

**Interviewee: Lois Snyder**

**Interviewers and transcribers: Lorelei Swenson and Arthur Tiscareno**

**Date of interview: 12 April 2001**

**Location of interview: Lois Snyder's home in Plymouth, MN**

**Edited by: Daniel Borkenhagen and Thomas Saylor, August 2001**

Lois was born on 19 July 1922 in Altura, Minnesota. At age four, her family moved to Lanesboro, Minnesota, where they lived until Lois graduated from high school; at that time, Lois moved to Minneapolis. In April 1942, Lois got married, and shortly thereafter became pregnant. Her husband Gerry was drafted, entered the US Army Air Forces, and in 1943 was sent to Europe; at this time Lois moved back to Lanesboro to be with her family. She did housework until she had her child, and then moved to St. Paul and got a job with Northwest Plastics.

When Gerry returned from wartime service, the couple moved to Minneapolis and raised their family of six children. Lois worked at a number of different jobs over the years, as well as being a homemaker. Lois and Gerry later moved to Plymouth, Minnesota, where they resided during their retirement.

This interview provides poignant details of some of the challenges faced by a working mother during the war years.

**Interview key:**

**S = Lorelei Swenson**

**A = Arthur Tiscareno**

**L = Lois Snyder**

**[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation**

**(\*\*\*) = words or phrase unclear**

**NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity**

**Side A. Counter begins at 000.**

S: Today is April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and this is our interview with Lois Snyder. Lois, why don't we start with what you were doing when you heard the news of [the Japanese attack on] Pearl Harbor [on 7 December 1941]?

L: My boyfriend [Gerry] had come down to Lanesboro for the weekend, and I think we had just been out riding around or something, and we came home and heard it on the radio at my house.

A: How did you react when you heard the news?

L: Well, I was unbelievably naive about the whole thing. [My future husband] Gerry realized of course that it was war, and my dad had been in World War I, so he knew right away what it meant. Along about then we decided that we would get married. At first we said, no, we will wait till afterwards, then we decided we would get married before he went into service. He was working and going to school up here at Dunwoody [Institute in Minneapolis], and by then I think he was working. I was home yet; I had been working up in the Twin Cities for a while, kind of babysitting, maid stuff. Not doing much of anything, and I was home for the weekend. That's about it right there.

S: Alright, so you already mentioned some changes that occurred because of the US entering of war, but can you think of anything else, maybe long term or that changed because we entered the war?

L: Well, I was just out of high school and, like I said, I was unbelievably naïve when I think back. I wanted to find a job, of some kind, and so far I hadn't done anything very much, nothing special. *(pauses three seconds)* Didn't make that much difference to me, it did more to my husband, or who would be my husband, who was my boyfriend then.

S: What about you that changed during the war, stayed with you because of the war?

L: Well, I found out I could learn things, but like I said, I was unbelievably naive. I finally got a job at Northwest Plastics in St. Paul, and I was running a hydraulic press with a plastic mold in it and I learned all kinds of things about that. And the main thing was, at home I really hadn't learned anything, or to plan for anything.

Somehow there was just... well, there wasn't that atmosphere of planning back then. *(laughs)* The girls just went on to school or they got married and had families. But there was no chance of me going on to school; my dad did not have that kind of money. He was a shoemaker, he repaired harnesses and repaired shoes and he sold shoes. He had a shop, but it was just a little shop in a little town, and it just was enough to keep going, that's all.

But I found out I could learn things and I made a lot of new friends up here in the Cities then, because I was working in St. Paul, I was living in Minneapolis.

*(pauses three seconds)* I was pregnant before Gerry went into the service, because he left in October. We were married in April [1942] and he left in October, and by then I was four or five months pregnant. That was the main problem, but I pretty much stayed home until after I had the baby, and then I came up here in the Cities and found a job, found work. And hassled for babysitters and stuff.

A: How did you feel when Gerry left, to go to war?

L: How did I feel when he left?

A: Yes. What was your reaction?

L: *(laughs)* I cried, what else! I knew he was going to be gone and I knew I was going to be on my own, and I knew I was going to have to go back down home until I had the baby anyway. There wasn't very much I could do about it. You know, when a situation comes up, either you fix it or you go with it, you know. *(pauses five seconds)* Next question.

**(A, 54)**

S: Lois, were you doing anything within your community during the war, that is besides work and besides taking care of yourself?

L: I sang in the choir. Until the time I had the baby, that was the most of us in a small community, it wasn't as if there were Red Cross units where you could do anything. My grandpa, for example, my mom's dad, and my kid sister got rheumatic fever and I had to come home and help take care of her because my mom wasn't well. But no, there was nothing like community service, nothing made available. Like I said, the only thing I ever really did I had all kinds of friends that were still in school and I went up to some of their school activities, but it wasn't as if I could volunteer to do anything like that. Except, like I said, I did sing in the choir.

