

Department of History and American Studies
University of Mary Washington
Fredericksburg, Virginia

Alice Royall Acree Clarke
Rosie the Riveter and the World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
James Hitch
in 2012

This interview was conducted by a student in an oral history seminar in the Department of History and American Studies at the University of Mary Washington. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this interview transcript are covered by a legal agreement between the interviewee and the University of Mary Washington. The interview transcript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the University of Mary Washington. No part of the interview transcript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Department of History and American Studies, University Mary Washington, 1301 College Avenue, Fredericksburg, Virginia, 22401, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:
Rosie the Riveter and the World War II American Home Front Oral History Project: An Oral History with Alice Clarke conducted by James Hitch, Date, Department of History and American Studies, University of Mary Washington, 2012.

(00:00:04) Alice Clarke: My name is Alice Royall Acree Clarke I was born on September 13, 1928.

James Hitch: Can you talk about growing up in Lynchburg Virginia?

(00:00:20) Alice Clarke: I grew up in Lynchburg. I lived there for 25 years before I was married. It was a very nice place in which to grow up. I'm afraid that during the war years, since I was 13 to 17 it was a time of self-centeredness for people my age. We have agreed on that because I have talked to some of my friends from that period and so I can't say we were aware of the hardships that a lot of people were going through. Meaning people who had to go into the service, or people whose business were affected. We were not concerned with that at all, just mostly with ourselves. Except for the fact that I did lose a brother in 1942. And that made a big difference; it affected my parents in a way that is just unspeakable. And my father, I think just for the rest of his life, because was a boy who was going to go into business with him, which was in insurance and real estate. My father had an insurance and real estate business in Lynchburg called Acree and Peck. And he was grooming his son to go into that with him, and so he died at the age of 24. That was a hard blow.

James Hitch: When you were growing up in Lynchburg Virginia can you look back and remember anything along the lines of the racial diversity in Lynchburg while you were growing up?

(00:02:32) Alice Clarke: I don't remember, if you mean the percentage of black?

James Hitch: Not necessarily the percentage but just the generic feel of what type of racial diversity there was. That you were surrounded by.

(00:02:48) Alice Clarke: We were surrounded by blacks, black people, some of who were employed in our home. We had a wonderful helper I liked to call her named Suzie who was with us from the time I was 6 years old until my father died. Which was in 1966, so that was a long loving association. And they were beloved, those who stayed with families were much beloved. And aside from that I don't know much about the, of course we all know about segregation and it was just unspeakable, it was horrible. As I think about it now I am just ashamed to even let my children and grandchildren know how we acted then. But that was the way everybody was, so that was the way we were taught and that's the way we were.

James Hitch: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Their household roles? The jobs they held?

(00:04:13) Alice Clarke: Well my father was busy with his business, insurance and real estate. His office was downtown on Church Street. And I remember going by there frequently, just to visit with him or to ask him things after school maybe because it was not too far from high school which was E.C. Glass. And my mother was not employed. She worked in the home, she was a wonderful homemaker. She sowed, she cooked, she

baked, she took care of the gardens, she directed somebody to take care of the yards. She was just a wonderful mother. But she did not have a job outside the home.

James Hitch: And you would say this is pretty par for the course for this period?

(00:05:21) Alice Clarke: Yes I would say so, for the ones, the women I knew. The mothers I knew.

James Hitch: So growing up as the youngest of four children, how would you describe your childhood in you dynamic?

(00:05:41) Alice Clarke: I would describe it as a good childhood. I am sure that my sister who was 8 years older, my brother who was 19 months older and I were subject to maybe over protection, which I didn't understand then but I certainly have understood afterwards. Because my parents had lost two babies early on, they had died with intestinal problems. And then they lost this son at age 24 so they were cautious. They were cautious with who I went out with and where I went and what I did. But they were, I look back on that now and I do not, I don't think about that as being something that I disliked them for because I understand it. As you will.

James Hitch: Can you talk to me and discuss your relationship and just some information on your 3 siblings?

