

Margaret Rose Ensley

My name is Margaret Rose Ensley and I was born in Asheville, N.C. on June 23, 1921 and have lived here through the World War II years 1941-46, as well as the remainder of my 81 years.

On June 5, 1941, at age 19, I received my Junior College Diploma, majoring in biology and chemistry, from Biltmore College (now UNCA), Asheville, N.C. During my sophomore year my German professor, Dean Charles Lloyd died and was replaced by Dr. Klaus Hiltzheimer, a Ph. D. from University of Jena, Germany and a German who had escaped Germany just in time. During our classes, Dr. Hiltzheimer described to us the conditions in Germany, but like the rest of the world, in my then simple innocent way of life, I ignored his warnings of what was to come. World War II was approaching.

After my graduation, rumors of war continued during the summer of 1941. I knew then that more college was not feasible for me due to family circumstances. In July, I was accepted as a student in the local Mission Hospital Lab Technician Program. Shortly thereafter, my high school boy friend, Roy Totherow, asked me if I would like to have his job as laboratory technician at the local Southern Dairies (National Dairy Products-Sealtest) laboratory. He was enlisting in the Naval Air Force. Many of my classmates were enlisting as rumors of war grew stronger. An interview was scheduled with Gary E. Hughes, General Manager of Southern Dairies-Sealtest and I was hired with much reservation because I was a woman. I was the first woman in a laboratory that Southern Dairies had ever hired in any of their plants from Washington to Florida. From the applications they received for this position, I was the only one who had the necessary qualifications, so they didn't have much choice with many men leaving for the armed forces. My starting salary was 35 cents per hour, a 48 hour work week, and a free daily pint of milk. Not long afterwards this was increased to \$42 per week with unlimited hours (this went to as much as 20 hours a day, catching a nap on my desk, before the war ended).

After I was hired, I well remember the day in the office of Mr. Hughes when he conducted my indoctrination. This dairy plant had three stories with the milk and ice cream processing, cooler and freezer rooms, receiving plant, wholesale and retail loading dock, bottling and garage in part of this large building. At the time of my employment, only men worked in this section of the building. The office and sales area were connected. There were women employees there but I would have limited contact. As I was 20 years old, pretty, and single, this could present a problem in relationship with a large number of men. Mr. Hughes explained to me that I had both a personal and professional challenge with these men. Their language was not always the purest and they were certainly not used to taking orders from a young woman. To carry out the duties of my job, this would be necessary. Mr. Hughes stated no dates or personal contact with any of the plant men, either inside or outside the plant. At all times I must maintain a strictly professional appearance and attitude and that it was up to me to figure out how I was going to do it. I really wanted this job. The laboratory was nicely equipped with everything to do the job. It was located on the main floor with a large window opening onto Patton Avenue. As you entered through a screen door on the opposite end, the Mojonnier testing equipment was on the right.

This test was done on all ice cream mix for butter fat and solids. Next to this was an old oak roll top desk with a book case above. Next was a refrigerator. Then the large beautiful oak incubator used to incubate the agar dishes used for bacteria counts. Beside this was an electric oven for dry sterilization of glassware. Then across the front window was a long table used for milk and ice cream quality control tasting and bacterial plating. On the left was a beautiful copper autoclave used for steam sterilization of glassware and agar. On the wall, a copper still for making distilled water. Below was counter space for microscopic counts with an outstanding Spencer microscope with an oil emersion lens, as well as a plate counter and test equipment for acidity testing. A sink and another counter with a 24 cup centrifuge, acid bottle and book for recording results for butterfat testing by the Babcock method. Above were cabinets for storing supplies. This was truly a diversified lab, equipped to handle most any test needed. My job was to run these tests. Butterfat tests on every vat of milk/cream bottled. Solids and butterfat on every vat of ice cream mix frozen. Check pasteurization charts on every vat of milk/ice cream and sedimentation tests on incoming 10 gallon cans of milk. Weekly taste sampling of finished dairy products. Monthly butter fat testing on milk producers composite samples to determine their rate of imbursement. These were among the tests run to protect the health of citizens in a wartime setting of western North Carolina and the rapidly incoming army and navy personnel who would be stationed in Asheville and adjoining areas.

Moore General Army Hospital in Swannanoa, N.C. with rail tracks running directly into the hospital for unloading wounded soldiers from both the European, African and Pacific war theaters. Some time ago I passed by this area and nothing now remains of this big hospital that covered many acres but the railroad tracks. Other Army and Navy installations who would soon converge on the Asheville area included the Kenilworth Inn, City Hall, Grove Park Inn, Arcade, Sand Hill School, Asheville Normal School Campus and Oteen Veterans Hospital.

I completed the Sealtest training course and was certified as the plant now was gearing up to take care of these military installations for milk and ice cream. On December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor was bombed and we were officially at war. On that Sunday afternoon I had gone to the home of Sara Reid, my best friend.

