Lester Marshall was born on 5 March 1921 in Washington, D.C. After graduating from high school in 1939 he completed an apprenticeship at the Navy Yard in Washington, where he worked as a skilled machinist throughout the war years. As a skilled worker, Lester received a deferment from active service in the military. He met his future wife, Jo Ann Marshall, of Cloquet, Minnesota, in 1942, while she was working a government job. Lester and Jo Ann were married in October 1943 in Cloquet.

In 1945, as the war was coming to a close, Lester and Jo Ann decided to leave Washington and return to her hometown of Cloquet, where they raised two children and remained. Lester worked 41 years as a machinist at Northwest Paper (later Potlatch Paper, then Sappi) in Cloquet, retiring in 1986. Lester passed away on 5 December 2005, aged 84.

Lester provides important details of military production work at a major naval facility; he also discusses some of the difficulties of civilian life during wartime in the nation’s capital, such as transportation and housing.
Interview key:
S = Thomas Saylor
M = Lester Marshall
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

S: This is the 23rd of May 2001, and this is an interview with Lester Marshall, in Cloquet, Minnesota. Lester, I want to thank you first of all for agreeing to talk with me.

M: Anybody willing to put up with me is willing to listen, I'll talk to them.

S: Let me start with, and I know a little bit about you [because we talked before this interview began]. We talked about your background, growing up in Washington D.C. Lester, do you remember where you were when you heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor [on 7 December 1941]?

M: I was sitting with my father in the living room of 5911 2nd Place NW, Washington, D.C., listening to the Washington Redskins whoop the daylights out of the Chicago Bears. The announcer came on and said, “Whoops, folks, we’ve got to break this up. This is just come through, it’s from the White House. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor today.” And about twenty minutes later, I don’t know what happened after that, because about twenty minutes later, the telephone rang. A fellow by the name of, oh boy, I can’t remember his name... (pauses three seconds) Well anyway, he was a foreman at the Navy Yard, where I worked. He called me up and he said, “You’re home. That’s good. Is your mother home? That’s fine. Have her pack enough lunch to keep you going for at least twenty-four hours. Throw some clean clothes in the sack that you can wear after that, when you get to the mill.” Those places are dirty.

I’m mixing up the paper mill [here in Cloquet] and the Navy Yard, so you’ll have to excuse me. I was working at the Washington, D.C. Navy Yard at that time. And [the foreman] said, “We’re going to be, I’m picking up three other fellows, and I don’t know when we’ll get home.” He said, “We won’t work you more than eighteen hours out of a twenty-four hour day. But you’ll get at least three hours breaks to sleep and you’ll have an hour to eat a couple times during that time. Take what you can to eat, and what you can’t, you’ll have to buy some. Where we’re going to go to work, after we get through the gate, at 8th and Pennsylvania Avenue SE, nobody knows. ‘Cause that Marine on that gate is going to have a loaded rifle, there’s going to be somebody up in a watch tower with a .50 caliber machine gun trained on that gate, so don’t try anything.” I can remember that so far.

He picked me up in about fifteen minutes. My mother literally, well, what she did was take a loaf of bread and slice it length-wise. Then she put butter and ham on one side, and on the other side she put peanut butter, and then she slapped them together. She said, “You can have peanut butter and ham together. Or you can have an open-face sandwiches.” She took threw some pickles in a jar, and some Jell-O. And I had some kind of fruit, it must have been apples, but I don’t really remember. December, that’s about all the fresh fruit
you can get. I know there was some oranges there. We got our oranges from Florida, and they came up by boat on the inland waterway.

(A, 65)

S: How did you react to that news [about Pearl Harbor]? It sounds like you're rushing around a bit. How did that make you feel?

M: I couldn't feel it.

S: Really?

M: I probably knew as well as most of the people working with me around there, how ill-prepared we were for war. (pauses three seconds) They had been quietly preparing for it for a couple of years. I think it was about a year before that [President Franklin] Roosevelt had persuaded the Congress to give fifty overage destroyers and light cruisers from World War I that had been in mothballs, to reactivate them and send them over to Great Britain. I can't give you the exact dates on it; at that time it wasn't too important to me (**). When I saw what we were working on—radar had just come in to its own in England about a year and a half before that. They weren't pushing it too much until the last five or six months, and then they were really jamming it at us as fast as they could get the prints off. I don't think they really knew what to expect from it on our side, or if they did, they didn't let it out to the working man.

I had on occasion that fall [1941] been taken down to... (interruption as Mr. Marshall speaks briefly with his wife in the next room) They were mounting radar mounts on different places, and trying to pick out images for this. It was something so totally new that we were in the advanced stages of the preparation, the making of it, while the fellows that were trying to determine how to best use it, were working in all the same area. That's just something that doesn't happen too often.

S: Now, this is at the Navy Yard, right, where they're doing this?

M: Actually, let's put the real name to it. Classified as the US Naval Gun Factory is what it was, but everyone called it the Navy Yards. It was on the [Potomac] river.

S: Now, for comparison, you worked there as well before the war started, didn't you?

M: Yes.

S: So how did your life on the job, or off, change after 7 December 1941? Start with your job.

M: Well, all of the sudden... I was about, I think, three months shy of finishing my second year of the apprenticeship. We had to put it in, I'm not certain about this anymore, I believe it was 1610 hours a year of actual work and working at, and we put in one eight hour day a week going to school, and studying drafting, mechanical drawing, and mathematics. They
taught us what they called “south trig,” which had a lot of short cuts. But having had logarithms, calculus, and trigonometry in high school because I liked it so well, that was easy. I managed to show one of the instructors a short cut he didn’t know, and he accused me of being a smart ass!

S: (laughs) Did you do it in front of the class, too?

M: No, not really, but he was pretty, well, he said, “If you want to use it, fine, go ahead.” And he kind of picked on me the rest of that day, and two days later, or two weeks later, whatever it was. We were tight—they cut our school times down from eight hours a week to four hours a week, because they needed more help out in the field, so to speak, and they were bringing in new apprentices all the time. But anyhow, I felt particularly happy one day when I walked into class, and he said, “Marshall, you stay up here, I want to talk to you. Well, I don’t want to talk to you, I want to talk about you.” Oh boy, [I thought,] now what have I done. As soon as the whole class got in there, he said, “I know that some of you are aware, maybe all of you are, that I have been pretty doggone rough on this kid for about a week. As a matter of fact, one of you came and told me that you thought I was out of line, and that it wasn’t part of our instruction. Right now, I am telling Lester Marshall, I openly apologize for my rudeness, my crudeness, and I hope that if he finds anymore good ideas, he isn’t afraid to come and tell me.” One guy piped up in the back, “You know Marshall, you know he isn’t afraid!”

