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.

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Discursive Table of Contents—Doris Stefaniga

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Background information- Full name Doris Mills Stefaniga, born October 10t, 1930- From Spotsylvania, Virginia- Family description- Two much older half siblings, one full younger sister- father worked for the RF&P railroad, mother was a homemaker- Separate African American communities- Growing up during the Depression- Effects of war on her mother, rationing.

1-00:10:48
Extent of her education- First job right out of high school- Religion big part of life- Going to the theater- how received information the war- Typical day for mother and father.

1-00:20:05
Transportation- Riding the train- Labor shortage- Rural living- End of war- Jobs she held- Social life, dating- meeting her husband- Discussion of her wedding.

1-00:30:18
Family trips nonexistent- Day trips with the church- Effects of war on community minimal- No memory of Hiroshima or Nagasaki.
Simonpietri:
I’m Kendall Simonpietri here with Doris Stefaniga on October, 16th 2012 in Stafford, Virginia. If you could just tell us your first name, date of birth and where you are from.

Stefaniga:
OK, Doris Mills Stefaniga. Uh, October 10th 1930. And-

Simonpietri:
Where you’re from.

Stefaniga:
From Spotsylvania County- Well from Stafford County.

Simonpietri:
Ok, Um can you tell us a little about your father and where he’s from?

Stefaniga:
My father’s name was Benjamin Franklin Mills. He worked for the RF and P railroad for 55 years. And he was from Spotsylvania County.

Simonpietri:
And what did he do for the railroad?

Stefaniga:
He worked on the tracks and later became foreman.

Simonpietri:
Ok, can we hear a little about your mother and her background?
Stefaniga:
My mother’s name was Laura Perks Mills. She didn’t work outside the home. She was a homemaker. And she was from Spotsylvania County too.

00:01:18
Simonpietri:
Ok, um, can you tell us a little bit about the first years of your life and your family life was like?

00:01:31
Stefaniga:
You mean when I was smaller?

00:01:35
Simonpietri:
Mhm, Yep.

00:01:38
Stefaniga:
I don’t remember much.

00:01:40
Simonpietri:
That’s ok, whatever you remember. What about siblings?

00:01:46
Stefaniga:
I had a sister Connie Mills and I had a half brother and sister. My half brother’s name was Joseph Mills and my half sister’s name was Lorraine Borne. And I went to school at Chancellor Elementary School and the first years of my life we lived at Summit, Virginia in a house where my father worked the railroad furnished a house for us to live in. And later he was transferred and we moved to Spotsylvania county Hamlin’s crossing and then also a home was also furnished for us to live in. And . . .

00:02:44
Simonpietri:
So your family moved based on your father’s job?

00:02:48
Stefaniga:
Yeah.
Simonpietri:
Um, do you know why you moved? Was it because he had-

Stefaniga:
Because he was transferred to a different section so we had to move.

Simonpietri:
Where were you in the birth order of your siblings?

Stefaniga:
I am the oldest of my sister, I’m older than my sister but my half sister she lived to be uh 94 years old and my brother he was older than I was but he had lung cancer and committed suicide.

Simonpietri:
You said you went to Chancellor Elementary. Do you remember much about school? If you had a favorite subject or?

Stefaniga:
No I don’t remember too much about school. I do remember getting in trouble at school and having to stand in the corner until one day I fainted and they never did make me stand in the corner anymore.

Simonpietri:
What about, were there any African Americans who went to your school?

Stefaniga:
No

Simonpietri:
No? Did they have their own school or?
00:04:04
Stefaniga:
They had their own schools.

00:04:06
Simonpietri:
What about communities? Did they- did your communities ever cross any?

00:04:13
Stefaniga:
No, I don’t think so, I can never remember ever being -associating with any when I was small.

00:04:22
Simonpietri:
Mhm, um what kind of things did you do for fun in your adolescence?

00:04:33
Stefaniga:
Well we didn’t have a whole lot to do. WE went to church a lot and on Sunday afternoons we lived close to the battlefield park so we would roller skate or walk through the park and then catch the train home. Because our father worked for the railroad we could ride the trains free. That’s what we did. That’s about it.