(00:07:08) Alice Clarke: Well my relationship with my brother was that of a much older sibling with babyish kind of sister. I remember he protected me at least once out in the yard, when I was playing a bullying type of, group of children. And he saw that, and he ran out and intervened. So he was a very loving brother and he wrote me letters and just the way I remember him. But I was 14 when he died so, you know and he was 24 so I didn't have a long relationship with him, but what I did was very loving. My sister was wonderful, she helped me out in lots of occasions, she made things lighter for me when I was in college and I was trying to get, we had so many rules then. If you had a general permission from home, you could do more things and she helped with that, getting that through, she gave me presents, she was a good older sister. My brother and I were obviously close from childhood, we were playmates, he was 19 months older. As the years went on we became less close, but in high school and I think into college we double dated some. He wrote to me from college and from his time in the navy. We communicated after we were married, he called often. We had long conversations. So I don't have anything to complain of about my family relationships.

James Hitch: So as you grew older, I know you mentioned that you were in some sort of a self-centered stage based on your age during this period. But what do you remember of your junior high years with the emergence of a world war in Europe and were you aware of art sort of foreign relations even superficially or have any idea of the global unrest in and the condition of foreign affairs?

(00:10:03) Alice Clarke: I guess I did, for one thing, I was thinking about this a day or two ago, we went to, movies didn't stop, newspapers didn't stop. So we had all that and the movies were where, that was our chief form of entertainment as little teenagers. And that was how we dated, we went to movies together. The movies had newsreels at the beginnings that enabled us, since we had no television, to see the war in action. It was interesting. That sort of kept us up. And newspapers.

James Hitch: Okay, can you talk a little bit more about these news reels and short clips that you remember seeing whether it was before you watched movies or whatever was written about in the paper?

(00:11:17) Alice Clarke: I don't know anything more. I don't know what you mean James. There were means of information as was radio. Radio was big. And I remember when my family was most concerned about John, my brother; Daddy would even bring radio to the dining room table at dinner. Just to listen to the news and if we happened to talk, the rest of us, or giggle or in some other way upset, you didn't want to do that with my father. He was pretty stern when it came to the war.

James Hitch: That's interesting.

(00:12:19) Alice Clarke: He wanted to hear what was happening so he knew what was happening with his son.

James Hitch: Looking back at these pieces of information offered in newspapers, in movies and on the radio. Would you say they had some sort of propaganda twist to them or do you think they were more of an objective center to broadcast information to the citizens of the United States?

(00:13:02) Alice Clarke: I think I was too young to discriminate between those two attitudes. I guess they were factual information but Mr. Torgler could probably help you more with that one.

James Hitch: What are some of your first memories of hearing about war breaking out?

(00:13:35) Alice Clarke: James I knew you were going to ask me that. And I know everybody supposed to know where they were when the war started. When Roosevelt announced we were at war. And when the peace came in 1945. But I just have to admit; I do not remember where I was. I'm sure there was great consternation in our house because of John. See this was December 7, 1941. He was at Pearl Harbor. He was stationed at Pearl Harbor. He was on the Enterprise aircraft carrier, but I think they had moved out of the harbor at that particular time when the Japs attacked because their ship was not affected. So that was December of 1941 and it was not until October of 1942 when he was, when the ship was in the south Pacific. It was the battle of Santa Cruz and that's when he was killed by a Japanese bomb.

James Hitch: Shifting back toward the home front and back in Lynchburg, what are some of the things you remember changing after the beginning of the war? For example, rationing? The blackout practices? The paper drives? The meatless Tuesdays? What can you tell me about these sorts of things?

