

Betty Barnes

Oral History

2/19/13

Tell me a little bit about your life.

“I am in the midst of celebrating my 90th birthday. So ninety years ago I was born in the city of Harrisburg. I am one of five children, and I am the last of the line. My mother was one of ten, and my father was left orphaned at the age of six weeks. His mother and only brother were killed by a freight train in the Shipoke area.”

“I am very proud of my father because he overcame a lot of difficulties, and retired after fifty-one years of working for the railroad. He had started at 15 years old working as what they referred to as a “call boy”, and worked his way up to the position of Trainmaster of the Rutherford Yards; which is now the Rutherford bus terminal. Although he accomplished this without much education, he was determined that his children would go to college. I am proud of my mother too. You know, I never heard her raise her voice; and the first time that I heard my father swear, I was twenty-one - and I almost fell over! I had an older brother who unfortunately drowned at the age of six, but the remaining four of us did go on to attend college at Bucknell.”

“I was initially educated in the Harrisburg school system. I would have started Kindergarten before the age of six, but once they discovered that I was not yet six, they made me leave school. The Junior League of Harrisburg had started an experimental Kindergarten program, which I attended and almost failed. I had fallen very ill that year, and did not return to school until I was of age for first grade.”

“I went to the “Old” John Harris High School, and I graduated in the next-to-last mid term class before they did away with that and changed to June graduations. I was not an exceptional student; I was a good student, but not exceptional. After high school, my father let me take a job. I asked him if I could just keep the job, and not go on to college like my older brother at Bucknell. I was dating a young man at the time whom I thought to be “The One”. Daddy agreed (for the time being), and in the meantime, Pearl Harbor.”

“I was eighteen and working at the State Council of Defense for a year when the University [Bucknell] contacted my dad, and said that I had to

attend by September. So he sat me down and told me that I had to resign. I said that I didn't want to, and he said, 'You either resign, or I'll do it for you'. He of course had the backing of Dr. Mertz, [her boss] because Dr. Mertz knew that I was supposed to be going to school at the time."

"So I went to school at Bucknell in September of '42, and within six weeks [sighs] I knew that I wasn't really interested in that boy back home [she laughs]."

"At that time all of the men were leaving campus, but at the end of my freshman year came the VI 2: Any young man who was enlisted in the Marine Corps or the Navy was given a college education. If they followed the military rules and graduated, they were made officers. I'll never forget one Sunday when the Sergeant had them all lined up on the men's quad, and he noticed quite a few had not responded to role call. So he said, 'As I call your name, you step forward'. Over 100 of them were A-W-O-L, and so then they really "lowered the boom". The men had to report to the men's quad at 7:30 pm, while we co-eds could do anything that we wanted! [laughing] It was rather fun standing there waving goodbye to the boys - instead of them waving to us!"

"I completed my college education in two years and eight months. I don't know if it was good, bad, or indifferent, but I graduated in June of 1945, and two weeks later I was married to my Marine. Practically our whole wedding party was military families. My maid of honor's husband was a First Lieutenant who was killed at the start of Heartbreak Ridge, and was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously."

"My husband was called back into the Marine Corps during the Korean Outbreak. When he came home I was determined to still go to work. My husband was very old fashioned, and didn't want me to work, but he was realistic about it because he knew that if I didn't work we wouldn't be able to do anything. Our rent for our efficiency apartment on Front St [across from the civic club building] was \$48.50/month. It was smaller than this living room! [20' X 40'] To use the bathroom we had to go in, turn around, and then close the door! (it was very small) Best eight years of our life!" [She laughs]

You interview very well!

"That comes from being a secretary. My first interview was at my first job out of college. My husband was away at war. The man interviewing me informed me that he was a Penn State graduate - that was before Penn State was a University. He was a general agent of an insurance company. He asked me something, (which they can't do anymore) he knew that I had recently been honeymooning, and he asked me if I was pregnant. I said,

'No, I'm not', and well, I wasn't - right at that moment; but I was meeting my husband in NYC that weekend...and just guess what happened?!" [She laughs]

"Well, he [her boss] would always give a Christmas luncheon at the West Shore Country Club. When he found out that I was pregnant, he made it very clear that I was not to attend. I had to stay at the office and answer the phones. [Her punishment for having appeared to lie to the insurance agent] But I had been truthful! I wasn't pregnant...on that Monday! I was making \$18/week at that time. A short time after I resigned that position, it was discovered that he [her boss] had been claiming to the government that he was paying me \$24/week. Of course, there was no recourse of action for that sort of thing back in '45."

"When I went to "housekeeping" [staying at home with her child], which was now sixty-eight years ago, we were in the apartment right across the street from the Civic Club. When my little fella was born, he and I would go and play in the grass along side of the Civic Club building. At that time I had never thought that I would ever be qualified to be a member [of the Civic Club]. It's nice to know that somebody thought that I was good enough to be there."

"When I went back to work, I worked for thirty-four years straight. My greatest achievement was working as Ginny Thornburgh's Personal Secretary. Her husband was Governor Dick Thornburgh. I worked at the Governor's home. It was delightful! She is a wonderful person, and I can't ever say enough of Governor Thornburgh. He really was a very lovely person as well."