00:05:09
Simonpietri:
Spotsylvania was much more rural than it is now.

00:05:11
Stefaniga:
Oh yes

00:05:13
Simonpietri:
You grew up during the Depression, so that’s pretty much all you knew. Did you notice that is was like the hardest times for Americans or was that just kind of your normal?
No mainly when we were growing up though we were living in that area we always had everything that we needed. Always had plenty to eat and at Christmas time we didn’t get a whole lot but we got enough. And..

00:05:49
Simonpietri:
Um so when the war started you were 12.

00:05:54
Stefaniga:
12.

00:05:57
Simonpietri:
So did you notice any changes to your and how did you hear about the war?

00:06:06
Stefaniga:
Of course we didn’t have any TV and all we had was a radio and we had gone to the country store that afternoon and there were people there at the store talking about it that was how we found out about it.

00:06:16
Simonpietri:
Do you know if they found out about it from a radio or?

00:06:20
Stefaniga:
They probably did because like there wasn’t any television back then I don’t think, but we sure didn’t have any.

00:06:27
Simonpietri:
Right. Do you remember school changing at all during the war? Like before the war do you remember if you had mainly male teachers or female teachers?

00:06:40
Stefaniga:
Well mostly of course in elementary school I think all the teachers were females. When we got to high there were some male teachers.

00:06:49
Simonpietri:
Mhm, Um, what about your father’s job? Did it change at all during the war do you remember?

00:06:57
Stefaniga:
Yeah, during the war the railroad was an essential thing because they used the railroad to transport troops back and forth. My brother was called to service and because he also worked for the railroad he was deferred because his job that he was doing for the railroad was very essential to the time so he didn’t have to go then but he did later on go to war.

00:07:23
Simonpietri:
What did your brothers going to war, did that affect your family?

00:07:31
Stefaniga:
Well we were worried about him and anxious to hear from him and at the time he was married and he had a family but . .

00:07:42
Simonpietri:
Right. Um, what about your mother’s role in the household? Did it change at all during the war?

00:07:50
Stefaniga:
Well, she was always during the war there were certain things that were rationed that you had to have a coupon or stamp because you only got so much. She had some friends that would bring her their coupons where she could get extra coupons and butter because gas was rationed. There again my father, he was able to get more gas because he worked for the railroad and it was essential that he got to work. But, uh, she stayed home and you know, did the cooking and...

00:08:32
Simonpietri:
So, um, being a homemaker I’m sure rationing probably hit her pretty
Stefaniga:
Yeah it did. She tried all she could to get something extra stuff to cook with.

00:08:45
Simonpietri:
Do you remember some of the things she would make? Did you have a favorite food?

00:08:51
Stefaniga:
She was a good cook. She was a wonderful cook. She could make the best biscuits and cornbread, fried chicken. She always—she loved to cook and always cooked so much of everything.

00:09:06
Simonpietri:
You said your sister was older, you had an older sister.

00:09:11
Stefaniga:
Yeah my half sister

00:09:14
Simonpietri:
Did she, um, did she continue on with school through high school, or did she work?

00:09:20
Stefaniga:
No, no. She worked for years until she retired at G&H manufacturing where they made clothes, men’s clothing. Of course that’s not here anymore, its all gone.

00:09:37
Simonpietri:
Do you know what she did there?

00:09:40
Stefaniga:
I think, I’m not for sure, but I think she was what you call a spreader, where they spread the patterns on to the material to be cut.

00:09:53
Simonpietri:
Do you know when she started working there?

00:09:57
Stefaniga:
I don’t remember the year because we were just small children at home because she would come home on the weekends and when she came home she would always bring us stuff, bring us clothes and toys and stuff.

00:10:10
Simonpietri:
Oh so she was much older than you were.

00:10:13
Stefaniga:
Yeah she was 94 when she passed away. Four years ago on my birthday.

00:10:20
Simonpietri:
So, fourteen years older than you?