S: Since it was such a small community and not a lot to do, what were some of the things you would do for fun, anything in the area?

L: About the only thing, there was roller-skating. There was a place to roller skate, but I was pregnant enough that... I had fun and I went to one of the school dances, one of the high school dances. The one kid, he had been a neighbor of ours and a

friend of mine, and he had asked if I would dance with him. "Well," I said, "if you've got really long arms." Because I was like out to here [pregnant]. And we got a bang out of that, but that was about the only thing I did. There was a movie theatre, but not much. I don't think they had dances at the community hall at that time. Like I said, there was a rink, a roller-skating rink, but it got to where that wasn't too good, either.

A: Lois, in your opinion, did the war bring the community together?

L: I don't know... I know my dad got a lot more work in the store, because the farmers weren't able to get machines and they were using harnesses, I mean they were using horses. So he had a lot more harness repair and stuff to do with that, so he was working extra hard. I don't know that, well, I knew the guys, the fellows were gone [into military service]. Most of what girls did together was drive down to La Crosse [Wisconsin] to the doctor's office, because there was no hospital there in Lanesboro, and that's where we went to have our babies. There was a couple other girls, the three of us went together, but they were a lot older than I was. But still the same condition.

S: Financially, do you think you were better off during the war or before the war?

L: Financially, well I got a \$50 a month from Gerry's allowance that he made from his serviceman's pay, but I wasn't in any position to go out and earn much. I did work around the neighborhood a little bit now, and I remember I did some ironing for some of, a couple of the ladies, and helped with a small housekeeping things every once and a while. Things I could still do. I wasn't totally [laid up] by the pregnancy; I could get around, but I didn't have a car and the town was small enough where you could walk wherever you needed to go. So that was no problem. I had been used to walking the hills for school. *(pauses four seconds)*

Financially, there was, during the war, let's see. Gerry didn't make very much money, and we had a little apartment with, \$32 a month was our first apartment. And there was no way I could keep that with just \$50 a month coming in and then have any food. I don't know, somehow the idea of looking around and being responsible for work didn't, didn't really sink in until after I had the baby and came back up here to the Cities.

Back when I got in at Northwest Plastics, a girlfriend of mine that I had known, had a girl staying with her that was working at Northwest Plastics and that's how I got in. With somebody taking me by the hand, literally. When I found out I could do anything that they wanted, then there was no problem.

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A: At Northwest Plastics what did you do exactly?

L: What was I making?

A: Yes, what were you making?

L: We were making cases for periscope cases that they put a glass prism in. They used them in tanks, because there were no windows to see out in tanks. They would look in the mirror and they could see out; they used the same sort of thing in submarines. So that was one thing that we made.

Another thing that we made was a little tiny throat microphones. They were only about so big (*holds fingers about one inch apart*), that the fliers wore, the aviators. They were small enough, because the planes were so noisy that that was the only way they would have been able to get any sound across. So we made the little tiny cases for them and we made little condenser cans, about the size of a little fruit juice glass. That's about as much as I can remember about what I did.

There were other jobs in the place, too; there were certain molds that the fellows used because they were heavier. They put stuff in the mold and they would have to pry it open. The girls didn't do that kind of stuff because the hydraulic presses opened automatically. We'd put the, what we called pre-forms, the pre-measured blocks of plastic powder, and we'd put them in the machine and then there would be this thousand pounds of pressure and heat that would squish them into whatever they were supposed to be. And then they would open the press and take them out.

S: What hours did you work at Northwest Plastics?

L: I was working eight hour shifts. Actually I worked second shift always, so it was eight hours, and then a half hour of that was lunch break. I worked at Northwest Plastics for about two and a half years. Part of the time of it second shift, part of the time grave yard [midnight shift].

A: The majority of the people at Northwest Plastics, were they a mixture of women and men, or were the majority women?

L: There was a few young fellows that were either too young to go into service or in some way that had been classified... I'm trying to think... and some of them of them came back, and then some older fellows. I remember one, an old school teacher, and there was a lot of girls, ones my age and several of them considerably older. See, back then I was like 21, 22, and there were girls that were 10-15 years old than me. Some of them had raised their families even and some that were able to get away, had help [around the house], so they could come to work. We made fairly good money, I guess I have forgotten now, but I think it started out at a dollar an hour, though.

A: Did you notice anything significant between your pay and the men's pay?

L: No, there was no, we got the same pay. There wasn't, the fellows weren't paid anymore then we were. The scale rates were the same, at least where I worked.