(00:15:25) Alice Clarke: All four of those. I know the paper drives occurred when we were in high school. That was a wonderful time because we got out of school. So everyone volunteered for paper drives. And you would go out on a truck somewhere and collect. Pick up newspapers, and take them to a certain point. I don't remember a whole lot about that but I know that's how that happened. And blackouts, they had air raid wardens in each neighborhood. And there were fathers of families in the neighborhood and so when the siren sounded and there was any light showing, he would come around and I don't whether there was any punishment connected with that or not. But people had blackout curtains; the streetlights were blacked out. I mean everything was black. And I'm sure if you talked to somebody who lived in Norfolk, that would be you know a really big story. Now I don't know how often this happened, somebody suggested two or three times a month. I sort of doubt if it was the frequent in Lynchburg but Lynchburg of course is inland. I talked to somebody who grew up in Martinsburg West Virginia and she was very hazy about the war. She is a person my age and she is hazy because she said they were just not affected and she just went on about her way. As she thought about it, she said there were about 70 miles from Washington so must have been a little bit of cause for concern. But they had everything, blackouts, rationing, they had everything everyone else did but I guess maybe not with the frequency. And rationing, I have ration books. Do you want to see my ration books? One for me. Everyone in the family had a ration book and we lived in my grandmother's house and so there was one for her, my sister, for my mother, and for Suzie who was our maid. And I don't know where my father's was. I don't know why I don't have that, but as you see inside, they had little tickets and every time you purchased something that was rationed. I don't know what these stood for. I wish I did. Every time you purchased something they took a ticket. But you could use tickets out of other family members ration books and I have another one that's my own. I have tried to find it and couldn't find it. Sugar, gas, meat, butter, and oil products I think. And processed foods. Somebody reminded me of that the other day. And did I say shoes? Because of the leather, that came a little bit later. And I found out that most of the rationing was stopped at the end of 1945 except sugar. And that was rationed until 1947. A historian told me that. Let's see James. There was a pressure to make consumer goods available. And the major concern according to my history professor friend was how to avoid a rush on certain commodities that had been rationed. So sugar was the last to go off of the list.

James Hitch: What were parents' opinions and reactions to the start of the war? Do you remember them changing their attitudes, or adjusting in a specific way?

(00:22:03) Alice Clarke: No I don't remember that. They never adjusted to my brother's death. I remember, mother was a very stoic women, she did not show her feelings. She had been through a lot in her childhood. So she kept her feelings inward. I remember at that time when a service person was killed there had been some arrangement that

somebody close to the family would receive the telegram and then go to the family. And I remember my uncle, my mother's brother who lived in Lynchburg at that time, coming to the house. I remember that vividly. And if it were almost as if she knew what was going to happen. But I can see my father crying at the breakfast table.

James Hitch: What do you remember about you and your families' feeling about John joining the military after he graduated from UVA?

(00:24:14) Alice Clarke: Well, I don't remember that. I don't remember what the feelings were, but I'm sure it was just a given thing that any warm blooded healthy young man was going to do that and those who didn't were, I have to say, looked down on. And I'm sure there were conscientious objectors but I don't know who they were. But I wouldn't want to be one of those around people who had lost boys in the war.

James Hitch: Do you think John joining the navy inspired Warren to do so as well? And do you think he would have joined the military had John not joined?

(00:25:06) Alice Clarke: I don't know. I have a card from him when he was in training at Bainbridge Maryland. This being Warren, my younger older brother. He was in the hospital for some reason there but he went from there to Guantanamo Bay. And this card was dated April of 1945. So say he went in 1945 but the war wasn't over until August of 1945. I don't know whether you were drafted then. I wouldn't have thought so but the war wasn't over, maybe you were. And I think John would have gone because it was the honorable thing to do.

James Hitch: You mentioned earlier a certain nationwide sentiment towards young men joining the war? Can you talk a little bit more about that?

(00:26:35) Alice Clarke: You mean the ones who didn't?

James Hitch: Well just the national outlook on young men joining the war.

(00:26:49) Alice Clarke: There was a great appreciate of it. Is that what you mean. You know the war effort behind these young people was just tremendous. You were urged to write them, to send cookies, that type of thing. And they were much admired, and much praised. And I have a church bulletin from December 1945 and it gives a list. This is a list from people from our church, who were in the war. And this was a church, I would guess we had 500 members. And there was a star by those who were killed. And out of this list there were only two that were killed. And you will notice some women's names. And that was because the WAC and the WAF and the WAV. You know those branches. Women's Air Force, WAVs were obviously the women in the navy. And I know some people my age here who have served overseas.

