

Interview with Margery Steele

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, September 8, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today with Margery Steele. Good morning, Margery.

Steele: Good morning. How are you, Mark?

DePue: I'm doing great. How about yourself?

Steele: Fine and dandy.

DePue: We probably should start by asking you how you spell your first name, because it's unusual.

Steele: M-a-r-g-e-r-y. That's English spelling.

DePue: But you weren't born in England, were you?

Steele: No, but my mother was half English. (laughs) And very proud of it.

DePue: Okay. We are here today to talk with Margery about your experiences during World War II with the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS. Not many people can say that. I suspect that, even back in the 1940s, not many people knew much about the OSS.

Steele: No, they didn't, because it hadn't started much before the 1940s. General Donovan convinced Roosevelt that we should have one central supply of information, rather than the Army having theirs and the Navy having theirs and so on.

DePue: We're going to take a giant leap back in time, though, and talk about when and where you were born.

Steele: I was born in Michigan City, Indiana.

DePue: And when was that?

Steele: July 17, 1920.

DePue: Okay. Did you grow up in Michigan—or excuse me, in Indiana?

Steele: No. By the age of five, we were burned out and we moved to New York. My mother took the two girls with her, and she put the three boys in a boarding school.

DePue: Okay, now that suggests that your parents were divorced.

Steele: Yes, they were.

DePue: When did that occur?

Steele: Well, they were separated at that time. My mother didn't divorce my father until 1928, I think, '28 or '29, somewhere along in there.

DePue: Do you know when they were separated, when they became separated?

Steele: Yes, about 1923.

DePue: So you were just three years old at the time?

Steele: Mm-hmm. About then.

DePue: Do you remember much about your father?

Steele: Not a thing.

DePue: Do you know much about the reason that they separated and eventually divorced?

Steele: No. My mother just said it was never going to be any better than it was right now, and that wasn't good enough for her and her children.

DePue: Do you have any idea what he did for a living?

Steele: Yes. He was a salesman, a very good one I understand. He sold for many different companies, and eventually it was life insurance, I believe, was his biggest one.

DePue: Okay. Tell me more about the fire.

Steele: Well, we lived in an apartment above a grocery store, and apparently a tramp came into the basement, got into the basement somehow, and in order to warm himself—since this was the week before Christmas—he apparently started a fire there, and that took care of the whole building.

DePue: An accidental fire?

Steele: Well, I guess. I guess you would say accidental.

DePue: Why did that fire trigger a move hundreds of miles east?

Steele: Well, Gary, Indiana was a steel mill town. My grandmother's sister, my Aunt Mary, explained to my mother that if we stayed –she said, “Marion, you're going to have to move, and if you stay here in Gary, they'll all end up in the steel mills,”–which was true. And so she said, “Now would be a good time to make a move.” So my mother took the money that she acquired from her loss and she paid for my brothers for a year in advance, and gathered up the two little girls and took them to New York where she felt she could make a better living.

DePue: There were five children at this time?

Steele: Five, yes.

DePue: Were you the youngest?

Steele: No. The three boys were the oldest, and then I came and then my sister.

DePue: So you had a younger sister?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Was there family in the Indiana area?

Steele: Our family, you mean?

DePue: Your mother's family. Did she have family there?

Steele: Yes, um-hmm, yes.

DePue: Did she have family in New York?

Steele: No. Just my Aunt Mary. Everybody else was in Indiana.

DePue: So talk to me about the move to New York: what she did and where you were living.

Steele: Well, when we first got there my Aunt Mary had an apartment and a business on Fifth Avenue. It was a whole floor, so the business was in the front part and the living quarters were in the back part.

DePue: What was the business?

Steele: Cosmetics and perfumes, which she brought those recipes from the Middle East back with her one time. My Aunt Mary was an exceptional person. She knew no limits to anything.

DePue: Was she married?

Steele: Several times. (both laugh)

DePue: What was her last name when you were living with her?

Steele: Well, she went by the name of Desti, Mary Desti, D-e-s-t-i.

DePue: Okay. Okay, she's got a business on Fifth Avenue.

Steele: Between 48th and 49th Streets.

DePue: That sounds like a pretty ritzy place to have a business.

Steele: Well, it was. It was a very good place to have a business. Um-hmm

DePue: Was she successful at it?

Steele: Yes. Until she decided she didn't want to do that anymore. (laughs)

DePue: What was your mother doing at that time?

Steele: You know, I'm not positively sure. I know that she worked for a bank, and I know she worked for a theater selling tickets, and she had a third job and I don't know what it was.

DePue: So she was hustling a little bit to make some money?

Steele: Yes she was. She had to. My father never contributed. He contributed \$200 to the support of five children in our lifetime.

DePue: Over all of the years?

Steele: Over all those years. My mother made all the money.

DePue: Did she ever complain about that, that you heard?

Steele: No. Hm-mmm.

DePue: What did she tell you about your father?

Steele: Just that it was never going to be any better than she knew what it was in, what? It would have been '23, '28 when—and that just wasn't good enough. We asked her. I mean, we primed her one time, you know. We're big, we're grown up, you can tell us now. And she said, that was it.

DePue: Was it hard for you not having a father around the house?

Steele: No. I was in boarding school for the first three years in New York and had excellent teachers and made lots of friends in school there. So, no. I never missed him.

DePue: You were in boarding school? How did your mother manage to afford boarding school?

Steele: My mother must have been a super salesperson. She convinced the Mother Superior not only to take me at five and a half, but also to take my sister at three.

DePue: Oh my.

Steele: "Oh my" is right. The Mother Superior said, well, they'd think about taking me but they wouldn't consider my sister. My mother just said, "You either take both of them or neither one. I won't separate them".

DePue: Where was this boarding school?

Steele: On Staten Island. Arrowcar the last stop on the train.

DePue: That was the name of the little community?

Steele: Arrowcar.

DePue: Okay. And the name of the boarding school?

Steele: Saint Joseph's Hill Academy.

DePue: So, you're going to a Catholic boarding school. Does that mean you were Catholic?

Steele: We had been, yes. Mm-hmm. My mother had been raised as a Catholic, but of course divorce is not part of the Catholic ideology, so she probably would have been excommunicated or some such thing as this, but just that she knew her children would get an excellent education there. And that was the important thing to her.

DePue: And did you?

Steele: Yes, I think I did.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about what it was like living in that boarding school.

Steele: Oh! It was just wonderful. I mean, it was a very organized sort of thing. We had big dormitories with a little box bedside to keep our personal things in, and a nun that lived in or slept in the same room with us. But she was in a covered bed with curtains around hers. We had wonderful food, we had a wonderful playground, a swimming pool. The hill went down the front of it was great in the wintertime to go sledding. The nuns were great about taking us to the beach and showing us all the

different sea things that washed in at night and washed out again. I guess we had calisthenics or some kind of exercises and whatnot. And we had days, you know, when you had to sit in the common room, I'll call it—I don't know what they call it—but where we had lectures on being polite and manners, (both laugh) and grammar, (laughs) things of this sort. But the most important lesson I learned in that school was, we never competed with anybody else. We were always judged on our own, and every day it was to serve to the glory of God. For me, that has been a wonderful lesson in my life.

DePue: It seems to me you went from living in Indiana as a very young girl, burned out, your parents are separated, you move east, and then you're sent to a boarding school. So much of what was familiar to you was kind of taken away piece by piece. Did you or your little sister have any emotional problems?

Steele: No. Not my sister. I'm not sure my youngest brother might not have had a few little problems. He would have liked to have moved the world. He suffered from being the youngest of three boys.

DePue: Where did you say the boys ended up?

