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University of Mary Washington
Fredericksburg, Virginia

Lillian Mills
Rosie the Riveter and the World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Mary Ogle
In 2012

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Discursive Table of Contents – Lillian Mills

00:00:03

Family life, born in 1921 in Caroline County Virginia, growing up in Caroline, siblings, father's work on the farm and selling produce, mother's daily life, losing the family farm to the government, relocating.

00:11:10

Marriage, wedding and honeymoon, Great Depression, impact of Depression on the family, work experience at J.P. Penny's, husband's work experience.

00:21:00

Learning about the start of the war, husband getting classified 4F by military, reminiscing about a childhood game, learning about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, impact of war on her family, living close to Fort A.P. Hill, rationing.

00:30:28

Effects of rationing, effect of war on her job, working in the cellophane plant, work experience, temporary housing located across the street from her home for African Americans, other families affected by losing their homes for Fort A.P. Hill, learning about the end of the war, time it took the community to return to normal after the war, closing comments.

Interview with Lillian Mills
Interviewed by: Mary Ogle
Transcriber: Mary Ogle
Interview 1: November 5, 2012

00:00:03

Ogle: To start out, I'm going to ask you some straight forward questions. What is your full name and date of birth?

00:00:09

Mills: Lillian Pearl Phillips Mills and born on December the 23rd 1921.

00:00:23

Ogle: Where were you born?

00:00:25

Mills: In Caroline, right here in Caroline. [Caroline County, Virginia]

00:00:28

Ogle: Could you describe growing up in Caroline County?

00:00:31

Mills: Well, it was like any other country girl I guess you would say. I went to high school, I was fortunate enough to have high school all 8 years at Mica High School here in Caroline County. My father and brothers drove the school buses at that time and I was very lucky to be able to ride on one of the local buses from my home which was about 3 miles from here where I'm located, which would put me about 10 miles from school, so I was very fortunate to be one of the local girls or the local students who could attend.

00:01:56

Ogle: What was the town of Bowling Green like? Did you spend a lot of time there?

00:01:59

Mills: No, not really, it was actually our county seat at that time and all of county records were kept there, and it was the average little village I'd say, with a theater it actually had a theater there and a drug store, and several other merchandising stores and also a grocery store.

00:02:46

Ogle: Did you have any extended family that lived closed to you? Aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents?

00:02:51

Mills: Oh yes, all of my family were very close. My sister was only about 12 miles away and then one sister worked in Fredericksburg and lived there during the week and came home on the weekends.

00:03:20

Ogle: What was a typical day like for your father when you were growing up?

00:03:27

Mills: Well he was, we lived on the farm and of course we had things to do, like a horse and chickens and cows that had to be taken care of, we would get up and have to milk the cow and feed the chickens, and feed the pigs and whatever livestock there was on the farm, then he had land to cultivate he would cultivate the land for whatever crop he was putting in and if we had raised like tobacco and cucumbers, were our main products, he would prepare those for the market, pick them, and prepare them for the market and take them to the market. The tobacco would have to go to Richmond to the warehouse down there for sale and the other things like tomatoes and cantaloupes and cucumbers, the cucumbers would go to the cucumber factory in Milford and then other products would go to Richmond and local farmers or merchants I would say that would sell the produce for us another words, we would take it to whatever factory, like tomatoes or cucumbers and the tobacco plant was in Richmond, the auction house to auction the tobacco was in Richmond.

00:06:00

Ogle: So the farming was the primary income for the family?

00:06:04

Mills: Yes, Definitely.

00:06:07

Ogle: What about your mother. What was a typical day like for her?

00:06:10

Mills: Oh my, she was the typical house wife. Mother always stayed at home she was not a person that was out, she never worked out in the public, and she always

worked at home taking care of her children, she sewed and cooked mainly, and then if we had laborers that were working for us she would prepare the meals, she would always have meals prepared for the family and for the workers.

00:07:01

Ogle: You mentioned that your parents lived on property that became part of Fort A.P. Hill, is that correct?

00:07:06

Mills: [Nodding yes] Right.

00:07:07

Ogle: Could you tell me a little about that?

00:07:10

Mills: Well it was originally the property of, the property originally belonged to my mother's parents who raised her, they were her uncle and aunt and they raised her from the time she was 9 months old until they were deceased, it was just a typical farm.

