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Interviewee: Jackie McGiffert
Interviewer: Dawn Walsh
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Dawn Walsh: Good morning, Jackie.

Jackie McGiffert: Good morning, Dawn.

Dawn Walsh: Well, first I'd like to start just by asking you some background information about yourself, just the date and place of your birth?

Jackie McGiffert: Uh, huh. I was born on August 28, 1923 in Phillipsburg, New Jersey.

Dawn Walsh: And so, did you grow up going to school in Phillipsburg?

Jackie McGiffert: No, when I was two my parents moved across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania, and the town the other side of the river is Easton, Pennsylvania. So, I went through high school there, and I went to college Bethlehem, Pennsylvania at Corinthian College for Women. Now, the men and women's colleges have merged, and it's just plain Corinthian College.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, and what were some of the interests that you had growing up, at anytime in elementary school or high school or college? Any activities that you were involved in, groups that you belonged to, interests that you had?

Jackie McGiffert: I liked doing outdoor things, roller-skating, riding a bike. I had a dog from first through twelfth grade, and the dog always went with me when I was doing anything like that. And then from about third grade on, I was often in plays at school and that continued through—I was going to say through junior high school, but I think that's not right. I think it was just elementary school, and also in church we did a lot of plays too. At that time I went to a Methodist Church, some. I guess that kind of covers it.

Dawn Walsh: Were you aware of any peace work or peace issues as you were growing up, either from what was happening in your home, from your parents or your siblings, or your peers in school?

Jackie McGiffert: No. Well, yes and no—I shouldn't just say no. I was an only child, but my father had been in the First World War, and his experiences were apparently so awful that only twice in my life did I ever hear him talk about it. So, I suppose that I grew up thinking that war was terrible until the Second World War, and I was in college during that. And not unlike virtual all of the country, I suddenly believed in that War and what was behind it, and worked in a war

plant during the summer between my Junior and Senior years—no, that’s not right—between my sophomore and junior years. I worked on an assembly line that, well we painted and buffed and that kind of thing, anti-personnel land mines. I would come home in the afternoons after work—we worked shifts, so it was a different time that you came home with each shift. But anyway, we had a good time every day at work. I was the only college girl, and the other people on the line were, for the most part, grown women, married women with families and, in some instances, there were women who worked in that plant whose sons were in the service. We just told jokes and laughed and sang songs, and it seemed like an enjoyable summer. Once, when I was talking about what fun it had been that day, my father said harshly and soberly that I should think about what I was doing there, and that, I’ve never forgotten that, and that did sort of make it seem in a different light.

Dawn Walsh: And so, what was that different light after your father said that to you?

Jackie McGiffert: Well, to tell you the truth it was still fun. You know, we still laughed and joked, but I was more mindful of the fact that what we were working on at our little assembly line was going to blow somebody’s son or brother or father or husband to smithereens, so that was a sobering thought. But, by in large, the country felt extremely hostile, with very good reason, I have never changed my mind about that, toward both Germans and Japanese. So, my feelings were somewhat tempered. I wouldn’t want to do that today, but things were different. That was—there was justification for that war, I think, despite our heritage here with Jeannette Rankin.

Dawn Walsh: So, you were able to come to some sort of balance or understanding?

Jackie McGiffert: Yeah, I guess you could put it that way. I, frankly, have no regrets that I spent the summer that way.

Dawn Walsh: I’d like to go back to your father in World War I, when you said that you remember just a couple of time him mentioning that. Do you remember your response at that time and what your thoughts were those couple of times when he did talk about that war? How that affected you?

Jackie McGiffert: You would have had to have known my father and the relationship, I suppose. He was a difficult, autocratic person. So, actually, I don’t remember whether I asked any questions. I think, maybe, it was just sort of stunned silence on my part. Do you want to hear the stories?

Dawn Walsh: Oh, only if you’re comfortable. I was mostly interested in how it affected you and how it affected your attitudes toward war and peace, so it’s up to you.

Jackie McGiffert: Well, I don’t mind a bit telling you. It might be interesting for somebody to hear an actual wartime story. The first story goes like this: They got to—this is my

understanding—my father was not eloquent and did not like to be interrupted or asked questions. I had this impression that these young, American soldiers, he was 21, arrived in a truck—that's my feeling—at a battle site, or nearby, or at least at a place where there had been a battle, or maybe they marched there. Anyway, by this time, my father had two buddies and the three of them were close, they were in the midst of devastation and one of these buddies and reached down and picked up a hand and said, "Here's your dinner Jack." Now, that's pretty horrifying.