Steele: Well, they were in Indiana and then they went to another school in Morristown, New Jersey, and then went to another school in Leonardtown, Maryland.

DePue: And your mother was paying for them as well?

Steele: Yes, yes she was. She was a remarkable woman.

DePue: She must have been.

Steele: She was.

DePue: How much did you see your mother during the time that you were in the boarding school?

Steele: Every other weekend. She'd come to the school to see us or we would go into New York to see her.

DePue: Okay. Do you know if she was dating at the time?

Steele: No, no, she didn't.

DePue: So her life was working so she could get her kids through school?

Steele: That's right.

DePue: And how long were you in this boarding school and New York?

Steele: Three years. And New York? Four. Four years probably, all told. About the time that the crash came along. That changed everybody and everything.

DePue: What happened in 1929?

Steele: Well, with the crash, my Aunt Mary, the entrepreneur, (laughs) had built a home in Woodstock, New York, and she invited my mother to bring the children up for the summer. We all thoroughly enjoyed living in the country for a change.

DePue: So this was then the summer of 1930?

Steele: No, I think it was the summer of '29, I'm not sure really.

DePue: Okay, so that would have been right before the crash.

Steele: Well, or it may have been right after. I was thinking the crash was '28.

DePue: No, it was October of '29.

Steele: Okay, well then this probably was '30. But anyway, we continued to stay on there in Woodstock, on what they called the Maverick. Not in the village itself, but about five miles outside the village.

DePue: Were there difficulties your mother had in holding onto all the jobs she had?

Steele: No, apparently not. Some of the jobs, of course, just disappeared, so she got other ones.

DePue: So you went to Woodstock. Did she have just the two girls or all five of you?

Steele: All five, all five of us. By the time the crash came –she had invested in some land in Florida –and when the crash came she had to use that to pay for the boys schooling. She gave the school where they were, she gave them the land lease or the—what do we call it—what do we call it? You have a—not a lease. You own it. What's that piece of paper called?

DePue: Title?

Steele: Title, okay. Thank you.

DePue: Okay. What was she doing in Woodstock?

Steele: What was she doing?

DePue: Yeah, for work.

Steele: She didn't work in Woodstock. She went back to New York.

DePue: So the five kids were in Woodstock?

Steele: Yes, and we had a housekeeper that lived down the road and came and took care of us.

DePue: Okay, let's review the bidding again. You're ten when this started, you have a younger sister, and how old was the oldest brother?

Steele: Ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen.

DePue: And the housekeeper that came in during the days?

Steele: Yes. And sometimes stayed overnight, and sometimes my Aunt Mary was there; she'd come in for the weekend or my mother would come up for the weekend if she could manage it.

DePue: Can you give me a description of the house?

Steele: Yes. This was an artist colony, so the houses were built with huge windows to the north for true light. Coming along the east side was a fireplace that took four-foot logs, and my brothers cut all the wood for them. And then on the west side was the kitchen and a porch. There was a beautiful terrace beyond the fireplace on the east side that we used all summer long for places to eat. On the south side—no, on the other side, anyway, were some bedrooms, upstairs and down. There were two bedrooms. Well, originally I think we just had one, and then we added another one over the first one, and a balcony over one-third of the living room.

DePue: Margery, you might want to put that letter over to the side, because that's a pretty important letter. I know you don't want to get it tattered. I'm amazed that the five of you children are living by yourself, essentially. Was the neighborhood the type that people looked out for you?

Steele: Oh yes, very definitely. All of our neighbors were writers, artists, sculptors, painters. Nobody had any money. Everybody looked after everybody else. If you were out on the road and wanted to go somewhere, if a car went by they'd always stop and say, Do you need a ride? Where are you going? And you knew you could trust them and they trusted you. We never locked doors; I don't think we had a key. (laughs) It was just a wonderful place to live at that time.

DePue: What was your schooling like at that time?

Steele: My schooling at that time? I went to a one-room school house north of the Maverick. Not in Woodstock. Woodstock had a larger school, several rooms in theirs. But I went to a one-room school house with fantastic teachers, absolutely fantastic.

DePue: Were all of your siblings going to the same school?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: You said, though, that Woodstock had other schools? Why didn't you go to those?

Steele: We weren't in that district. We were in the Glenford district.

DePue: Okay, and you also mentioned Maverick. I'm not sure I understand.

Steele: That was the road on which we lived, and it was five miles from Woodstock, and it ran from one highway to the other. It was called the Maverick because someone had carved a horse standing on the slope about half-way down the road and they called that the Maverick. One of our neighbors had previously been a dance instructor in Moscow, in the ballet. He wanted to be sure you kept up with this sort of thing, Margery, it's necessary. (laughs)

DePue: Well, I would imagine you've got an artist community like what you've described, and being considered mavericks is something that they kind of embraced.

Steele: Could be. Could be.

DePue: You went to school, then, with all of your brothers and sisters in the same room?

Steele: Well, my oldest brother, by the time he was sixteen, he had pretty much finished high school. I've forgotten where he went his last year. But yeah, the rest of us all went in a one-room school house. At that time in New York State—Harold's heard me tell this a thousand times—but New York State at that time had the finest educational system because every child had to take a state exam in every subject that they took, and even the teachers didn't know what the questions were going to be. Teachers would go to Albany during the wintertime and say, "Well, I teach this and this is what I think is important," and they would prepare, many of them prepared. And then there would be some committee that would decide what kinds of questions would be asked on the state exam. English was at nine o'clock and arithmetic was at ten o'clock and geography was at another hour. The teachers always would say, I'll do anything I can to help you from now until June, but remember, when you go in to take the exams you're on your own; I can't help you then.

DePue: You didn't feel, then, you were slighted by being in the same classroom as children who were a couple years younger and four or five years older?

Steele: Oh no! Wonderful! If you forgot something, you could listen to the lower ones as they reviewed it, (both chuckle) and you could think about what's coming down the pipe for you later on.

DePue: How many students in that classroom then?

Steele: Oh. Golly. Maybe thirty.

DePue: And one teacher?

Steele: One teacher.

DePue: No assistant?

- Steele: No assistant. The teacher usually had to start the fire, supervise the playground, make sure we all ate the lunch that we brought with us.
- DePue: Tell me more about growing up during the Depression. Maybe I'll put it this way. Did you figure that you were poor?
- Steele: No. It was never a subject. Nobody worried about being poor. Nobody had any money, so you were never comparing yourself with anybody else. Here again, maybe the fact that in the convent we had learned not to compete, maybe this helped us. So people had a tendency to always lift somebody else up, to say, Oh, you're doing well, You've got talent for this, or, Why don't you try this? People that I didn't even know –one man's wife said, –Margery, you know how to knit? No. She said, Why don't you come now; I'll teach you. And she did. Well, she didn't teach me according to how our German housekeeper thought it should be (DePue laughs) after she watched me struggling with the pick and throw. She said, What do you think you're doing, child? And I said, Muddy, I'm learning to knit. She said, What's that? So anyway, she said, Just put that aside; I'll bring you some needles tomorrow and I'll teach you how to knit, which she did.
- DePue: The German housekeeper, what was her name?
- Steele: Muddy. Muddy Hardenberg.
- DePue: Muddy?
- Steele: Muddy. I'm going to guess M-u-d-d-y. At least that's what we called her.
- DePue: Okay. Was she something of a mother figure to you?
- Steele: Well, I suppose in a way, yes. Maybe. She had been a cook for the German Army in World War I and came to America after World War I was over.
- DePue: I'm conjuring up pictures of this woman already. (both chuckle) It's not necessarily complimentary.
- Steele: Well, hey, she was tough,, she raised German Shepherd dogs that never got along, and Muddy had to keep one in one room while she let the other one out, and then transfer them around. But Muddy knew exactly how everything should be.
- DePue: Was she the disciplinarian, then?
- Steele: Yes, she was. Mm-hmm,
- DePue: And your mother obviously was okay with that?
- Steele: Yes.
- DePue: How often did you see your mother during this timeframe?

