

Interviewee: Heloise Neal

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 4 January 2003

Location: living room of the Neal apartment, St. Paul, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, February 2003

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, June 2003

Heloise Tabor Neal was born on 17 September 1925 in Sioux City, Iowa, the middle child of three of parents from Texas (mother) and Mississippi (father). The Neal family moved to St. Paul in 1930, when Heloise was five, and she attended local schools, graduating from Marshall High School in 1944. Heloise spent the war years 1941-45 living at home with her parents; from her perspective, aged sixteen to twenty, shortages and wartime rationing didn't represent serious problems for her family.

Heloise worked after high school, starting with an assembly line job at Raymond Laboratories in 1944; the wartime economy meant jobs were plentiful and easy to find. One year later, in 1945, she became an elevator operator in a downtown St. Paul office building; Heloise later worked in this job at the Ramsey County courthouse, in St. Paul, and remained there until retiring at age sixty-two.

Heloise married Roger Neal in 1945, and the couple made their home in St. Paul; a first child was born in July 1946. All together, Heloise and Roger would have four children. Retired since 1987, Heloise kept busy with family and activities at her church, Pilgrim Baptist of St. Paul.

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

H = Heloise Neal

[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.

T: Today is the 4th of January 2003 and this is our interview with Heloise Neal at her apartment here in St. Paul. First, Heloise, on the record, thanks very much for taking time today to speak with me.

H: Okay.

T: We've talked for a little while here and some of what I've learned is this. You were born in Sioux City, Iowa, on the 17th of September 1925, and you were the middle child of three, a brother and a sister.

H: Right.

T: You moved to St. Paul with your folks at age five. Your dad was an electrician and then also later worked as a Red Cap down at the St. Paul Depot. Originally your mother came from Mississippi and your dad was from Texas. You attended local schools...

H: No, no.

T: Is that wrong?

H: Yes. My mother was from Texas. My daddy was from Mississippi.

T: Thanks for correcting me. Local schools in St. Paul and John Marshall High School, class of '44. After high school you were married, in 1945, to Roger Neal. In between high school and when you got married you had a couple of jobs. One was assembly line work at Raymond Laboratories. That was here in St. Paul.

H: Yes.

T: And the second job you had that period was of an elevator operator. You ultimately retired as an elevator operator, in 1987. You worked at the County Courthouse when you retired.

H: Yes.

T: In the late 1930s, early 1940s rather, you were in high school at John Marshall High School. Let me start off by asking you what kind of memories you have of your time in high school.

H: I don't know. We did a lot of work.

T: Were you a good student?

H: I was average. I would say average. I kind of enjoyed it. Well, at times, I would say. Times I figured I wouldn't graduate because it got so you hated it, then again you started liking it, so it was just a time.

T: Was there a subject or an activity that you liked most about high school?

H: Nothing special. I didn't have any special activity or anything, no.

T: When you were in high school, did you think about what you were going to do when you got out of high school?

H: I had no idea.

T: Really? It wasn't something you gave a lot of thought to?

H: No.

T: Did your folks, your mom and dad, did they give you ideas about what they thought would be a good idea for you?

H: No, because I never asked them.

T: They didn't volunteer any information.

H: No.

(1, A, 63)

T: Heloise, you were a sophomore in high school, if my math is correct, when the US entered the war in December of 1941. Specifically, the attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. I'm wondering, Heloise, if you remember what you were doing when you first heard the news about the attack on Pearl Harbor.

H: As far as I know I wasn't doing anything. Still in school. That's was about all.

T: Was there much reaction by your folks at home about what it meant that the country was now at war?

H: No.

T: Was politics or government something that your folks talked about a lot at dinner or around the house?

H: No, we never did. Never discussed it like we do now. No.

T: When you were at home in high school, after meals or in the evening, what kind of things did you like to do?

H: I went to what they call Hallie Q. Brown [Center, in St. Paul]. A lot of us went there. We went to each other's houses. We associated. We had parties. Get together. That's about all.

T: What did you find interesting about the Hallie Q. Brown Center?

H: We just had clubs and we had parties. That's where we met with all our friends.

T: Was that something that a lot of your friends would go to after school or on weekends?

H: Oh, yes.

T: Was that in walking distance from your home?

H: Yes.

T: So it was close for you.

H: They didn't take us. No.

T: So you had to either walk or take the bus or streetcar?

H: We didn't take the streetcar to Hallie Q. because where I lived it wasn't far. We wouldn't take a streetcar, no. Some of my friends, we all lived right around one another.