My father originally was what was called the First Anti-Aircraft Machine Gun Battalion, and the Anti-Aircraft Machine Gun Battalion consisted of posts with a machine gun mounted on the top or on a swivel base so that the soldier would just stand there and shoot a machine gun at German planes and would walk around in a circle doing this. My father, who really I think, always saw himself as a tough guy found out quickly that he really didn't want to kill anybody, and he got himself transferred from these Machine Gun Battalion to a Medical Corps. That, I think, is when the horror really began, because the second story is even worse than the severed hand story. My father is in a trench, and he's doing what he can for the wounded. And he comes upon a boy who's lying gravely wounded in the trench, and so, he stoops down, or kneels down, or whatever with this boy, and the boy is moaning. And my father discovers that he has a wound, so he tells the boy—here I'm saying "boy," he was probably the same age as my father or older even—so, he tells this young soldier, "It's not serious, it's all right, you're going to be okay, we'll fix you up." The young soldier says to him, "No, that's not the place, and takes my father's hand and puts it into his abdominal cavity. He had simply been blown open—end of story.

Dawn Walsh: So, after all these years, as you tell that story today, how does that influence your feelings of war and peace?

Jackie McGiffert: Of course, we know now that there's nothing glorious about war. I am not, however, a real pacifist. I do believe that as Americans we have to stand up against injustice and against mistreatment of people, but it's a terrible thing that men really—let's face it—have done to one another for centuries upon centuries usually in the name of glory, and there's nothing about it. It's dreadful, as they know as soon as they've been in it. I have more and more and of a feeling of the injustice of being a male of the correct age at the right time, and it seems less and less fair that they're the ones that always have to get blown apart, even if they think that this is a brave wonderful thing to do. So I feel as though if we have to have military, and we do, if they have to be put in danger, than women need to experience the same danger or be put in the same danger. It just no longer seems fair to me that they're the ones that get it only.

Dawn Walsh: So then you'd been all for women in the military in all fields?

Jackie McGiffert: Yeah, I'm afraid so, anywhere they can physically do it. Yeah, I'm afraid it's come to that in my mind.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, I want to go back again to the summer that you spent...?

Jackie McGiffert: In that defense plant.

Dawn Walsh: And I was curious how you came about getting that job, and what got you there?

Jackie McGiffert: Well, that is kind of interesting. I very much wanted to participate in the war effort, and I had a cousin that worked for Job Service, and she lined me up with a plant that was supposed to be making parachute cloth, but it turned out that—and I worked there for a couple weeks—and it turned that they really were making hand-screened dress goods, not parachute cloth. I did not want to spend my summer doing that; I wanted to be involved in the war effort.

My father was a railroader, a conductor at that time, on a line that ran from—it doesn't matter where it ran from—it ran into New York and back. Then in the '40s, a lot of people commuted on a train to work, and I guess, people still do in the metropolitan East. Well, my father had regular passengers, and it turned out that one of them was the manager of a plant in Easton that had made silk stockings and now had converted to making shells, artillery shells, and land mines. We didn't make the shells for the land mines. Some women worked on big lathes that made big shells, and the land mine operations was just painting and putting cosmetic touches—not that had to look good, but they had to be rust proof and that kind of thing.

So, my father told this plant manager that his daughter very much wanted a job in a war plant and could he fix her up, and that I was a college student. And the plant manager said, well certainly, he could do that, but wouldn't I like to work in the office instead. And my dad said no he didn't think so, he thought that I wanted to be out on the floor. So, when I went in for an interview, again the man said to me, "but you don't want to do that. I'll give you a job in the office." But this was not what I wanted to do. So we wore coveralls, my hair was pretty long then—I wore it two pigtailed. And you'd have to put a cork in these land mines and bang them to get the cork out when they were being painted. So you got army green khaki paint all over your coveralls, face, hands. Frankly, I thought it was wonderful. I just loved it. So that's how I got the job.

I was, by the way, the only college girl on the floor. When the women found this out about me, they were very leery, and I won them over by singing dirty songs and telling dirty jokes, and they thought that this was not their conception of a college girl, and they liked it a lot. At the end of the summer my line, the one that I worked on, took up a collection and they bought little gifts for me. They must have spent most of the money on one thing, and then they had a little money left over, and they had stuff like bath powder and that kind of thing. It was very touching, and I felt pleased with myself that we had all liked each other and became friends. I haven't even thought about those days for a long time.

Dawn Walsh: Well, thank you for sharing them.

Jackie McGiffert: Yeah, you're welcome.

Dawn Walsh: And so, then when you went back to college did that experience come with you in terms of any activity that you did once school started up again?