James Hitch: Do you remember any sort of emotions or reactions within your family after finding out John was being stationed in Pearl Harbor?

(00:29:35) Alice Clarke: No. I don't know that anybody attached any importance to the fact that Pearl Harbor was dangerous.

James Hitch: Just in the sense that it was a very long way away?

(00:29:55) Alice Clarke: Well yes that was true. And I told you he was married there.

James Hitch: Were you all aware that John was not stationed in Pearl Harbor the day it went under attack from Japan?

(00:30:07) Alice Clarke: No I don't think we were aware then but I think we got some kind of notice from him not too long after that saying he was safe. He was married in September of 1941. Obviously this was December of 1941 and dependents had to leave shortly before that I don't know how long before that. But she was here so she wasn't in any danger.

James Hitch: What kind of reactions do you remember your family, your friends, and the community around you having after learning about Japan attacking Pearl Harbor?

(00:31:09) Alice Clarke: Well, fear and horror. Concern for the boys that we knew would be in danger. I would say. Disbelief.

James Hitch: After the start of the war, how would you describe the community in Lynchburg support behind the war effort.

(00:31:42) Alice Clarke: Oh large. I just think people in this country; it was a time of rallying around and it was a time when everybody was equal. And no particular dispensation for any one person. It didn't matter whether you had a million dollars or a thousand, you still had to be subject to rationing. People were sympathetic of families who had lost their boys. The outpouring over John and I think he was the first Lynchburg boy killed. It was either John or one other one. It was just an outpouring of sympathy and I just think the whole nation rallied around and did what they had to do. That's my impression of it and I'm glad I have that impression. You know that some people had more gas than others.

James Hitch: How much correspondence did you remember your family having with your brother John while he was deployed?

(00:33:17) Alice Clarke: Good correspondence. He was just a good son. He was. And I have letters he wrote his mother, here's one he wrote his father. He wrote them to me. He wrote them to my sister and me together. So he was just a good conscientious boy.

James Hitch: So I know you mentioned it briefly, but do you mind retouching on the first time you heard about the death of your brother?

(00:34:20) Alice Clarke: We were living at 2140 Rivermont. I remember exactly where I was. Not that's a time I do remember where I was. I remember I was upstairs at that house and my uncle and mother coming upstairs to tell her. I don't remember her falling apart at all. As I said before she was very stoic. She kept her feelings to herself. I do remember one thing, to show how people who had sons in the service were on edge as you can imagine. And I remember in 1941, because I have this in my little diary, my sisters birthday which is December 11th. We were assembled at home and a Western Union man can across the yard with a telegram. And my mother did fall apart then. She rushed in the bathroom and just was hysterical. And the reason for the telegram was my sister's birthday. But she thought it was going to be about John. So that was a little sign of edginess. I'm sure for them constant worry.

James Hitch: Can you talk a little bit more about your parents' reaction? Specifically your father?

(00:36:34) Alice Clarke: To his death? Well I said a little earlier I remember seeing him at the breakfast table with tears streaming down his face. My mother just as affected by it as he was but he did not deal with it as well I didn't think. He wouldn't talk about it much. It was just awful. That's all I can say James. It affected our lives because it affected theirs. As much as they tried, especially my mother, make things normal for the rest of us. Especially my brother and me because we were in that teen age. When we should have been doing fun things. And she helped with that. She was good with that.

James Hitch: So you said your mom bring helped bring back some sense of normalcy, as much normalcy as she could following this news.

(00:38:01) Alice Clarke: Yes I would say that.

James Hitch: Despite that how would you say you as well as Warren and Leighton responded to this news?

(00:38:17) Alice Clarke: I don't have any idea how Warren responded. I don't remember that at all. I'm sure Day, my sister, was kind of like me. Upset, but she was 21 and I don't have a whole lot of memory of that James, I have to say. She was 22, I was 14. She was 22.

James Hitch: Can you talk about the sort of community response that surrounded the news of the death of your brother?