T: Where was your childhood home here in St. Paul?

H: I lived on Rondo. At St. Albans and Dale.

T: Rondo, that's now Concordia Avenue, right?

H: Concordia, yes.

T: I'm thinking about your reaction to Pearl Harbor now. That was December 1941, so during your sophomore year in high school. I'm wondering about life at school. Do you recall special assemblies or any kind of discussion of the war in any of your classes or by any of your friends?

H: No. I don't think we ever discussed it. In fact, I don't think we even paid any attention about it. Well, at that time, we really, we were at that age when we didn't bother to discuss anything. Pearl Harbor really didn't mean that much to us in a way where we discussed it as far, as I was concerned.

T: At that point you were sixteen years old and perhaps had other things to think about.

H: That's true. It didn't phase us... me. It might have somebody else, but me it didn't.

T: You have one brother. Was he older or younger?

H: Older.

T: Was he in service during the war?

H: Yes, he was in World War II.

T: What branch of the service was he in?

H: Army.

(1, A, 128)

T: How did that impact your family, having your brother, your only brother, go off to service?

H: I didn't pay much attention. My mother and daddy would be a little more concerned. I was concerned, but we never discussed it.

T: So your folks you think might have been slightly more concerned about him then.

H: I guess parents would be more so.

T: After all, you're only his sister, right? *(laughs)*

H: *(laughs)*

T: When he was away did he write or did you write to him or anything?

H: Oh, yes, he wrote home. Couldn't read it, but he wrote home.

T: Did you write back to him sometimes?

H: Oh, yes.

T: What kind of things did you tell him when you wrote back to him?

H: Just things we did. A lot of his friends were going in service too. That was the draft. Now when he wrote home, he told everything they did and had so much cut out it looked like a puzzle.

T: So they were censoring letters.

H: Censoring letters, yes.

T: When you got it some stuff was missing. That's interesting. Now was he stationed stateside or did he go overseas too?

H: He went overseas. He was under General Patton. He was on the German front.

T: What did he do exactly? What was his job?

H: He was a quartermaster, or something like that.

T: So he got over to Europe, and was in Germany. So maybe your folks were concerned a bit about how he was doing over there.

H: Well, yes, they were. Like I said we, you know, you didn't discuss it like you do now. You didn't parade around and go up against...

T: Do you think that was your age at the time, that you didn't discuss it?

H: Yes. I think the age had something to do with it. Well, you really, at that time we really weren't thinking. We knew they were at service. We knew danger. We just didn't discuss it.

T: Were the teachers at your school during sophomore, junior, senior year, were they keen to make students aware of what was going on?

H: No, I don't think so, because I can't remember doing it. No. At that time, I don't know, they weren't as open like they are now. World War I and World War II. A lot of them went to World War I, so they just... they just weren't discussing it I guess.

T: That's interesting. Let me ask you about St. Paul, a city that you lived in throughout this time period, during high school and after as well. How did you

notice St. Paul changing when we were in the war? These last years in high school or when you were out working in either one of your jobs.

H: What do you mean?

T: Did you notice physical changes? Were there people in uniform around or were there...

H: I didn't pay much attention to that, no. The guys that I knew, when they came home they were in uniforms. When they had their furloughs or what they call it. Like that.

T: When you were still in high school, did you work after school or on weekends?

H: Oh, yes. I had a little job. I kept a lady's kids for her. Babysat just about two hours, three hours after school and on Saturdays while she went to, she was a Jew and she went to these Mason parties, and she didn't want... I'd carry them to the shows or something like that. That's about it.

T: So a little extra money for you.

H: Yes.

T: Your dad worked. Did your mom work at all during the war?

H: No.

T: So she worked only inside the home. Let me ask you then about home life. Some products were in short supply during the war. Some things were rationed, other things were hard to get.

H: Yes.

T: For example, with food and things like that. When you did the shopping, or when your mom or dad did the shopping, were there certain things that you couldn't get enough of or that you couldn't get at all?

H: It was rationed, because they had the stamps. Shoes and let's see.... I'm trying to think. There were certain foods that you couldn't get with the stamps. Our neighbor next door, he ran on the road [worked on the railroad, traveling]. He went to Canada and back... They could bring things in from Canada that we couldn't... so they could get what they needed. We had the food stamps. We would divide it. They would bring us things that we couldn't get with food stamps and things that we would get. Like butter and bacon and stuff like that. He, Mr. McGee, could bring all he could. So we were okay. Shoes were rationed. Myself, we didn't wear many

shoes, so we could give them the shoe stamp if they had a larger family than mine. They would give us butter, bacon.