Steele: Oh, we probably saw her almost every weekend, that she'd come up.

DePue: Now how far is New York City from Woodstock?

Steele: About a hundred miles, I'd say. Say about a hundred, I think.

DePue: Did she take the train back and forth, then?

Steele: You know, I don't know.

DePue: Do you recall if she had a car? I would think not, living in New York.

Steele: Well, I know we had a car. I know we had a car. Mm-hmm. Because she drove it when we came out to the World's Fair here. She was the only one licensed to drive.

DePue: What was the car?

Steele: Mm-mmm. I couldn't tell you. I don't know.

DePue: Okay. And tell me again what your mother was doing all of these years in New York?

Steele: Just working.

DePue: What were the jobs that she had?

Steele: Well, eventually she worked in a department store for the store itself, and then—back then, there were many—what did we call them?—people that worked for private companies. I'll call them—I did it, too.

DePue: Secretarial work or something?

Steele: No, no. No, no. Where you stood, and if you were working the book department, you were representing authors and you would explain to anybody that came by why this was the book of the month, or why this particular person. Demonstrators. Okay, she was a demonstrator. And as I say, I don't know what all she did. We never asked her. It didn't make any difference to us. We were always so thrilled to see her every weekend.

DePue: Did she ever remarry?

Steele: Not until in the '40s.

DePue: So all the children were well grown. When did you graduate from high school, then?

Steele: 1937.

DePue: Was it still you were graduating from this one room school?

Steele: Oh no. By then, I was going to a high school ten to fifteen miles from Woodstock, in the town of Kingston, New York. It was a very large school. There were over 300 in my graduating class.

DePue: How were you getting from where you were living in Woodstock to school?

Steele: Public transportation was provided. I say public. It was not school transportation as we see now, school buses. It was arranged between the schools and the bus companies that they would pick certain children up along the roads. The buses started twenty-five miles north of the school and picked up kids all the way down the line.

DePue: What were you thinking of then, what your life profession would be, when you were in your high school years?

Steele: (chuckles) Well, I had wanted to be a ballet dancer till I realized how many hours you spend at the barre every day doing exercises. I gave that up. Then I wanted to be an actress, and I hung onto that idea for a long time.

DePue: Does that mean you were in all the school plays?

Steele: Oh yeah. Absolutely. I wrote plays when I was a little child, even, for other schools to put on.

DePue: And they put them on?

Steele: Yeah. Yeah, we did. When I went to school in New Jersey, I wrote several of the plays for them.

DePue: Well, give me a little thumbnail sketch of what a typical theme of a—your maiden name, what was your maiden name?

Steele: Whiteley.

DePue: Okay, of Margery Whiteley.

Steele: A thumbnail sketch? Well, she was a very happy young thing with lots of dreams, lots. I enjoyed reading. Probably that was my biggest... We didn't have all the sports then that we have now, so you had to find other things that you did. And as I say, I lived in a community with all this talent that they were willing to share. I thought I had a wonderful childhood; I really did.

DePue: Were you in any leads in high school plays?

Steele: I don't know that I had the lead. I was in several of the plays.

DePue: Any come to mind?

Steele: Not without looking at my yearbook. (both)

DePue: Okay, I put you on the spot here, Margery. Graduated in 1937 and then what happens?

Steele: Well, I was offered a scholarship to the University of Connecticut as a P.E.[physical education] teacher. That was the last thing on my list. (laughs)

DePue: From ballet to P.E. wasn't making it, huh?

Steele: It wasn't doing it. And so I just said, Thank you but no thank you, that's not what I'm going to do. So then I went to New York City and lived with my mother, and I went to Merchant and Banker's Business College. I was a whiz in shorthand and I was worthless in typing. (laughs)

DePue: Had you given up dreams of ballet and being an actress?

Steele: Ballet, yes. But acting, no. And the agreement on my going to business college was—my mother had a cousin who was exceedingly wealthy and offered to put all of us through college—and when I came along and said I wanted to go to the American Academy of Dramatic Art, she said, “Margery, even Helen Hayes doesn't have a job every year. It's not very secure.” I said, “Yeah.” So she said, “Well, let's do something **first** where you can always earn a living.” So that's why I went to the business college. Well, then after that, I decided I didn't want the other. I would like to work for myself.

DePue: And after the business college, what came after that?

Steele: Then I began working.

DePue: And where did you work?

Steele: Well, I worked as a waitress in a residential hotel. I worked as a model for a painter who did things for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Then I became a food demonstrator in Brooklyn at Abraham & Strauss. Fortunately, they liked to give you the summers off, so that meant they didn't have to pay for somebody who wasn't needed, really. So I got a chance to go back to Woodstock for many of the summers. Then I worked up there as a—first year, I was running a concession stand outside the theater, and then I became the stage manager for several years.

DePue: How much were you paying attention, during these years –especially last year or so in high school and then afterwards –to what was going on in the rest of the world?

Steele: Believe it or not, we were thinking about this. Particularly when we studied world history, which would have been in my junior year, and we had a crackerjack teacher then who thought we should correspond with foreign students. We were not allowed –girls could not write to German boys, nor could American boys write to French girls –but kids being kids, we worked this out.

DePue: You have to explain the rationale for that for me.

Steele: Well, they just thought that we shouldn't mix the sexes, I guess. I don't know what all they had in mind in Boston. Any other country was all right, but those two were very specific about not trading off the sexes. So a friend of mine in school said, Marge, I'd like to write to a French girl. I said, I want to write to a German boy. So he put his name in and I put mine in, and we just exchanged. We had a wonderful correspondence for a while. But then I asked too many personal questions, like, How can you live under a system where you can't even trust your own family? By then, we knew that the kids in the Nazi Youth Group were snitching on their folks: telling them what they ate, what they drank, how much they made, anything else. I found this very disgusting. And there were a number of other things along this same line that bothered me. I got a notice finally: You cannot keep asking these kinds of questions. Your correspondence will be... so somebody was monitoring—

DePue: So the note came, not from your pen pal?

Steele: No, no. From somebody else.

DePue: Do you remember anything in particular your pen pal was telling you that really caught your attention?

Steele: No, just that he was so secretive, I felt. I mean, he never answered any of my questions as to what I thought was wrong. And about the third or fourth time, finally it came out, If you continue this way, your correspondence will be dispensed with. And it was. (laughs) Because I didn't quit, I kept asking.

DePue: It strikes me, Margery, that you had a somewhat independent spirit, or you wouldn't have been writing to a German boy in the first place.

Steele: Well, that's very true. But hey, I came from a very independent family, too.

DePue: Absolutely. And also adventurous?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: And there was another word here, but it escapes me now. So let's go on. Do you recall when Pearl Harbor happened?

Steele: Of course.

DePue: Tell me about that.

Steele: I had gone to the movies on Sunday afternoon, and I came home and my mother said, Sit down and listen to the radio. Then we heard all the news of what had happened at Pearl Harbor that day. And that was a tremendous shock. By now I had three brothers, one who was married, one who was a senior, probably, in college, and the other one, maybe a sophomore. He went to a school that only had two years, so he graduated early. It was a special—it's still in business in Indiana, in Angola, Indiana.

DePue: So it sounds like you knew right away the implications of what that meant.

Steele: We did, yes. I think we all did, really. Didn't you? It was a time when you just said, I don't believe it, and yet you did believe it. You knew that this was so.