00:10:26
Stefaniga:
Yeah, she was a lot older than me.

00:10:30
Simonpietri:
Was that normal for girls her age to work?

00:10:40
Stefaniga:
Yeah, yeah it was. They had to work.

00:10:48
Simonpietri:
How far did you continue with your education?

00:10:53
Stefaniga:
I graduated from high school.
Simonpietri:
And where did you graduate from?

Stefaniga:
Spotsylvania High School.

Simonpietri:
What did you, when did you have your first job?

Stefaniga:
The day I graduated, 1947, and I went to work the next day at Gayle Motor Company.

Simonpietri:
And what did you do there?

Stefaniga:
In the office.

Simonpietri:
So was it secretarial work?

Stefaniga:
Yeah. And then after I left there I went to, uh, at the time we called it Sylvania plant. Now I think its Sysco. I worked there for about five years.

Simonpietri:
And what did you do at the Sylvania?
I worked in the bookkeeping department.

00:11:48
Simonpietri:
And why did you stop working there?

00:11:49
Stefaniga:
Because I got pregnant. I was.

00:11:58
Simonpietri:
Were, going back to when you were younger, were a lot of your friends, did you meet them at school or through the church?

00:12:06
Stefaniga:
Through the church mostly.

00:11:09
Simonpietri:
So the church was a big part of your life?

00:12:11
Stefaniga:
Yes, it was.

00:12:12
Simonpietri:
What denomination?

00:12:15
Stefaniga:
Baptist.

00:12:17
Simonpietri:
Were a lot of people in your community, were they mostly Baptist?
Stefaniga: Yes, all of the neighbors, that’s who we went to church with mainly.

00:12:33
Simonpietri: Were they in similar economic situations as you growing up or did you notice any difference?

00:12:42
Stefaniga: No, everybody seemed to be about on the same level.

00:12:49
Simonpietri: During the war do you remember going to movies at all? Were there any theaters around?

00:12:51
Stefaniga: Yeah, there were theaters. The theater was in downtown Fredericksburg the Victoria and the Colonial. We used to go, after we got older we would go on Friday nights with my brother and his wife would take us to town and to the movies. And then after that we would come home.

00:13:14
Simonpietri: Do you remember seeing, do you have a specific movie you remember?

00:13:22
Stefaniga: Well, I remember we went to see Gone with the Wind. But just really, basically we went to see what was playing on Friday nights. You didn’t have much choice.

00:13:37
Simonpietri: I remember I watched a clip of a cartoon, it was like Daffy Duck cartoon about the war. Do you remember anything about like, pro-war videos or films or anything?

00:13:59
Stefaniga: No.

00:14:00
Simonpietri:
During the course of the war did you have, do you remember getting information about it? How you would get information?

00:14:12
Stefaniga:
On the radio I think, I don’t know how often but they’d have a reporter on and everybody would gather around the radio and listen to it. We had like blackouts where you had to have your lights off and then they’d have air plane spotters. My sister, my older sister, she worked as an air plane spotter.

00:14:43
Simonpietri:
Do you remember your feelings about it? All that going on like as a small child?

00:14:51
Stefaniga:
No, I don’t remember. I was concerned because we all knew with the war being declared that, you know, our brother was going to have to go in to service.

00:15:04
Simonpietri:
While he was in service did he communicate a lot, or was he? Do you remember being…?

00:15:14
Stefaniga:
Well he, yeah, we used to get letters from him. There were no phone calls or anything like that.

00:15:33
Simonpietri:
Did you have a lot of extended family that lived around you growing up or was it?

00:15:40
Stefaniga:
No, it was just, well my sister and brother, you know, they were close by. And of course my sister lived in Fredericksburg because she lived there. She stayed there all week and would come home on the weekends. And my brother of course was at home. We were all at home.
So you didn’t have a lot of aunts and uncles and cousins living around?

00:16:03
Stefaniga: You mean now?

00:16:05
Simonpietri: No, when you were growing up.

00:16:05
Stefaniga: No.

