

Interviewee: Maybelle Broberg

Interviewer: Dan Borkenhagen

Date of interview: 13 July 2002

Location: the Broberg home in Kerkhoven, MN

Transcribed by: Dan Borkenhagen, August 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, January 2003

Maybelle Ortenblatt Broberg was born on 28 May 1925 on a farm near Murdock, Swift County, Minnesota. She attended country school (K-8) in Murdock, and then high school in nearby Willmar, graduating in 1942. During the war years 1941-45, Maybelle lived at home on the farm. After high school she worked for about nine months at the Cargill Elevator in the neighboring town of Kerkhoven, and then for more than a year and a half as a bookkeeper at the State Bank of Kerkhoven.

Maybelle has recollections of civilian life during the war years: shortages, rationing, social life, and small town life in general.

After the war Maybelle got married (1946, husband Edmond Broberg), and the couple moved to a Swift County farm of their own. Maybelle and Edmond raised a family of six children, and Maybelle worked as a full-time homemaker. The Brobergs lived and worked on the farm until 1983, when they moved to Kerkhoven. At the time of this interview (July 2002) Edmond and Maybelle lived in the Swift County town of Kerkhoven.

Interview key:

M = Maybelle Broberg

E = Edmond Broberg (Maybelle's husband)

D = Dan Borkenhagen

[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.

D: Hello, my name is Dan Borkenhagen and I'm sitting down here for an interview on July 13, 2002, and I'm getting a chance to interview my wife Jessica Twedt's grandmother, Maybelle Broberg. Thank you for the opportunity to sit down with you.

M: Thank you, I'm glad to do it.

D: I'm just going to start off with some basic biography stuff. Just so that we can get a few things out of the way, so that people have a general idea who you are, where you've been and things like that, if that's all right.

M: Sure.

D: Okay, so just to start, if you can tell me when you were born and where that was?

M: Yeah, but then you'll know how old I am.

(laughter all)

M: I was born on May 25, 1925,—May 28, I'm sorry—in Murdock, Minnesota. What else was it you asked?

D: That was the first question. Who were your parents?

M: My parents were Eric and Ella Ortenblatt.

D: Did you spend your entire childhood in that area?

M: Yes. In fact, I didn't move very far. I was nine miles south of Murdock in Willmar. And now I'm two miles east of Kerkhoven.

D: So Murdock is right around this area?

M: Just four miles west. And I was raised nine miles south of Murdock.

D: And you went to school down in Murdock?

M: I went to country school. We were thirty-eight kids in one little building. All

eight grades. I was alone in first grade, so the teacher let me go as fast as I could, so I skipped second grade. I did first and second grade, two of them, in one year. And I went to Willmar High School my ninth grade, because we did not have bus service in Murdock. Then when I was a sophomore they decided to have bus service in Murdock, so then I went to Murdock for my next three years. I graduated in '42.

D: Okay, so the war had already begun at that time. I'm going to skip past the direct war years right now just so I can fill out the biography, then we'll come back to that.

M: Sure.

D: So after you graduated high school you were...?

M: I worked at the Cargill Elevator in Kerkhoven for about a year. Then I worked at the State Bank of Kerkhoven for about 19 months. Then I got married.

D: When were you married?

M: In 1946, on January 4, 1946.

D: And became a housewife and raised your children.

M: Yeah.

D: How many children did you have?

M: We had six. Three boys and three girls. Now we have twenty-four grandkids and eighteen great grandkids. So by Christmas we'll be seventy people in our family.

D: That's a good number, huh?

M: I can't believe it.

D: And so today we sit in your house in Kerkhoven. Recently moved just a little bit in Kerkhoven, as I understand.

M: Yeah. But it's nineteen years ago since we moved from the farm. And two years ago, this house was up for auction and the sale was going on and finally they came to the house sale. A lady was bidding on it and I had no thoughts of buying it. I went out there and I thought, "This would be perfect for dad [husband Edmond] and I as we're getting older," so I bought the house without him even being there (*laughter*).