DePue: The word I was looking for before –it strikes me you also were somewhat idealistic. Would that be a fair assessment?

Steele: Yes, I think it would be. Mm-hmm.

DePue: What was your attitude about what you needed to do now that the nation was at war?

Steele: Well, I don't know that I personally felt it right away, but in a short time it became obvious that all of the men were gone, or most of them, even in New York City. There were very few that were left on the streets, and the few that were, we'd all say, "Wonder why he's 4F; what's the matter with that one?" [4F meant draft exemption based on a physical problem]

DePue: You weren't interested in a 4F to begin with.

Steele: No, no. Then my second oldest brother had graduated from college by then, and he couldn't get a job because he was eligible for the draft. I mean, nobody wanted—and I didn't blame them. Why would they take somebody in and train them, and maybe the government wants them next month? So after a little while, he suggested to my mother that he would enlist. So he was the first one to go. Then my oldest brother decided to go. He also went in the Air Force. My youngest brother graduated from college as an electrical engineer, and he wanted to go but unfortunately he was working on the Norden bomb sight [developed for air-to-ground bombing] and they didn't excuse him. He was classified 4A, which was essential industry.

DePue: Yeah. I can't argue with that being an essential industry. Where was he living?

Steele: In New York.

DePue: And what was the company that he was working with? Do you recall?

Steele: I don't know. Was there a Sperry Gyroscope?

DePue: That one doesn't ring a bell but I'm sure there was.

Steele: All right, I think that might have been. Anyway, he had to stay with that for quite a long time. That really frustrated him. He wanted to be in the service.

DePue: You said your two other brothers were both in the Air Force?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Were either of them in flight status?

Steele: No. The one that went in first—of course, I think they sent everybody to communications school at that time—and he ended up being, I guess, a good instructor or something. Anyway, he never left the States. He stayed here and taught their systems, and worked in the barrack that God forgot down in Liberal, Kansas. (laughs) He spent most of the war in Liberal, Kansas. The older one managed to get all the way to Hawaii before the war was over. The younger one finally got excused and signed up with the Air Force, went to Texas and went to school there. Unfortunately one week before he graduated, the war was over. (laughs) He was a real frustrated young man.

DePue: Maybe your mother was happy about that, though. (she laughs) She had three boys who were very talented, and they all managed to miss combat.

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, but this isn't about them. It's about you. Let me back up because I'm curious about this as well. Were you dating much while you were living in New York City, a young, attractive lady?

Steele: Not a lot. Not a lot. I dated some, and usually with the people that I worked with. There just weren't very many around to date, (both laugh) frankly and honestly and we were all terribly busy.

DePue: What was the mood of New York City in those first couple years of the war?

Steele: I think that bewilderment really would be the best word. I mean, there were so many things that were different. You'd go to work on the subway, and these people that were standing around you couldn't speak English, they had bad breath, they had body odor, they had weird clothing. Who are they? What are they here for? Why are they here, you know? Can we trust them?

DePue: Before, they were just the massive immigrants that were always flowing though New York City.

Steele: Mm-hmm. But now all of a sudden, they took on an entirely different look about them. Of course, you spent your free time wrapping bandages for the Red Cross and things of this nature. And we worked long hours then. I mean, when they said an eight-hour day, they meant, be there eight hours on the job.

DePue: But you didn't stay for the entire war in New York City. What happened next?

Steele: Well, after I applied for a job with the Air Force—because I knew they needed some help—and I got a job in the file department because I could not type. Then after I'd been there a while, some friends that worked at OWI, which was the Office of War Information, they said, Marge, why don't you come work with us? We do such interesting things. We broadcast all over the world. And I said, But I can't

speak any languages. Well, that's okay, you can translate for us in French. So I applied for a job as a junior radio engineer with OWI. I did not know a thing about radio or electricity. (laugh) Or even if Ben Franklin was right, that it was here to stay. OWI did not look at my application, but OSS did, because OSS, at that time, had entree to all government files. All government files. So they were rapidly looking through any papers where people could speak a foreign language, translate a language. Most anything I guess. And so they called me and asked me to come for an interview, and it went very well. They had no openings in any of the places I'd like to go, namely London, Paris, Rome. You know, what does a twenty-three year old think is exciting? And I said to the young man, Well where? And he said, North Africa. This was just after we'd seen the news reels. You know, back then, we didn't have TV, so you went to the movie theater every week and you had an hour run of what was going on in the world. And there were the fellows in North Africa with one helmet full of water. They brushed their teeth first and then they shaved, then they did their armpits, then they did everything else, eventually their socks. And I remember saying, Can I have a bath every day? He said, Yeah, are you in the habit of bathing every day? I said, Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Well, that's good. And we talked about other things. I said, How well do I have to be able to speak French? He said, Well, you've had three years. I said, Yes, I can translate, but I can't speak. But they didn't expect us to speak. All we did when I was to school was learn to translate and transcribe.

DePue: This was in high school you learned French.

Steele: Yes. And so we just chatted and we got along fine, and he explained the salary and who I'd be working with and so on, and I said fine. I started to leave, and I finally said to him, By the way, doing what? And he said, Well, what do you know about cryptography? And I said, Practically nothing. He said, What do you mean by that? And I said, Well, I try them in the Sunday Paper. It was something you did, you know, some people like crossword puzzles. I did too, but this was harder. So he said, Oh, that's marvelous. (laughs) I said, I didn't say I'd knew it, that I could get the answers. I'm just saying I tried. Oh, that's wonderful. The hardest thing for me for the interview was to find twenty-two character references.

DePue: Holy cow.

Steele: Holy cow is right. Twenty-three years old and you need twenty-two character references. But I finally did. I left, and in time they called and said, We would like you to please come, go to Washington. We'd like to train you.

DePue: Now, this was an OSS hiring agent who was asking you these?

Steele: No, OWI. [Office of War Information]

DePue: This was still OWI?

Steele: Yes. So when I found OSS—they found me. They went through OWI's files; they found me.

DePue: Okay, but it was OSS who were interested in you serving as a cryptographer?

Steele: Yes, yes.

DePue: A cryptographer?

Steele: Uh-huh. And I was one of six that ended up in Washington.

DePue: Washington, because that's where you needed to take training?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Tell me about the training there.

Steele: (laughs) The training was out of a horror film. (both laugh) We were Oh, So Secret. People said, Oh, So Social, and you'll see that in the papers now. No. Our department was Oh, So Secret. We were not to tell anybody what we were doing, how we were doing it, so on. And we trained in an attic in one of the offices in Washington that absolutely had no windows. It was incredible. We had a steel gate for us to get in there that locked behind us and so on. There we sat and learned cryptography.

DePue: Well, what I know about Washington D.C. at that time was, it was jam packed and there was nowhere to live.

Steele: Well, I was lucky. We had some friends that owned a business across from my Aunt Mary on Fifth Avenue, and they owned an apartment. They said, Marge, you're going to Washington? Here. Here's the key to the apartment. I was lucky. Now they said, There is another woman that works for us in Washington. She lives there too, but at least you'll have a room of your own and you can use the kitchen. So I was very lucky. Some of the gals were sleeping in halls in places.

DePue: How long were you there and when was this?

Steele: I'm going to say maybe I went about June, the end of June, and I left for overseas in October. No, no, wait. When did I go?

DePue: I'm guessing this is 1944?

Steele: '44, that's right. I went overseas—what order? The fifteenth—I think that's a five—the fifteenth of September.

DePue: Of 1944?

Steele: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Now, you need to tell us what you're looking at here.