00:16:08
Simonpietri: Do you remember what a typical day would’ve been like for your father when you were younger?

00:16:17
Stefaniga: Get up in the early morning and go to work and work and come home and usually if it was in the summer time he’d work in the garden. If it snowed or anything he’d have to go back to work because they’d have to keep the switches and all clean so the trains wouldn’t derail.

00:16:38
Simonpietri: And you said your mother was a homemaker. What was her typical day like?

00:16:47
Stefaniga: Same thing, she’d get up I guess and get us off to school, fix breakfast and get us off to school. Clean the house and in the summer time she did a lot of canning and preserving. Back in those days there was no television to watch and people went to bed early.

00:17:11
Stefaniga: They used to, of course, carry the troops on trains and where we lived was right by the railroad track and my sister and I we would go out and of course wave at the soldiers and after we were a
little older they would, they would throw their name and address out of the window and we’d pick it up and write to them.

00:17:44
Simonpietri:
Did you ever follow up with any of them?

00:17:46
Stefaniga:
No, no. And at the same time there were a lot of them. AP Hill was very active then and on Sunday my father would go part of the way and pick up 2 or 3 and bring them home to have Sunday dinner with us. And then he’d take them home, take them back to the base.

00:18:09
Simonpietri:
It sounds like there was quite a bit of military activity going around in the area.

00:18:118
Stefaniga:
Yeah, like on Friday and Saturday nights when you went down to downtown Fredericksburg there were so many soldiers down there that you could hardly get up and down the streets.

00:18:31
Simonpietri:
So were they waiting to go over to Europe or?

00:18:35
Stefaniga:
I don’t know, there was just a, it was an army base and like I said during the war it was real active, now it’s not but I don’t think they have you know, they go there for maneuvers and things but I don’t think there are many troops there now. That was down in Caroline County.

00:19:01
Simonpietri:
How different besides not have television would you say your childhood was from kids growing up today?
Stefaniga:
Oh, a whole lot of difference. A whole lot of difference. We just didn’t have any television and the only thing you could do to entertain yourself maybe was to read some. That’s it.

00:19:31
Simonpietri:
So you mentioned reading. Was there a library close by?

00:19:38
Stefaniga:
No, no.

00:19:42
Simonpietri:
So was it mainly school that you?

00:19:44
Stefaniga:
Yeah, you’d, well you’d go to the school library and get a book and read, that’s what you would read.

00:19:52
Simonpietri:
So it doesn’t sound like there was much around when you were growing up.

00:19:56
Stefaniga:
Not at all.

00:19:58
Simonpietri:
How far would you have to drive to get to say, the church or grocery store?

00:20:05
Stefaniga:
It wasn’t too far for church. Church I guess was still maybe about, maybe about 5 miles away. And even getting to Fredericksburg was just, was a short distance and there was no real big grocery store, there was just a little, a little country store that was about a mile away because when we got older we used to walk there and get ice cream and stuff. We didn’t have any cars
and we didn’t drive, I mean my father had a car but uh we, my sister now drives and my other sister drove too but she didn’t drive then. She just learned later in life how to drive.

Simonpietri:
So how did she mainly get around, do you know?

Stefaniga:
She rode the train. We rode the train for everything. I went to summer school and when I worked I’d go out and flag the train down in the morning and get on it and come home in the afternoon.

Simonpietri:
Wow, so just flag it down you didn’t have to go to a station?

Stefaniga:
Just flag it down, go like that. Flag it like that. We didn’t have to pay to ride the train because our father worked for the railroad.

Simonpietri:
Did you have a pass that said that?

Stefaniga:
Uh huh, we had a pass.

Simonpietri:
So you said your father worked for the railroad for fifty years?

Stefaniga:
Mhm, about fifty-five.

Simonpietri:
Do you know when he started working there?
Stefaniga: No, I don’t. I really don’t.

Simonpietri: Did he like working for the railroad?

Stefaniga: Yes he did.

Simonpietri: Do you know what he liked about it?

