebody came to Pearl Harbor and they bombed us and it was a definite war, and the European Theater, too. I mean, we really had something that we felt we should fight over. So, we thought they were both just wars, our involvement.

HA: Being on the home front, back in New Brunswick, did you feel that you were really part of what was going on in the war or did you feel more like it was a situation that you were outside of, because it was happening in the Pacific and in Europe? How did you see yourself?

RM: Well, we all felt as though we were a part of it, because our boys were going, not only our boyfriends, but our family. Douglass and Rutgers got involved with Camp Kilmer the year after I was there. So, I wasn't in the middle of it, that way, but we all felt involved.

HA: Did you know a lot of the boys that went over? Did you have any family members, cousins or anything, that went over?

RM: Well, I just knew Bill's family, Bill and his two brothers. That was all. … I'm an only child and my cousins were girls. …

SH: What do you remember about when your husband first left? You were not married when he first left the area.

RM: Yes.

SH: Did he leave from New Brunswick to report for duty or did he leave from Bridgeton?

RM: No, he left from New Brunswick. He was right in it. He graduated as a second lieutenant right away and he had additional training for a few months. It was in the South, some of it and then he was in Washington State.

SH: Between semesters or between the school year, during the summer, were you back home in Bridgeton every time or did you take another job or anything? Did you always return to Bridgeton?

RM: I always returned to Bridgeton.

SH: That would usually be in June that you would go back home.

RM: I guess it was.

SH: Do you remember when he left for the first time? He had just graduated and the semester has ended for you and your junior year is ending. Did you then stay a little longer to tell him good-bye or did you go straight down to Bridgeton?

RM: Oh, let's see, he was in the South and then he came to tell me good-bye. That's what that train station picture is in there for, because it seems as though we were always meeting at the train station, and then he went to Washington State, but that time I didn't tell him good-bye. I married him instead. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mrs. Moncrief is referring to a photo album she had made.]

SH: All right. Before we talk about when you got married, could you tell us a little bit about his family and his family background?

RM: Well, his father had training to be a pharmacist and he did that awhile, but he didn't like to do that. He would rather farm, so he farmed, and his mother was a schoolteacher. They had five boys, and the youngest boy, it was a tragedy, he was killed in front of their house with an automobile, and three boys were in the war at the same time. One was in the European field, in the Battle of the Bulge, and Bill was in the Pacific field, and the Marine was everywhere. So,

they were all in the military, and they all came home. The oldest brother had a family and stayed home with a factory job.

SH: Did they all join about the same time? Do you remember?

RM: Yes.

HA: How did their mother react to three of her four remaining boys going over, into the war?

RM: Well, it was hard, it was hard.

SH: Did you keep a correspondence with other young men, other than your husband? Did you write to his brothers or others?

RM: I wrote to his brothers and they wrote to me.

SH: How did the rationing affect you and your family?

RM: Well, I know my father dealt with it, because he had the store, but we never suffered at all. We had plenty.

SH: You talked about going to J&J and making bandages there.

RM: Yes, whatever they asked us to do.

SH: What about "Bundles for Britain," prior to that?

RM: I wasn't involved in that.

SH: Okay, I just wondered if you had participated in that. Your husband's family were farmers in the Bridgeton area.

RM: Yes.

SH: Mr. Moncrief was the second oldest son?

RM: No, … he was the baby. He was the youngest. The little boy that was killed was younger than him, but Bill was the youngest of the four remaining.

SH: Tell us about that exciting period. You come back to Rutgers in September of 1942. How had the campus changed from when you had left it? You talked about all the parties and the dances and all of that, but you also talked about the young men starting to go off. Did you notice a difference when you came back that fall, in your senior year?

RM: Well, of course, the war was on everybody's mind. That was uppermost, but they still had parties and it got to be a little stark later on.

SH: Were there any women who did not come back to campus because they had married, or were married women allowed to come back?

RM: Oh, married women were allowed, but they couldn't live together on campus. There were no men on campus; it was not coed at all.