Steele: A short snorter. (laughs)

DePue: Okay, you had shown me that before. It looks, to me, distinctly like a one dollar bill with lots of scribbling on it.

Steele: Uh-huh. Anybody that crossed the ocean then was entitled to get one of these if you went by air. We were lucky.

DePue: You went by air?

Steele: Yes, we flew. So the captain signed it and the rest of the crew and the people that were on it. Yes, we were really traveling in style.

DePue: A short snorter. Tell me exactly what that's supposed to mean.

Steele: I don't know, except that you had crossed the ocean by air. You know, we didn't have—

DePue: There are worse ways to cross the ocean.

Steele: Yes. (laughter) And we didn't have that many airplanes in '44. You know, we really built our Air Force. Yeah, that's my passport photo. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. Well, that's quite a bit of hair you had at that time. We'll have to get these things scanned if you don't mind. So, September of 1944, and where did you land first then?

Steele: First place was Casablanca.

DePue: Had you seen the movie at that time?

Steele: Yes, I had, so I was intrigued. (laughs)

Unknown:(background) Did you stop to refuel?

Steele: Yes, we stopped and refueled in the Azores.

DePue: Okay, what was the aircraft that you flew over?

Steele: I think a C-54.

DePue: Okay, that sounds right. And then to Casablanca—

Steele: And it had plush seats, you know. Oh my. So the first time I got the bucket seats along the side, that was a revelation.

DePue: And where from Casablanca then?

Steele: Which one was first? Algiers. After Casablanca, then Algiers. There we gals stayed and relieved the men in the message center. The men, our men, the American

soldiers that were running the message center in Algiers went to Southern France. We stayed to clean up the debris and take care of whatever.

DePue: What does that mean, clean up the debris?

Steele: Well, take care of any messages that were coming in or should be going out. We were running a message center.

DePue: This is for the United States Army?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: And where were the messages coming from?

Steele: Across North Africa, from Spain, from France, from Italy, England. I don't know how much other world traffic we had until we got to Egypt. In Egypt, we had it from all over the world.

DePue: Okay, and I assume a lot of these were being transmitted through cable, the underwater cables? Or are they radio?

Steele: No, radio. Radio.

DePue: Okay.

Steele: And then we'd josh and tease when one of the fellows would make a mistake. We'd say to him, Now try it on your left foot. (both laugh)

DePue: How long were you in Algiers?

Steele: Ooh. I honestly don't remember. I'll say four or five months at most.

DePue: Not a long time.

Steele: No, not a long time.

DePue: Did you have a chance to see much of the countryside, the people, the culture?

Steele: Not a great deal. We were first billeted in a hotel downtown and that was an absolute mess. Then they moved us out to a villa near our station and sent in a French-speaking Spanish woman that sort of took care of the billet for us. Because we worked around the clock, the six girls.

DePue: When you first arrived in North Africa, late 1944, this is shortly after D-Day. What was the mood of yourself and the people you were working with? Was it optimistic?

Steele: Oh very.

DePue: Was there any doubt in your mind that the United States would not win?

Steele: No, no. I knew we'd win.

DePue: Why?

Steele: Well, having worked in the Air Force in the file department, I had an idea of how much we were sending, how much we were making, how much traffic we had going. I mean, I saw all these files coming through there. Granted I also saw the ships that got blown out of the water on their way to the Brooklyn Navy Yard to be repaired. And the bigger the Air Force got, the easier it was to transport supplies and personnel.

DePue: So just by the scale of the American operations and endeavor?

Steele: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay. What caused you to be moving from Algiers to Egypt then?

Steele: Well, because we closed the office in Algiers and we moved to Egypt. Cairo became the big hub between the war in China and the European theater. CBI. [China-Burma-India]

DePue: When did you move there?

Steele: Gosh, I don't know.

DePue: Still 1944?

Steele: '44 or beginning of '45, one of the two.

DePue: Okay, and if you were in Algiers for three months, that puts you around the December time frame. Egypt. There aren't any American troops in Egypt at that time, were there?

Steele: Not very many. Most of them were billeted or with groups like ours. or out at the airport. And we had radio people out in the desert.

DePue: Okay. Explain to me in a little bit more detail why the OSS needed to operate out of Egypt, though?

Steele: It was just, we were a hub for China-Burma theater. You had to stop, it would only carry so far, so you had to keep—

DePue: The radio transmissions?

Steele: Yes. You had to keep relaying. We would relay to Italy, and we could relay from there to England or to France, and to Washington. It depended entirely on what the messages were and how important they were and so on.

DePue: And tell me in as much detail as you can exactly what you were doing then.

Steele: Well, I was message center chief clerk, and I got all the—from the radio men whom we teased, you know, try your left foot now—I would hand out the coded messages, to the various people in the code room, and that included the five other gals. I've forgotten how many men we had, but several. Then we would decode the messages and bring them back to me, then I'd take them and we would transpose them. We used a different word. We would paraphrase them so that if any one of our messages ever got in somebody else's hands, they still wouldn't be able to come back with what—if they had picked up the aerial radio thing, they still wouldn't be able to translate it. I mean, coding was the best thing we had come up with...

DePue: What did the message sound like? Was it just a series of letters that was being spoken, or was it words?

Steele: No. The Navy had one system, and the Army and OSS had another. It was just a matter of five letters. That's all. And then it was up to whoever was doing the decoding to figure out was that "I will do," (laughs) or "I will go," or "things are fine?" You just needed to know what the letters, how you could transpose them.

DePue: So you mean each one of these messages was basically just five letters being transmitted?

Steele: Yes, mm-hmm...no! The letters all came in groups of five. Yeah. When the civil war broke out in Greece, we had reams of stuff that came in. I mean, we worked around the clock for that.

DePue: How often were the codes changed?

Steele: We had a different code for everybody.

DePue: I'm not sure I understand. A different code for everybody?

Steele: Well, for each one of our agents that we had placed somewhere, each one had their own code system. There were no two alike.

DePue: So this isn't necessarily information that's flowing from one headquarters to another. Maybe some of it was, but you're also decoding information received from agents?

Steele: Yes. Oh. Tremendous amounts from agents, mm-hmm.

DePue: Where were the agents operating?

Steele: Well, they were all over. (chuckles) They were in Greece, they were in Italy, they were in Damascus, they were in Arabia, they were—you name it. And the same was true in CBI.

DePue: Behind enemy lines?

Steele: Yes, yes.

DePue: Okay. Arabia. So you were getting some traffic from Saudi Arabia?

Steele: Yes, and Yemen, mm-hmm.

DePue: And did a particular agent's code then stay the same over a long period of time, or did that change occasionally?

Steele: Occasionally. I don't feel free to tell you what system we used. Years back, the Romans did it and they did it with pictures as a substitute for words. So a horse was a horse, was a horse, was a horse. Well, we had to come up with something different, and we did. I think what we figured out to give each agent was an incredible operation.

DePue: So doing what you're doing—it was in the mid-seventies, I think, when the word came out that the United States had broken the German code and the United States had opened the Japanese code—at least twenty-five years after the war before that secret, the Ultra.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: What was your thoughts when you heard about that?

Steele: Well, I wasn't surprised really. I mean, we had such really clever, brilliant people. We also had some dead heads. (both laugh) But most of them... The young man that taught me, most of it in Washington –I've often wondered what happened to him – he was so capable of making you understand why you would do this instead of that, and how it worked, and then keep your mouth shut. Yeah.

DePue: I think the brainpower during that war was either working on the atomic bomb or cryptography.

Steele: Yeah, well...

DePue: It's my understanding that that's where the really brilliant people had to be.