D: So now we get to sit down in this house. And you keep yourself busy with your family, and do you have any other hobbies?

M: Oh yeah, I weave rugs, and I crochet, and what else... Make Christmas tree ornaments.

D: All right then, I'm going to jump back to the war years and we'll go through that topically. The first question I always ask people is about the 7th of December, 1941. Do you remember where you were, and what you were doing when you heard the news about Pearl Harbor?

M: Well I was in school yet. I vaguely remember it. I know it was a bad time. People were worried. Boys having to go into the service. Girls didn't go that much then; they weren't drafted. If they volunteered, that's what they did. Not like they do now. Like I said, I didn't know Edmond at that time. His brother went in, his older brother. My brothers were too young. My younger brother did go in the Navy after he got older, but there was no war then.

D: So when you first heard about the news, you didn't have to worry about any of your family having to go into the service right away.

M: No, not right then. My dad had been in World War II, no World War I. But he didn't go very far. He was a cook at the camps in Iowa, so that's as far as he went. He couldn't tell me too many stories.

D: Do you remember your family reacting when they heard the news at all? Were people shocked about things, were they upset?

M: Oh yeah, they were very upset that it should come to that. Terrible, the war. Then of course rationing came in. We had stamps for sugar, bread, and what else did we have stamps for... I didn't do much buying of the groceries then. It was very touchy in that way.

D: You said you didn't buy a lot of the groceries at that time, but do you remember that you had to ration things? Did it seem like you guys had less food or because you were on the farm, did it not affect you as much?

(A, 114)

M: No, it didn't affect us, because we had gardens, we had our own meat, we churned our own butter, and we had our own milk. So we got along pretty well. But I can see where people who lived in town, a lot of them had gardens, too. They started gardens more so then.

D: You remember a lot of people starting gardens during the war time?

M: Yeah.

D: I know we saw pictures of people planting gardens that they referred to as victory gardens. Do you remember anything about that?

M: Yeah.

D: A lot of people in town that had town jobs or something would do that?

M: Sure. Plowed up their backyards and planted a garden.

D: Did you have any friends or family that did that kind of thing?

M: I don't remember.

D: What kind of other changes besides rationing did you notice right away? Does anything big stand out in your mind?

M: Oh yes. We had to sign up to get a refrigerator. We had to sign up to get a tractor. They were just not available, because all the iron was shipped out to make guns, for the war.

D: So you remember having to sit there on waiting lists for your equipment, of any type basically?

M: Yeah.

D: How did that affect... I mean a refrigerator probably affected the ladies in the house, and a tractor the guys out on the farm.

M: Sure. Well, when we were at this house that we lived in, it did not have electricity. Did not have any water. So then a year and a half afterwards, we moved over to his [Edmond's] home place. They had current. So then we signed up for a refrigerator.

D: But during the war, you were still living at home, correct?

M: Yeah.

D: And during that time you did have electricity?

M: No, we didn't. Let's see. Electricity didn't come into this area until 1940. Because I was in school yet then.

D: Maybelle, what kind of activities did you participate in during the war? What kind of social things did you do? You had just graduated high school, so were you part of any clubs or organizations?

M: Oh yeah, we belonged to 4-H. And our home revolved around church mostly. Oh we'd get together and have house parties. Play games. We never went to dances.

D: No dances?

M: No dances. *(pauses three seconds)* That was a no-no at my home.

D: Shows?

M: No, we weren't allowed to go to shows. So we got together with our neighbor friends and looked for guys up here at [my church] Salem Lutheran. Just had good times

D: Do you remember if the war maybe impacted any of those things at all? Do you remember in 4-H that you did any projects related to the war, or if conversations when you got together with friends revolved around that topic a lot or did things stay relatively the same? What do you remember?

M: Well, the topic was the war, and the boys being gone. Write letters, they said. "Be sure you write to your servicemen, and pray for them." It was quite a thing. But we had good times, too. Otherwise you'd lose your mind.

D: Who'd you write letters to? Did you get in big groups to just write letters to whatever servicemen were from your town, or was it always to relatives?