T: So there was kind of a trading of things. The things that you didn't need you could trade stamps to him. He went up to Canada on business?

H: Yes. Ran on the road. At that time, the train went there. His route was to go to Canada and back.

T: So he worked on the railroad.

H: He was what they called a Red Cap on the railroad, or he worked on the diner. I can't remember quite what he was. But he ran on the road. Just ran on the road.

T: So he was able to go up there and get some products that were in short supply here.

H: He didn't go purposely to get them.

T: But he was there anyway, so he picked up certain items.

H: Yes.

T: Heloise, who did most of the shopping here in your house?

H: My mother.

T: Did you go along too?

H: Yes, I had to.

T: What things when you went to the store, what things do you think that you most noticed that you wish you had more of?

H: I don't know. We had plenty, so I can't think of a special thing. Meat, during the war you could only get certain type of meat.

T: And you needed stamps for it?

H: But I can't think of... We had meat. I can't think of anything that we, that I wanted and we didn't get.

T: As a high school student did you feel you had enough clothes, or the right kind of clothes, or shoes, or nylon stockings?

H: I couldn't say I had enough clothes or anything, but I had clothes. At that time, well, I could almost say I was on the tail end of the Depression. So, they were rationed. We didn't go overboard. I didn't have a lot of changes [of clothes], but I had enough changes, so that's about all I know.

T: Do you think that growing up in the Depression and of course those were your formative years, the 1930s, do you think that the hard times in the '30s made things like rationing and shortages during the war easier to handle?

H: I don't know, because I didn't pay any attention. I didn't have to fool with it. I mean, I can't say.

T: During the war, was your dad working at the St. Paul Depot at this time, during the war when you were in high school?

H: Yes, I think so. Yes.

T: Was he working longer hours or extra hours, do you recall?

H: No, just regular hours. I can't think of him working overtime, no.

T: Let's talk about you and working, because you had some little work in high school but once you got out of high school, you did go out and get a full time job at the Raymond Laboratories, right?

H: Yes. I had a full time job.

T: How difficult was it to find a job when you were out looking?

H: Easy.

T: Did you have the pick of more than one job?

H: I never did try for it. That was the opening and I went there.

T: So it was the first place you went. There was an opening and you took it.

H: Yes.

T: So it was not hard at all.

H: No.

T: Can you describe on tape the kind of work that you were doing at Raymond Laboratories?

H: I filled shampoo bottles, put labels on shampoo bottles, and packed shampoo bottles. It was assembly line.

(1, A, 265)

T: How many people were on that line working with you?

H: Oh, wow. I don't know. Maybe about twenty, twenty-five. About like that.

T: Mostly all doing the same, about what you're doing, labeling and boxing?

H: Yes.

T: The people you were working with, mostly men or mostly women?

H: I think it was all women as I can remember, but it's been so long (*laughs*).

T: Yes, I know.

H: I think it was all women.

T: African-Americans and whites working together?

H: Well, yes.

T: Maybe you know this and maybe not, but were those jobs that used to be done by men, that women had now taken over?

H: That I don't know. Because I didn't know when I just came out of high school. So I don't know. I can't tell you.

T: When you think about how much you were paid, not the exact amount, but when you think about getting your paycheck, did you consider yourself well paid, okay, or not very well paid?

H: Not very, well, at that time I don't know. Because I had just come out of high school. I didn't compare. Because at this time we didn't compare.

T: It was the first place you went, wasn't it?

H: Yes. So I didn't compare my wages until I quit there. Naturally when I quit I went to more money.

T: What did you like about the job at Raymond Laboratories?

H: It was okay. We got along. All of us got along together. It was really a hard job. Steady. It was steady work because when you're putting the labels down you were sitting down. Then you were standing up when you filled the bottles or packing the bottles. When it was labels you were sitting down.

T: Was it monotonous?

H: Yes. Sometimes. I moved around, so... If I had to do labels...

T: Eight hours of that would have been hard work.

H: With packing, yes.

T: What prompted you to quit at Raymond Laboratories and move on to something else?

H: I really was... I just quit. Just wanted to see if I could do something else. That was my reason.

T: Did you have another job lined up before you quit?

H: No.

T: So you were fairly confident that even though you quit one job you'd find another one?

H: Back then you could. Now you can't... you can't do it now *(laughs)*.

T: No kidding. Did you find what you considered a better job?