Steele: As far as Ultra went, the British did help on that tremendously. I mean, their navy helped because they were worried about losing their ships. But I think the most daunting thing of all were the Navajo Indians. They used their own language and nobody ever broke their code. (both laugh) No one! [the Navajo Code Talkers, not revealed for many decades]

DePue: That was going on in the Pacific, not the Atlantic, wasn't it?

Steele: Yeah, that was in the Pacific.

DePue: Okay. How long were you in Egypt?

Steele: Thirteen months.

DePue: So quite a while.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Where in Egypt were you?

Steele: Cairo.

DePue: And did you get out and see much of Cairo?

Steele: Yes. I saw lots of Cairo, and I did manage on a couple of occasions to get all the way to Alexandria, and I did get to Jerusalem. That was a leave. And I went down to Aswan one weekend. Egypt is a desert country. I mean, there isn't very much to see beyond the Nile waters, because they need that in order to make anything grow or for people to even live there. So it's the cities along the Nile that make it.

DePue: What was your impression of the Egyptian people?

Steele: Well, I wasn't really favorably impressed with them, although I must admit, King Farouk, (laughs) he **loved** the Americans. He was a young man then, and so if he could manage to get invited to any of our parties, he just thought that was a great idea. He had been well-schooled, I think, but he was very young to be a king, with no experience.

DePue: Did you have a chance to meet him?

Steele: Yes, yes. I better not—I'll tell you that story by ourselves sometime. (both laugh) Yes, I met him several times.

DePue: Okay. Maybe even Harold shouldn't be here when we hear that story.

Steele: No, no, that's all right. He can hear it. He has heard.

DePue: Were the Egyptian people generally happy or favorable towards the Americans and the Brits?

Steele: I think so. I think so. They felt relieved to be out from under the Italians and the Germans. We were kinder to them, I guess. Or I don't know exactly why, but yeah, they seemed much happier.

DePue: But the Brits had had a presence in that region for decades.

Steele: Yes. But the Germans and Italians had been really rough on the country.

DePue: When did you head to Greece, then? Was that after the war was over?

Steele: No, I went in November '45.

DePue: November of 1945. So you were in Egypt when victory in Europe occurred. Your mood at that time?

Steele: Oh! We were **ecstatic**. We were absolutely out of our gourds. I mean, everybody was just whooping and hollering, lots of parties, lots of balloons, just everybody was having a wonderful Fourth of July.

DePue: And that was May of 1945. May to November, are you still working for the OSS?

Steele: Yes, yes.

DePue: You're still receiving messages from agents who are working undercover?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: This is a stupid question, but why do we still need to have undercover agents if the war in Europe is over?

Steele: To tell us what the governments are doing. We would be better off today if we had a few, I think, (laugh) so we'd know what they're up to.

DePue: Were there agents working in Italy and France?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: As well as behind the Iron Curtain?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Of course that was a foreign concept at that time.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: But they were communist controlled countries. Okay. Anything stick in your mind or the kinds of things that struck you about what was going on in the immediate post-war Europe?

Steele: No, not really, except there was tremendous devastation every place, and to see how these people were trying to come back to what they thought was normal. This was really quite something to see. Some places did very well with it and some didn't. The Austrians did. I mean, they were very proud of their own country. I did not feel that the Italians did very well. I felt the southern part of Greece had some problems, where the northern part—no, the other way around. The southern part was getting along very well, but the northern part was really suffering. I mean, they had no money, they had no food. They had nothing up there. Literally.

DePue: You got to Greece November of 1945, and were you still then working with the OSS during that?

Steele: Yes, yes.

DePue: And how long were you in Greece?

Steele: I think eight months.

DePue: Okay, and this—now, correct me if I'm wrong—this is basically at the beginning of the guerilla war, the civil war in Greece.

Steele: Well, it was already on.

DePue: When you got there?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: This was before, though, the Truman Doctrine and American Land Lease started in Greece?

Steele: Well, it had started, yes. In pure, political know how, they shipped into Greece a planeload of cranberries, (DePue laughs) and the Greeks hadn't a clue as to what they were or what you did with them. I thought, Oh God, how can we be so stupid? But politics are not necessarily the most brilliant part of it.

DePue: You're still doing the same kind of duties, though, in Greece?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Where in Greece where you operating?

Steele: Athens. DePue: What was Athens like?

Steele: Athens was wonderful. I felt far more attuned to the Greek civilization than I had to the Egyptian. Maybe because one of the men in the office was a teacher of Greek civilization at Columbia University in New York City; he was so kind to take me under his wing and take me for walks and explain things and tell me what this was and why that was. But the people themselves were just so generous and so kind.

DePue: Did Athens experience much destruction during the war?

Steele: Not a great deal, no. During the civil war they had. But no. Of course, most of their buildings had been used forever and ever, and so they weren't brittle. I'll use that word. They weren't susceptible to easy destruction. And then the people themselves were very concerned about keeping track of all their beautiful antiquities, too.

DePue: How much did you get to deal with the Greek people then?

Steele: I lived with a Greek woman for part of the time. She had an apartment just down the street from where the office was, so I could just walk back and forth to work.

DePue: Did you have a top secret clearance?

Steele: I think so.

DePue: And yet there wasn't a concern for you to go live with the Greeks and to deal with the Greeks quite a bit?

Steele: No, no.

DePue: You were in a country in the midst of a civil war between the communists and the democratic forces. Did you ever feel threatened by any of that?

Steele: No, I really didn't. Maybe I was young and stupid, (DePue chuckles) but I just knew I was all right.

DePue: So Athens sounds like it stayed relatively secure through this entire time.

Steele: I thought so. I could have been wrong. I know that Dr. Hadas had different opinions on some things, but you know, I just thought everything was fine.

DePue: Were you receiving any messages from agents that were plants with the communists?

Steele: No, I did not.

DePue: Okay. That's not to say that there weren't some?

Steele: That's not to say that there weren't some, but they may have been going into the State Department rather than to us.

DePue: Were there agents in Yugoslavia—

Steele: Yes.

DePue: —and Bulgaria that you were receiving information from?

Steele: Mm-hmm.

DePue: What were you hearing and learning about from those agents?

Steele: Nothing, nothing. I just learned to transcribe them and transpose them and forget them.

DePue: Was that basically the instructions you'd receive?

Steele: Yes, yes.

DePue: You weren't supposed to get too curious.

Steele: No, no. We learned that in Washington. Transcribe, transpose, that's it.

DePue: Then the analysts go to work after that?

Steele: That's right.

DePue: Very interesting. Okay. What else strikes you about your experiences in Greece?

Steele: I was overcome by the poverty there. The poverty was worse in Greece than it was in Egypt, and yet the people had tremendous pride in their country and their antiquities, and they just... I don't know. They just were so outgoing and pleasant.

DePue: How much were you able to communicate with your family back home, especially your mother?

Steele: I could have a blue envelope once a month if I needed it. That meant my superior didn't read my letter. But outside of that I could write whenever I wanted.

DePue: But it would be read by censors?

Steele: Yes, it would always be read by my superior unless it was in a blue envelope, and then it was given to somebody else that did not work in our office.

DePue: So somebody else read it?

Steele: Yes. Somebody else. All of our mail was read. Um hmm.

DePue: It's hard to imagine that being accepted by the American public today, isn't it?

Steele: (laughs) I don't think it would go down very well.

DePue: No, it sure wouldn't. What did your mother think about your work in the OSS?

Steele: Well, I think that she was very distressed at first that I was going. But I didn't tell her anything until I was sure, because I didn't want her to talk me out of it. (both laugh) After I told her, then she said, Well, I wish you the best of everything, dearest, and keep in touch.

DePue: Maybe she figured, Well, May 1945, the war is over, Margery's coming home.

