

HELEN QUIRINI

My name is Helen Quirini
I was born in Schenectady, New York. I lived with my mother and father during the war. My mother died in 1942 and my father died in 1946 before the war ended. My two brothers and one sister lived in their own homes.

MY mother was a school teacher before she was married. My father worked on many jobs including owning a soda bottling plant. He also sold real estate and worked as an accountant for a state agency.

I was single and still am single.

I was appalled about the bombings in England and knew that eventually our country had to get involved.

My brother, Karl, and I opened a store called the Brother and Sister Cash market after we graduated from high school. When we realized that a war was inevitable, Karl went to work for the General Electric and I closed up the store and also applied for a job at GE and was hired on April 1, 1941.

I was shocked to discover that the General Electric company discriminated not only against women, minorities, but males under the age of 21. Women were paid "woman's wages" Males under the age of 21 were paid the same as women but the rates were called "boys rates". These rates were about two thirds of what a man was paid. Minorities were only allowed to be hired as elevator operators or sweepers or other lower rated jobs even though they may have been qualified to work on other jobs. There were also different seniority lists.

(I have published a book "HELEN QUIRINI AND GENERAL ELECTRIC: A PERSONAL MEMOIR OF WORLD WAR 11". I have sent you a copy. Some of the above information is covered in this book.

I developed great relationships with my Co-workers and we would go to movies, visit each others families etc. We were like an extended family. In reality we spent more time at work than we did with our own families. And after Pearl Harbor we worked many overtime hours which was necessary to produce the goods necessary to win the war. Some of these friendships lasted to today for those of us who are still alive.

GE had a building that had a gym, running track, tennis courts, baseball fields, bowling alleys, showers facility, lunch counter, and meeting rooms. A board of directors was responsible for this General Electric athletic association. I was the only woman elected to serve on this board. I was a member of the bowling team, the women basketball team, the softball women team. I also arranged meetings and discussion groups so that women would have a place to socialize after working. I arranged baking contests, and other contests such as making jams etc. I also sponsored speakers from the federal government who discussed what the civilian population should know about what they called "social diseases and other matters about the war. This was a

great place for people but especially women to socialize in a safe, frindly place after hours. There was a male staff person who made arrangements for the many activities and I asked the company to hire a woman to coordinate all the activities that I was doing in my spare time and when they refused, I resigned. This facility was supported by the money made from coffee machines and if there was a shortage it would not have been that costly to the company. And during the war about 40,000 people were employed at GE, 35% of the workers were women.

GE sponsored a weekly "Works News". Employees volunteered to write about people and activities in their building. The paper was also sent to all the employees who were in the armed service. I worked in a huge building on Campbell Avenue. I wrote a column about hundreds of people who worked in this building on three shifts. I would collect information all week and every Sunday night I would write my column.

My father thought I was crazy to spend so much of my time to do this but I enjoyed doing it. I would collect information about weddings, births, parties, and other information about the workers but the most important part of my articles was about our Co-workers who were serving in the armed forces. I received many nice letters thanking me for the columns because it made service people feel wanted and they were glad to know about their friends. I also wrote when these soldiers came to visit us and the sad news when they were killed in action. The articles are a history of the times also. To quote a paragraph from my works news of 1/12/45 "According to the figures given on the "Army Hour" Sunday night--figures as of December, 1944--our casualty list stands as follows: killed about 103,200 Wounded 326,127--Missing in action 66,667 and Prisoner of War 59,667". As I listened to the news I thought of our 5 Co-workers who had made the supreme sacrifice. On 10/3/44 I wrote " During the first week of the 10 week blood drive we wore a path to the blood donor center and donated 136 pints of blood". There was also articles and pictures of our Co-workers who made the supreme sacrifice.

My union also had articles of interest during this time. One headline "Women Play Real Role in War Plants" and another "Women Exploited by General Electric".

There were many activities during the war. I had an idea to create a backdrop for rallies that were held during the lunch half hours. The company approved and put up a 8 by 12 foot board on a wall between two doors to our cafeteria. Across the top in big letters were the words "LEST WE FORGET" and on the bottom were the words "CAP HONOR ROLL" Three of my friends and I did all the work for this board. We decorated the wall behind this board with red, white and blue crepe paper. The board had over 900 names on little plastic name plates. These were attached on the board with little nails. My friends and I spent many hours putting the names on the name plates and keeping up with changes.

The board had a blue background. In the middle was a huge white cross that dominated the board. In the center of

the cross was a red star. On the star were the names of people who had donated a gallon of blood. On the cross were names of people who were from Campbell avenue who were serving in the armed forces.

The blue part contained the names of people who had donated blood. At both ends on the bottom were small crosses with the names of those who had made the supreme sacrifice.