H: I wouldn't say a better job. I would just say more money.

T: That was working as an elevator operator, right?

H: Yes.

T: Around this time, 1945, you got married to Roger Neal.

H: Yes.

T: Did you move out of your folks' house once you got married?

H: Oh, yes. I lived with his sister for about, for over a year. Not quite a year. Then we moved into our own apartment.

T: So you lived with his sister.

H: Yes.

T: That was after you got married.

H: Yes.

T: When you and Roger were looking for an apartment, a place to move into, how difficult was it to find a place?

H: It wasn't difficult. His brother owned the building (*laughs*).

T: So you didn't have to go open the papers and start looking for places to rent.

H: No.

T: When you think about the rent, did he charge you fair rent?

H: Yes, I guess so. I didn't have anything to do with it.

T: Did Roger take care of it?

H: Yes.

(1, A, 315)

T: While you were in high school and living at home, there was your dad's income. Your mom was a homemaker and you had one brother, your older brother who went to service and then you had a younger sister.

H: Yes.

T: So there were four of you at home.

H: There were four.

T: When you think about how your folks were doing, and the family's financial situation, did it seem to you that the war years improved your family's financial situation, kept it about the same, or did it get worse?

H: Kept it about the same. I can't say it improved it. At that time we only paid a quarter for a show. I mean, we did all right. As far as I know, we did all right.

T: And your mom didn't work outside the home? Perhaps she could have found a job if she wanted to find a job.

H: Oh, yes. She could have done that.

T: How about your church? Were you attending church in those days?

H: Yes. Had to.

T: What church did you and your folks go to?

H: Camphor. Camphor Methodist Church.

T: Where is that located?

H: Fuller, 585 Fuller [in St. Paul].

T: When you were at the church during the time you were in high school and during the war there, did your church sponsor any volunteer programs that were part of the war effort?

H: No.

T: Things like food drives or clothing drives?

H: No.

T: When you were in church on Sunday morning, do you remember the preacher mentioning anything about the war in any way?

H: No, I can't remember him saying anything like that because, at that time, really, I don't think we talked too much about the war.

T: You've mentioned school, and now church, and your folks too, that it was not something that people really brought up, at least that you recall.

H: We would just sit down like we're doing now, talking. No, we didn't do that.

T: Let me move to 1945. That's the year after you were finished in high school. On April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died. You were what, twenty years old? I'm wondering if you remember how you reacted when you heard the news that President Roosevelt had died.

H: I don't think I reacted at all. As far as me personally, I don't think I had any reaction about it. I can't remember. Like I said, and I'm back to that again, we didn't discuss those things. And I don't think we paid too much attention to who was the president.

T: So you don't remember your folks really being unduly upset or noticing that either.

H: No.

T: In May of 1945, that is a month later, the war against Germany ended and in August of 1945 the war against Japan ended. I'm wondering what you remember about the day that the war ended.

H: The day the war ended I can't remember. My brother came home and that's about it.

T: He was home for good from service then?

H: Yes.

T: In St. Paul do you remember any kind of celebrations, impromptu gatherings, at your place of work, for example, or in your neighborhood?

H: I can't remember doing anything like that. Now there might have been some. At least I didn't take part in that.

T: And that's the important thing for us. There was a celebration in downtown St. Paul.

H: Well, I didn't take part in it.

T: That's what we wanted to know. Now, one of the reasons that the war ended so quickly in August of 1945 was the decision by the US government to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in Japan. At the time, when this was reported in the news and talked about, what were your feelings on the US government's decision to use atomic weapons?

H: I don't know. I can't say. I think we talked a little about it was a terrible thing to do, but I don't think anybody really realized just what it was doing. I can't remember any discussion about it. To tell the truth, like it is now, I don't think there was much discussion of things to do about it. Maybe a lot of folks didn't even know it. That nobody hardly knew exactly what the atomic bomb was until later on. Later on they began to really tell you about it.

T: Did you have an opinion years later as we learned more about atomic weapons? Did you have an opinion later about whether it was the right thing or the wrong thing to do in 1945?

H: My opinion is that it was the wrong thing to do. That's about it.

T: After the war ended, by this time you were married. In 1946 you had your first child. Was your husband, Roger Neal, was he a veteran?

H: Yes. He was Navy.

T: What did he do during the war?

H: I think he said he was a cook.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.

T: When he got back from service you and he had an apartment thanks to his connections.

H: He was out of service.