Stefaniga: I don’t know, he just, he just really, he did like it because he never missed work. I never heard him complain about having to go to work.

Simonpietri: What about your mother? Do you think she enjoyed being a homemaker?

Stefaniga: Oh yes. Mhm, oh yeah.

Simonpietri: Was it, during the war, was there like a labor shortage? Were there a lot of men who went off to work, or off to war and then women came in and worked?

Stefaniga: You know, I don’t know. But I think because I know my brother’s wife she went to work in a factory that made airplane parts so possibly that’s was--that’s what happened.
Simonpietri:
So your friends mothers, were they mostly homemakers?

Stefaniga:
Homemakers, yes.

Simonpietri:
And you said your sister was an airplane spotter?

Stefaniga:
She was an airplane spotter.

Simonpietri:
Was that in addition to her job in the…

Stefaniga:
Yeah you did that at nighttime. You did that at nighttime.

Simonpietri:
So she worked two jobs during the war.

Stefaniga:
I think the airplane spotter was more or less a volunteer thing. I don’t think there was any money involved in that.

Simonpietri:
Was there a big, did you have a victory garden or did your friends?
Oh we had a garden, a big garden. I don’t know if you’d call them victory or not but they’re gardens.

00:23:28
Simonpietri:
So you already had a garden it wasn’t necessarily for the war?

00:23:32
Stefaniga:
Yeah, we raised up, we raised up pigs and had you know, had our own pork and our mother stewed the fat out and made the lard, like I said she did a lot of canning so we had that all winter to eat.

00:23:51
Simonpietri:
Were a lot of the other people in your community more self sufficient like that?

00:23:57
Stefaniga:
Mhm, yeah. Most of them had gardens.

00:24:05
Simonpietri:
Were you or your family aware of what was going on in the rest of the country at all or was it just more like?

00:24:18
Stefaniga:
I don’t think I was. I didn’t show any interest in it.

00:24:25
Simonpietri:
So at the end of the war, were you closer to-- in high school by the end of the war?

00:24:36
Stefaniga:
Yeah I was in high school. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen.
So was that typical to graduate?

00:24:22
Stefaniga:
Now see, we didn’t have any kindergarten and you didn’t have any 8th grade back then and I started first grade when I was four years old.

00:24:57
Simonpietri:
So you were sixteen when you had your first job.

00:25:00
Stefaniga:
Mhm.

00:25:03
Simonpietri:
And you worked at your first job for how long?

00:25:07
Stefaniga:
About two years.

00:25:11
Simonpietri:
And then you?

00:25:14
Stefaniga:
Went to American Visco and I was there for about five years until I got pregnant and then I lost the baby and then I--I didn’t go back to work anymore.

00:25:27
Simonpietri:
And, what about, did you date a lot or?

00:25:34
Stefaniga:
No, we really didn’t. I mean, we, I wouldn’t call it dating. We would, like, be down in the road. Like not a-- just a road and we’d roller skate and everybody would gather, the boys were there and the girls were there but we never went out anywhere with boys.

00:25:55
Simonpietri:
So how did you meet your husband?

00:26:00
Stefaniga:
Uh, at a dance. I had gone to a dance with my sister, my older sister, and that’s where I met him.

00:26:11
Simonpietri:
Did you go to a lot of dances or was this?

00:26:15
Stefaniga:
Yes, we did, we did a lot of dancing.

00:26:20
Simonpietri:
Who would put on these dances?

00:26:24
Stefaniga:
Different organizations, around different places. There used to be this place called, it was on route one, it was called Acquire Tavern. We used to go there on Saturday nights.

00:26:39
Simonpietri:
You met your husband at one of these dances and you didn’t, how did, you said you didn’t necessarily date. How did that relationship kind of?

00:26:55
Stefaniga:
Yeah, well after that then, you know we would like I said go to the dances each week so when you went during the week you know, I would see him. And we finally got you know, he--we started going out places.
Simonpietri: When did you get married?

Stefaniga: February the 3rd, 1951.

Simonpietri: And can you tell me a little about your wedding?