Jackie McGiffert: You mean like anti-war stuff? Oh, no—no. There was no such thing, except among Quakers, I think, or if there was I didn't know about it. I really was a politically unaware kid. I'm divorced now, but I really credit my ex-husband with my education when it comes to social and political issues.

Dawn Walsh: So how old were you when you started becoming politically and socially aware, about what year was that?

Jackie McGiffert: I suppose, not until after we got married, maybe. Maybe he was beginning to get through to me before we got married. I was 24 when we married.

Dawn Walsh: And so then, what year did you move to Missoula?

Jackie McGiffert: 1966. I went to work for a newspaper, the local—the only newspaper in town—after I was graduated from college. I was graduated in '45, and he was in... I had never met my husband, whose name is Bob McGiffert. He had not gone to public school in Easton. I would've known him, or known of him, in high school, but he went to Andover, and then he went to Princeton, and he finished Princeton in three years and joined the army. He had been in ROTC. Eventually he was sent to the South Pacific. He came from, when he was finally discharged, he came to that newspaper, and so he came to work for the paper about a year after I did. About a year, maybe a year and a half, later he and I were married. Then I kept on working for the paper until I was pregnant with our first child, and I quit then, but lost the baby. The baby was stillborn in the seventh month. I didn't go back to work, because I had really wanted to start a family. So, we stayed in Easton until '62, and by that time we had two children, and he was city editor of the paper by then. He was a perfectionist and also took a tremendous amount of responsibility for the content of the paper, and I felt, sooner rather than later, that this job was going to kill him. I sort of connived him, in a feminine wiles way, to get him to apply for a teaching job at Ohio State, they were advertising in a trade magazine, and he was amenable to doing this. We went to New York where they were interviewing about six of the hundred some people who had applied. They—boy, it struck me as being just like what General Motors had started doing—they wanted to meet the wife too, and to also interview me and all the wives, one at a time, of course—an informal setting. It was he, or it was we, that they chose, and in '62 we moved to Columbus, Ohio. He began a new career teaching journalism. And we stayed there for just four years, because the director of, as they called him there, of the very large journalism department had died, and a new director had to be appointed, and the very conservative administration, in a very conservative city, in a very conservative state, was going to jam down the faculty's throat a man who was going to muzzle

the school paper and just step all over things in a repressive way. Well, we were involved in the Vietnam War. So, about half of the faculty had to, or choose to, quit. We came here for just a year. Bob was given a offer, a visiting lectureship, and then we expected after a year we'd go back to the real world, and he'd get a job on a newspaper or magazine or something. But, at the end of the year, they offered him a permanent job, and he decided to take it, and I was distressed. The year had been wonderful. I had certainly had loved it, like a sabbatical anywhere, but then I was ready to leave, and he was offered a job in Chicago, and that's what I wanted, but he didn't. So, we stayed. I was resentful for a little while, but I rather quickly got over that and decided that this was the best thing in the world that could happen.

Dawn Walsh: And so, you mentioned that while you were still at Ohio State that you started getting involved in the Vietnam War, in what capacity?

Jackie McGiffert: Well, I didn't say that. I simply said that the Vietnam War had started. I remember being ambivalent about it in—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

Jackie McGiffert: —quite ambivalent about the Vietnam War in '65. But, by the time we were here in the fall of—we came in the Fall of '66—and by the fall, there was going to be a big demonstration, and I wanted, by that time I felt a great opposition to the war. I wanted to—well, I was saying that we came here in '66, in August of '66, and there was a big demonstration against the Vietnam War in, probably September, or maybe October, that fall anyway. I really wanted to join it, but I had never done anything like that, and I felt sort of intimidated by the idea. And my husband, while he was opposed to the war, having been a journalist all of his life and still thinking of himself that way, even as a professor, he felt that he should not overtly become involved in things like demonstrations in order to maintain a neutrality perspective with that bias. Later, he too did openly join demonstrations. So I didn't, and '66 was a violent one. And then, I regretted that I had not been a part of it. It was really something that I felt that one should stand up to and stand up for. Rocks were thrown by fraternity boys; people were struck with rocks, and awful name-calling and that kind of thing.

So the following year in '67, I did join the demonstration. I was by myself, within a sea of people, not with Missoula Women for Peace. And, I really don't know whether I knew those women or not. Many, as you may know Dawn, are faculty wives, and often one gets to know the other ones in that way. So I just don't know if I knew them or not. Sometime in that period, I started going to their meetings, but it didn't really take with me. I didn't stick with it. I guess that I'd come from a world of—I don't even quite know put what I've kind of feeling for, and I think I'll just sort of drop that. So, before I just kind of rambled on—do you want to ask me anything about the particulars? If not, I can just sort of wrap it up.