SH: No, I did not mean that. Obviously, their husbands must be in the military, but, if you were married, could you live in Jameson or Douglass?

RM: No.

SH: No. You had to be a commuter student then or live off campus.

RM: There weren't very many married while I was there. I mean, that was a rare thing. I would say there were a half a dozen, maybe, that had gotten married right away. After that, it was more, of course.

SH: Was there any thought given to waiting to get married until after the war?

RM: Oh, everybody, especially parents; you know, there was a lot of thought about that.

SH: Your parents were advising you to wait as well.

RM: No, they were wonderful. They just let me do what I thought I should do, and they liked Bill. Of course, they'd met him. … In the summertime, he would work at the tomato factory and he would come and stop by. He walked, didn't have a car then. He'd walk and always stop in at my house on the way out to his farm, and he'd smell just like a tomato, [laughter] and my mother and dad, they loved him. My grandparents loved him, everybody liked him. So, I had it easy. I know my parents thought about that, and you know, I would think about it if it were my children. "Suppose there was a baby involved and he didn't come back?" or, "How would he come back?" or everything, but it didn't matter then, no.

SH: You took it into consideration.

RM: Didn't matter.

SH: Do you remember when the phone call came, with the fifty cents going in the phone box, when you finally said yes?

RM: It was in May.

SH: This was just before you graduated then.

RM: Yes. I hadn't graduated yet.

SH: Who was the first person you called after you said yes? Did you call your parents?

RM: I'm sure I must have, because we had a lot to do. I don't know. My mother got a new hat. That was about it, [laughter] but we had ten days and we had to get a ring. I had a shower; my cousins gave me a shower. We were married on Sunday and I think I graduated from college on Monday or Tuesday.

SH: After the wedding or before?

RM: After the wedding.

SH: After the wedding.

RM: We went to Senior Ball. On Saturday night we had the Senior Ball, and I was married on Sunday and graduated the following week, and had a bit of a honeymoon. Friends, my parents' friends, had a cottage at the shore, in Avalon. "I met my love in Avalon," or left it there; so we had a couple of days at the shore, and he bid me good-bye. … Where was the bus? I don't know, in Bridgeton, I guess; anyway, he bid me good-bye; no, it was in Philadelphia.

SH: Okay. Were you married in Bridgeton?

RM: We were married in Bridgeton. I had a church wedding. We'd gotten our dresses; I had a maid of honor and a bridesmaid and we got our dresses in Wanamaker's basement. They met me. They came down from school and it was my roommate and a girlfriend from home. They came down from school and we got our dresses and did that all in that ten days, too. Oh, and I had a reception. We had it in a reception hall, people that gave parties, but they didn't have the wherewithal, food. So my father went around and got a lot of chickens for a reception. … I had eighty, I think, or sixty or eighty; I don't remember. Anyway, my parents would know. I don't know how they stood it, but I had it all.

SH: You were able to buy your wedding dress and everything right there at …

RM: Wanamaker's basement.

SH: One-stop shopping.

RM: We ate. We had lunch in Wanamaker's tearoom. [laughter] They went back to school; I went home.

SH: Did you have a lot of classmates that came to your wedding or was it mostly family?

RM: Well, there was no time for invitations. My classmates, … maybe a half a dozen came and, of course, my roommate stood up with me, but there was no time for invitations. So, my parents made the announcement in church and said, "Y'all come," and telephoned everybody that they thought should come, and the church was so full, they had to lift up the doors between the church and the Sunday school room and sit in the choir loft. We had everybody, and my mother's

friends went in everybody's garden and got red, white, and blue flowers and candles and put them on the pews. I just had it all. They worked hard.

SH: That is one of the stories that we like to hear.

RM: But, it was wonderful, not a hitch. It was just fun and wonderful.

SH: Did you have a dinner at this facility?

RM: … At this dining hall, dining facility, we had a reception, and then, we went to Avalon, to my friend's cottage, and we thought we'd go out to dinner. It was May and the restaurants weren't open yet. So I had to cook and it was strange, I didn't cook much, but we didn't care. [laughter]

SH: Where did he report to after this?

RM: He went back to Washington State.

SH: Fort Lewis?

RM: Fort Lewis, in Washington, and he left from there. … Do you want me to tell you where he went?

SH: Sure, please.

RM: Okay. He went to Hawaii first. He was a first lieutenant and he was responsible for a, what do you call that group of people?

SH: A platoon or a company?

RM: Platoon, something like that. He had to train men in Hawaii. That's what he did. … My husband was a sharpshooter, so he taught them to shoot and, when he came home, he gave away all his guns. He never wanted to see another one. And he taught them all to swim, because he said, "They should know how to swim, going from island to island," the way they would be doing. So they went from Hawaii to New Guinea and Luzon and …

GA: Was it Honshu?

RM: Honshu. … He never told me about the fighting, but he told me where he was and what the accommodations were like, and he was responsible for his men, but he never … talked about the bad parts, and there were some. … His last stay was in Japan, in the occupation army, keeping the peace; (Himeji?), I think that was the name of the city.

SH: Did he talk at all about how it was to be in Japan then?

RM: Oh, he talked about Japan. He talked about all the good things, and he sent us all home pearls and Japanese robes and some dishes and everything. He sent me things from everywhere when he could shop. I know he sent me home a lifetime subscription to the *Reader's Digest.* I still get it every month, and those people are so in debt. [laughter] I am so in debt to them.

SH: They did not know what they were in for.

RM: That was one of my gifts. Yes, I still get it. [laughter]

SH: That is a great story.

RM: He sent pearls home to me and to my mother and his mother.

SH: What were you doing while he was gone?

RM: Well, as soon as he left, it's odd, I think, I was in education courses at Douglass, but we didn't have practice teaching, so I practice taught in Woodbury. The people that oversaw were professors from Penn State, I believe it was, that would come in to see how we were doing. So, you just flew by the; I shouldn't say by the "hmm of your hmm," but that's what you did. [laughter] You learned to teach while you were teaching, because you hadn't had that experience. … My children, it was summer school that I taught, and they were wonderful. I got an orchid every week from Hawaii and they thought that was cool, you know. [laughter] I had a girlfriend that I grew up with, that had gone to another college, and she practice taught with me and we rented rooms in a house there.

SH: In Woodbury?

RM: In Woodbury, and came home to Bridgeton on weekends. That was fine, and then I had a job right away. Because I lived with my mother and dad, I went to my own high school and I got a job teaching English. The man in charge of discipline, said, "Now, don't worry, Ruthie. If you have any trouble, you just send them to me," [laughter] and two of my English teachers were still there and they said, "Now, Ruthie, you can have my lesson plans, or, anything you want, we'll help you." So, I was in the bosom of the community, you know. I was just very lucky. … Do you want me to tell you about the Japanese students?

SH: I want you to, of course.

RM: This is going on for three hours?

SH: This is okay.

RM: Well, the one interesting thing that tied-in with the war was a blemish, I think, on our country because of the Japanese people that they uprooted from California to send to different parts of the country. They had successful businesses out there and families and nice homes, and some of them were sent to Seabrook Farms. We had a very rural community. Cumberland County was very rural. Seabrook Farms was big in frozen food and everything else, so they built

little cottages to house these people. They came from the West Coast, and I was lucky enough to have a whole group of them in one of my classes. You know, when you're in high school, you have different subjects. You don't teach everything, you teach one thing, or different courses to different groups. So, I had one group for English and they were so wonderful, they were so respectful of older people, and so polite, and they didn't wreak vengeance at all. I mean, they just accepted it and they were beautiful artists. … I had them do notebooks all the time, because they did beautiful artwork, but that was an experience. I remember one little boy I had. His hair stood out, just like this, straight, and he was about this tall.

SH: About four foot tall.

RM: And his name was either Oshio Yoshio or Yoshio Oshio?. Every time I tried to get it straight, he'd go like that, and I was right. [laughter] So, I never knew until he wrote me, when he was in the Army. Then, he wrote back, and I was glad to hear from Oshio Yoshio.

HA: How many of these Japanese-American students did you have?

RM: I must have had eighteen or twenty in the class.

SH: They had a full opportunity to go to high school.

RM: Their whole high school education.

SH: Were you teaching now in Bridgeton?

RM: Oh, I only taught in Bridgeton.

SH: Were they bused in from Seabrook?

RM: Yes.

SH: Is that how they got there?

RM: They had lots of busses. Bridgeton was the hub of the whole county, and we had lots of bus loads of students from everywhere in the county.

SH: How were they accepted by the other students? Was there any problem?

RM: Wonderfully well.

SH: Really? They were totally integrated within the school community.

RM: Yes.

SH: Because their parents are basically interned in these camps. They were not given free …

RM: Oh, they were free to go everywhere in the area.

SH: Were they?

RM: Yes. They were not prisoners.

SH: There were no guards?

RM: Shackles or guards or anything, to my knowledge, no. They had their own religion. I've gone to several affairs there since that time. Some of them are still there and they still have their religion and their church and their customs.

SH: Many stayed here then.

RM: Yes. A lot of them stayed, mostly not integrated as far as intermarriage was concerned though, they had their own life and civilization. …

SH: Did the children participate in the sports programs?

RM: Yes.

SH: Did any of them leave to join the military while you were teaching them?

RM: Well, my Yoshio Oshio did. I didn't keep track of everybody, but I'm sure they did.

SH: When you looked out at the sea of, as you said, very sweet Japanese faces, and knowing that your husband is in the Pacific, did that ever give you pause to ponder this dilemma?

RM: Not a minute. No, I just felt sorry and I felt that we shouldn't have done that. These people had had successful lives where they were and that was hard.

HA: Did anybody in your community speak out, that it was unfair what was happening to the Japanese?

RM: No, never. They never did. They never showed any displeasure with us, you know. Maybe among themselves, they must have, but they were very peaceful, laidback people.

SH: I just wondered if there was any animosity towards them as Japanese.

RM: Not a bit. … I didn't even think about that back then, but they didn't. … They were welcomed.

SH: I find that so interesting, that they had been uprooted, as you said, and, yet, they were completely …

RM: They were Americans. …

SH: Okay, thank you. Your husband became part of the occupation in Japan.

RM: Yes.

SH: He did not get back until what time, in 1946?

RM: January of '46. He left in May of '43.

SH: That was the first time that you had seen him since he left.

RM: And there are all of our letters, right there in those books. I didn't know he kept mine and he didn't know I kept his. …

SH: This is a fabulous treasure trove I am sitting in front of; we will talk about that in just a moment. Was there anything that was really surprising that you remember about the war, other than the fact that you had this unique experience of teaching the Japanese-Americans? Were there other things about that period that you look back on now and you either accepted or that you were really stunned or surprised at?

RM: No. We had a wives club, the teachers. There were five of us, and we'd get together once a week and talk over our husbands and send them provocative pictures, [laughter] so that they'd keep us in mind, and we just kept track of each other's husbands.

SH: All five of them were in the military, in some area of the war.

RM: Yes, in different places, in different parts of the world.

SH: Did you keep in contact with any of the women from NJC, to see how their lives were progressing as well? Obviously, the war is impacting them, too.

RM: You mean?

SH: Your classmates.

RM: Lately, you mean?

SH: No, during the war. Were you keeping up with what was going on with your classmates?

RM: Yes. I had girls, my friends from school, Jackie Snedeker and Peggy Goewey. You know, they had men different places and we would visit.

GA: Well, I was just going to say, since this is going public, you might want to say, about those provocative pictures, that they were …

RM: Oh, yes, scratch that.

GA: No, don't scratch it, but you were in bathing suits and bathing suit poses and ball gowns, and you traded each other's wedding dresses or dress-up gowns.

RM: That's right.

GA: … But, they were not "provocative" pictures.