(A, 154)

S: And that was all before December 7th, right?

M: Yes. But, I mean, it made me feel good.

S: Sure it did. Well, to have it said in front of the class, too.

M: I didn’t say it front of the class.

S: He did, though.

M: Yes, he did. But he was pretty obvious in the fact that he was picking on me.

S: How about your apprenticeship and your job? How did those change after Pearl Harbor?

M: Well, we got a raise in wages for one thing. I started at the Navy Yard early in ’39. I was working only two four-hour days a week, because they didn’t really have the demand for it. I had taken the civil service exam for the Navy Yard in 1938 I think, and it was pretty much multiple choice. They gave us the problems and they gave us the answers, but if you didn’t know how to do the math, or if you didn’t understand English, you’d have trouble with something like that (**). A lot of the questions were stupid—“How many three cent stamps do you put on a letter that requires two cents?” (pauses three seconds) Now what’s that got to do with the Navy Yard? Or, uh, “How many pears can you peel and put in with...
this bushel of apples without taking up any extra room?” (shakes his head in apparent disgust) Well, anyhow.

S: Well, were you working only part-time until Pearl Harbor?

M: I worked only part time up until... (pauses three seconds) I graduated from high school 1st of February 1939, but I had been working there four hours twice a week for about six months, because they wanted to get us... I guess they knew they were going to have to have more people, and they had to start training them soon as they could, but it took Congress so doggone long to get off their dead butts and do anything. (pauses three seconds) I think that was the reason for it.

Sometime, I had about a third of what I should have had, but I’d had concentrated training, concentration in the training. They used to have one apprentice instructor for every fifteen boys, or around there. In this special advanced program that they were putting us through, we had one apprentice instructor for three boys. So I mean he had time to say, “This is way we do this.” (*** He was experienced. (telephone rings several times) I’ve been wracking my brains since you called the other day. I can remember some things, and you’ll have to excuse my memory on some of it. (pauses until telephone is answered by wife Jo Ann, in all about ten seconds) I was working full-time at the (*** laundry. I got to work fours in the afternoon shift, from I think it was from one to five in the Yard, then I had to go back and put in my other four hours in the laundry in order to get my wages. And they weren’t making very good in the Navy Yard, and they weren’t paying any better in the laundry. But after I had worked at the laundry for thirty days, I got a nickel raise to twenty five cents an hour. And I didn’t make the mistake of going by the drinking fountain the wrong time [and getting docked from my pay]. I had a half gallon jug of water under my table every morning. I made sure my bladder was empty before I started working because I didn’t have to pay to go to the bathroom.

S: So you were working in this apprenticeship program before December 7th 1941. Now after December 7th, did you...

M: Everything speeded up.

S: So they speeded up your apprenticeship program to get you through faster?

(A, 220)

M: Well, they speeded it up to get us the training we needed faster, yes. I can only speak for myself—there were 172 total men in this job, and how many were apprentices I don’t know, but they said they had 35,000 employees working in the overall Yard.

S: How many, 35,000?

M: Yes, 35,000 either in or associated with it. Before the war, they worked an eight-hour day. But when it looked like we might be getting into the war, they doubled it to two shifts.
And as soon as Pearl Harbor banged up, then they went to seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

S: So they must have added lots of employees, then, after Pearl Harbor?

M: Yes, and they weren’t quite so fussy, but they, what they did was, they added a lot of machine operators and stuff like that. Because the apprentices were in there to learn the trade as such, and the operators... Like this apprenticeship works they used to have over here in [Cloquet]; they had 200 women there, and all they were doing was running the electric (**). All they had to do was follow lights that are drawn into the grid. They were machine operators.

S: So they weren’t skilled workers, they were, we might call them, unskilled workers, then right?

M: They were unskilled workers; by the time they had been there a month they were skilled on one machine, that’s it. One job, one operation.

S: Where as your apprenticeship taught you a number of different things, didn’t it?

M: I had to do a lot of things. I told you, I had to follow through on my apprenticeship when I came out of (**). Then I went from 72 cents an hour to $1.27 an hour. I couldn’t believe it.

S: Which was, what year was that, 1943?

M: (pauses three seconds) I think it was around October of ’43. I think I told my wife it was her wedding present. (laughs) We were married on the 9th of October [1943].

S: Now did your wages increase during the war years?

M: Ours didn’t. We were frozen. Roosevelt clamped down on all federal establishments, what they called the “little steel wage formula” [a policy of the Roosevelt administration]. I don’t know what little steel had to do with it. Outside, anybody working with the federal government, uh, contract could get as high as a 15 cent raise on certain jobs, but we didn’t come under that heading. Our wages stayed the same. As a machinist third class in ’43, they were the same as they had been in ’39. They hadn’t changed any.

S: How about by ’45? Were you earning more money then, or were you still frozen?

M: Yes, I was making quite a bit more money then. I was up to a whole $1.72 an hour.

S: Okay, and that was up from $1.27 that you mentioned just a bit ago, right?

M: Right. I had moved from machinist third class, to journeyman tool and die maker, and journeyman lens grinder and set-up man. Because I was so interested in certain phases of
it, that I put extra time in, on my own time that I didn’t get paid for, in order to get the instruction and follow through on it. And then in ’44, they did a lot of subcontracting, I’m sure you are aware of that. There was an outfit in Silver Spring [Maryland] that was only about maybe six blocks from where I lived, American (***). They had originally, before the war, made dental equipment, doctor’s scalpels and things like that. I got a chance to go in there, and I learned how to get that razor edge on fine steel, keep the burrs off the wire edges, how to grind up a type of emery reels, that are soft stones that you use on hard metal. This doesn’t make sense to you, but if you are actually grinding, are you going to *(poses several technical questions; words unclear, and unrelated to interview)*?

S: Beats the heck out of me.