(00:39:06) Alice Clarke: It was amazing; I think I have already gone into that a little bit. Yes it was just amazing you know there were letters written. For one thing, I think my family was pretty well known in the community and he had had an outstanding career at UVA. A lot of people knew that and a lot of the men who were the business associates of my father had maybe gone to UVA games, where he was captain of the football team his last year. He was just outstanding. Much beloved and admired. I would say he was admired greatly. So the community just responded to that.

James Hitch: How would you describe John's death on you and your parents' outlooks on the war from then on?

(00:40:47) Alice Clarke: Well I remember in my childish ways being mad at the Japanese. I remember writing down somewhere, on the back of a letter or something, "the Japs killed my brother." So I was affected by it, I remember we had a preacher at our church who was a pacifist. And that did not sit well with my father having just lost a son to a non-pacifist event. But that's all I know about that.

James Hitch: How long after John's death was the destroyer escort named after him? And how did you and your family receive this type of news?

(00:41:58) Alice Clarke: We were thrilled with that. And it was not long. I would guess it was, I don't know. I would say a couple of years. This is a letter to John's wife from the secretary of the navy, Frank Knox. I'm sure he did that for all seamen. What were you just asking me that I was looking up?

James Hitch: How you and your receive the news of..

(00:43:25) Alice Clarke: Oh the news about the, yeah that was a thrill. What do you have a commissioning and a launching. But there is no date on that either. 1943. The letter was dated May 3rd and the launching was May the 9th. That was less than a year after he died.

James Hitch: So transitioning from your oldest brother John to your sister Leighton and Warren. How would you describe the way your sister adjusted to having many of the men her age deployed or stationed away from home?

(00:45:14) Alice Clarke: I was 13 to 17. My sister was 8 years older, she was 20 when the war broke out. It was hard on that age of young woman when they should have had men to date and be thinking of marriage. So most of the eligible men were gone. One thing they did for the war effort, there was an organization in most towns, the USO. The United Services Organization and they had dances and parties for servicemen. And I remember my sister going to those. And you would go and just heavily chaperoned. I forgot, somewhere downtown. You would dance with and talk to the servicemen. I don't know whether she had any other part in the war effort or not. But a lot of people did. People knitted things for the men and they baked and cooked and there were a lot of thoughtful things done to backup servicemen.

James Hitch: Do you remember any sort of additional function of venue that was used to facilitate this mixed sex interaction with women and men your age, and your sister's age, other than the USO shows?

(00:47:25) Alice Clarke: No, I have heard some people say they entertained servicemen in their homes. I don't think we did this. But I remember seeing my sister's dates come. When servicemen had time off seeing them come in uniform. Actually the man who

became her second husband, she met when she was 16 years old, and he was in the navy. He wasn't in the navy then, I don't know what the age difference was. Very handsome in his naval officer uniform.

James Hitch: Moving to Warren for a minute. How did your parents react when Warren expressed interest in joining in the military?

(00:48:50) Alice Clarke: I don't know. I guess they just accepted the fact that that was the thing he was supposed to do. I don't remember anybody objecting. And a lot of people had two or three people in the service.

James Hitch: Do you remember how you felt knowing that you had an older brother who had died and now had another brother join the military as well.

(00:49:36) Alice Clarke: No, I don't. Because I think the general thought was that most danger had passed. And he had trained in Bainbridge Maryland and then went to Guantanamo Bay and there was nothing going on. I don't know why Guantanamo Bay but I remember that's where he was. So I don't think there was any fear that something would happen to him.

James Hitch: Do you remember ever getting to go visit Warren after he joined the service and if so, can you talk a little bit about what it was like?

(00:50:31) Alice Clarke: That's interesting you ask me that. I do remember that. I remember going with my father on a train, up to Bainbridge. I think we had a meal with him or something. We didn't spend the night. And then coming back, I think it was just a visit. My mother had some health problems, so she that's probably why she didn't make that trip. She had high blood pressure and heart problems in her adult life.

James Hitch: Do you remember the status of the war when Warren enlisted in the navy? And what the general attitude concerning the war was by the time he joined later into the war?

(00:51:40) Alice Clarke: Well this letter from him is written in '45. I'm just thinking he probably went in in '45 because he was still in Bainbridge. No, I don't remember much about that.

James Hitch: Can you share any of the memories who have regarding the atomic bomb dropping in Nagasaki as well as Hiroshima?

(00:52:30) Alice Clarke: No, I don't remember. I can understand why you'd ask but I just don't remember James. I don't remember being horrified, as I'm sure I probably was. Most of us were.

James Hitch: Do you remember any sort of specific event that signified the end of the war? Whether it was for your family or your community in Lynchburg? And what type of changes that came along with that final stepping stone of the war?

(00:53:23) Alice Clarke: No.

James Hitch: You don't remember any sort of changes following the end of the war? Things going back to normal?

(00:53:36) Alice Clarke: I do not think it took long for things to go back to normal. That's kind of the surprising thing. I think people had some money then because there were a lot of things they hadn't been able to spend money on during the war. So when they no longer had to worry about the war and there was no longer rationing from the war, they could spend more money. I think normalcy came about fairly quickly, but I may be wrong about that. As I said, somebody told me that it was a major concern how to avoid a rush on certain commodities. Like shoes. It was a pressure to make consumer goods available.

James Hitch: Do you think that sort of pressure lifted after the end of the war?

(00:55:10) Alice Clarke: I think so, yeah. This was an interesting that somebody told me, of course the people that lived in Norfolk had a different experience from us as we've said. Because they had German subs out there. Somebody told me that the Virginia Beach Inn Keepers in '41 and '42 were advertising to come to Virginia Beach. And then later after that, they had to put out ads that said don't come to Virginia Beach because the military had taken over the inns. So I thought that was an interesting point. I think I told you this James. In high school I remember, and I would love for someone to explain this to me. Our physical education took the shape of marching in squads. Left, right, harch. Right flank harch. Left flank harch. I don't know why we did that but I know we did it. It is a vivid memory of mine as many other things are not. The thing that I've concluded was that there was a fear that the war might be fought on our shores eventually. I mean who knew. And that we might in someway be involved.

James Hitch: Do you remember there being any communal sense of elation once the war was won?

(00:57:39) Alice Clarke: I don't remember that but I'm sure there was. However, I would guess, somehow I have a memory of that elation in my family was tempered a little bit. You know because we didn't have our son coming home. That was everyone else was very excited about, was the boys. They didn't have to worry about them anymore.

James Hitch: So how would you describe the way John's death settled within your family after the conclusion of the war?

(00:58:28) Alice Clarke: How it was settled? Well with my parents it was ever present. Especially my father. But you know, I was a young woman and I was having a good time. It was my time of lie to have a good time, and I did. I went to college in 1946. I

remember the trains going down to South Carolina being crowded with soldiers. Either on leave or coming home. See '46 to '48. That's my memory about the soldiers there. On a street in Lynchburg, there was a big board at the foot of a hill, 9th street hill. Big board with all the names of servicemen on it, who served from Lynchburg. And if they were killed there was a gold star put by their name.

James Hitch: Do you remember that staying there for a long period of time?

(01:00:09) Alice Clarke: No I don't. I imagine it did though. I imagine for a while. About gas rationing, my friend who lived in Lynchburg told me that she remembers driving to the beach with her friend and her friend's mother, and the mother drove 35 mph. Must have taken them a week to get to Virginia Beach. And that was because of that rationing. You know you just thought about everything you did with a car. And you couldn't buy new tires. You could only buy retreads.

James Hitch: Is there anything else, any other stories, any other remarks you'd like to add before we conclude?

(01:01:28) Alice Clarke: I don't think so. Do you remember the slogan; Lucky Strike has gone to war? Lucky Strike was a brand of cigarettes. I don't know if they still have them or not, very popular brand. And they were encased in a tinfoil package. That was on chewing gum wrappers too and that was a kind of aluminum. Like a mild kind of medal I guess it's what it was. So under pressure they changed their packaging, and their ad was Lucky Strike was gone to war. Still had lucky strike, but they didn't have the same kind of packaging.