00:07:53

Ogle: The government took the property correct?

00:07:56

Mills: Absolutely.

00:07:57

Ogle: Was that for A.P. Hill?

00:07:59

Mills: Yes, it was for Fort A.P. Hill.

00:08:03

Ogle: Where did your parents move to after they left the house on Fort A.P. Hill?

00:08:08

Mills: Well my father . . . my mother only lived a few months after we had to leave the property, some people believe that, most of her loved ones, thought that she just grieved herself for having to leave a home that she'd always had all of her life her entire life, she was only 59 when she passed away.

00:08:40

Ogle: Where was the next house that you moved to?

00:08:44

Mills: The next house that I went to was, well I got married in the mean time in 1940 I was married and I went from there to my mother in laws place which was home, which was about 10 miles from where we originally lived.

00:09:17

Ogle: You mentioned a couple sisters. Did you have any brothers?

00:09:21

Mills: Yes, I had two brothers and, no, no no no, I had one brother and two sisters.

00:09:33

Ogle: Who was the oldest?

00:09:36

Mills: William, James William Phillips Jr.

00:09:44

Ogle: Could you tell me a little bit about them?

00:09:46

Mills: Well I'd say we were the typical country family, we went to church on Sunday's and we went to whatever was going on in the community, we had a little theater in Bowling Green that we would attend once in a while for the movies, then we have community get togethers mostly by families we didn't have, well there was some public recreation but most of it was by the families and we had just lots of fun going from family to family in the community for birthdays and Christmas and any occasion that we could get together and have fun and games and refreshments of all kinds, just a typical country living.

00:11:10

Ogle: You mentioned that you got married. Could you tell me how you met your husband?

00:11:14

Mills: Yes, I went to school with him, we were in high school together and we went together the last two years of our education.

00:11:35

Ogle: How old were you when you got married?

00:11:37

Mills: Eighteen.

00:11:40

Ogle: What was your wedding like?

00:11:42

Mills: Simple [laughs]. We went to Washington on the train, went from Fredericksburg to Washington on the train and went to a hotel and went out for dinner and then we went to a theater and saw Mickey Rooney of all people was on the stage in person and we thought that was just something and big time for country people.

00:12:25

Ogle: Was the trip to D.C. your honeymoon?

00:12:28

Mills: Yes.

00:12:34

Ogle: You would have been fairly young but can you tell me about the Great Depression?

00:12:40

Mills: Well, hmm . . . not a whole lot. I mean I did not really feel too much effect from it because of course, I remember having, I think it was sugar mainly that was rationed and things like linens were rationed I guess because of use of it for the army supplies but it was still just by being used to the country and we raised everything that we possibly could on the farm for our livelihood and whatever produce was more than we could use every day my father would as you say peddle it, he's go to Fredericksburg and then reached out as far as Charlottesville to sell things.

00:13:54

Ogle: Being rural, Caroline was a rural area, was it less affected since farmers could sustain themselves do you think, would you say that you were less affected than a larger city?

00:14:06

Mills: Yes, I think so.

00:14:11

Ogle: Your family as a whole did the Depression has an impact on your family?

00:14:15

Mills: Not, not to any big extent. We lived the average farm life and raised our own fruits and vegetables and my father was what you would call a peddler and if he had extra produce he would take it to Fredericksburg or even as far as Charlottesville because we had relatives and he knew other people in that area.

00:15:07

Ogle: You mentioned that you worked as a clerk at J.C. Penny's . . .

00:15:11

Mills: Yes I did.

00:15:12

Ogle: Was that in down town Fredericksburg?

00:15:14

Mills: [nodding yes] Right.

00:15:15

Ogle: Could you describe what that was like?