M: Well, I forgot, you’re a college man, and that doesn’t make any sense, you are on the other end of the scale. *(laughs)* But you use a hundred grit wheel on the piece of steel. The tougher the steel the softer the wheel. Soft material, you use a hard wheel (**). *(Several sentences on complicated technical matters, unrelated to interview.)* Let’s leave it there.

S: Those kinds of skills, those things helped you moved from one job to another within the Navy Yard.

M: I had a fellow who worked with me—I worked the midnight shift after I got out of my (***) about the time I got married. And he worked the afternoon shift, and we seemed to stick together. He was a year ahead of me in training, but when he moved off the lathe onto the (***) machine. His name is Francis George, and of course he got a lot of crap about (**). But, two days later, Bingham [the foreman] came to me and he says, “You know what? I don’t how you guys managed it. Schultz says you’re coming in Monday at midnight, and you’re going in on the slide mill. You don’t mind?” I said, “Heck no.” He said, “Why do you want to run that thing?” I said, “I know two guys that are going to like it, and you’re going to like the work they put out.” He said, “Is that a promise?” I said, “Yep.” (***)

S: *(laughs)* You convinced him, though?

M: Well, he was an apprentice instructor and he was actually a good guy; he really knew his business. He was, he told us, let’s see if I can remember. He had a wife, they were married when they first got out of high school, he was 18 and she was 17. They had their first two children before they were 21, and they had three more before they were 25. By the time he was 40, I think he said he had three grandchildren. And I said, “How old are you now, Bing?” He says, “I’m fifty seven; I’m still open.” *(laughs)* I don’t know what he meant by that, but he was such a wonderful instructor. He didn’t say, “You do this, and this, and this, now go do it.” He had a chart he had made up and he pointed with his pointer. He said, “We’re going to *(motions with arm)*, here’s the way you’re going to do it.” And he pointed it out and diagramed it as he went along.

*(Explains in detail a technical procedure for finishing metal; not included here.)*

*(A, 371)*

Interview © 2001 by Thomas Saylor
S: Lester, you had a number of different instructors. When you began your apprenticeship, you were living at home with your folks, right? Now, how long did you live at home?

M: Until I was married.

S: That was in October ’43.

M: Yes.

S: Okay. The community, the neighborhood you lived in, how did life in your neighborhood change after the war started?

M: Well, for one thing, they had neighborhood defense units, they called them. Men and women that weren’t going to war, we went around and got everybody to black out their windows, or help them put up black out curtains that one of the government agencies came out with. And we didn’t want any light showing outside after it got dark. And there weren’t any street lights; they were (***), except for maybe or two per street or so. The street cars went, I think they said they couldn’t go over twelve miles an hour, because they were on a track, and they couldn’t use enough light ahead of them to see if there was something stuck in the track. I can’t remember, but I think speed limits within the District [of Columbia] were 22 miles an hour.

S: That’s lower than they had been before the war?

M: No, that was the same. But they only went down at night. I think it was 22 at night, and 25 or 28 during the day, I’m not sure.

S: But you remember blackouts.

M: We had blackouts, yes, and then they brought hard helmets around for us. Oh, we were important. We had nice, like those jungle helmets.

S: Like a pith helmet?

M: Yes, but they were metal, and they had a headband in there, and then it had the three red, white and blue (***), badge on the front. And behind it said “National Defense.” Well, I was important! (laughs)

S: And that was a volunteer position?

M: (nods head yes)

S: Were you asked to do that, or did you volunteer at a local agency?
M: I think (pauses three seconds) they sent a card or something to every household asking for a volunteer. My dad said to me, “You just volunteered,” or something to that effect.

S: Did you do that during the whole war?

M: Not all of the time; when I was working the midnight shift, no. I would have been available if it happened during the day and I was off, if something came up that I was needed. So far as meetings and things that were concerned, they had them at night, and I was working most night shift.

S: Did you have air raid drills in Washington?

M: Yes.

S: Did that start pretty much right away?

M: I don’t remember that they started right away. I think they were more concerned with dispersing various government offices. They had an underground railway that went from the capital to the Congressional Library and to the Supreme Court. (pauses three seconds) I’m not sure, but somebody said it went all the way to the White House, and maybe it did, but I’m not really sure. But there would have been room enough then to meet there, for all of Congress to get down there if they had to, to some room that they had underneath there to hold their sessions, if it became dangerous up above. They put it a new vault-like deal between the Treasury and the White House. The Treasury ran from 14th to 15th, and the White House was 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, so the Treasury was just a road between the two, two fences. I remember, I think they had a cast iron fence running around the White House. I’ve been gone from there for 55 years, and you forget some of that stuff.

S: In general, Lester, do you feel that the war brought the community together?

M: Yes, I think it did. We had a lot of animosity, too, I guess that’s the correct word. Where my folks lived, in one house, it was the first house on the block, he was name was Jimmy (***), he was a motorcycle patrolman. He was Italian. So he was a dago. And then there was Harry (**), and he was a postman, and he was from Wales, Welch. And next door to him was Green. I don’t know what he was, except he had a loud mouth. And he had a skinny wife, and he had two kids, and I went to school with one of them, Mary Jane. And all she was, was a tattle-tale. And then next door to him was Sherburne, and that was a two-family house. They call them duplexes now. And Sherburne worked for the IRS [Internal Revenue Service], I think. I don’t know if his wife worked or not. And next door to them was Jones, and they were renting, and he was a high mucky-muck in the Treasury, and she was a Mormon. They had one boy, and he and I were pretty good friends.

S: Do you feel this group of people...

M: They had been living together on that block for maybe twenty years. I don’t know them all. I don’t remember when they all moved in, but they all homes that were built after 1920.
They were thrown together like some of these shacks they threw together up here at UMD [University of Minnesota-Duluth] a few years ago. (reference unclear; no explanation provided)

Then there was Jacoby, and he worked at the Navy Yard. And he’s the one that got me interested in it. He was a good mechanic, he knew his business, and he told me I should try to get into the Navy Yard because I had the qualities that would be needed. And I had the patience to do it. I don’t know what it took, but if maybe instead of the Civil Service examination for the Navy Yard there might have been one for the Longshoremen or something, maybe I’d have taken that, because I was looking for a job! (laughs) So I really don’t know.

And then next to Jacoby was Lee Bell, and he was an Englishman. And, oh, he was a friendly guy. He was anybody’s helper or friend or helper if they needed help in the neighborhood. He got up every morning at 4:30 and went to deliver his mail, and he got home by 3:30 in the afternoon. He was just a general handy man, and he was everybody’s friend.

(A, 460)

S: Was there a sense, or a feeling of patriotism in your neighborhood?

M: Yes, I think so, but I think we had different ways of showing it. (pauses three seconds) There were a couple of people there that came over after World War I. They were Germans. Whether they were citizens or not, I don’t know. But, when things were needed, they were there to help out. I never heard that anybody was ever taken and confined, or under suspicion or anything. The German ambassador to the United States lived like a block and a half away from where we were. He and his wife had gone back to Germany in 1939, but his daughter, they left her because she was enrolled to go to college. Of course when the war broke out, her parents were over there [in Germany]. The Axis [Powers, Italy and Germany] declared war on the United States after we declared war on Japan. Of course they were outside her door right away first thing in the morning. She said that she didn’t know anything about the war, or what that was all about. Yes, she was German, she was the ambassador’s daughter. Now they have one whole street dedicated to the ambassadors, Wisconsin Avenue, but that’s where he lived anyway. Her name was Barbara Krichting (sp?). Heck of a nice girl. She was always a joy in my class.

S: Was she interned, then?

M: Yes and no. They took her away for about six months, and then she came back and I saw her. I said, “Hey, good to see you back! How long you going to be here?” She said, “I hope I’m going to be here permanent, but I don’t know. I put your name down as a reference.” I said, “Good. Put my mom and dad’s down, too, because they’ll give you a good reference.” She said, “I don’t know your mom and dad that well.” So I said, “Come on. Let’s go meet them then.”

I took her to the house, and told my mother, my mother knew who she was. I said, “This is Barbara Krichting. Her mother and her father was the ambassador of Germany to the United States. And she had the good fortune to be in this country when the war broke
out.” My dad says, “Good fortune, and her parents are over there.” I said, “Well, she’s happy to be here and she’s happy to be back.” And my mother said, and we had rationing by that time [December 1941], and things were pretty tight. She said, “Are you going to live in that place by yourself?” She [Barbara] said that she thought she’d have to; she have to get some renters, though. My mom said to her, “Our daughter, Enola, got married just a couple months, three months, before Pearl Harbor. If you would like to move into her room, and take your meals with us, I’ll register you tomorrow for ration books. If you decide then you want to stay on your own, you can do it, or if you want to stay in the room, you can do it. If you’re there, you’re going to have to help me around the house, because I’ve got to have some help.” As far as I know, it worked out that way for about a year and a half, and then she disappeared and I don’t know what happened to her. I was working at other places, so I didn’t really know she was gone.

S: But she was there for a while?

M: She stayed with my folks for just about a year.

S: That is a very interesting story. Lester, you mentioned rationing there. Do you remember when rationing started?

M: I think it started about... Some things were clamped on right away. Gasoline was very tight because it came mainly up the Atlantic Coast by ship. These tankers, like they use now—not near as big as they have now—they used to bring it up from Texas and Louisiana, up the coast. And they had places like pumper stations. Well, after we got into the war with Germany, they couldn’t do it anymore because they were sinking the tankers as fast as they got away from shore. Well, they had to carry all that oil, what oil we got, fuel oil and gasoline, came up by train. And most of the tankers, they told me at that time, one tanker could carry as much fuel oil, or gasoline, in their hoppers as three freight trains could carry. So it was only emergency vehicles that had more than a limited supply: fire engines, ambulances. But we did have a good system of streetcars and buses.

S: Did your folks or you have a car during the war years?

M: My dad had a car; I didn’t have one.

S: Did he have rationing coupons, then, for gas?

M: Yes, he didn’t have to have it because of public transportation for him to go to work. He got a gallon and half a week ration card on an A sticker.

S: A gallon and a half a week?

M: Yes, a gallon and a half a week. And I’m sure that old Buick must have gotten all of ten miles to the gallon.

S: So he wasn’t driving very much, was he?
M: No, he wasn’t driving very much. But he did get a tank full of gas, and he saved it so that they could go to the market on Saturday morning, something they had done for years. Farmers market, they came from all over. They had open stalls, and we could get meat, vegetables, and fruits and stuff like that. My folks both grew up on farms. My mother actually did; I don’t think my dad grew up on a farm, but he was in farming country.

(pauses three seconds)

You had to have ration coupons for sugar, coffee. I think you were allowed, oh,... at one time anyway; things changed on you. You had red stamps and green stamps. Green stamps were for non-perishable items such as canned goods and things. Of course you weren’t going to get a canned ham; that was out. Our meats, the red coupons, or red stamps, had... (pauses three seconds) Butter was rationed, all kinds of fresh and smoked meats were rationed. Eggs you could get if they had them; there wasn’t any rationing on that. Milk wasn’t rationed, fresh milk. Wheat was rationed. My mother never bought more than a twelve pound sack of flour. When I come to Minnesota, my mother-in-law was buying flour 50 pounds at a time. Her sister down there that had eight kids, she was buying 150 pounds of flour every other day. She baked bread on Saturday, and she’d bake twelve to sixteen loaves of bread. Then she’d put it in the window sill to freeze at night so that they’d have it all during the week.

S: Do you remember, did your mom do most of the cooking when you were living at home?

M: Oh yes. My father could. He sold (***) cooking utensils and he always had to give demonstrations sometimes. I don’t remember how long he worked for them. He had worked for the federal government, and then he quit for some reason or other. Then he (***) cooking utensils, he sold (***) products, he sold Fuller brushes. But he was back working for Uncle Sam [the US government] at that time.

S: Do you remember your mom changing how she, what she cooked and how she cooked during the war years?

(A, 546)

M: Yes, she would try to buy a roast on Saturday. They took the least stamps, and she would get the most out of it during the week. (pauses three seconds) Chickens weren’t rationed, I don’t think. And she knew several people that had chickens in the county, so she could get chickens. I don’t think they were, but I’m not really sure. Eggs weren’t rationed, I don’t think.

S: Did this rationing system work, or was there a black market where people could get what they wanted if they just knew the right person?

M: I heard that there was a black market, and they were always talking about it. You’d get stories in the paper where there’d be: “Such-and-such a place was raided; they found this and that and the other thing.” But I never knew anyone that was directly involved. My father-in-law was on the draft board here in town [in Cloquet] after I got acquainted with
him. After we were married, he let us use his car for a free honeymoon up on the North Shore [of Lake Superior]. We were married on a Saturday night [in Cloquet], and the following Tuesday we had to get ready to go back to Washington. So we didn’t have a lot of time. But he gave me a book of meat coupons, which was, uh, he said, “Use discretion when you use them.” They could get tires without ration, but there had to be a darn good reason for needing them. There were a lot of people out of the country who couldn’t get to work otherwise; they had to have tires, they had to have gasoline. (***)

S: What were those B coupons for, the ones you just mentioned?

M: Yes, they were more or less used for farm vehicles and stuff. For tractors, or to plow, things like that. And then there were C coupons, pretty much commercial. Well, B’s and C’s were both for people that have to have them to get to work, things like that.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

S: This is side B of the interview with Lester Marshall.

M: B and C coupons… B coupons, I believe, were green; C were red. They were all, all the coupons with letters on them were white with a black background for the joy riders, gallon and a half a week. It was for personal use. Charging companies that had to have the bigger ones, I don’t know what kind of stamps they had on them.

I rode to work, when I worked with one fellow, and we were going to Dahlberg [probably referring to Dahlgren], Virginia, which was around there right from home, which is about sixty miles, and he had a C coupon on his car. He said, “I got it licked, because this old Ford will run on anything. When the oil starts getting too heavy in the winter (reference unclear), I just pour in some kerosene. When the gasoline gets scarce, I just pour in some kerosene.” I said, “You got the original Stanley Steamer?” “Oh, no,” he says, “they run on hot water!” (laughs)

S: So his Ford would run on anything?

M: Oh, man, (***) but we got there! He had one of the first V-8’s, about 1932 I think it was, and it was a coupe. And I said, “How many miles you got on this thing?” “Gosh, I don’t know,” he says, “when the [odometer] quit running, I quit counting.” They went to 100,000 in those days, and he ran it through twice, so it had been 200,000 miles. And I said, “Your tires are kind of smooth, aren’t they? They have a hard ride.” He said, “You’d be hard riding, too, if they filled you up with sand.” (laughs)

S: Tires were hard to get, right? He didn’t have a ration coupon for tires?

M: I think he had a good car that his wife used for going to church, something like that. And I think he kept the coupons as much for that as he could. I don’t think he was cheating, in that sense of the word. But when her tank was empty, he filled it up.
S: When you got married in October of ‘43, did you go looking then for an apartment for you and Jo Ann in Washington?

M: No, I was, we were looking before, and we needed a furnished apartment. Jo Ann came home, she quit her job, I think it was the 15th of September she came back here. She had earned two or three weeks vacation time, so she got paid for that. I hadn’t been allowed to take any vacation time. We earned 26 days a year annual leave, as they called it, and 15 days a year sick leave, and then we were supposed to have so many holidays, I don’t remember what they were anymore. I know we didn’t get them. (laughs)

S: They gave you all those days on paper, but you didn’t get a chance to take them.

M: I got paid for my holidays that I didn’t get. I got paid time and a half. But the vacation time... When the war was over in ‘45, I think I had 120 days of annual leave earned. Prior to the war, you couldn’t let it accumulate more than 45 days. And I think I had 90 days of sick leave, and 126 days of annual leave, I think.

S: You weren’t taking days off at all, then, were you?

M: They weren’t letting us. And, see, I lived right in the District [of Columbia], so that I could take public transportation to work. Some of the fellows that I worked with, that lived way out, came in that way, then I would ride in with them. And that was by streetcar, by public transportation. But they’re going to get down to Pennsylvania Avenue, and that’s over here (motions left with hand) and you’ve got to get over here (motions right with hand). Well, when it gets there, you walk.

S: So when you went looking for an apartment, was it hard to find one?

M: My mother found an apartment about a mile and a quarter from where my folks lived. It was furnished, it was $45 a month. It had three apartments on the second floor of an older home. There was an old couple that lived there. They had one apartment that was furnished, and then two private rooms that they rented out, and we all shared the same bathroom. We lived in that from October [1943] until February [1944].

And I happened to be reading the paper that night, and I picked it up and it said, “For Rent—furnished apartment. 109 Maple Avenue, Takoma Park, Maryland.” I said to Jo Ann, “Grab your hat, we’re going someplace.” She said, “Where we going? I got something on the stove.” “Well, take it off. We’re going over here.” This is the evening paper. I didn’t know what the house was like, but I knew where it was. It was only a block and a half from where my folks went to church. We got over there and I knocked on the door, and an old lady comes to the door and says, “What do you want!?” I said, “Well, I have a paper here that says there is an apartment for rent at this address.” “Well, why didn’t you say so.” She turned around and real nicely said, “You want to follow me?” And I said, “Yes ma’am,” and we followed her back.

We went in the center hall. There was a stairway going up the center hall. I could see when we came up it that there were three floors in the house. The center hall, her apartment was on this side (motions left), there was another apartment on the other side. I
assumed there were two upstairs. We went straight to the back of the house, and she got to a door and opened it. We went in. The furniture wasn’t dilapidated, but it wasn’t anything new. Looked like a reasonable good bed; it was kind of short. But then I’d been sleeping on the floor for years, because my folks couldn’t afford a long bed! (Mr. Marshall is almost 6’4” tall) I tried the bed and it seemed to have a good mattress. I went over and tried the faucet. It had a big, big bathroom about the size of that room over there by the porch, and that’s 9 ½ [feet] by 15 [feet]. This bathroom was probably 8 [feet] by 12 [feet] or something like that, I don’t really remember. It had this little bathtub. Jo Ann said, “That will never do.” I said, “What’s the matter, don’t you think you can get in there?” She said, “I can, but where are you going to go?” I said, “I’ll sit on the toilet and put my feet in the bathtub. Or I could sit in the bathtub and put my feet on the toilet.” (laughs) That went over real big.

The center hall, I think, was about 6 ½ feet wide, maybe seven, and she had like a day bed. It didn’t look like a davenport; it didn’t have a back on it. It had two end rails on it, but it had nice, soft cushions on it. I figured they could be used in an emergency. She turned on the light, and it was the most awful looking you ever saw. I said, “You can stand a coat a paint here.” She said, “Sure I can, if I can find somebody to do it.” I put that in the back of my mind. Her room was, I think, pretty close to… It wasn’t as wide as this one, maybe 12 feet wide. It had been a back porch, converted into a sleeping porch at some time in the past. Across one corner, one end of it, were two French doors that opened up into the room. And I swear, I don’t think the place was any wider than maybe 4 ½ feet. Along the far wall was a stove, with an oven above it, and a draining board for the sink. Cupboards underneath the stove. Icebox over here (motioning with hands as he describes apartment), electric refrigerator, underneath the draining board. Cabinets up above. She said, “This is a French style kitchen.” She explained it to Jo Ann. I said, “Jo Ann, you can’t get along in there, can you?” (pauses three seconds) We’d already looked at the bedroom and the bathroom, and there was a big closet by the bathroom. She said, “That isn’t bad.” I said, “Well, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll make two suggestions here. If you can get by in the kitchen, I’ll get by in the bathroom. If nothing else, I can get a galvanized [steel] tub, set it on the floor, take a bath in it. People did it for years.” Mrs. Coats [the property owner] says, “I used to do that when I was a girl!” (laughs)

S: So you took this place? That was a deal you could both live with?

(B, 172)

M: Well, and I had one other thing. I said to Mrs. Coats, “If you get the paint, I’ll paint the living room. This is one of the most hideous places I’ve seen in a long time.” She said, “You got a deal. You go buy the paint, bring me the receipt, and I’ll deduct it from your first month’s rent. Or second, or what.” And it was $55 a month. She went to the back, and there was a door there. I went to open up the door, and she said, “Don’t go out there, or you’ll fall off into the ground. As soon as the weather gets nice,” now this is February [1944], “I’ve got a man that’s going to come and build a porch there, and he’s going to put a roof over it. It’ll be a nice porch, and I got a swing down in the basement that can go on there.” We had a private entrance, and everybody else had to go through the house. You couldn’t see much of the outdoors without going back there.
So I said to Jo Ann, “You want it?” She said, “I like it. I like the bathroom.” I said, “I like the kitchen.” I reached into my pocket and said [to Mrs. Coats], “How much of a deposit do you want? Do you want it now? When can we move in?” She said, “It’ll be two weeks before you can move in.” I said, “Well, that will give us time to give them notice [at our other place]. They are entitled to a two weeks notice over there.” We hadn’t lived there too long at that time, just from October [1943] to February [1944]. She says, “I’ll get a lady to come in, and I’ll have her clean everything up good. You and I are going to get along pretty good, young fellow.”

I said, “Where do we put our garbage?” She said, “We got a garbage burner out here.” She went out in the hall, opened the door, and stink! (***). She says, “Everybody dumps their stuff down there, and we burn it once a week.” I said, “There’s something down there that hasn’t been burned in twenty years!” (laughs) She said, “I don’t know what to do with it.” I said, “The first time I get a day off, or some time on my own, I’ll get in there and clean it out so it is good for something.” She said, “We’ll make a deal on that.” I said okay. And then, as we started down the floor, I saw something on the floor, and I gave it a kick, and it went splat. It was a tomato, and rotten. “That’s something else that this place needs. We need a janitor.” I said, “What?” She said, “We need somebody to keep the floors swept and clean. We don’t get any snow in the wintertime, but it gets kind of hot in the summertime.”

Finally I said, “You told me the rent was $55 a month. You told me that if I buy the paint and put it on, you’d pay for the paint. I’ll make a deal with you.” She said, “You’re all about dealing—you sure you don’t have a little Jew in you?” I said, “No, but I work for Jews. (pauses three seconds) I will pay you $40 a month for the rent for this apartment. I’ll do everything I told you I would do. I’ll clean out the chimney out as soon as I can so we can use it. We’ll burn it once a week, but [other renters] can’t put garbage in there because it won’t burn, you can’t get it hot enough.” She said, “I’ve got a garbage man, but all he picks up is trash.” I said, “That’s where they’re at; they’re all buying. They put the garbage out for the garbage man, and burn the trash. I’ll get some barrels or something to put up there for them to put their newspapers in for a week or two. After I get here I’ll get it cleaned out.” She said, “I’ve got to figure things out, I am getting less and less money all the time [from you].” I said, “I think you’re getting a pretty good deal. I wash the windows in my apartment. I keep the leaves raked up, I clean the floors, I’m going to paint the room for you. I think you’re getting a pretty good deal.” She said, “Can I think on it?” I said, “As long as you don’t take too long. If I walk out that front door before you decide, I’m going to look somewhere else for an apartment.” She said, “Why don’t you put $10 down on it and pay the rest later.”

(B, 236)

S: That’s a good story.

M: It’s the truth. I didn’t elaborate on it.

S: One thing struck me—when you first read about the apartment in the newspaper, you hustled right over there to look at it. Why didn’t you wait till the next day, or the day after?
M: Because there were so many people looking for apartments to rent, particularly furnished, because so many people came in from all over the country, like Jo Ann [who moved from Cloquet to Washington, D.C. in 1942]. She had an aunt that lived there, and that’s how I met her, through her aunt. Her aunt and my dad worked together, and we lived in the same block where her aunt lived. But there were so many people coming in [to Washington] all the time, and they were looking for rooms. [Mrs. Coats] didn’t have a telephone number, and this was the last edition of the [daily] paper. I didn’t know if [the apartment] had been in the earlier editions or not, but it was only about a fifteen minute walk from where we were. Jo Ann said, “If you’re going to run, I’m going back.” I wasn’t running, I was just walking fast.

I know fellows that I worked with that had wives and children back here in Frederick, Maryland, or over here, in Roanoke, Virginia, and they couldn’t bring them in [to Washington] because they couldn’t find a place to live. They were mechanics, they did different work, but it was the same place [that I worked]. And I just wasn’t going to take any chances. I was going to go. I can’t remember, but I think it was on a Saturday night. I’m not sure.

S: That was something that had changed since before the war? It would have been much easier to find an apartment if you had been married in 1939, for example?

M: I don’t know. (pauses three seconds) In ’39, it was still the tail end of the Depression. They tell me that the Depression started to lift around here, in this part of the country, along in the 40s because there was more of a demand for their farm products that they were shipping overseas. See, Hitler had marched into Poland and all those small countries, and these ones used to be the bread basket for Europe, but they weren’t producing anymore. We were shipping lots of foodstuffs to England, Canada. (pauses three seconds) I really don’t know.