T: He was out of service when you got the apartment and your first child was born. So in 1945 the war was over and Roger was out of service. When you looked at the future and you thought about what life was going to be like, would you say you were optimistic about the future when you saw your own life in front of you, more pessimistic, or somewhere in the middle?

H: I was excited when I thought about it. Just raising my kids.

T: Did you move from that apartment to another apartment, and did you finally get a house here in St. Paul?

H: No. We moved to another apartment. I guess we stayed there. Then we bought a house.

T: Where was your house located?

H: On Marshall and St. Albans [in St. Paul].

T: Were you working outside the home at this time?

H: Yes.

T: So you continued to work as an elevator operator, didn't you?

H: Yes.

T: You and Roger had four kids all together, didn't you?

H: Yes.

T: Did you continue to work as your kids were born?

H: Yes.

T: How did you manage the childcare situation?

H: Well, my niece babysits. Now when I started working at the Courthouse my oldest boys were old enough to take care of the youngest ones. The two older, then my daughter, then a boy, so I would get them up for school and they would see that he got off to school and then they went to Central [High School].

T: Did you and Roger use GI Bill benefits for your home mortgage?

H: No. Now then I don't know because I didn't take care of it. He might have.

T: He didn't use it for school or education benefits? Tech school or anything?

H: For him?

T: Yes.

H: No. He used some of it so the oldest boy could go to college.

T: When you think back on the period of the war, 1941 to 1946 let's say, what I heard you say is that in many ways the war, you didn't discuss the war openly and in a sense, almost didn't notice that it was going on.

H: We knew it was going on. But as far as just discussing it, I just never did. I knew there was a war because, like I say, a lot of the boys at school were drafted. I knew the war was on.

T: Yes, but is it safe or fair to say that you didn't follow closely the daily events of the war?

H: I didn't.

T: What do you think, when you think about that period, what do you think is the most important way that that war experience that our nation had changed your life individually?

H: I don't think it changed mine at all. Not that I know of. I don't think it changed mine at all.

T: Do you think, to follow up, do you think that the person that you ended up being after high school, after the war, was probably the same as it would have been had the war not taken place?

H: Yes, I think so.

T: Do you think, continuing, that the job opportunities that you had were better or different because labor was in short supply? After all, when you went out looking for a job in 1944 you looked and you found a job like that.

(1, B, 464)

H: What do you mean?

T: Do you think you had maybe better or more job opportunities because the manpower was in short supply?

H: I don't know, because I didn't think of it all like that.

T: You were just happy to have a job the first place you looked.

H: Yes.

T: It's sure different these days, isn't it?

H: Yes.

T: Your brother and your husband both were in service, and came back safely.

H: Yes.

T: Your dad kept the same job all the time.

H: Yes.

T: Your mom never did work outside the home during that time.

H: No.

T: That was the last question I had. I'm wondering at this point if there's anything else you want to add, something perhaps that we didn't cover. A story or anecdote or a memory that is important, that we didn't have a chance to get to.

H: I know one thing. Between that time and during the time now, times are different.

T: How would you describe that difference?

H: Well, a good time that I can remember, like I said, we didn't have a whole lot, but we had... well, we could entertain ourselves without money. The streetcar rides were a lot different, and the things we did. Like I said, we didn't have any fifteen, twenty, thirty dollars to put out. Church picnics, things like that. We got along better.

It didn't take a lot of money for us. Now it takes a lot of money. We went to the shows. It didn't cost so much. We went downtown St. Paul. There were shows all around the area. We could go down there some Sundays after church, and go to the Orpheum, Paramount, Lyceum, World, and stay all day. Now, there's nothing downtown, so there's a difference. This River Center now, but there was an auditorium then. Where all the big name bands came in, and we went to dances down there. We didn't have to pay fifty dollars to go see them. I think it's, then we got along better.

We had things. I might not have had a lot, but I never had to want for anything. I still don't get a lot, so I can't tell you. You say, gee, if we would have had this. Just like the kids get out of school now—if we had that kind of school like the kids do now, we'd have had it made. So, I mean, the times.

I think our kids, we grew up much better because we respected people more. In fact, we had to. If you disrespected somebody and it got home to your parents, you got it.

T: You notice a difference in that these days?

H: Yes. Oh, yes. Those kids nowadays you can't even chastise them. Back in those days you got a good spanking, a good tanning, and sometimes you got knocked down if you didn't watch it. We didn't talk back like kids do now. I don't know if it is the way you did it or the times. I know the times were good when I came along, but discipline is the same. I think.

T: That's the last question, so thank you again for the interview today.

END OF INTERVIEW