Her brother Jimmy was a newspaper carrier and the Asheville Citizen-Times phoned him to pick up the special edition. Her mother drove us to the paper office and that is how I found out about the bombing. This was the day my quiet, innocent life was changed forever. Never to return. More of the plant employees were now going into the military. This was putting the load on older employees. Women were hired in the ice cream department and over the next four years, three different girls, cousins Louise and Carolyn Brown and Catherine Post from Pearl River, N.Y., whose husband was stationed in Asheville, served as my lab assistant in the laboratory. As only one of them had any previous lab experience, this left their training to me. For a short time Bill Bynum returned to the lab.

The men in the plant accepted me as a young women who would put up with no foolishness. I put them at ease and did my job. I never had a single incident as they respected me both personally and professionally. If they had a hurt finger, I bandaged it. The lab was also the first aid center. Most of these men are deceased now but they live on in my happy memories. Gary

Hughes became President of Southern Dairies and moved to Washington. "The Old Man" never forgot this plant and returned his expensive suits on the Sealtest truck to be hand cleaned across the street at Ted and Rochelle Adler's ABC Cleaners. Long after the war ended, he retired to Asheville and died. He also was responsible for the building plans of the now existing Sealtest plant. Charles L. Rackley became General Manager and was my mentor in so many ways. His door was always open. One day I had a decision to make on some long forgotten matter. I went to his office and discussed it with him. His comment was "You are up a tree, now get yourself down." I got myself down and to this day, I have never forgotten his advice. He was killed in an automobile accident caused by a freak ice slick. Hammond G. Strom became the manager near the war year's end. He is also deceased.

The war brought many changes in the plant. Security was tightened and visitors were no longer taken on tours of the plant. Mine was classed as a top priority job and I could only leave to take another high priority job. I began to get calls from companies that wouldn't even give me an interview after my graduation.

I liked my job and my men. They treated me as their sister. Since I was tiny, they would never let me fill my test bottle from the heavy sulfuric acid jug. They taught me how to roll a ten-gallon milk can and how to scrub the milk stone (which created high bacteria counts) off of a milk vat with citric acid. They carried heavy cases of composite samples to the lab for me. I even picked up a few very choice words of profanity from them which I still use on the proper occasion today.

J.D. Hofler, retail sales manager, took me on a call to meet one of his best accounts in an adjoining county. He was a real pro. He showed me how to do a real firm grip handshake as this customer would not buy from anyone who didn't have a firm grip. I learned how to handle Sealtest national inspectors, military officers, and state inspectors who came to inspect the plant, as well as irate milk producers. The Blue Ridge Milk Dealers' Association represented the producers. Cal Cook of Leicester was their president. It was necessary to handle these men very carefully as their milk was very necessary. I still laugh at how a complaint on Mr. Cook's milk was handled by Mr. Rackley, Manager and good friend of Mr. Cook. For several weeks Mr. Cook's cans of milk showed heavy sediment pads when I tested them. Knowing of this bosom friendship, I considered it wise to consult Mr. Rackley on how he wanted to handle the matter. He said "I will handle it." Several days later, Mr. Cook, red-faced, arrived in the lab to show me the letter Mr. Rackley sent him. It said "Dear Cal, there is a war going on and cow feed is very expensive and in short supply. I would so appreciate it if you would put the feed into the cow and not into the milk." This sure solved the problem. There was no new equipment to be had, so it was repair it and make do. T. V. (Toots) Eudy, plant engineer, and Harry Shroat, plant manager, were stretched to the limit repairing and keeping equipment operational. Both did a noble job.

I was advised that any test I run must be accurate and stand up in a court of law. Only on one occasion did I have to prove my accuracy. A small competitive milk plant badly needed milk and persuaded several of our best producers to change to them, promising a better price by padding their composite test samples. When the producers dropped by to show us these figures, we immediately suspected what was going on. Mr. Rackley contacted Carroll Pegram, state

inspector in Raleigh, who came to Asheville at once and caught them in the act. I was licensed by North Carolina to test, weigh and sample milk.

Southern Dairies was indeed fortunate to have a federal credit union for the benefit of its employees. It served as a convenience for savings and loans within the group. It was open a few hours on pay day. As there was no one else, the treasurer job fell to me as the war years progressed. I learned to keep accounts.

As most every one in the plant had someone in the military that they mailed goodies to, the A&P store next door to the plant was always so kind when their truck came in with Hershey bars, sugar, butter and coffee which were in short demand. The ice cream department also had 5 pound cans of cold chocolate fudge which we could buy and ship to servicemen, especially overseas. It traveled well in hot climates. A soldier I sent one to said. "We cut the can open and ate it by the handful with much rejoicing". He was in the south Pacific.