S: Let’s talk about your church. Were you and your folks a member of a congregation when you were growing up?

M: That’s kind of funny. I’ll answer that the best way I know. My mother was a… (pauses three seconds) We went to a Presbyterian Church. It was about a block and a half from where my wife and I were going to live. My folks had lived out in Takoma Park, D.C., which was only a block from the D.C.—Maryland line, which by the way, the D.C.—Maryland line ran through that house we were going to live in.

S: So it was right on the border, literally.

M: Yes. On it. It went through the corner. So I mean, I knew the area, because I had gone there for Sunday School. I had gone by there to go to elementary school. This is kind of haphazard, but Jo Ann and I were renting right across the street from the Takoma Park Elementary School that I went to. So I mean, it was in that close area. I was also within three blocks of Walter Reed Hospital.
S: How did your church, your place of worship help with the war effort? Did they sponsor volunteer programs, things like that?

M: Yes they did. But my wife was a Lutheran, and she went got a (****) with a couple of girls and her aunt when she first came down here, and she went to a Lutheran church. My mother was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Takoma Park. I could never this figure out. I didn't know until after I had been married that I hadn’t been baptized. I had two sisters and a brother. The brother and the other sister were twins, and I knew when they were baptized. I didn’t know when the oldest was baptized, she was a year and a half younger than I was. I still don’t know if she has been baptized or not. I’m sure she has been, but whether she had been or not I don’t know. So my mother was active in the church. She taught Sunday School, she belonged to a mother's club that was a part of a sewing club, she went to church on Sunday. All of us kids went to Sunday school. My mother didn’t often go with us because church wasn’t always the same time as Sunday school. But my dad was pretty severe, “You’re going to Sunday school! No fooling around!” But he didn’t go to church.

S: Were there any special activities at the church, do you remember, during the war?

M: I’m sure there were, but I don’t really remember. There were at a lot of churches. Jo Ann went to a Lutheran church on 16th Street, close to a park. She and her aunt went there to church, and they rolled bandages. They went out Sundays and did things.

S: You weren’t working on Sundays, were you?

M: I worked seven days a week.

S: Seven days a week?

M: I came home from work on the (pauses three seconds), it would have been the 14th of November of 1942. I was working midnight. I said to my mother, “I’m going to take a bath and change my clothes, and I’m going to go downtown.” She said, “You’ve got to sleep.” I said, “I’m not working tonight. I’m taking Saturday and Sunday off.” Our Saturdays started at midnight, and Sundays at midnight. I had to be at work midnight Monday, Sunday night at midnight. I told my mother, “I’m going to go downtown, and I’m going to see so-and-so, and some other people I want to see. I haven’t had a day off since Pearl Harbor. I’ve been working 74 hours a week. It’s time for me to take a day off.” She said, “What are you going to do after you get up and get through with church?” I said, “I’ll probably sleep a little bit and listen to a football game or a baseball game. What difference does it make as long as I don’t have to do it.” “Oh. Well, I’m going to church with you tomorrow morning.” I said, “I haven’t been to church since Thanksgiving.”

S: So getting a day off of work was something special then!

(B, 336)
M: They wouldn’t make us work Saturdays and Sundays. They wanted us to work Saturdays and Sundays. But you better have a damned good reason to take a day off otherwise.

S: How about after ’42, between ’42 and ’45? Were days off pretty common, or not?

M: No, they weren’t common; you had to have special permission. You could get a vacation, get leave, made up from... Saturdays and Sundays were time and a half days. But it wasn’t a day that counted toward your leave or anything like that.

S: So you were encouraged to work Saturday and Sunday?

M: We were encouraged to work Saturday and Sunday, and sometimes we had a job that had to go. And they come around and said, “Marshall, we have to have this job tonight, or we have to have this machine manned tomorrow night.” And I said, “I’m here.” And that’s the way it would go. They had a pretty good crew for the night shift; I think it generally ran around 100 men in there on the afternoon shift and midnight shift.

S: You mentioned earlier there were 35,000 people employed there in the whole Yard complex.

M: Well, that was counting the subsidiaries outside, too.

S: That’s still an awful lot of people. I had no idea it was that big.

M: Well, I thought it was a lot, too. But when I stop to think of the, all the different buildings that... maybe I’m all wet, maybe it was 3500 people. It’s been a while, I forget.

S: Let me see what this does for you. (displays copy of newspaper front page for Mr. Marshall to view) This is from the Cloquet Pine Knot [the local weekly newspaper], which I was reading the other day at the Minnesota History Center [in St. Paul]. Here’s the headline from the day President Roosevelt died [in April 1945]. I was wondering what kind of memories the death of President Roosevelt brings back for you?

M: Very bad ones. We all felt bad. (pauses three seconds) People just stood on the corner and cried.

S: Was that a workday for you? Did you get that news at work, or were you at home?

(B, 362)

M: I was at work, she [wife Jo Ann] was home. She went down to (**). (begins to read front page of Cloquet Pine Knot, commenting on names of local merchants and residents; unclear) That was a long time ago.

S: But back to the day President Roosevelt died. Do you feel that impacted you personally?
M: Yep.

S: In what way?

M: I guess, well, he was the man that held the country together. Did you ever hear his first speeches after he was elected to office? He called them fireside chats.

S: I remember the fireside chat concept, yes. I've heard bits and pieces on tapes.

M: "We only have to fear fear itself. We have a supreme person, or being, spiritual advisor, whether he’s up here or over there, around here. I don’t believe that he’s everywhere that he needs to be. If we do what’s right, he will see us through." [references to Roosevelt’s inaugural speech in 1933] I can remember that much.

But I was at work. Then it went through the Yard that Roosevelt had succumbed to a cerebral hemorrhage. (pauses three seconds) I don’t know where Jo Ann was. When I got my mother’s—I stopped off there on the way home from work—she was crying. Little kids were crying on the corners, but they were only crying because their mothers were; they didn’t know why. I rode the streetcar and bus most of the time; there were an awful lot of wet handkerchiefs on that bus ride going home. (pauses three seconds) I just felt that, I think most people did, there was no question about him running for a third term, or a fourth term. Whether Wendall Wilkie ran against him, or [Thomas] Dewey. But there really wasn’t any confusion in their nomination in the [Democratic] party. That’s the impression I got, that he would be the man. (****). He had John Garner for the first two terms, then [Henry] Wallace for the third term, and then [Harry] Truman [for the fourth term]. They tried to get somebody that could out and stump the country [in 1944], and Truman did it.

