

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Diane B. Simms

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

April 21, 2010

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This interview is being conducted on April 21, 2010, with Ms. Diane Simms at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Ms. Simms was born on September 16, 1939, in Chicago, Illinois. She retired as a secretary for Argonne National Laboratory, and knew of the Veterans History Project because she also is a volunteer on this project. Diane has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is her story.

Diane, you said when you were young, you didn't enter the military, but you got to know a lot of military because you were working in downtown Chicago and you became familiar with the USO.

I had not heard of the USO, but a young woman I worked with, Joan, she and her friend had heard that the USO was just two blocks down from where we worked. And they had given thought to going there and volunteering. And I said I would go, too.

How old were you at that point?

I was probably 20 years old.

You were 20 years old, working downtown. Were you living with your parents?

Yes.

In the suburbs or in the city?

I was living on the north side of Chicago.

What did your friends tell you about the USO, or did you know about it before you went there?

I really had heard of the USO, but I wasn't that familiar with it. I just knew that you would go there as a volunteer and there would be soldiers and sailors there, and this was a place for them to come and either relax or, what I had heard, there was dancing. And I happened to love to dance. So I thought, well, this would be great. I thought it would be a great way to help soldiers and sailors feel comfortable and be able to socialize with them – to talk with them and dance with them.

So that was around 1959.

Yes. It probably began by the summer of 1959.

And this country was not involved, as far as the public knew, in a lot of combat actions. So what drew you to doing something for the soldiers and sailors?

Well, again, that was good that there was no war going on. But still, you know Chicago had Glenview Air Force Base. There was the Great Lakes Naval Base. So there were quite a few military people who were still in Chicago. At that time, that was the only USO facility.

In the Chicago area.

Yes. And that's where you would want to go.

Had any of your family been in the military?

My uncle was in World War II, but I think at that time I wasn't familiar with what he did.

So this wasn't prompted by any of your family's experiences – you just thought this would be a good thing to do, and you enjoyed dancing so it would be kind of fun.

Yes.

So your friends got you to go down with them – after work, on the weekend?

Well, it's hard for me to remember after all these years. But I'm pretty sure we went there once a week after work. And, again, we'd leave work at 5:00 and you'd walk down two blocks and you were right there. And I believe I did go on some Saturdays.

What was your impression when you got to the USO the first time?

I was pretty shy at that time. So it wasn't like I could just walk up to people and talk to them that easily. Yet, at the same time, with the music and dancing it was like an icebreaker, and it was easy to get to meet people.

Did you have to check in somewhere? Or did you just walk in and start dancing with people?

I can't remember that now. I don't even remember if I wore a badge back then. I would think you would have had to check in, but I don't really remember.

Were there a lot of people when you would go? Were there a lot of people in the room dancing?

Again, it's hard for me to remember. But I would think there could have been anywhere from a few dozen to maybe 30 to 40 people there at a time.

Was it a large room? Was it a band playing or records?

I don't remember a band. I really don't. So I'm going to say they either had a phonograph with records, or maybe there could have been a jukebox. But I don't remember for sure. There was music and there was dancing. The room – I remember two rooms connected together. It

reminds you of ...[how] a living room and dining room would be connected. And one room had chairs and a couch and maybe some writing desks – so the soldiers and sailors could sit around and read or talk. There might have been magazines or books. And then the other room was where there was dancing and they would have refreshments.

What kind of refreshments did they serve?

Again, I know they would have had to have something like coffee or maybe cokes. And I believe there would have been cookies and maybe there could have been donuts.

Non-alcoholic stuff.

Non-alcoholic stuff, I'm sure. Whether they would have had sandwiches – they could have. I can't remember that because my memories are more on socializing and dancing than they were on the food. But they would have had all of this, and it would have all been free to the military people.

And to the volunteers?

And to the volunteers.

So you went in with your friends and you saw these people – some sitting around in one room reading, writing and talking; other people dancing. How did you get started dancing there?

Again, I don't know. I think there were just a lot of the young men who wanted to dance.

So you just waited a minute (chuckles).

Basically, you probably did just wait just a minute and there was somebody to dance with. I will even say right now that I really liked being there. The men who came to the USO were young men – probably some of them no older than me – but they didn't want to go to bars. They didn't know where to go. They might have been very lonely – what do you do in a big city? But they could feel comfortable there. And I think it was just a nice place. I know I wanted them to feel comfortable. I know the time I spent there I wanted to do whatever I could to dance with them, talk with them – just make them feel comfortable.

So it was a nice, safe, comfortable place for everybody just to relax and spend some time together.

Yes.

And you said you went there once a week and sometimes on Saturday, too.

I believe I went there on some Saturdays.

Was it any different on the weekends than it was during the week?

I don't think so. It might have been more crowded than it would on an evening during the week.

I was going to tell you, I did find some information on the computer. And I ... found where it was located. It actually was located at 308 North Michigan Avenue.

So it would be near Michigan and Wacker.

Well, I worked right at Michigan and Wacker. So this would have been a little bit south of there, and it probably would have been a little bit closer to Randolph. And I know it was on the second floor.

The whole thing was on the second floor.

Yes.

So you walked in, you waited a minute and somebody would ask you to dance. What kind of dances?

I can't remember. You know, when I think back to those times, they could have been doing the jitterbug. I'm not sure if they were doing the twist at that time, but it would have been about that time. There would have been some slow dances, too.

You usually would dance with one person and at the end of the dance they would thank you and maybe someone else would come up?

Right. You might have a few dances with the same person. But the idea was to socialize and not spend all your time with one person. I could remember times just sitting down and talking to people, too. And especially as you got to feel more comfortable you wouldn't be sitting necessarily alone with someone. You might be in a group and talking.