RM: … You kept the thing running, didn't you, while she said that, to set me straight? [laughter] Because that's right. No, provocative now means something else; provocative then was …

HA: Different than what it is now.

GA: A bathing suit picture, not a bikini.

RM: Yes; no, full. [laughter]

SH: One-piece.

RM: One-piece, that's right.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: You talked about writing letters to your husband. How often did you write to each other?

RM: Just about every day, a lot.

SA: Did you have to wait a long while for a response? Did they come all together?

RM: Sometimes I'd get a bunch together, sometimes you'd get one a week later and, sometimes you'd get it three weeks or a month later; no rhyme or reason.

SA: How difficult was it waiting for the letters to come in?

RM: Well, he wrote so many that I really didn't have a problem. Once in awhile, I'd worry, if they didn't come for quite a spell. They had those little letters; what do you call them?

SH: V-mail.

RM: V-mail that, you know, they wrote sometimes, but other times he just wrote longhand, letter style.

RM: My dear grandfather died in May of '44 and enclosed is the V-mail Bill sent to my grandmother. [Editors note: Ruth Moncrief has included a letter dated June 5, 1944. New Guinea]

"Dearest Grandma,

May I offer my deepest sympathy. Golly, it does make me feel heavy hearted. Granddad was a wonderful man. I would have liked to had him live till I came home – and maybe till we could present him with a great grandchild. Dear you wait for me. Ruth and I want to be as happy as you two have been. Your happiness has been an inspiration to me. To everyone. May the lord give you strength and comfort.

Love Bill. "

SA: Do you remember reading any advice columns in magazines about how to write good letters or how to cope with the war while you were at home?

RM: Well, I read all the columns but, I don't know, I just figured you just cope with what you've got and what is. You just do it. You know, if anybody told you girls now, if you got married, that you wouldn't see your husband for just about three years, you'd wonder how you could stand it but, during the war, everybody was in the same boat. Everybody was on the same side and in the same boat, and so you made do, and what you did was write a lot of letters.

SH: What about the rationing for you, as a young bride? Did you get ration books?

RM: My parents did. I lived at home. I was lucky.

SH: You contributed to the household with what you had.

RM: Yes.

SH: You talked about working for the Red Cross and entertaining the flyboys; were there other things that you did?

RM: I have to tell you that I wish I could say I did, but I didn't. That was about the extent of it, Johnson & Johnson when in New Brunswick and the Red Cross at home.

SA: Do you remember collecting any items, like aluminum foil and things like that?

RM: We collected everything. Aluminum foil was one of them. Anything that you should be doing, we were all doing. We were all trying.

SH: Did you have a victory garden?

RM: Oh, yes. Everybody had. My granddad and my uncle and my father all had gardens and they all had tomatoes. My granddad was a tease and he would come over because he had the biggest, the first red tomato, you know, the biggest tomato. So, one night, my uncle tied a red tomato, everybody's was green, and he tied a red tomato on granddad's plant and they let him rant and rave the next day, until they felt sorry for him. [laughter] Then they told him, but they had a good time.

SA: Do you know about Betty Crocker being big in New Jersey? I mean, she was a fictional character made up during the war. [Editor's Note: Betty Crocker is a fictional character created in 1921 by the Washburn Crosby Company, the forerunner of General Mills.]

RM: Betty Crocker was real, wasn't she? I don't know.

SA: Did she seem real to you? You thought she was a real woman.

RM: She seemed real. I don't know; I'm sorry, I'm going to flunk that question.

SA: Do you remember her cookbooks or anything like that?

RM: Oh, I had cookbooks, but I didn't have a Betty Crocker cookbook. I'm trying to think of the name; everybody had it. I had the *Good Housekeeping Cookbook*, for one, and I practiced. [laughter]

SH: It sounds like you had good teachers. You said your grandmother was an excellent cook.

RM: And my mother was, too; yes, I did.

SA: Going back to the rationing of heat and oil, was it a problem to heat up the rooms in your house during the winter, or was that not a problem?

RM: No, we never had a problem.