Many rallies were held in front of this board. It was used as a background for rallies held on the lunch half hour to sell bonds, plead for blood, share news from people in the service. This is explained in more detail with extra articles I have included in my materials.

Outside of being tired from working so may overtime hours, my health remained good but I worried about people who worked in hot buildings like the foundry and places where hazardous materials were handled. GE factories in Schenectady never had air-conditioning. During the war there were changes in the amount of hours women could work and many worked the second and third shift which was a change from normal hours.

I met many great people. I have kept in touch with some of them and made lasting friendships that lasted while they were alive.

I became active in my union so that I could represent workers who had grievances but also to join the fight to end discrimination against women. A case was filed with the War Labor Board which ordered the General Electric Company to bring the rates for women into line with the rates for men doing similar work. War Labor Board made a personal investigation of conditions in the Schenectady plant and stated that women were being exploited by the Company. The WLB said the Company should increase women's wages by 6 cents an hour.

Schenectady was high on the list of places to be bombed. Besides the GE plant, and the American Locomotive Plant which built army tanks, the Watervliet Arsenal was close by. The whole area was in a state of high alert. People were watchers on hills around the area looking for airplanes, the Red Cross trained many people in first aid. We knew that if there was a real emergency, sirens would alert us. The windows in our factories were painted black so as not to be a target for bombing at night.

The sale of war bonds, blood drives and saving scrap were some of the other activities. We saved scrap metals, grease, cans, aluminum foil, and other items.

There were rationing books for gasoline, butter, meat, and other items. The first and most important effort of our people was to go to work in our defense plants to produce the materials necessary to win the war but also to join the armed services to fight the war.

I represented the union on the "War Production Council" which met with the company to discuss ways to increase production. Our union was honored by Stars and Stripes the G.I. overseas newspaper which said editorially 'It is gratifying to note the excellent record of no strikes since

Pearl Harbor" Schenectady works was one of many UE shops awarded the Army-Navy "E" banner signifying great production accomplishments.

I represented our union in committees to set up the much needed services of child day care centers. I was shocked to see an article in our local union paper which stated that women were giving up their children because they could not take care of them while they were working.

In regard to food including meat, butter, etc. and gas, these items were only available with these ration coupons.

I did not have a victory garden. I had to learn how to exist within the limitations of the ration coupons.

I was a leader of a government effort named the Block Plan, to keep the civilians informed and utilized to aid in the war effort. The entire city was divided down by blocks and each block had a representative. I represented a total section of the city and met regularly with the block representatives. We covered needs such as saving scrap metals, grease and other materials needed to be recycled for the war. We discussed the usage of the ration coupons and any latest news that was important.

There were many memorial experiences that I have previously covered but the biggest and most important to me personally was when our union were forced to go on strike right after the war ended. The company was paid on a percentage plus rate for their costs during the war. Because of lack of raises to keep up with the cost of living because our wages were frozen, workers throughout the country were forced to go on strike to get the companies to share in the profits that they were able to accumulate.

I worked all the overtime allowed so didn't have time to get another job. My brother Karl did serve in the Navy. I became a shop steward in my union and after the strike ended was elected secretary of the whole union. I realized that the only hope to get the company to correct discrimination and other unfair practices, I had to get involved in my union. I developed long and lasting friendships with many people and my union brothers and sisters which is lasting as long as we are still alive.

I was at my fathers camp when we heard the news on the radio that the war was ended. My guests led a prayer of thanksgiving and concern for our people in the armed forces and a prayer for those who had lost their lives.

We of course, were very happy and rejoiced with a party. But it was a somber occasion remembering all our friends who had paid the supreme sacrifice or who had come home injured and would never be the same.

There was much confusion and anxiety because with the soldiers coming home, obviously there were going to be layoffs. And the question was who would be entitled to the jobs?

I was fortunate to have enough seniority under the rules and did keep my job. I had originally only gone to work in GE to earn enough money to go to college. Now, that my

father had died and I was my only support I had to give up on this dream. There were no college loans available. In 1980, I retired from GE with 39 years of service.

One of the affects of war that many people don't think about is the fact that thousands of young men were killed which changed the previous ratio of men and women. So many women never married.

Considering the present conditions in the world and the fact that once again we are at war, I strongly urge everyone to get active in their government. We should have a Department of Peace and spend time and effort to avoid war. Questions are now being raised about the necessity of the Vietnam war and the Irag war. War is HELL!! It is a MORAL SHAME that so many people have lost and are losing their lives, so many families lives have been shattered because of the loss of their loved ones, the wounded of their loved ones and the terrible toll on the veterans who lives will never be the same. ETERNAL VIGILANCE of THE PRICE OF FREEDOM!!!