M: It was more an individual thing, or family.

D: Do you remember writing some letters to servicemen during the war?

M: Yeah, because after I was through with high school I went with a fellow in the service. So that was almost an everyday thing (*laughs*).

D: What branch of the service was he in?

M: He was in the Army. He never went overseas, because he had a heart problem. I don't think that was my fault (*laughs*).

D: So he was shipped around the country?

M: Mostly California, but I never went out to see him. And then I got tired of waiting for him, so I started going with Edmond. It was December 1943. The war was still on.

D: What would you guys do for fun when you went out?

M: Oh, we'd go bowling. We could bowl. Roller skate. And church functions.

D: You mentioned church a couple of times. Did the church ever organize anything to support the war effort? Did they ever have bandage rolling or anything like that that you remember?

M: No, we didn't do that. I don't know. Mostly prayer and write letters.

D: So the pastor reminded the congregation to pray for the soldiers?

M: Oh, you didn't have to be reminded. That was a necessity. Just something everybody knew needed to be done.

D: Did the pastor ever talk about the war in his sermons that you remember?

M: Oh I suppose, but I don't remember. Nothing specific.

D: Nothing about the war really stands out in regards to church then you would say?

M: No.

D: All right. Now you didn't get married until after the war, correct?

M: Yeah.

(A, 202)

D: So you went out with Edmond during those years?

M: Three years.

D: Three years, and you got married afterwards. You graduated high school about a year after the war started, correct?

M: Yeah [in 1942].

D: Do you remember if anything that last year in school changed while the war was on? Did you talk about it during school, like maybe in history class?

M: In history class we probably did. Lots of things weren't supposed to be talked about. Secrets... I don't know how to say it. So that it wouldn't go out to the other country, where the men were.

D: Or you didn't want things to get out so that enemies would find out?

M: Yeah, that's what I mean, enemies.

D: What kind of things were you talking about? Could you tell me a little bit about what you were thinking?

M: Oh dear. That seems so long ago.

D: Well it is a long time ago, we're talking well over fifty years ago now.

M: Yeah, we've been married fifty-six. *(three second pause)* Maybe Edmond can say more about that.

D: You just remember some notion of not wanting to talk about the war in public places because enemies could find out what you were saying?

M: Yeah, it was so sad. Couldn't help but feel bad for the boys. Because some didn't come back.

D: Do you remember if in your community there were some boys that were lost?

M: Oh yeah.

D: What was the reactions of the community to that? I mean this is a small area, so anyone who was lost, I imagine that was a big impact.

M: Yeah, you felt sorry for the families, like you do when anyone passes away. Only it was a real tragedy because they were young. I had one classmate that went right into the service after high school and he never came back. And in the class play with him, I played opposite of him, and I really felt bad when he didn't come back (*voice shows emotion*).

D: So these were people that you knew well.

M: Sure.

D: Were there funerals for these people over here or?

M: Yeah they shipped the body back.

D: Was there a community type of feeling, to rally around the family then?

M: Sure.

D: Do you remember if anything was done for the family or to recognize them in any way?

M: Oh yeah, they were recognized by the church, by the community. Even the state. They had a gold star in their window. Then we had a flag in church, with stars on, representing each fellow that was in the service.

(brief pause in tape)

D: Okay, we'll resume the tape here quick. We were just talking about the community recognizing families and supporting families with servicemen. You were talking about how there were stars in the windows, and even at church, I believe you said, there was a flag with stars for the men from the church that were in the service?

M: Yes.

D: Did you have a special service to recognize that at all?

M: Oh, when they were going to leave, it was just like a funeral. The men sat up

front with their families. Everybody was crying, it was sad. We didn't know if they would be back or not. Give them a testament, and they were in your prayers.

D: So it was a pretty somber mood, it sounds like.

M: Yes, it was.

D: Well that's interesting to hear how your church supported it, and your community. Maybelle, you were employed then for most of those years, right?

M: Yeah.

D: What were those two jobs you had?

M: I was secretary at the Cargill elevator. And then I was a teller, or a bookkeeper, at the bank in Kerkhoven.