SA: How about blackout curtains? Were there blackout curtains used in Bridgeton?

RM: Yes. We had blackouts, when everybody else did.

SA: Did you put up the curtains in the house or the black curtains that they provided?

RM: We didn't have black curtains, no, but during the time when the blackout time was on, then you just had the lights out and you had one place in the house you could go where the lights didn't come out.

HA: How serious were they about the blackouts? Were they really strict on them?

RM: I don't know. Everybody conformed. I never heard of any problems.

SH: Did you ever see any of the war posters or the war bond drives?

RM: Oh, they were every place, sure.

SH: Really? Did you have any war bond drives in your school?

RM: I remember the posters and I remember them downtown. I don't remember them in the school, but in the town.

SH: Did they ever have, like, a rally, where sailors or soldiers would come?

RM: Yes, right, and everybody bought bonds.

SH: Did you read the newspaper faithfully to keep up with the war, is that another way, or listening to the radio?

RM: Both, everything that you could manage.

SH: Did you go into Philly at all then, during the war? How did Philadelphia change? You talked about going there and getting your bridal outfits, but did you go back? Was it beginning to really drastically change?

RM: I don't think it drastically changed. We shopped in Philadelphia once or twice a year.

SH: How hard was it to have your first Christmas apart?

RM: Well, you felt sad because they weren't there, but it's just like … as I said before, everybody else was with you. and they had church services, and families were very close, all in the same boat, sang carols and did everything, more heart in it, probably.

SH: Were there any of the wounded coming back to the area, of the young men? Did you witness any of that?

RM: I didn't. I heard of some that were in my high school class, you know, that didn't come back or came back with problems, but none in my immediate family or group of friends.

SA: Did you put blue or gold stars in your windows in your neighborhood for the people serving in the war?

RM: Everybody did. Of course, I couldn't. That was for your children, wasn't it?

SH: Yes.

RM: Children, but Bill's folks did.

SH: They had the three blue stars on the banners.

SA: Had it always been your intention to work as a teacher after graduation or were you just going to stay at home? What was your agenda?

RM: Oh, I was always going to have a career of some sort, and I did. I taught while Bill was gone, and then, my teaching stood me in good stead because, with four children (they didn't all

come at once) but I substituted all through any of the grades, from one to twelve. I had a girlfriend that went to Douglass and she had four children and we both had good children so, when she got a job, I'd keep hers and when I got a job, she'd keep mine. So, it was pin money, you know, and I did it once in awhile, and I went to school on the school bus.

SH: Really?

RM: Yes, high school or grade school, and I had the children, my own children, sometimes, and I'd tell them, "Now, don't do anything to call my attention to you." This was the boys. "Don't do anything to call my attention to you and I won't look or call on you," and that's what we did because I didn't want to put them on the spot, and I didn't want to be on the spot.

GA: I know. I can remember, "Wait," I knew the answer, and she'd call on everybody but me, but everybody loved her for a teacher. She was a good teacher and very interesting and my mother can draw. She's artistic. So, with colored chalk, she'd do all kinds of things on the blackboard in the younger grades, and it was fun to have her there as a teacher.

RM: That's nice.

GA: Yes, true.

RM: It's nice to hear.

GA: But, she wouldn't call on me. [laughter]

RM: No, I didn't. [laughter] … Her dad was the president of the East Amwell Board of Education while she was in school, and she was a standout, because …

GA: Well, East Amwell was a very small school. There were eighteen in my whole eighth grade class and Dad handed out the diplomas. When you're thirteen, you don't want to be noticed, but he called my name and I walked across and he gave me the diploma, and then he wrapped me in his arms and he said, "And this is my daughter," [laughter] which was humiliating, but wonderful at the same time, you know, it really was, but it was great.

SA: When you were teaching English, how odd was it to teach with your former teachers?

RM: Oh, they just took care of me. It was wonderful. I had a good time. I had the dramatic class and we put on plays and I was just lucky, lucky, lucky.

HA: Do you have any horror stories from your days as a teacher?

