

Joan Dunton

On December 7, 1941 Mrs. Dunton was a high school student living in Mason, Wisconsin. She learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor as she emerged from a movie theatre after going on an afternoon date. She recalls going home after getting a soda at the dime store to listen to the radio with her family to gather all the details they could of the attack.

The possibility of war was not new to Mrs. Dunton. Her father was a member of the Michigan State Police and had gone to an Army base in Maryland previously for training for potential wartime duties. These duties included blackout enforcement and fighting fires caused by air raids. In fact her father brought home a piece of sulphur that was used to simulate a fire during his training.

Her memories of the first year of the war include practicing air raid drills, learning to live with food rationing and selling defense savings stamps to raise money for the war. Mrs. Dunton was the president of her high school student council and felt it was her responsibility to handle this last chore. Every Friday morning she would go by the local post office and collect the defense saving stamps to take to school where she would sell them during study breaks. At the end of the day she would take her proceeds back to the post office. Defense savings stamps were one of the ways the government raised money to pay for the war. Children could buy them and then collect them in books to turn into at the post office for a War Savings Bond that would then mature in ten years to \$25.

She also had distinct memories of going to the bus station to see all of the boys in her class off as they joined the military. She kept in touch with a few of them, including the boy she was on a date with on December 7th, 1941. She wrote letters to him throughout the war and even knitted him a sweater! She also maintained a V-Mail correspondence with a friend from high school who was stationed in England. He described a great deal about England but rarely wrote about the war as he was not happy to be involved in it.

Mrs. Dunton graduated from high school and was accepted at Wooster College in Ohio. Her parents had to save enough gas ration stamps to drive her down to school. They also saved enough to buy her two pairs of shoes to take with her. After she returned to school from her first Christmas vacation she found that everyone had been moved out of the dormitories and into the houses of locals. The dormitories were being used for men who were training as part of the new V-12 Navy College Training Program. This was a program to ensure that the navy had enough college educated officers to fill its greatly expanded ranks. Mrs. Dunton and four other female students ended up in the house of a local chiropractor who had no children of her own. She spent the rest of her college career there.

In fact there were not many men left on campus at all, most had left school to join the military. Mrs. Dunton remembers three male students remaining on campus; two conscientious objectors and one student who could not serve for health reasons. She admired the two boys who were morally opposed to the war and found herself drawn to the pacifist movement on campus. This movement was supported by a Quaker chemistry professor at school who was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. While she never gave up being a Presbyterian during the war she

did find that she had a lot in common with the FOR and Quaker movements and considered herself an unofficial Quaker during this time.

The Quakers and FOR sought not to actively oppose the war but rather to carry out programs of human betterment. These ranged from relief for those who were suffering from the war to trying to break down social barriers that led to conflict. To this end after the war the FOR group knitted cloths for those who were suffering in Europe and Japan in the wake of the war. Mrs. Dunton and her friends also worked to desegregate the town of Wooster. She caught the attention of the Dean of Women when she and a friend invited two black men as dates to a school dance. The dean asked for an explanation for behavior and Mrs. Dunton explained that Wooster was a Presbyterian school and segregation didn't seem to be "very Christian!" In the end Mrs. Dunton's black friends were allowed to attend though the dean was none too happy.

In another attempt to break down the walls that segregated the races in Wooster Mrs. Dunton and her friends would go out to eat at "white" restaurants with black friends. Most of the time the group was politely told that they had to leave because allowing a black person to eat with whites would be bad for business. After a few instances of this they decided to circulate a petition in town to discover if any of the locals would actually mind eating in a restaurant with blacks. To the surprise of many restaurant owners most people in Wooster did not mind eating with blacks! They thereby succeeded in getting a few restaurants to open their doors to blacks and whites. This was in 1944, well before the Civil Rights Movement.

At times Mrs. Dunton would travel to other towns to meet with Quaker groups. Some Quaker communities ran youth hostels. She and her friends had little money and would have to hitchhike to these various locations. On one trip she and a friend caught a ride with an elderly lady who was going to the same town and agreed to give them a ride back when it was time to leave. On the way back they ran into a terrible thunderstorm and Mrs. Dunton and her friend were scared, but not as scared as the elderly woman driving! Mrs. Dunton asked the lady if she would rather that Mrs. Dunton drove the car in the storm, the elderly lady readily agreed!

Another time Mrs. Dunton and friend hitchhiked back to her home town to surprise her family and attend a play her sister was in. They got rides with trucks most of the way but had to get off of the major highways for the last twenty miles. They decided to just to cut across country through backroads, walking if they had to. In the end they were picked up by a gentleman who recognized Mrs. Dunton and knew her father. "Does he know you are out her?" was his question. He took them all the way to the front door of her parents' house where family was surprised to see them and alarmed at their mode of travel! Her father "saw to it that we took the train back to school" after the weekend.

After school Mrs. Dunton's life took a different path than she had anticipated. All her life she had wanted to help other people and had considered that being a doctor was the best way for her to do that. It was in this desire to help that she found common cause with the Quaker Movement. She planned on going to medical school after graduating from Wooster but found herself moving to a small coal mining town in southeastern Ohio. She had been asked by the Presbyterian Church to help out with a church in the town and she agreed. There she taught Sunday school, set

up Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, and was involved in a lot of youth activities. She even took twenty young boys on a fishing trip!

After working there for two years she felt a different calling and decided to attend the seminary. She earned a Master's degree in Christian Education from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. When she was done one of her teachers asked her if she was interested in traveling to Japan as a missionary. She said yes and was then sent to Yale University for a year to learn Japanese. There she met Rupert Dunton, a Methodist missionary and horticulturalist who was also going to Japan. They decided "it would be more fun to go together" and were married before they left!

They lived and worked in a rural area of Japan for three years and Mrs. Dunton relates that they made "some of the best friends we ever had there." While there they had two sons. Despite all of the groundbreaking work Mrs. Dunton had performed while at Wooster she still ran into some of the prejudices existing during the time. She was called into the office of the head of the mission and asked to say that she didn't feel well and wished to return to the U.S. Mrs. Dunton was experiencing no health issues and loved living in Japan, she understood the request was to preserve the reputation of her husband who was not doing well in his missionary work. As she tells it "Mr. Dunton was a good man, he was just not a good teacher." She agreed so as not to cause problems and they returned to the U.S.

Despite the less than optimal exit from Japan, once in the U.S. they had a couple of strokes of good fortune. The first was that they had a baby daughter. The second was that the same teacher who had suggested to Mrs. Dunton that she go to Japan as a missionary suggested that she look into a potential job at Warren Wilson College in Asheville. In fact it turned out that the college hired her husband as a horticulturist. While he worked she did volunteer work and raised their children.

Later a friend who was on the Board of Directors at the YWCA approached her about a job there. She worked for three years with the director, Mrs. Thelma Caldwell, helping to desegregate the center. After three years, Mrs. Caldwell retired and Mrs. Dunton took on the role of director, a post she held for 40 years. After retiring from the YWCA she worked for another 17 years on the Buncombe County Council on Aging.