Southern Dairies acquired a Grade C milk receiving plant at Murphy, N.C. close to the Georgia line. I spent most of one summer there. Believe me, that was an interesting experience. Mr. Rackley had arranged with the Dickey Hotel for my room and board. The plant was just a few doors down the street. I was given precise instructions as to how I would proceed with the work there. As many of our milk producers were from the backwoods and rural areas, it was doubtful if they had ever produced any Grade A milk and this was the task assigned to me and J.D. Elrod, plant manager. This was a task that had to be approached with utmost care. Moonshine stills were not uncommon in this area. On my last day there, I was presented with a jug of very fine moonshine as a going away gift. There was no way I could transport this gift home because it was illegal to carry it in a company truck. If caught, that truck would lose its war time gas and tire ration. Breathing a prayer, I commented what a lovely gift to the producer who brought it and explained why I couldn't accept it. He understood. I considered this one of the most honored gifts I was ever offered, as it showed that the producers accepted me. I never returned to Murphy again, but still remember them fondly. A woman I trained, Sue Williams, from Murphy, took over the lab there. Sometime later she moved to Asheville to live, but never worked in the dairy again.

On the morning of June 6, 1944 the D-DAY Landing began on the beach at Normandy to reclaim Europe. This would signal the beginning of the end of World War II. I listened in the lab to the radio commentator as the battle progressed that day and wept tears.

Military personnel stationed in Asheville began to return home and facilities returned to near normal. I had been offered a transfer to Southern Dairies Laboratory in Washington. In the spring of 1945 I took a vacation to New York and stopped on my return trip in Washington. I had decided to accept it, but fate plays strange tricks on us. Shortly after returning home, I became very ill for the next year. My body was worn out from the stress and long hours of the war and surgery was necessary. I never returned to the work I loved so much. It was 1946.

Roy Totherow never returned to claim his job in the laboratory. He graduated from Harvard Medical School and became a surgeon in Hawaii and California. I saw him only twice after I took his job. He died in the 70's.

I would like to mention the men that I worked with during this time. We did a job just as important as those in the military. Among those were: Doyle Freeman, John Sharp, George Laster, Bill Dale, Hurdas Tiller, Pete Mayo, Orville Brown, Billings, Sug Hendrix, Bobby Whittington, John Howard Robinson (an Afro-American man who made beautiful ice cream molds for holidays and parties), Shorty Duvall, Bob Duvall, and Bob Laster. Some of them served in the military as well. Also, Neil Culbertson.

ADDITIONAL WRITTEN ACCOUNT, May 2003

Mary Ensley, May 2003

During the World War II years of 1941-1946, much entertainment was made available for the service men stationed in Asheville and adjoining areas. There were several large military installations in the surrounding areas. I was a card-carrying USO girl. Up until 1977, when I moved from my family home at 508 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville, N.C., I still had my card. It was on my dresser and during the move apparently was left behind. Even though most of my waking hours were spent at work, I used my lunch hour weekly to take a voice lesson. I loved to sing and spent many happy hours in song. I was frequently asked to sing at the USO parties, hospitals, and veterans hospital for the service men. At Moore General Army Hospital, wounded men and women were brought in special hospital trains and unloaded directly into the hospital where their wounds were treated. When a hospital train arrived, a party was planned for them upon their arrival and USO girls were called. You always wore your prettiest long dress and a smile on your face. Sometimes it was hard to smile when you saw their wounds and agony. You talked to them and danced with them if they felt up to it. If I had been asked to sing, I took their song requests. These were songs that reminded them of their girls back home. In some cases, the girls back home had sent them "Dear John" letters. I shall always remember one man who asked me to sing "Don't Cry, Joe". I latter found out this had happened to him. He died a few days later. Today, I don't even remember his name, but I shall always remember that song. Though I sing no more, the copy of that song is still in my music. After the war ended, I was the music chairman at Oteen Veterans Hospital for the Asheville Music Club and for a number of years I arranged a monthly program of music there.

The YMCA on Woodfin Street (now long torn down) in downtown Asheville had weekly USO dances on Saturday nights. Many soldiers came from the surrounding military installations in and around Asheville. Camp Croft in Spartanburg, S.C. was also within traveling distance. Laurentine Canteen, on the lower floor of St. Lawrence Catholic Church on Haywood Street was also a popular gathering place for dances and entertainment. The Grove Park Inn was taken over by the Army and was a rehab center for officers. Later on it housed some prisoners of war, to the

displeasure of many Asheville people. Many of the local churches sponsored parties for the soldiers and sailors. The Navy took over the Kenilworth Inn. Across the street from my family home on Biltmore Avenue was the Asheville Normal & Teachers College campus and the Army had personnel stationed in the large executive home directly across from me. Many young men visited and sat on our front porch with my cousins and I.

Sunday afternoon was the gathering time at my home for my girl friends to visit, bake cookies to mail to our soldier friends, visit and write letters. As I remember back these sixty years, it was like a time that never was, that never happened. Homes in Asheville were opened to the service men and friendship was shared with them. I often wonder what happened to them after they returned to their homes far away. Some married local girls and stayed in Asheville to raise their families. Life in Asheville eventually returned to a near normal pace and life went on.