(pause in recording)

S: Let me see if this brings back any memories for you. (displays St Paul Dispatch front page) That’s the newspaper headlines from V-J Day [in August 1945]. What’s your memory of V-J Day in Washington?

M: I think it was more serious than it was on V-E Day [in May 1945]. I think that was the one that hit most people the hardest. (pauses three seconds) I was working when V-E Day was announced, so I didn’t get to see too much of the goings on. We knew we still had a war to fight in the Pacific, but we were concentrating on other things at that time. (relates story of how gravity-style gasoline pump worked; unrelated to question)

S: Let me ask you, in a larger sense, Lester, how did the war change your life?

M: Well, I had said to my mother and dad when I got out of high school, the first chance I got I was going to get out of the District [of Columbia], because I had (*** and it was terrible country to work in. But I wasn’t making enough money to move, I didn’t know any place to go to move. Then when the war came on, that was a pretty rigid set of rules for us.
You either worked or you didn't work, and if you didn't work they could lock you up. If you were drafted and didn't want to go to the Army, or weren't capable of it, then they put you to work doing something. You worked regardless. They put orange suits on the guys in the District. There were a lot of fellows, they really weren't draft dodgers, they just physically weren’t able to do either one. But they put them in those patrols anyway.

How did it change my life? Because of the war, Jo Ann went to Washington. Because she followed the war, I met her. Because of the war, I have a bride of 58 years. Does that answer your question?

S: That’s a pretty darn good answer.

M: I feel that God sent her my way, our way, and one way or the other we would have met. It was a blind date set up by her aunt, a lady her aunt lived with, my dad and mother. I didn’t know anything about it and Jo Ann didn’t either. (pauses three seconds) My dad came home from work that day, and he said, “You still up?” I said, “Yep. I’m taking the day off. I’m not working tonight.” He said, “Well, good.” He had just come from work; they worked a half day on Saturday. He said, “I was down to Washington, and I got this and this and this, shampoo and soap and something else. You can take it down there [to where Jo Ann was living with a relative].”

I was thrilled to do it, because I liked the people down there real well. And Leila had a brother who lived down in Virginia, he was a farmer, and quite often he’d bring in a side of pork. They had a big refrigerator in the basement, so he could easy keep all the meat and stuff in there. (**). Anyway, I went down there, and Leila said, “How would you like a good ham sandwich?” And I said, “I was hoping you’d offer.” They had bread there that was always brought in from the farm. They made these big round loaves. And he would cut them in half, the long way. She cut two slices of that rye bread, it was about that thick (holds fingers about two inches apart), and then she cut three thick slices of ham. Good country butter, too; we were eating margarine at our house. Country butter right off the farm, and she really lathered it on there. Oh, that was so good. And a glass of fresh milk from the country. Boy that was just great.

(shareseveral lengthy stories of relatives, unrelated to interview question)

S: Lester, when you think now about the war, what do you think about?

M: I think it’s something that never really should have happened. I think the Allies should have marched into Berlin in 1918. They wanted to go, but the so-called big shots, the presidents of the various countries, didn’t think it was necessary. The German people at that time didn’t know what war was like. If it had been fought on the Western Front, and on the Eastern Front, but there wasn’t any severe damage to Berlin. I think that’s one thing.

I think another was that the important part the United States played in [World War II] was downplayed by so many different leaders. The French didn’t know what kind of help they got, the English didn’t know. The English only talked about how the Yankee soldier went over there and married the English girls, and played soldier, and didn’t do nothing but eat up all the food that was rationed and this, that, and the other thing. But they all did a lot of good.
There were some kids, young folks, who come to church one night, there were some there from Australia, two from New Zealand, some from Canada, they were sponsored by the Presbyterian hierarchy, or whatever you want to call it. And all they could do was knock the Yanks because the Yanks claimed so much. Well, I happen to know what the Yanks did. I happen to know that the Yanks were the ones that put Hitler out of the war. We lost 72,000 people, men in [World War I], and we were only in it a year and a half [during 1917-18]. We lost 58,000 young men in Vietnam that never should have happened. We lost 48,000 in Korea that never should have happened. Truman put the troops into Korea [in 1950] because he wanted to forestall another World War II. I think, I’m pretty sure now that the Japanese people are never going to get involved in another holocaust like that. I’m pretty sure the German people are going to remember what happened to Berlin for a long time.

S: Well, they do, believe me. (interviewer Thomas Saylor lived in Germany from 1988-95)

M: I don’t think it’s anything that’s glorious about war that people should keep talking about it. But it was our young men that turned the tide of war, and the people at home kept the produce going so they could fight a war. Yes, I’m sure there were a lot of Rockefellers and others that were out to make the dollar, capitalists as much as anything, but they aren’t all bad. There’s a lot of good ones. Henry Ford has been portrayed as a (**), a bastard. But Henry Ford furnished one army (**), and he gets paid to have it shipped over seas. Andrew Mellon was a no-good SOB, but Andrew Mellon came through with $40 million to help out the US Treasury when they were having trouble selling some of their government bonds. But he didn’t hesitate to dig down and put it out. I just don’t think that the credit is given where it should be given. This is my thought. (apparent confusion of World War I and World War II)

I didn’t go overseas and hold a rifle or fire a gun, but I went swimming in the Chesapeake Bay on the 14th of December 1942 because someone on board the cruiser I was working on didn’t clear the ice off the gun director platform where I was working. And this was 68 feet above the deck of this cruiser. The first man up was supposed to go up the ladder and up to the crow’s nest and the gun director, which was 16 feet in diameter, and chip all the ice off and spread some sand and salt. The second and third man up was supposed to carry the tools, and that was me. I climbed that thing as the second man up, and because he didn’t chip all the ice off I lost my footing and fell 68 feet down into the water of the Chesapeake Bay. I missed hitting the side of the ship by about one foot. They fished me out, I dried my clothes, and then had to go back to work because we had no extra men.

T: Lester, that’s my final question, so I’ll thank you for your time and turn the recorder off.

END OF INTERVIEW