Steele: Well, no, no. Margery didn't come home then.

DePue: Did you volunteer to stay? Did you have an option?

Steele: Yes. I could have come home after Cairo. No, not after Cairo. When I came back to Cairo to the headquarters after Greece, I could have come home then. But by then I'd made so many friends, both in former OSS and other civilians, that I wanted to go on and do what they were doing. They'd all gone to Austria, so I had to go to Austria too.

DePue: Well, we'll get to that in a little bit. You talked about those years prior to going into the OWI and the OSS in New York, and there was a paucity of young men to date—

Steele: A what?

DePue: A shortage of young men to date in New York. I would think that now that you're in places like Cairo and Athens, there's lots of young men to be dating.

Steele: There were. But also there were lots of Egyptian girls too, and particularly our enlisted men—I was so proud of them—they all learned to speak Arabic so they could date an Egyptian girl. We girls didn't do that. We just figured we're Americans. If they want to date us, they have to learn English. (laughs) So we dated Americans or British, pretty much.

DePue: So you had an active social life as well?

Steele: Oh yes, very much so.

DePue: What did you do with your free time? Now you mentioned travel, but were there clubs that you'd go to as well?

Steele: Yes. Well, there was one called the Gazeera Club. I think it's probably still in existence today. It had a swimming pool and we'd go there every day.

DePue: Was that an Egyptian club?

Steele: Yes. Well, I think it was. A lot of the British were there and a lot of the Americans, but there were Egyptians also that were there. We had a lot of social life. We did get together, even though we worked shifts. I mean, we worked around the clock, twenty-four hours a day, so there was always somebody sleeping in the apartment, there was always somebody on their way to work, there was always somebody coming back from work. But we had plenty of social life.

DePue: What did you think about your coworkers, then?

Steele: I thought nothing but the finest things of four of them and myself. And then one, mmm, she was not a desirable, and we finally shipped her home.

DePue: You weren't the only one who had a negative opinion of her?

Steele: Oh no. No. I think everybody had it, in time.

DePue: Did you get to meet many of the OSS agents? Would they occasionally come through the office?

Steele: Occasionally.

DePue: What struck you about them?

Steele: Nothing too unusual. Some were brilliant and some were, just caught—the picture that you asked about, you know. That fellow was an Air Force pilot, got shot down and became an agent.

DePue: The one that you looked rather friendly with?

Steele: Yes. You know, it takes a certain kind of person, I guess, to want to do this sort of thing or to live that kind of life. We had one absolutely brilliant man that we trained to be an agent and send him to, I think we entered the Arabian peninsula somewhere. And I mean, we had gone over it and over it and over it; there was no way he could make a mistake. We never got a message from him that was legible. **Never!. Never!** We said, My God, what's the matter with him? Oooh. Hopeless! (laughs) So brains weren't necessarily...

DePue: I know I asked you this again, but how many months were you in Athens? Was it eight?

Steele: Eight.

DePue: What happens after that?

Steele: Then I went back to Cairo and their OSS was closing out, and what did I want to do? And I wanted to go along with the rest of the gang, and they were all in Vienna.

DePue: So continue your adventure?

Steele: So I went on to Vienna and now I became a civilian employee of the War Department, and I was assigned to G4, which is travel and supply.

DePue: Logistics.

Steele: And I got into the office and it was pretty much routine kind of stuff.

DePue: I would suspect it's not nearly as exciting as what you were doing before.

Steele: No, no. It wasn't nearly as exciting. It was pretty dang dull, as a matter of fact. (chuckles) There were young, very young, enlisted men. In OSS, we were a family so we didn't care about the rank. The enlisted men all the way up to the colonels, we were all together as a group. We had a party, everybody came. We had a dinner or a picnic, we went to the desert, we all went together on bikes or in a truck. But when we got to Vienna, that was quite different. There was all this strata, and we had...

DePue: You learned about things like RHIP? Rank has its privileges.

Steele: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Absolutely.

DePue: And you weren't impressed by that?

Steele: No I wasn't. Not in the least. (laughs)

DePue: But did you enjoy your time in Vienna nonetheless?

Steele: Yes, I did. Yes I did. It's a beautiful city. Of course, I knew some of the people that were already there, and I met Harold. That made it even a more attractive city.

DePue: It had not suffered the same level of devastation as a lot of other cities?

Steele: Oh yes, I would say it had. I mean, where we girls were billeted, we walked by piles and piles of trash just to get to the headquarters building. It was the only way you could get there was by all this stuff that had been bombed out. Now, the Viennese had been smart in that they had put colonnades of bricks around some of their lovely carvings out in the street and saved them, but buildings took a terrible beating. But then the Viennese also, they liked their music, they were proud of it. They very quickly had opera going. That was our big entertainment in Vienna.

DePue: Did you run across a lot of Austrians who were still hanging on to their Nazi heritage as well?

Steele: I didn't. Some of the others may have, but I did not.

DePue: What was your impression of the Austrian people?

Steele: I liked them, I really did. The ones that I met. I'm sure that there were communists in Vienna, but I did happen to work—well, I knew they worked, lived across the street—

DePue: And former Nazis as well, I would think.

Steele: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Did it surprise you that you liked and warmed up to the Austrians?

Steele: That I did what?

DePue: That you liked the Austrians, did that surprise you?

Steele: No, no. They weren't German.

DePue: They spoke German.

Steele: I would not have felt the same way about the Germans because of my studying of the war while still in high school and the response I got with trying to correspond with Germans. These were outgoing people...at least the ones we met. They were hard pressed for food so they were happy to be with the Americans because we'd feed them one meal a day. But they had a sense of their own being and worth. They had been under Hitler so long that you could work up a tremendous amount of

compassion for them. I didn't feel the same way for the Russians that we met. That was quite different.

DePue: Where did you meet Russians?

Steele: In Vienna.

DePue: What was the opportunity for you meeting Russians?

Steele: Well, Vienna was a city with four controlling interests.

DePue: Just like Berlin was.

Steele: Yes. Exactly. And so some of the Russians were—I sound like a snob and I don't mean it that way—but they were truly peasants that had never been out of their own country before. I was appalled at how they wrecked things, just go through and knock them down and set things afire, and just for a kick, I guess. That bothered me.

DePue: How about the Austrians? Did you have a sense of how the Austrians felt about the Americans, the Brits, the French, and the Russians?

Steele: Yes, I think they probably put us first, the Brits second, the French third, and the Russians last.

DePue: The Russians way behind, perhaps?

Steele: Way behind, way, way behind.

DePue: Okay. Now let's get to the other interesting part of this, because this is where you ran into Harold. So talk about how you first met Harold.

Steele: All right. We met on a blind date engineered by my roommate.

DePue: Your roommate was?

Steele: A girl from America, from Wyoming. She said, Are you going to such and such a gathering at such and such a palace? I said no. She said, I know just the fellow for you to go with; I'll just fix that up. Well, she fixed it up and he was late arriving. He was very late arriving. For about the third time I said, When are we supposed to be at this thing?

DePue: Where were you waiting for him?

Steele: I was waiting in our hotel, up in our room, waiting for him to come and announce that he was downstairs waiting. I said, if he isn't here in twenty minutes, forget it. I'm not going. He made it in about fifteen. (both laugh) So I came down the stairs and we went off to the party, and we clicked, I would say.

DePue: Well, you must have gotten over being upset that he was so late in the first place?

Steele: Well yeah. In time. Well, it was a beautiful party and it was lots of fun. I found out he really didn't know how to dance, but that wasn't a terrible drawback.

DePue: Well, you'd met plenty of other interesting people over the last few years before that time. What was it about Harold that was different?