00:15:17

Mills: Well it was my first job of course, in the public and I liked it very much I had people that appreciated your efficiency and your style of living, coming from a rural area, the one thing that fascinated me and has fascinated other people since were the way that we managed the sales of merchandise. We did not have cash registers down on the floor, on the first floor where I worked they had, we had I guess you would call it a cable type between the floor, the first floor that I worked on and the office and it was on a cable and you had a little cup that was fitted on the end of the cable it's hard for me to describe because I don't know exactly how to describe it to you but we attached, we put the money in the cups and attached the cups back to the cable and sent it folded by hand to the office which was one floor above us, there were two office workers that took the money made the change, exchanged it for whatever change we had coming back, they made a

record of what was sold and then sent the change back to the clerk and then we in turn gave it to the customers [laughing]. It's a little hard to explain, but of course it was unique, and very different from anything I had ever experienced but it was interesting and I loved my work, I really did and they people that I worked with I had lovely people to work with, I had one lady she just kind of took me under her wing and just kind of second mothered me and we got along just fine and it was interesting and I enjoyed it I never felt like I was working it was almost like a second chapter in my life really in my experiences.

00:19:13

Ogle: Your husband worked for a few different companies, correct?

00:19:17

Mills: [nodding yes] Right.

00:19:18

Ogle: Could you tell me a little bit about his work experience?

00:19:21

Mills: Yes, he a shipping clerk at Sylvania Industrial and that was a plant that was in competition with DuPont for cellophane at that time and it was one of the largest factories in the community or in the area, they had other plants like the pants factory which was a clothing place there in Fredericksburg, the G&H and then there were of course local merchants like J.C. Penny's and Woolworth's, Newberry's and local pharmacies, Barnes, and Goolrick's there in Fredericksburg.

00:21:00

Ogle: Did any of the companies that your husband worked for, did they create products that supplied the war effort?

00:21:09

Mills: No, except like I said, uh no not here but in other locations but not here in Fredericksburg.

00:21:26

Ogle: Can you tell me how you first learned about the war?

00:21:34

Mills: Well of course my husband was the age for the war, for the draft, for the local county draft and he was sent to Richmond for his first examination for the

army and that was where he was turned down and put in 4F for disability because they realized that he was not strong enough and that he had a disability that would lead in to permanent disability at that time.

00:22:51

[Paused the tape for a visitor, started the recording back up while Mrs. Mills was reminiscing about a childhood game.]

Mills: Well we used to, when we were playing Annie over, of course that was long before you were born and that was a real big game that we played here in the country and we would have a ball and we would get on one side of a building regardless of what, or a wood shed or a small barn or whatever and we would say “Annie over and throw it and run just as hard as we could to get around on the other side to catch it before the person on the other side could catch it. It was a competition between two of us, and that was one of our big games, it was called Annie over [laughs] we didn’t have games and all like we do now you know or to play with mechanical things, so we had to make up our own games which was a lot of fun.

00:24:10

Ogle: Can you tell me how you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

00:24:15

Mills: Well, yes I was at work and it came over the radio they announced it over the radio and then of course it was reported to us at work, we were told about it at work at the old, well by then it was American Viscos, started out being the original Sylvania Plant which was cellophane which later on became the American Viscos, then later on FMC. It went from one manufacturing firm to the other.

00:25:26

Ogle: What was your initial reaction?

00:25:30

Mills: Well at the time it sounded real drastic, I mean it was something that we were not expecting and it was, sounded like a drastic thing happening to our community at that time.

00:26:03

Ogle: Did you primarily get your news of the war from the radio?

00:26:09

Mills: Yes.

00:26:11

Ogle: How different is that than getting news on TV today?

00:26:16

Mills: Oh quite different, now they put it on the screen and we see it but this was all by audio, all by radio, and it was passed from one to the other by mouth locally.

00:26:46

Ogle: You mentioned that your husband was classified as a 4F by the army, what exactly did that mean?

00:26:54

Mills: That meant that he could not be drafted or would not be drafted because of his disability.

00:27:08

Ogle: Were you glad that he didn't serve in the military?

00:27:11

Mills: No. I really wasn't, maybe in my heart I was but I felt the hurt that he felt because he wanted to be a whole man to start with he was just a young man and he wanted to serve his country like his buddies who were all going into service.

00:27:51

Ogle: Did any of your other family members serve in the military during the war?

00:27:56

Mills: No.

00:28:08

Ogle: What impact did the war have on your family?

00:28:13

Mills: Well, except for inconveniences of maybe not having the things locally that we would have had, our life went on as usual by being farmers by being born and raised on the farm and being our main support it went on without too much interruption really.

00:29:00

Ogle: What was it like living so close to Fort A.P. Hill during the war? Did that have any effect on your daily life?