"In July of 1980, Ginny, her mother, and I were in a terrible car accident on Rt. 15. I ended up in the hospital. I had a broken face, a severe concussion, four broken ribs, and a bruised spleen - but we were lucky. A tractor-trailer did not like the back end of our new Oldsmobile, and had plowed into us on the very side where I was sitting. My younger brother was a lawyer, and Governor Thornburgh said, "If you want your brother to be your council, he can work with us". Governor Thornburgh even found time to visit me in the hospital."

"My husband and his family had been very active in the Republican Party here since the Civil War. My husband was the Director of the Bureau of Elections and Registration for twenty years. When he retired, Steve Reed declared that day "Bill Barnes Day", Governor Thornburgh sent out a declaration, and the entire courthouse, judges, commissioners, and laypersons gave him a surprise retirement party."

How and when did you first become a member of the Civic Club?

“My husband was always very supportive of my being involved in organizations doing whatever it was that I wanted to do, but I did not become really active in any organizations until my son went away to school at Syracuse. That is when I became involved in all of the organizations – of which I am still a member.”

“In 1992 I was asked to give a presentation for women during Women’s Month, which is March. After giving that talk I was offered membership in the Women’s Civic Club. At that time, my younger brother’s wife was the Vice President in charge of the programs, and she was the one who really got me interested in joining. I had always thought, ‘My Goodness, I would never qualify to be a member of the Civic Club!’. That was back before women left the home to go to work. They [the members of the Civic Club] were the wives of the attorneys and doctors, and other prominent men, who had found the way to do a lot of good things. When I joined we were at a point in the organization where the older members were dying, going into nursing homes, or moving away in order to be closer to their children. Our younger women were having trouble being active because they couldn’t simply leave their places of employment in the middle of the day in order to attend luncheons and the like.”

“We were still doing a lot of good things, and after three years I was asked to be Club President. It was at a time when people were not being innovative. They had seemed to lose their “thrust”, and we were having trouble motivating the young people. The ladies who were there were very active. They played bridge twice a month, and usually had anywhere from four to six tables. We also had lunches once a month with book reviews, and we tried to draw a diverse group of organizations to attend and speak to us. Still, slowly our members were losing interest due to the ailments of old age. We had lovely people, but many of my suggestions were overlooked because our membership was a little too old.”

“After about ten years, cliques began to form, and about that time my own health began to deteriorate. I couldn’t take the pressures anymore. For two years of my term as President, my husband was battling bladder cancer. I wanted to resign, but the ladies wouldn’t let me. They felt that if something were to happen to my husband that I should have something to hold on to. They were a very supportive group.”

“After seven and a half years of battling cancer, my husband passed away. We had fifty-one wonderful years, and only one son [she smiles and places her hands on her chest wistfully] the love of my life. During that time the Civic Club was sort of my lifeline. Now I’m the proud grandmother of two great –grandchildren! You can see pictures of my other grandchildren

around here everywhere, but I don't have too many of my great-grandchildren in here yet...but I do on my iPad!"

What do you see for the future of the Civic Club?

"I cannot begin to tell you the renaissance that has occurred [within the Civic Club] in the last three years! It is so encouraging and wonderful! Beth and Jean, (and I don't know all of the young people who have come in) but they have really come in and have been doing a magnificent job! I constantly tell them that, because having seen how things were going to pieces, and now to see how it is beginning to rise again - its just wonderful! The care and upkeep of the building is just beautiful too. The club is now in the process of making sure that the building doesn't fall in around our ears. It is 100 years old you know. Back in 1936 that is where my music teacher would have our recitals every June. Back then the Civic Club would also hold dances where they would teach the young girls and boys the niceties of being at a dance."

"Do you know the story of Myra Dock? [Nope.] Well, she was a member, and through her efforts she helped to beautify the Front St. Walk. The Civic Club is the only edifice that is permitted to be on that side of the river. Up where the Sunken Garden is now, used to be a shantytown called "Hard Scrabble". That was all cleaned up, and I don't know if it was made into a city law, but it has been held in perpetuity that nothing else be built on that side of the River Walk. It is a good thing."

"I guess that I am a one woman cheering squad, but what they are doing now is just absolutely wonderful. When Jean and Beth became members of the Civic Club, they created The Affiliates of the Civic Club. One of the first things that they did was start up "Manners Matter". We had close to seventy-five children, and they weren't from what we used to call "the 400 of Harrisburg", they were just ordinary kids who had never had the opportunity to learn life's niceties. It was a huge success. They've done it in a minor way since then, but that was one of the highlights right before the recent renaissance. They have since done many other good things."

"I regret that because I am battling cancer, and my chemo treatment each month lays me low for three days, that I sometimes miss Civic Club activities. They know that my heart is always with them, and it always will be. They have a lot of good people."

"There were a lot of good times. I only remember the good times, because why worry about anything else? I try to live my life that way. I've had too many blessings and too much fun in my life to complain!"

-Interview conducted by Taavi Lehtimaki 2013