Stefaniga: Oh, I was married at St. Mary’s Catholic Church and had the reception in the hall in the back of the church. This was when St. Mary’s was down on Princess Anne Street.

Simonpietri: Was it a big wedding?

Stefaniga: No, it wasn’t too big of a wedding. I did not wear a wedding gown. I wore a white dress but it wasn’t a gown.

Simonpietri: Was that typical or were wedding gowns the?

Stefaniga: No, I don’t think that was typical, I just didn’t want no, no wedding gown.

Simonpietri: So how do you think growing up in the Depression and living through the war affected the rest of your life?
Stefaniga:
I don’t think it basically had any effect on me to tell you the truth. I don’t know.

00:28:28
Simonpietri:
So you , I’ve read a lot of books that have said that women’s that-- during the war it really gave women a chance to get out in to the work force. Do you think it might have helped you or was that just kind of what women did anyway?

00:28:47
Stefaniga:
Well, yeah. I think that was the main object when you got out of school you tried to find a job. I know, when I, my first paycheck was fourteen dollars and ten cents. I remember that but you could buy a whole lot for fourteen dollars and ten cents in those days.

[long pause]

00:29:31
Simonpietri:
So you said your sister didn’t go to high school?

00:29:35
Stefaniga:
Yeah, my sister Connie she graduated from highschool.

00:29:39
Simonpietri:
But your older sister didn’t?

00:29:41
Stefaniga:
My older sister, no.

00:29:44
Simonpietri:
And that was because?

00:29:50
Stefaniga:
I guess she probably left to go to work.
Ok, I’m just going to pause it real quick.

Ok, I want to go back to growing up during the war. Did you, since you said Spotsylvania was pretty rural do you think that affected the amount of information you got about the war?

Probably, probably. We didn’t have a whole lot of communication.

Do you remember newspapers? Did they have a lot of information or was that a big source of information?

You know, I don’t remember if we had, if we got the newspaper or not. I doubt it.

Was it the Free Lance Star?

Yeah, it would’ve been. It would’ve been the Free Lance Star.

Do you remember taking any trips as a family?

No, no. Never, never.
Simonpietri:
So it was pretty much local and getting around on the railroad?

00:30:56
Stefaniga:
Mhm, right.

00:31:00
Simonpietri:
What about day trips or?

00:31:05
Stefaniga:
With the church we went to like Fairview beach for a picnic and have the church picnic at the beach. That was, that was about it. And of course when we were teenagers growing up in the church we did have a lot of hayrides, weenie roast, and did things of that nature. We did things like that even at home. All the neighbors would get together like on Halloween or something and we’d have a big fire and have a weenie roast, roast hotdogs and just get togethers like that, it was no going out anywhere.

00:31:55
Simonpietri:
Do you remember hearing about Pearl Harbor and if so do you remember where you were or?

00:32:06
Stefaniga:
No, I don’t remember where I was I remember that--but like I said before we had gone to the little country store and somebody there had told us about it.

00:32:18
Simonpietri:
Did it, how do you think this affected your community at all?

00:32:29
Stefaniga:
I don’t know if it had any effect on it or not.

00:32:34
Simonpietri:
Were there a lot of young men that?
Stefaniga:
No, one of my neighbors lost one of her sons in the war.

Simonpietri:
So it was really only that one local?

Stefaniga:
Yeah.

Simonpietri:
What about the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Do you remember hearing about those at all?

Stefaniga:
No.

Simonpietri:
Or did you ever hear, while the war was going on, hear about what the Jews were going through in Europe?

Stefaniga:
If I did I don’t remember it now, Kendall.

Simonpietri:
Or Japanese Internment?

Stefaniga:
No.
Simonpietri:
I read in another interview she talked about girl scouts, was that a thing in Spotsylvania?

00:33:39
Stefaniga:
Not where, we didn’t belong to no girl scouts.

00:33:49
Simonpietri:
Do you have any specific memories about the war? Anything that really stands out?

00:33:51
Stefaniga:
Not really, no.