A: Lois, describe the neighborhoods in which you lived during the war.

L: Well, our first apartment was just off of Franklin and Clinton [in Minneapolis], where Fourth Avenue is on Franklin, downtown someplace. It's not too far from Nicollet. It would be east of Nicollet maybe three or four blocks, and Franklin about twentieth and then it's a couple, a long block there was a double block there. That was our first apartment, actually our first two apartments. Then when I was working at Northwest Plastics I lived over in St. Paul, and I really don't know what kind of neighborhood it was, I know the old address was on Tuscarawas, not too far off of 7th street. But I lived over on University campus for a while with Gerry's mom and his sister. They had an apartment over the post office on Oak and Washington. Do you know where that area is?

S: Yes, I think so.

L: Yes. I lived there for awhile, and then I got an apartment across campus on Fourth Avenue right next to that Bridge Café, right next to the bridge there. I just had small apartments or just a room when I first came up, and then when I stayed with Gerry's mom and sister, it was, we made up a day bed in the living room and he was in the bedroom with Grandma. So the accommodations were nothing fancy! *(laughs)* Barely adequate, I mean there were toilets and bathtubs and hot water.

A: The bare necessities.

L: Yes.

S: If Gerry wouldn't have gone to war do you think your life would have been a lot different, for example where you would have been living?

L: Oh, I'm sure. He probably would have gotten started in his trade much younger, but we picked up and moved on in a hurry when he came home. The first thing I got [after the war was] a sewing machine, and he got a car. A little old used, well-used thing, and then we found a little house over in South Minneapolis. What do you know about South Minneapolis? Do you know the area at all?

S: Not a lot.

L: Okay, well it was on the east side of the Kenwood area, is where we were. He went to Dunwoody and he was working. That was a hassle because there was no money and two small kids. *(laughs)*

A: Did your place of worship sponsor volunteer programs to aid the war effort?

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L: Well, we were married at St. Lawrence over on campus, over on University campus, but we lived right next door to St. Stevens in our first apartment, and there was nothing offered there, I don't think. And when I went down home before the baby was born, before Dickey was born, I sang in the choir, that's all. It was just choir stuff.

S: Did the messages in church change after the beginning of the war?

L: I suppose, I don't really remember. I didn't listen too carefully, to be honest.

A: Lois, what did you think of the war?

L: What did I think of the War? As far as am concerned, it was terribly remote, and Gerry didn't write much about it at all, so all the information we got was on the radio and newspapers and it was *(pauses five seconds)* so remote. I knew what he was in was not front line danger zone. So for that part of it, I wasn't real scared for him. He was in the Air Force, but he was in repair and reclamation. He would go out when a plane came down, and they would go out and check and see if there was anything recyclable, anything reusable, and they would either dismantle it or leave it. But they would bring home anything they could use, and he wasn't just a fix it mechanic, it was an exchange mechanic.

A: How do you feel about the war now? After it's a long time ago.

L: I read Tom Brokaw's books. Those were really something, a lot of people had a lot more grief and a lot more... well, they were a lot closer to it. Like I said, Gerry didn't write home much. He wrote home frequently, but he didn't write much about the war. They were not allowed to write about they were doing and where they were or anything, and he just does not, he doesn't talk much. Up until just the last three or four years he has kind of opened up a little bit, but he just never talked much. So I talked to the kids and that was it. Dickey went into the Air Force one time when he got out of high school. He figured he needed the chance to learn something and he needed the discipline, and that was fairly good for him. He was a weather observer, but there was no conflict at the time. It was after the Korean War and before the Vietnam War, so he just missed it.

S: Lucky.

L: Yes, yes.

S: What do you remember about the death of President Roosevelt, on 12 April 1945?

L: Oh yes, because it was almost the same time as Dickey's birthday, and it was almost the same time as the end of the war, too, because so soon after that Truman dropped the first A-bomb. *(pauses four seconds)* I don't remember so much. You have to know, Harry Truman, *(starts to cry)* he reminds me of my dad so much. *(gets*

*up to get a tissue*) My dad was a real little guy, and he was an officer in the First World War. *(pauses ten seconds; cries more)*

A: Take your time.

L: There was something about it. *(blows her nose with the tissue)* There was something about him that reminded me so much of my dad. *(pauses five seconds and begins to cry again)* One of the fellows from down home who had been in service and had come home. *(pauses five seconds)* My dad was the only one that, when he saw him in his uniform, he snapped to attention, he saw the guy was a lieutenant and he had been to officer candidate school and so he knew what the guy had to study and he really appreciated it. My dad had been the only officer that had come back to our little town, the other guys were infantry. And I suppose there was a few sergeants along the way. But his lieutenant bars were big stuff out in the [American] Legion down there, but you know what that was all about, he hadn't been in the conflict part of World War I. He had been in what they call the depot brigade in Fort Dodge, Iowa. The crew that ran the camp, he was a drill sergeant, like I say he was a little guy.

When I had high heels on I was taller than he was, he was 5'3". And I was 5'1/4", and with two inch heels that made me taller than he was. And he liked that, but he was a little guy and he had a voice on him, he was real nice, but when he said do it, you did it with no question. *(laughs)* When he said jump, you said how far.

A: I understand.

L: Yeah, I remember when the war was over, literally right on that bridge on Fourth Street and, oh I don't know, the street that crosses. Anyway, the trains would go under the bridge and everybody was outside hollering and I waved to the engineer told him to blow the whistle, the war was over, and that's how they got the word on that train. *(pauses briefly and begins to cry again)* Naturally I do this [crying]! *(laughs)* Can you think of anything else?

S: Were there any differences in your feelings towards the victory in Europe and the victory in Japan?

L: Well, by that time it was almost anti-climactic, because Gerry had been in Europe. So as far as we were concerned, as long as he was going to come home from there, he was not going to have to go onto Japan, so this was our only consideration, what to do when he got home.

A: How did people react in your workplace, or in your neighborhood?

L: Well, every once and a while somebody's husband would come home, and all of a sudden they were not at work. *(laughs)* As far as the neighborhood was concerned, I had my landlady downstairs, and the only thing in the neighborhood was like a grocery store and the old Bridgeman's [ice cream parlor] down the next block. It

wasn't as though I knew people in the neighborhood; I only knew the people next door who had a tailor shop, and their daughter would baby-sit while I worked nights. She would come over after supper and I would take a nap and I would get Dickey to bed. Then I would take a nap and try to remember to wake up before it was time to go to work. *(laughs)*

One time I went to sleep waiting for the streetcar. A police car stopped and gave me a ride to work. I had missed the bus and there was only one bus; I had to walk clear cross campus. *(pauses five seconds)* I don't remember if it was buses or street cars, but there were times it was a hassle because it was a double fare going over to St. Paul to work, and I remember one night I had gotten my check from Gerry, the monthly allotment check. And the stores around our neighborhood were closed and I just had one streetcar token, so I could only make one trip and it wasn't enough to get to work. So I went downtown and the only place I could open find to cash the check was a liquor store, and I hated to go into the liquor store because I looked like I was about fourteen. But that was the only place I could cash the check, and I cashed the check and then I could buy tokens to go get home, and tokens to get to work the next day. But, that was just one thing that I remembered that happened once.

A: During the war do you remember any shortages or rations?

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L: Oh yes, toilet paper. We had ration books for meat, but with just me and my kid sister and the baby, it wasn't as if I had to do a lot of cooking. So, it isn't like when you cook for your husband or boyfriend where you had to have hamburger, pork chops, and roast beef and stuff like that. We lived a lot easier than that and *(laughs)* we ate a lot cheaper than that. But that's... Well, we had a lot of Spam, it seem to me that was a mainstay. It was to make sandwiches for work and it went a long way. When you haven't got much money to spend you don't eat big. I remember when a neighbor kid was taking care of Dickey one time, she ate up all that was left of the open Spam that was going to be my sandwiches for all week. *(laughs)* She lost her job in a hurry. She ate a whole jar of pickles too, in just one night babysitting. If I had anything in the cupboards she cleaned that out.

A: *(laughs)* What else would you like to add?

*(five second pause)*

L: At work I learned a lot about plastic materials because one of the fellows was an old chemistry teacher, and he kind of taught us some of the things. And then we learned just how to run the big hydraulic presses; that was something I never even dreamed about. We didn't have tools at home like Gerry did for working on the car; my dad was not a great hand for that. He could fix things in the store and he could sew things and he did a lot, but I didn't learn how to fix things and do things until I got married and found out that Gerry could fix things and do things, and that was

great. A girl asked me one time, "What should I look for in a husband?" And I said, "Somebody who can fix things, really fix things good, make things. They're worth their weight in gold."

There was one time when money was awful tight, and Gerry said, "We might not be able to afford to buy insurance." And I said, "Honey, we got \$10,000 insurance. What did you pay income tax on last year?" It was probably about that, and I said, "How long do you suppose that much would last me and three kids, if we didn't have you here to do things, to do all the things that you do?" And he saw my point.

If there's anything you want to know that I didn't think of or remember, just get in touch with me.

A: Thank you very much for your time today

**END OF INTERVIEW**