Steele: (laughs) His consideration. His politeness. He wasn't all hands all over you, which some of them had been. His desire to share what he knew and find out something about me. So that was Saturday night, and Sunday we went for a ride, and Tuesday we did something, and Thursday we did something, and Saturday we did something, and Sunday we went for a ride. (laughs) And Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and it went on like that for months.

DePue: So you were enjoying your time in Austria for different kind of reasons as well.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Do you recall when he asked you the question?

Steele: Nope, I can't say that I do. (both chuckle) I'm not positively sure.

DePue: Do you remember roughly when you got engaged?

Steele: We'd been going together all of, probably, four months.

DePue: So this, I'm trying to figure this out. Sometime in 1947, '48?

Steele: No, no. '45—'46, '46.

DePue: Well, she's looking across at Harold and they're both trying to figure out when this actually happened. How much were you telling your mother about this guy Harold?

Steele: Not too much.

DePue: Why weren't you?

Steele: Well, I just didn't think that it would make any difference to her one way or t'other. Then finally when we decided yes, we were going to get married, I wrote and told her that I'd met this wonderful fellow and we were going to get married, and would she please send me a wedding gown? Which she did.

DePue: So you were going to get married in Austria?

Steele: Yeah. He says we'd been going together three months; I say four. But anyway, we had to write and promise the commanding general of the forces in Austria that we would not bring disgrace on the United States forces if we got married.

DePue: Now, the reason for getting married in Austria, other than being madly in love, was it because Harold had to stay in Austria for a while more?

Steele: Well, he was due to leave, but he opted to up his enlistment time.

DePue: Okay, so it never occurred to the two of you to come back to the United States and get married there?

Steele: No.

DePue: Okay. So you're married. What was the wedding date?

Steele: We have two, because if you get married in a foreign country, you have to be married by the Burgomeister of the city. So we did that on a Saturday. It's kind of nice. It gives him one day he can forget our anniversary. (both laugh) So we had the twelfth and the thirteenth of October.

DePue: Of?

Steele: 1946. Yeah.

DePue: Well, you're coming up to your anniversary here in about a month, then.

Steele: Yes. Sixty-two years, this one coming up.

DePue: That's wonderful.

Steele: Yes, it is.

DePue: When did you come back to the States?

Steele: In June of '47.

DePue: Okay, so about six, eight months afterwards then, something like that. Do you recall the first time you met your in-laws?

Steele: Oh yes. At the station down here in Princeton, and it was very formal; we shook hands and I thought, this isn't like my family at all. We love and grab one another. But we made it.

DePue: What did your mother think about your marrying a farmer?

Steele: She asked me if I'd lost my mind. (both laugh) Have you lost your mine, child? No, Mom. This is right. Just give us a chance. We're planning to make this, and we will.

DePue: So she thought you were a little bit more cosmopolitan than them?

Steele: Maybe. Or she didn't realize how cosmopolitan he might have been.

DePue: Yeah, there you go. And first time that you saw your relatives, especially your mother, coming back?

Steele: That was when the boat docked. We came home by boat and she was waiting there for us when we came off.

DePue: Do you recall any comments that she made about her impressions of Harold when you first met?

Steele: Nope, she didn't say a word about it. And when she finally got to know him a little bit, then she said, Great guy. Think you've done good; you've done good.

DePue: Now we're going to take a break here and then talk to Harold this afternoon about his experiences, but I want to close with some more general questions. We've been at this for a while, Margery.

Steele: Yes we have.

DePue: It's been a fascinating interview. What do you think about your service in the Second World War, looking back all these many years?

Steele: I'm delighted that I was able to go, and that I was able to do what I did. It was the only time in my lifetime that I really felt that our entire nation was geared for one purpose: to win the war. To be able to be part and parcel of that was a tremendous boost for anybody's morale. I mean, you weren't just sitting there twiddling your thumbs, waiting. Because of the chance to travel that much in different cultures, it's given me a chance to evaluate people more broadly than what do they look like or what kind of clothes they wear or how they speak. Those aren't the important things anymore. So I consider it very much a plus for me, very much.

DePue: How do you tend to evaluate people differently because of this experience?

Steele: I want to get to know them better before I decide one way or the other. I'm willing to listen. I've found that over the years, we're not all that different. There are a few things that are different from one culture to the next or from one country to the next, but by and large I think most people are really quite decent. Quite loving. Quite kind. There are, excuse the expression, lousy politicians (chuckles) who can convince people that the government can do more for them than they should, and of course I don't happen to belong to that school of thinking. I'd like to judge people by who they are rather than—and what they have to offer me and me to offer them. That's how you make a relationship.

DePue: Do you think the experience changed you then?

Steele: Well, I think it broadened me. Mm-hmm. I don't think I was a negative person before, but I think this certainly made me a more positive person.

DePue: After all of this travel and exotic places and seeing all kinds of different people, you were then ready to settle down into—

Steele: Yes.

DePue: —into the center of Illinois.

Steele: Yes, absolutely.

DePue: Have you had much chance to do traveling since that time?

Steele: Oh yes, we have. We have continued to travel. (laugh) And we've been blessed with two foreign exchange students which has also helped keep us interested in what's going on in the world: one from the Netherlands and one from Japan. The one from the Netherlands will be home next week to celebrate her forty-fifth high school graduation.

DePue: Oh my, the years do roll by, don't they?

Steele: Yes they do.

DePue: What advice would you give to anybody, based on the experiences you've had?

Steele: Don't be afraid, and try it. And remember, you are your own person. And if it turns out to be not what it should be, have the courage to walk away from it or have the courage also to say it's wrong. And you can do this. I know. I took my colonel down (laughs) once.

DePue: Is that something that we can go into a little bit?

Steele: Well, he was on his uppers. I had a train ticket to Salzburg, and I was to come back on the night train. When I got to the train, they said, Sorry, we've bumped you. I said, What do you mean you bumped me? Well, we had somebody with a higher rank than you. I said, I'm a civilian; I'm not ranked. Well, I mean, they outrank you. So I said, I have to be at work tomorrow morning. Well, we haven't got a seat for you. I have to be at work tomorrow morning in Vienna. There was another woman with me and she had the same problem. They said, "well, we'll put you in the cattle car," and they did. And I rode all night from Salzburg to Vienna in an open cattle car, and they wouldn't even let us into the dining car to have a cup of hot coffee. I was an irate individual, and exhausted, when I got to Vienna, so I went to the hotel and I told my roommate, the one that introduced me to Harold, Tell the colonel that I was up all night in his fine—since G4 takes care of transportation—in his fine train, and that I need some sleep and a hot bath, and when I've had those two, I will be in. I will get my work all done today but I have to do this first. Well, when I finally came in around noon, he happened to be in the hall and he said, Where have you been? I said, Didn't you get my message? I told you I rode your train last night. I needed some sleep. Well, by God, I'm going to dock you. He was feeling his oats for the day too. I just said, "No, unh-uh. I don't believe so, sir.

Whatever was missed, I'll get it all done." So anyway, "Well, we'll see about that." We're going down to civilian personnel. So we did, and he said, I want her docked. She said, What'd she do? She didn't come in on time today! And this gal said, And what's your side of the story? And I explained my side, and she said, Well sir, I'm sorry. She's right. Argh! He came from the Lower East Side of New York; he was a hot headed Italian! (both laugh) Oh my, we got along just fine. But anyway.

DePue: Any final comments you'd like to make then, Margery, in closing this up?

Steele: No, just I've had a wonderful life, and I hope my children and grandchildren do as well.

DePue: Well, this is a wonderful interview and it's been a delight to interview you. Thank you very much.

Steele: Thank you.

[End of interview]