D: Do you remember if there were any changes at either of those jobs because of the war? Did the farming get impacted at all while you worked at Cargill? Or I mean, you lived on the farm too, so you had an opportunity to just observe at home if the war impacted the farming at all.

M: Like I said, they had to sign up for machinery. And there was a lot of black market then. Some good people would get on the good side of some machinery guy and he would find them a plow or whatever. Another person would be without.

D: Was there resentment about that at all? I mean I'm sure people notice that kind of thing.

M: Sure. I don't know if it had much to do with my job, but...

D: But you certainly observed some of that, where you saw this guy ends up with the new machinery and I mean, people said, "Hey how did he get ahead of me on the list?"

M: Yeah. Or even a car. It was hard to get a new car. Edmond was lucky—he got his dad's car, because his dad passed away the year we got married. It was hard to get things then, too, even in 1946. Grain, as far as the price of grain... Edmond, come here, I need you.

D: We can go ahead and ask him later on the interview with him.

M: Yeah, that would be better.

D: Go ahead and tell me what you remember, and we'll get that from him later.

M: Well, I didn't work at the elevator very long; it was about nine months. It was that one fall [starting in 1942]. Then I got into the bank. I was only there 21

months, because then I got married. I didn't work after that.

But I had a garden; and we raised pigs, and chickens, and cows, and calves. At first we had some horses. There was plenty to do on the farm.

D: You talked about having plenty of food because you lived on the farm, so you had resources. You were able to have a garden, you were able to have animals. So you could obviously slaughter your own meat. I was always wondering if people from the farm ever set up shop in town and sold stuff? Because there was rationing on meat, on butter, or sugar, and many people didn't have access to those kinds of things, did the farmers ever sell directly to people in town?

M: Not that I know of. Unless there was a family that you would give meat or something. We had a produce in town, so we sold our eggs in town. A lot of people would come to my door and buy eggs, too, because I had 800 chickens. I'd get up to two cases a day, which is sixty dozen.

(A, 297)

D: Did people come more during the war, or was it pretty normal business then? I'm just curious if people from town who generally had normal access to meat, during the 1930s, as the war turns on, rationing comes up, if they came out more and tried to get a few more eggs or not.

M: Well, at the war times, we weren't married, so I didn't have control of that. I don't know if they came out and bought eggs from the farmers or not. The egg price was only like ten cents [\$.10] a dozen. Bring a penny for an egg. And meat, we butchered mostly during the wintertime, because of the coolness. We had to can the meat, because we didn't have refrigerators, or freezers.

D: We talked a little bit about your community and the way things changed. Would you say that your community came closer together during the war, or did it stay about the same? Do you remember any impact on the area you lived around, the town you lived in, during the war? Or did you feel kind of isolated from the war so it didn't really impact you so much?

M: Well, this community has always been close. I don't know.

D: So maybe things were relatively similar because you had started out close, so it just kind of stayed that way. Even with the new changes as part of the war, just kind of strengthened those bonds or something like that?

M: Yes.

D: It was just part of who you were already?

M: Right.

D: Do you remember if the financial situation on the farm changed at all during the war? Did things get tougher, leaner, or not?

M: Well they probably got better, because we'd just gone through the Depression in the '30s. And that was really tough. I remember the Depression. Yeah, I think it was a little better during the war years.

D: Do you remember having more of anything, was there more to go around, or not really?

M: We lived on hand me downs. Feed came in print sacks, so we had clothes, dresses out of that. And sheets made out of feed sacks. When you grew out of something, the next daughter got what you were wearing.

D: I wonder if you can describe an average day for you during the war, just to get an impression of what was life like for you. What time would you get up, what would you do in the morning, go to work, come back from work, what would you do in the evening? That kind of thing.

M: Well I've always been an early riser, so I'm sure I was up at six almost every day. And I'm still up at six. But I was the easiest one to get up, so my dad would call me. He'd call me, then he'd go out to chores, then I would get up and have to help with breakfast. It was pretty general. [After high school] I stayed in town some winters when I worked at the bank, because I didn't have a car. Girls didn't have cars then. That was a fact. I stayed with an uncle and his family.