Dawn Walsh: Well, let's talk specifically about when you did get involved with Missoula Women for Peace.

Jackie McGiffert: Well, you know, I just don't know. I started being just kind of a hanger on. Every year, as you may already know, they used to have a fund-raiser. That became a tradition of spring, and there would be an auction and sometimes some music and a dance and sometimes wine tasting. I went to those, sometimes with Bob and sometimes alone, for years and bought things at the auction as a way of supporting this group. So, I supported them emotionally and to a little-bitty bit, financially, I suppose you could say, but I did not want to go to their meetings. Then, somewhere fairly recently, and undoubtedly, this was since I've been divorced, I started to go to the meetings, and by this time I knew these women. I knew some of them through Democratic politics, which I had been very involved in and had been City Council member, ran for the legislature—didn't make it. So, I knew some of them, like Alice Campbell, through the Democratic Party, Gladys McKinsey—dead now—and Gladys, our daughters were friends, and she lived just a couple of blocks away.

So, I knew them, I like them, I admired their tenacity, I admired their belief that they could actually change things. I pretty much thought that was futile, but I admired their just keeping

on, keeping on. Then, as I say, I started to go to the meetings as a demonstration of friendship and loyalty and mutuality of beliefs. Even though I have never wholly shared their dedication, to me it's a reassuring and comforting to spend two hours or four hours about with a bunch of women who believe so passionately in the things that I believe in a little more dispassionately, perhaps. It's kind of empowering to be in the company women who are so fearless in their beliefs and so willing to invest their time and spirit in doing they believe is right.

Dawn Walsh: So throughout the years of going to the Missoula Women for Peace Meetings has that—I mean, in what ways has that enthusiasm rubbed off on you?

Jackie McGiffert: Well, actually, I don't think that it has changed me any. I believed pretty much what they believed right from the start and still do. I have much more a sense of, "Oh, you can't accomplish anything," but at the same time, I recognize that if there weren't people who said, "Well, I am never going to stop trying," if there weren't people like that, nothing would get accomplished. They contribute, the rest of the women, than more than I do, but they contribute to me too. They enrich my spirit with their dedication.

Dawn Walsh: So, if you could change something in regards to peace and war and society?

Jackie McGiffert: Less money spent on defense. Of course, I believe that we need instruments of war, and we need human beings ready to go and fight for us, but, my gosh when my armed forces, themselves, who seemed to me to be overcome with greed to begin with, when they are saying, "Well, we don't need that plane. We don't need that ship," but some Congressman or Senator is shoving it through not really to make jobs in his district, but to get himself reelected for creating jobs in his district, that is wrong, that is corrupt, that is taking money that should be spent on the poor, on children, or on the environment and not on these projects that are so self-serving for one or two, almost inevitably, men in Washington.

Dawn Walsh: I understand in 1985 there was a dedication center of the Jeannette Rankin in Washington, D.C., and that was initiated by Missoula Women for Peace—were you involved in that?

Jackie McGiffert: No, I wasn't.

Dawn Walsh: You weren't.

Jackie McGiffert: Actually, this is heresy, undoubtedly, but I think we should have been involved in the Second World War, and she is canonized for voting against it.

Dawn Walsh: So, you have some strong feelings about that? What is the basis for that belief?

Jackie McGiffert: The fact that we as a country were attacked by the Japanese, but even more so, that Germany did what it did. I think that it does not reflect well on us that it took us so

long to step in and try to help the Jews, the Gypsies, the homosexuals, the people they called dissidents that were being killed by the Germans.

Dawn Walsh: Were you involved at all in the Peace Consortium dinners that lead to the creation of the Jeannette Rankin Center?

Jackie McGiffert: Not then.

Dawn Walsh: And so, right now I do know that you are currently going, as you said, to the Missoula Women for Peace Meetings, and what is it that you are working now as a member of Missoula Women for Peace?

Jackie McGiffert: I'm not working on anything.

Dawn Walsh: Or the group?

Jackie McGiffert: Darned if I know. Same old, same old, and often something new.

Dawn Walsh: Well, do you have any story that you've thought of that you'd like to share at this point or any summary of what we've talked about?

Jackie McGiffert: Gee, I think I've talked a lot and said a lot of things that I haven't even thought of for a long time. I don't think that there's anything that I can add.

Dawn Walsh: Well, thank you very much.

Jackie McGiffert: You're welcome, Dawn.

[End of Interview]