00:29:08

Mills: No, except for traffic. There were a lot of troops coming and going at that time and it still now is a permanent reservation and they kept coming and going not as often, we still have companies coming in from Pennsylvania and other states for training.

00:29:49

Ogle: What do you remember about the ration booklets that they handed out during the war?

00:29:54

Mills: Well they were, as far as we were concerned, they were sufficient because our family was small and we could get enough supplies with our tickets that they allowed us, we made out very well with what we were raising on the farm, produce and everything we made out very well.

00:30:28

Ogle: Were there any specific items that you had a difficult time obtaining during the war?

00:30:36

Mills: I guess you could say gas was one of our main things because we depended on that for our communication and going into Fredericksburg and Richmond that was our main thing was the inconvenience, I'd say with that.

00:31:08

Ogle: Did you or your husband participate in any scrap drives or other activities to aid the war effort?

00:31:18

Mills: Uh-huh, nothing in particular, no.

00:31:27

Ogle: Did the war have an outward effect on your job?

00:31:32

Mills: To a point yes. But by being in the cellophane, being the main product being developed, it did not influence us, just very little bit, very little bit.

00:31:58

Ogle: Did you also work in the cellophane factory at a certain point in time?

00:32:03

Mills: Yes. I worked there for almost 40 years [laughing]. Retired . . . worked and retired.

00:32:12

Ogle: Could you explain your job at the cellophane company for me?

00:32:18

Mills: Well it's not a whole lot any one would understand; except that I handled cellophane from the very beginning of it when it was spun on machines we handled it as you would any other product by cutting it into size and weight and preparing it for shipment from the plant, from the main cellophane plant.

00:33:07

Ogle: So, both you and your husband worked for American Viscos?

00:33:12

Mills: Yes.

00:33:15

Ogle: You mentioned that there was temporary housing put up across the street for African Americans; was that because of the war?

00:33:22

Mills: Yes.

00:33:24

Ogle: Could you explain that to me?

00:33:26

Mills: Well they were, they put up little four wall houses so to speak, small that would have a family of maybe four to six and they were very small, I guess they had maybe three or four rooms was all that they were and they were very rudely

put up, or crudely put up, rudely is not the word [laughing] very crudely built and only the necessities, they did not have bath or water, they had wells each home had wells, but no inside plumbing of any kind.

00:34:41

Ogle: Where were the families moved from? Did they come from Fredericksburg?

00:34:46

Mills: No, they were local, they came from out of the reservation another words what land that A.P. Hill took over as a training, and for their own use to allow for their buildings and everything all taken over and it was I don't know how many acres that it took over for the land in Caroline it took so much of our productive land our farming land it took away a bit of our farming land of course at that time farming was the main occupation for Caroline.

00:36:08

Ogle: How did you learn that the war had ended?

00:36:13

Mills: It was announced on the radio, over the radio, and then I guess you could say travelled by phone, telephone word of mouth as much as anything anyway.

00:36:33

Ogle: Were there any major changes to your daily life once the war ended?

00:36:42

Mills: Well, basically not too many but naturally everything went on with production the factories and all went back to full production of regular materials then as time went on they were reconstructed and developments and the houses and home sites were developed more and more for the community.

00:37:37

Ogle: How long did it take before things were back to normal in the community once the war ended?

00:37:45

Mills: It was several years; I wouldn't like to say exactly the time because it was some time, several years I would say. And maybe some of us never really got back to normal because in the meantime a lot of the older people died from different things and so that made a change and all the other factories and places of business

were changing hands even stores and even the merchants in Fredericksburg were changing it was quite a change there. Most of it I hope was for the better of course [smiling].

00:39:00

Ogle: Is there anything else that you would like to add that I might have missed that you feel is important for us to know?

00:39:12

Mills: [shaking head no] No, I don't think so, I have always been a person that like to stay out of the lime light in other words and private, not in a selfish way because we all, it was wonderful, we could all share our experiences and whatever we had in merchandise and were neighborly, we have all always been in neighborly surroundings, people that we grew up with as children and as going to school, we all grew up together so it's always a been real closeness, and close knit between our communities I'd say

00:40:26

Ogle: Ok, well thank you for sharing your story.

00:40:31

Mills: Mm-hmm, [laughing] I'm sorry I couldn't explain it to you better.