D: None of the girls really drove at all?

M: No, they drove, but they never owned their own car.

D: So as a result of that you actually stayed with your uncle and his family?

M: Yeah.

D: And that was close enough to the bank you could just walk or something?

M: Yeah.

D: So during a lot of the war years, you were not actually out on the farm at home, you were in town?

M: Well, I'd go forth and back, weekends and so on.

D: But during the work week you stayed in town.

M: Yeah.

D: What was it like living with that family in town, do you remember?

M: It wasn't easy. I didn't have my own bedroom. I slept downstairs on the hide-a-bed. I didn't have privacy at all, because they had three kids, then they had her dad was there. So they were six. So I was kind of an intruder, you might say. It worked for a while, but it wasn't easy.

D: What did the uncle do?

M: He was manager at Cargill elevator.

D: So that's how you got in there?

M: Yeah.

D: And do you remember things around their family or their house changing at all during the war too, or pretty much the same?

M: Pretty much the same. Because their girls were little.

D: I see.

(Quick side conversation between Maybelle and her husband Edmond)

D: I'll probably just ask you about a couple more days, and see if they strike a bell in your memory or not.

(husband Edmond interjects: "The day you got married?")

D: Actually, I'm going to throw out some that the general public might recognize as well. The 12th of April 1945 was the day President Roosevelt died. Do you remember that event at all?

(Edmond interjects that he remembers)

M: I don't.

D: That's okay—there's some dates that some people have significant memories from and other people just don't. Do you remember the Victory in Europe Day? That was the 8th of May, 1945.

M: May 1945...

Edmond Broberg: You don't remember that?

M: He's talking to me, Edmond *(to husband Edmond)*.

D: And then the other one would be the victory in the entire war, V-J Day, the end of the war with Japan. That was the 15th August 1945. Do you remember celebrations or anything going on when that came?

M: Well yeah, my brother came home.

(Edmond interjects that that wasn't until November 1945)

M: Yeah, in November.

D: Do you remember that day at all, or that just kind of runs in with the other days?

M: It just does. I don't make an effort with special dates.

(A, 376)

End of Side A. Side B begins.

D: Okay, this is side B of the tape. We're just talking about some of the dates, and we're getting close to the end of the war period. Maybelle, do you remember the impact in your community when the war got over? Was there a parade or celebration at all around this area?

M: I don't remember.

D: Do you remember people reacting to the end of the war?

M: Yeah, people were glad that it was over. Waiting for the boys to come home. I don't know how things went. Did rationing quit then?

(Edmond agrees that it did)

D: Do you remember how long it took before some of the soldiers started coming back in town and you started seeing some of those guys that you'd sent away?

M: Well, I was already going with him [Edmund], so I didn't pay any attention.

D: The only other question about the end of the war, actually goes a little before that one. Do you remember hearing the news about when the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

M: Yeah.

D: What did you think about that when it happened? Was it just excitement that it looked like the war was coming close to done or was there some sad feelings about what happened when that was done, what do you remember?

M: Glad it wasn't in the United States. I don't know. I don't remember an awful lot.

D: The last thing I'm going to ask you then is just kind of a wrap up type of question. It's just kind of looking back on all the war years and looking back on your life since then. Do you feel that World War II changed your life? Do you think that living

during that time changed you as a person, and how did that change you do you think?

M: *(pauses five seconds)* I don't know.

D: Do you think you would have been pretty much the same person today if you hadn't gone through that kind of experience?

M: I think so.

D: Do you think you saw any significant changes in your life as a result of it, that did impact the direction you went in? Dating Edmond instead of that other guy?

(laughter)

M: Well I'm glad things turned out the way they did.

D: So basically, relatively the same, but a lot of different little things changed, rationing, who was around and those kinds of things.

M: Right.

D: That really kind of takes up the questions I have for you. I'd like to thank you formally, on the tape, for sitting down with me. I appreciate your time.

M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW