

Interview with **Barbara Archer**

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Interview # 1: June 26, 2008

Interviewer: Barbara Manning

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Manning: This is Barbara Manning. This is June 26, 2008, in Springfield, Illinois. I am interviewing Barbara Archer. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Veterans Remember* oral history program. What is your name?

Archer: Barbara Archer.

Manning: What was your maiden name?

Archer: Bartlett.

Manning: And where were you born and raised?

Archer: I was born and raised in Springfield.

Manning: And what's your current occupation?

Archer: Retired! (laughter)

Manning: When did you begin to realize, when you were a young girl, that America was at war?

Archer: I remember somehow all of a sudden there was a lot of turmoil. There was a lot of concern, but I didn't understand why. I heard something about Pearl Harbor, but that didn't mean anything to me.

Manning: Were you in school then?

Archer: Forty... Ah, yes.

Manning: What was your most memorable experience of World War II? What comes to mind first?

Archer: One thing that usually comes to mind to me is an incident that happened that really affected me. I had a little twenty-four-inch bicycle—or twenty-inch, maybe even—and I was still riding that. Of course bicycles were rationed and you couldn't get a new bicycle. I was getting to be eight years old and I thought I needed a new bicycle. A friend of ours had a son who was, I believe, in the Army. She knew he wasn't going to be using his, for awhile at least, so she gave it to me. After I got that, I thought I was a big shot, even if it was a twenty-six-inch boy's bicycle and I had to stand on the step to get onto it. But Jenny Katz gave me her son Pete's bicycle. I've always been taught to write thank-you notes. I sat down and I wrote a note to Pete basically saying something to the effect of, "You don't have a bicycle anymore because now it's mine."

Apparently, he got a kick out of my little childish letter. It disappeared one day. He was in service in Germany. There were two camps where he was. There was one on one side of the road and the other one on the other side of the road. The letter disappeared. It was, I don't know—a long time. To me, that really didn't mean much. The letter finally came back. It had made the rounds of both camps. Apparently, a lot of young service men were saying, "That sounds like my little sister!" It gave some of them a laugh.

So I got the bicycle with a little laugh at my expense. That never bothered me. I said, "No, in some sense, maybe it did some good."

Manning: When did you hear that he had gotten the letter? Or how did you hear the story?

Archer: He wrote home to his mother and Jenny came out and told us.

Manning: Did you ever write any other letters or do any correspondence as a child?

Archer: I did have a pen pal from England. All I can remember now is that her name was Pat and she was about my age. Of course things were rationed so much worse over there. When there were things she needed or wanted, we would try and get them for her. My mother spoiled her as badly as she did me. One of the things she wanted was a pair of red shoes. We found a pair of red shoes, but we couldn't send them to her as-is, meaning "new". I had to wear them and get the soles all scuffed up so they could be sent as "used." Otherwise, it would have cost you too much for import.

Manning: How did you get to have a pen pal? Was that common with young school girls?

Archer: It was very common. It was very common in that time. I don't remember just how it got started. My guess is at school.

- Manning: Tell me more about the war-time shortages and the rationing. How did it affect your family?
- Archer: One thing I remember the most is my grandfather. He had four boys my age, or about my age.
- Manning: About eight, that was?
- Archer: Granddaddy was never going to run out of flour or sugar. Every time they had a stamp, he got his flour and sugar. At the end of the war they had enough flour and sugar for forever, I think.
- But another one that did affect me in a different way was that my mother was a Girl Scout leader or a Brownie Scout leader. After the meeting one night, they sent me around the corner to a little restaurant. The people were good friends of ours. Mother needed milk, so I went around to buy a quart of milk. I don't know what my hurry was, but on the way home I was running and I fell with the *glass bottle* of milk. I split open an arm. Actually, I still have about a five-inch skin graft on my arm. Again, I don't know why, but I went to the back door to go into the house. My father could not stand the sight of blood. But this was one time he just had to suffer through it, because my arm was very badly damaged.
- But we had another problem. Because of rationing, we didn't have enough gas to make sure we could get to the hospital and back. So we had to get a neighbor to take me to the hospital. It seems to me like there was one hundred fourteen stitches in one wound and I don't remember how many in the other. I also remember the only anesthetic they could give me at that point was gas, and talk about sick! It was bad.
- Manning: Even for short trips in Springfield, the hospital would have been two or three miles from your house, you still had to really limit the gasoline?
- Archer: It would have been maybe four or five miles from home.
- Manning: OK—little more of a distance. What type of civil defense or war initiatives did Springfield have that you recall?
- Archer: Well, of course, we had all the rationings that everyone else had. I do remember the air raid practices. When that siren went off, all of your shades had to come down. If you weren't going to have any lights on, they should still be down anyway. Some of the neighbor men were air raid wardens. They made sure you were doing what you should. I still didn't understand what it was all about. I knew it was what we had to do.
- Manning: Would there be many practices?

- Archer: I remember a lot of practices. But again —timeline and what to me is a six, seven, eight, nine-year-old girl, “a lot” might not have been a lot.
- Manning: They were at school?
- Archer: No, these were at home. At school, we did have air raid practices. I went to Harvard Park School, and they would take us to the basement hallway. We’d have to be down on our knees with our arms over our head. Another thing at school was that one day a week, when you went to school, you would take your dime and buy your war savings stamps to go into your war bond book. You got one stamp at a time and then when you got your book full—enough for I think it was probably a twenty-five dollar bond, [\$18.75 at purchase; \$25 at 10 year maturity] I think that was the smallest one—you could get your war bond. I think it was Monday but I could be wrong.
- Manning: Was that a luxury? Was it easy for kids to have a dime at the time?
- Archer: I never really thought about the financial end of it. All I know is my mother and dad saw that I had my dime or whatever I was going to buy. We had paper drives. The schools had paper drives. I had my little red wagon from when I was small. The neighbors would know that here comes Barbara; it meant get your papers out. We collected papers and we tied them up neatly with twine and took those to school.
- Manning: Would you take your wagon to get them to school, then?
- Archer: Fortunately, my mother put them in the car. Some kids did, some kids didn’t, have a mother who would take her to school.
- Manning: So that really made a significant difference in everything children did at school.
- Archer: It made a big difference in things that we did. We couldn’t go out at night after a certain time, I believe. Or at least I couldn’t. There were other things...
- Manning: How about recycling? Was there any recycling that went on?
- Archer: Well, with the papers. I know one thing we were doing and at that time... I didn’t know that it had to do with the war, but now actually it probably did have. At that time, gum was wrapped in a tin foil wrapper but there was paper underneath it. We would take our gum wrappers and we’d peel the tin foil off and start a little tinfoil ball. I remember one of the boys in my class ended up with a tinfoil ball that was probably as big as a basketball, or at least it was six inches or better by the end of the war. [cigarette packages also had paper/foil wrap]
- Manning: Did you have any family or close relatives or neighbors in the service?

Archer: The girl across the street had a boyfriend in the service. But I did have a number of cousins and uncles. Mother's baby brother was in the Navy. He was not very good at communicating with his father. My mother wrote him and said, "Now, JD, you could at least write a note to your father and tell him you are okay." I guess it was one time when he was home, she told him, "The least you can do is write your dad and tell him you're OK." And shortly thereafter, he went back to the sea. Dad—as I got older, I called my grandfather "Dad" because of the boys my age—he got a letter that said, "Dear Dad, I'm fine. How are you? Love, Johnny." So he did what he was told to do!

Another uncle was a cook in the Army. He was a big guy. When they got his uniform, he looked at them and they said, "Button that coat!" He said, "Do you want it back in one piece or two?" He was fat, sure he was, but he was a *big guy*. In the thirties or the forties, he wore a 13EEEE shoe, which was not a usual shoe size at that time. I do remember he got jungle rot on his feet and he suffered that the rest of his life.

One brother—I always called him "Ooch," his name was Charles. He had his stripes [insignia of rank] on and off more than anything else. He was stationed in South Dakota at one time. His job was to go out and get the guys that were AWOL. Well, if he went out after somebody, if he got to Indianapolis, Chicago or St. Louis, he'd take a day and come home. So he was AWOL himself more than once! So his stripes went off and on.

I had a cousin Billy who was from Meredosia. He had been at our house a lot when I was in school, when he was high school age or just out. He was a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne. He jumped at the Big Jump. He had a German girl who hid him on their farm for three months to keep him alive. He did marry an English girl; he brought home an English war bride. His brother, who was also in the Army, who was the youngest of the boys, brought home a German war bride.

But when Billy, his wife and son were finally able to come to the States, they moved into my room because they didn't have a place to stay. Before too long, they did get a place in Springfield. If you know where WICS is, it was between WICS and the [then] main post office on Cook Street. South of Cook, there were several streets there that they just filled with old barracks. These became apartments for the ex-military. I remember going out there time and time again to see them.

His brother, another soldier, when he was abroad played with Glenn Miller's wartime orchestra. He did have a nervous breakdown. When he was coming home, as part of his recuperation he was permitted free will to go to the dining area at any time he wanted to play the piano. He was a trombone player and a piano player. He was very good. If he went down there at three o'clock in the morning to start playing, it didn't take very long before that

dining room was full. Let me see, I do think I have a picture of him and his wife. I'll have to see if I can't find that.

Manning: Your neighbors and family were fortunate no one was touched by death then?

Archer: I had one. It was my mother's first cousin. I remember when his wife came to see us. They sent me out to the backyard and wouldn't let me stay in the house. What she'd come for was to tell my mother that Grover had died. He had gone into battle. He'd hit the beach on D-Day. That's where he died. I know probably there were some others.

Manning: How long did it take to get word? Oh, being a young girl you weren't aware at that time.

Archer: Yeah, that meant nothing to me.

Manning: Do you remember when the war ended?

Archer: Yes, I remember. Well, not the complete end of the war. I remember V-E Day. [Victory – Europe] I want to say this word came out noon, early afternoon, and my dad was a person who didn't go anywhere. He went to his annual union meeting. In the later years, he went to the fair the first Sunday of every year. Back at the time when they were doing *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* at Kelso Hollow at New Salem, we'd go out there. But he didn't go places. When all this news came that victory had been declared, he wanted to go to town. So we went to town.

We were latecomers. The downtown square is between Fifth and Sixth Street and Adams. We were parked over about Ninth and Jackson. Everybody in town was there.

Manning: Quite a bit northeast of town.

Archer: Quite a bit east. No, actually we were southeast. There was a mob of people down there. I got sick so we had to go home. Daddy didn't say anything but I don't think he was a happy camper.

Manning: Was it an extreme crowd?

Archer: Oh it was a mob. It was a mob. Yelling, screaming, waving flags.

Manning: Was it a fun thing to do?

Archer: I didn't understand it. I didn't understand what all the excitement was about.

Manning: Did things change at school after the war? Did the rationing and everything go on?

- Archer: The rationing pretty well was over sometime in '46, I believe. I don't recall much more about that.
- Manning: Do you recall any family or neighbors coming home or the atmosphere of when someone would come home or anything?
- Archer: There weren't that many in our neighborhood who were the right age. Or people that I knew. I remember the boys coming home. Billy—the one with the English war bride—was the one we always said had a hollow leg. He came walking in our back door one day, because it was home to him more or less. I was home alone, ten years old. Mother had just run to the drug store, I think. Billy walked in that back door and I was the most excited person on earth. Since he liked to eat and he hadn't had breakfast, I was going to fix him breakfast. This is another one on me. I got out the toaster and the skillet and fixed him bacon and eggs. I don't remember making coffee. I know I got juice. But I found out something after the fact. He never said a word; he ate it. But I didn't know then that you had to have potatoes precooked to make hash browns. So he had French fries. (laughter)
- Manning: Probably better than Army food.
- Archer: Yeah, right!
- Manning: Good home cooking would be welcome. Are there any experiences from the war that changed you or think you left an impression on your life?
- Archer: Not that I remember. I'm sure there were. I think at my age, I just accepted the rationing. In those days, we respected the rules and that's all there was to it. This is the way it is. If anything, I would have missed my Coca-Cola. I don't think it ever got rationed.
- Manning: Did the wartime change your outlook on life or attitude or anything?
- Archer: I don't think so. But again, it very well may have shaped my life. A lot more than I realize.
- Manning: Is there anything else that I should ask you?
- Archer: I don't know, let's see...
- Manning: Or anything that you'd like to add or that you've thought of. Also, I want to know, did you ever get a girl's bike?
- Archer: Yes I did! It was blue, same as the other one.

Now this is actually kind of ironic because of the hearth cooking that I do nowadays. I remember that the woman next door to us would make yeast rolls about once a week because bread and flour and things were rationed.

Believe me, I could smell them go in the oven. Oh, Winona made the most delicious yeast rolls.

Manning: Would the neighbors all get them?

Archer: She had the daughter I ran around with. I don't know whether the neighbors got them or not. All I know is I got them!

Manning: As a child...

Archer: Another thing I remember, too—Grandpa Percy lived across the street. He was the father of a woman who lived across the street and he had to move in with them. You'd buy your chickens alive a lot of times and Grandpa Percy would kill them. When we got a chicken, I'd have to go over and get Grandpa Percy. He'd come over and he'd just take that chicken by the head and swing it around until he broke the neck off. They'd normally give him probably a quarter and he'd go down to the corner and get a beer.

But it was just one of those things. Things like that are things that I remember because I think it was unusual. The most unusual part was that one of the chicken's neck didn't come clear off and he ran around the neighborhood with his head hanging half off for, it seems like to me forever, but I think they said it was only five or six weeks.

Manning: During the war, did it change the kids' birthday parties or Christmas or special events, or you didn't really know any difference?

Archer: I don't remember. I think, for many people, birthday gifts, Christmas gifts were minimal. And the things that you might want, you were not going to get because they weren't available. But again—being ten and under—I don't recall too much about those.

Manning: Is there anything else you'd like to add on this subject?

Archer: Not that I can think of! (laughter)

Manning: Thank you so much.

Archer: No, you're welcome. I volunteered to do this because I was thinking that so many of the reports that they do get are going to be very serious. I think they need to have some fun with the whole thing. So that's why I'm here.

Manning: Your story is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much.

(end of interview)