

## **Life during World War II**

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Sitting in a room as familiar to me as my own face in the mirror and preparing to interview my grandmother, Mattie McNeese Honaker, I realized that the home and life I associated with her had actually been only a small part of her existence. She has lived in this home for longer than I have been alive, and yet that was not even half her life. It was at that moment I realized I should never take for granted the years of wisdom I have been given to learn from through my grandparents; instead, I should listen to them, learn from them, and never forget their stories.

Mattie McNeese was born on December 16, 1922, in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Her family was not wealthy in a monetary sense. They lived by necessity, as did many people of this era. One luxury that was never neglected, however, was reading material. There were frequent outings to the library, and the newspaper was a daily purchase. Mattie's mother, Queenie, read the newspaper from front page to back page every morning, reading tidbits and interesting articles aloud to her family.

This environment promoted an awareness of the world, and encouraged reading and education which influenced Mattie greatly. In September of 1940, at the age of seventeen, Mattie was ready to enter the world and begin her life professionally; she began with nursing school. However, eighteen years of age was the youngest at which one could enter the nursing program. With the impatience typical of youth and an eagerness to learn, Mattie decided to circumvent the age rule. She applied to nursing school using the birthdate of her best friend.

Nursing school was a controlled environment where learning was “king.” All the students lived in the nursing school dormitory. The students had tight schedules with time allotted for studying and time when they were to work in the hospital. Each day began early and ended late. Students were allowed three nights out a week, with an eleven o’clock curfew. On the nights the girls were allowed out, the two nursing supervisors stayed up as well. Each sat at an entrance and waited until all their charges had safely returned.

World War II began while Mattie lived in this structured learning environment. Mattie was taking care of a patient, who happened to have a radio in his room, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s voice came through the speaker, and Mattie heard a speech that would be quoted in history books for centuries to come. She heard the President declare that December 7, 1941, the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, was a day that would live in infamy. She heard the President ask Congress to declare war. Mattie had known there was unrest in the world. She was aware of what was going on in Germany, but it was this day that the unrest came into her world and changed it forever.

Mattie’s life didn’t change in the ways that many people’s did because she lived in such a controlled environment. Her daily needs were met by the school. There were changes, however, that could not be avoided. The Bogalusa National Guard was called into action. Uncles, cousins, and friends were traveling all over the country when most of them had never been farther than Mississippi. Donating blood became a routine act among the nursing students who knew how important it would be. Food was rationed. Everyday materials were being used to supply the war effort and therefore normal household items were changing. Mattie explained,

I remember we stopped wearing panty hose<sup>1</sup> and started wearing cardboard shoes.

One night I bought a new pair of black pumps to go out dancing. By the time the

night was over I had worn the heels off of both shoes. Rubber and other materials were helping with the war effort. We weren't a military country at the time. We didn't have the army that we have now in the way of people or machinery. But we learned fast and grew fast. We are Americans. We always come through.

In July of 1942, the war took something from Mattie far more important than hose or shoes. It was then Mattie's boyfriend Doug Honaker, joined the United States Marine Corps. Doug was shipped out to fight in the Pacific. In December of 1943, Doug came home on leave and on the 31st of the month he and Mattie were married. Again, Mattie lied to the officials at nursing school, as students weren't allowed to be married, but patience was obviously not Mattie's strong suit. Doug became a Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. He was a drill instructor when on American soil and an airplane mechanic overseas. He was once asked to go to flight school, but told his superiors no as, "his wife was too young to be a widow."

While Doug was fighting overseas, Mattie graduated from Nursing School. She accepted a position at Charity Hospital in New Orleans working in the delivery room. The war was a constant topic of conversation among the people in Mattie's life and revolved around how the war was affecting their lives. They talked about what they missed most about life before the war and about people overseas, people they had lost. They watched the newsreels at movie theaters and listened to President Roosevelt's fireside chats on the radio. Nostalgia for the days before the war was common, but never complaint. This was a war that had to be fought, and people would give up whatever was necessary to see that it was successful.

When Mattie was not working at the hospital, she was at home with her parents discussing the news events or writing letters to Doug. Often, she would listen to, "I'll Be Seeing You," by Frank Sinatra when writing her love letters. Mattie almost signed up for the Army

Corps of Nurses, but her husband returned home from overseas before the paperwork went through. He stopped her from joining, and together, they moved to California. They were living in California on the day the war ended. It was a military community, and everyone was “practically dancing in the streets.” When the war ended, they moved back home to Bogalusa, Louisiana. Doug went to college on the GI Bill at Old Miss. He became a football coach at the local high school. They raised a son and lived out the rest of their lives in Bogalusa. Doug passed away on December 1, 1993, just a few days short of their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

After listening to my grandmother’s story, I realized that although our nation has changed, although the government is not the same, and the war we fight today is not respected, we remain a united nation. Most of us still feel pride at the sight of the American Flag or a soldier in his uniform. Our national anthem can bring tears to our eyes. One thing we have not lost over the years, one thing we learned from our grandmothers and grandfathers, is a great love and pride for this United States of America.

#### Endnotes

1. At the time, panty-hose were made from nylon. During the war, nylon was used when making parachutes for the war effort and therefore nylon stockings became scarce in America.

#### Reference

Mary, B. (n.d.). *The History of Pantyhose and Nylon—Who was the Inventor of Pantyhose?*

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