So I would imagine that over time there were some regulars that you recognized.

Not necessarily. It could be that people were in Chicago at certain times and that's when they would come in. But as far as it goes, there is one person I did meet one evening. And I'll just call him a friend, because I've forgotten his name. But I do know, in his case, and again I found information on this on the computer because I was saying to myself, when would I have met him. I did bring along a picture of the two of us which was taken. So I do have a memory of this. But I remember we had a good time talking and dancing with each other. I'm not sure if there was a policy at the time, but he asked me if I'd like to have dinner with him, so we arranged to meet that Saturday. I did go downtown and I met him for dinner.

Do you remember where?

No. But we went for dinner and then we walked around on State Street. And ... we took this picture ...

Somewhere during that evening ...

There were those machines that you would sit down in ...

A photobooth.

Yes. But I only have the one. But I know that's what we did. And then, I thought it was so nice of him, it probably was close to 10:00, and I had to take the Ravenswood "L" home. And he insisted he would take me home.

Did he have a car?

No. He got on the "L" with me and we went all the way to the end of the line – Kimball and Lawrence where I lived. And he walked me home. And I brought him in and introduced him to my parents. And then he turned around and left and went back downtown.

Your parents must have been impressed that he came all the way to make sure you were safe.

Yes. And I thought it was very nice, too.

Did you see him after that?

No, I didn't. First of all, I do want to bring the fact that, once again, being a computer person I was trying to even figure out when I might have seen him. So I went on the computer – oh, this is important. I knew he was stationed on the USS Joseph Kennedy Jr. destroyer. So I put that information into the computer. And I found information with pictures on the USS Kennedy Jr. when it was in Chicago, which was on July 3, 1959. And it was here in Chicago for the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. And the destroyer was tied up by the Merchandise Mart ...

Which is owned by the Kennedy family.

That's correct. So it was right there on the Chicago River. I certainly wouldn't have remembered when I would have seen him. But, my goodness, it's right there in the records when the destroyer was in Chicago. So it would ... have been the week after that, or around then, that he came to the USO. I sort of wondered where was he going to go when he got back. But I didn't realize that maybe he was going to go to the Merchandise Mart and get aboard the destroyer.

Well, I corresponded with him. We wrote to each other from 1959 until 1961.

That's a lot of time.

Then it so happened that in July of 1961 I went on a vacation with two of my friends – Essy and Caryl – to New York City. And he ended up telling me in a letter that he would be in New York City at that time. So we arranged to meet for lunch. And it was nice to see him again.

Now all these years I've wondered why was he there at the same time I was. Well, in looking on the computer on the history of the Joseph Kennedy Jr. destroyer, [it shows] that in July 1961, the destroyer was taken to the New York Naval Shipyard for renovation. So that's why we were able to connect at that time. And so I got to see him again.

So you spent two years writing letters back and forth. You saw him twice – once in 1959 and once in 1961. Do you know where he was from? Did you learn about his family?

No. I think it was a situation where he really wasn't happy at home, that his father was very strict, that he was no longer in high school and yet he had to obey curfews. He thought going into the Navy at that time was what he wanted to do. I think he wasn't sure at that point if he wanted to make it his career. And, of course, I don't know what he did. But, again, to read the information on the destroyer he was on and what it was involved in, he might have participated in some of these things over a few years or a number of years.

So what happened after July 1961? Did you continue to write?

I don't remember keeping in touch with him after that.

So nothing, you just lost touch.

Right. But at the same time, in talking about it now, it's interesting because I could look up the history of the actual destroyer and what was involved in what he really did on the ship. Well, I don't know what his job was, but the work that they were doing either in the U.S. or around the world – to learn a little bit about why the destroyer was in Chicago.

Were you still working at the USO at this point?

Well, I left my job where I was working in August of 1960. So then I stopped going to the USO.

So you didn't meet any more people there, you just kept in touch with this person until 1961 and it tapered off.

However, Joan and her friend met military men whom they married. That did happen for them.

So that was something that was kind of a special thing for them.

Yes.

You had this experience. And obviously it stuck with you, even though you can't remember the gentleman's name. When you look back on your experience with the USO,

was it something that you would have encouraged other people to do? Was it just something that filled some time for you? What does that experience mean to you today?

Well, I was very glad I went. And once again, I can only say that they were all wonderful young men who were there. Really. And I understood that this was a place of comfort for them, and to be able to just socialize with the women who were there – dancing, talking, relaxing. It was very important for them. And I'm glad I had the time to do it.

What has happened in my life ever since that time is ... I have been a volunteer in many organizations in many different projects throughout my life.

Was the USO your first opportunity as a volunteer in anything?

Yes.

So it was a very good experience, and you continued volunteering throughout your life.

Yes, I did.

What would you tell people today about volunteering and not sure if they can fit into their schedule or if they're not sure if it will be worth their time?

Well, I'd say it's good to make a little time. Truthfully, if there was a USO around here, maybe I'd be interested in doing that, too. In going on the computer, I see they do discuss how they need volunteers. And now, in Chicago, there is a USO center at Midway Airport, at O'Hare Airport, and at ...[Navy] Pier. So there are ways to help by just talking or whatever else they have going on. I don't even know if they have dancing now, but I get the feeling that when they're in Chicago now they even give them tickets to go see plays or go to the museums. They may even take them to some of these places. The USO has always been there throughout the years for the young men. It's usually just young men.

Young men and women, now.

Men, women and older people who are in the USO.

So it's definitely something you would encourage people to volunteer their time for.

Yes.

Is there anything else that you remember about your experience that you would like to share?

No. I think maybe that's it.

Thank you for sharing your story.