RM: Oh, there were some. Yes, there was one section that I had with big boys, some of them that hadn't passed, and some of them were as old as I was, great, big, tall things. … That was hard, but I got through it and Bill sent me an instruction book, where they taught English to soldiers. I used that with them and they thought that was cool, you know, and I got along okay.

SA: What types of books did you read for your curriculum? Do you remember?

RM: For what?

SA: Your curriculum, for English. What sorts of books were you reading?

RM: Oh, well, we had the classics. We had Shakespeare.

SH: Did your hairpins fall out?

RM: No, my hairpins didn't fall out, no, [laughter] but we had grammar, of course, and I tried to get them to like to read.

SH: Did you diagram sentences?

RM: Absolutely, all over the blackboard.

HA: I have never diagramed a sentence.

RM: … You didn't? Well, that was fun. You make them come up here, and everything relates.

SH: Do you have any other questions before we talk about when Mr. Moncrief comes back?

SA: Just a quick one about the Japanese children that were there; did they ever share their experience of internment with you?

RM: Never. They never spoke of it; they just were wonderful and not critical. You know, it must have been hard for them to be that way. They must have had wonderful parents, because they made the best of the situation, and it wasn't fair. They were good.

SH: Did they ever talk about how they felt about the war?

RM: No. We never discussed it. I didn't initiate it. It would have been interesting, maybe, to do, but you might have gotten into trouble, too. I don't know.

SH: In that area of New Jersey, prior to the war, had there been any of what was called the *Bund*, the German *Bund* activity?

RM: There was the Ku Klux Klan. My parents talked about it, when they were young, but never in my lifetime, that I knew of, no.

SH: That is all kind of part of the history about that.

RM: That was disgusting, too.

SH: When Mr. Moncrief comes back, or as he was preparing to come back, what were your plans? Were you just planning for him to come home, and then, make plans or had you started to make plans?

RM: Right. He was busy getting his points together and, if he had stayed another month, he would have been a captain. He came out a first lieutenant, but he didn't care. He just wanted to get home, and he came home on the [SS] *Lurline,* which was a luxury liner.

SH: The *Lurline*?

RM: L-U-R-L-I-N-E. It was a luxury liner at that time. Rich people took vacations on the *Lurline,* and that was nice.

SH: He came back to the West Coast.

RM: He came back to the West Coast, and then it took him awhile to get back here because he kept getting on planes and getting kicked off for a higher ranking officer. He took about ten days.

HA: What was going through your head when you first heard that he was coming home?

RM: … Heaven, right. [laughter]

SH: Was there any inkling of doubt that perhaps things had really changed?

RM: Nope, because, you know, all the letters. It was my Bill. Of course, you know, he must have changed some. The war must have changed him some, but he was good.

SH: Before, Sabeenah had asked about some of the magazines and the columns and you said you read them all. Was there anything in these women's magazines that talked about readjusting to being married to someone who had been gone for a long time?

RM: Oh, they gave advice all the time about everything, but I don't think anybody knew unless they lived through it. But I didn't have adjustments to make, as far as Bill's disposition and, you know, he slept all night. What am I talking about? Well, I mean, some people are nervous and can't sleep at night.

SH: Right. He came back …

RM: He came back intact.

SH: Intact.

RM: Intact.

SH: He flew from the West Coast to here.

RM: Yes.

SH: To Philly?

RM: Yes.

SH: Did you go down and pick him up or did you wait for him?

RM: No, I had no idea when he was coming. It was late one night. I don't know whether my hair was in curlers or what, but anyway, it didn't seem to matter. [laughter] He got home at night and "surprise." We couldn't tell when he was coming because there was no timetable.

SH: One thing we should put on the record is, as you said prior to the interview starting, the date for the wedding kept getting put back and put back. I remember reading these telegrams, that he would be here, and then …

RM: Oh, yes, that the ten-days leave hadn't started. I didn't set a date for the wedding until the ten days had started. I knew they were going to start.

SH: I thought it was kind of the same thing now, when he was coming back and the war is over. You talked about him staying in another month and becoming a captain.

RM: Captain.

SH: Excuse me, captain. Did he ever entertain the thought of staying in the military?

RM: Never. He gave away all his guns. He didn't want any more to do with it.

GA: He saw enough. He was a pacifist, sort of, after that.

RM: He didn't teach his boys to shoot.

SH: Did he entertain the thought of staying in the Reserves?

RM: Never.

SH: Never.

RM: He wanted out.

SH: Did he know what he was going to do? Had he already made arrangements?

RM: He wanted to be a …

GA: Veterinarian.

RM: A veterinarian. It was very hard to get in school there. The best school was in New York State and they took all their boys from New York State first. While he was waiting, he was friends with everybody at the high school, so he taught a couple of years with me at high school while he was deciding what to do. From there, you want me to tell you what he was going to do then? He became the Soil Conservation Agent in Hunterdon County. We moved to Hunterdon County and stayed. It was lovely up there and the schools were good. It was good for the children and good for us. So he was the soil conservation agent and he had all types of agriculture jobs then.

SH: Was it a state job?

RM: The soil conservation agent? Yes.

SH: It was a state job.

RM: Or, was it a county job? It was a state job. It was state, because he had membership in state organizations and he was involved a lot in some other state organizations.

SH: Where did you live in Hunterdon County?

RM: Flemington; well, first in East Amwell Township and then Flemington.

SH: How soon did you start your family?

RM: Georgie, was born in Bridgeton, two years after he returned.

GA: '48.

RM: Yes, in '48. You were born in '48, and then, the boys. Everybody was born in a different hospital. Georgie was born in Bridgeton, and then we moved to Frenchtown for his job in Hunterdon County, and there was Billy. Then, Bob was in Flemington, Somerville really, and Jimmy was in Flemington. We had a decent, respectable two years in-between each one, except the last one was five - the baby. [laughter] He was a surprise package.

SH: At this point, were you still teaching, when they were really small, or did you kind of stop working?

RM: I stayed home.

SH: I was just going to say, with four little ones, I would imagine.

RM: Yes, but as I say, when the three were in school, grammar school and high school, and I still had Jim home, that's when I started practice teaching.

GA: Substitute teaching.

RM: Substituting, yes, substituting.

SH: At this time, you were living in Flemington.

RM: We were living in East Amwell Township when I started substituting, because they were going to school in East Amwell and I had them, sometimes, in class. That's how I remember that, and then I taught in high school. I substituted in high school when we moved to Flemington.

SH: At Hunterdon, had they regionalized yet?

RM: I taught in Flemington. It was the Flemington High School. No, it wasn't regionalized yet.

SH: It had not regionalized yet, okay.

RM: And I never taught in Georgie's high school, because, by that time, we had a business. We had a real estate business.

SH: When did you start that?

RM: We retired to that.

SH: Oh, you retired to that.

RM: I never in this world thought I would do that, but we had our own business and Hunterdon was such a gorgeous county. There were no slums. Of course, Bill was the president and I was the vice-president. We could do it whatever way we wanted to and we just had a good time, doing it for twenty years.

SH: Did you stay connected with NJC and Rutgers? Were you active alumni?

RM: … I wasn't active at the college, but as I said, we had this Douglass Club and most of the girls in Douglass were married to Rutgers boys. That was our social group. We had a wonderful time.

SH: Have you been back to Rutgers for the Rutgers and Douglass reunions?

RM: No, I haven't. I've had the Douglass Club reunions, the girls, but I haven't gone back.

SH: You have been a true delight. Thank you so much. I would hope that when you get your transcript back, that this has triggered more memories and you will add to this, rather than delete anything.

RM: [laughter] Well, that's nice to know, that it's not carved in stone.

SH: That is right. Thank you, again; this concludes the interview.

RM: Well, it's a pleasure to meet these girls, isn't it?

GA: Isn't it? It really is.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 8/18/08
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 8/20/08
Reviewed by Ruth Moncrief 11/7/08