

Pittsburgh Oral Histories  
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**AV**

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Independence Court, Monroeville

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Interviewer's Note

*The Great Depression meant leaving school at age 13. Doing housework and then on to the Schenley Distillery, and then to Cleveland during World War II to work at Firestone: "Rosie the Riveter!" With midgets small enough to fit inside the plane wings so as to bolster the riveting with a heavy weight bucking bar! But, essentially, she's been a homemaker and a caregiver, living, for the most part, a quiet life. "Just put down," she adds, "that, with God's help, you can do anything...."*

Interview

bc: Were you born in Pittsburgh?

AV: I was born in Dallas, Oklahoma. It was a little mining camp. My Dad and mother came from Europe, came from Italy. The mines were closed down in Pennsylvania. My mother had an aunt in Oklahoma. She said, Why don't you come down here: the mines are working.... So they went down there.

My brother was just a baby. My parents couldn't speak English. The conductor [on the train taking them to Oklahoma] got my brother some milk and they fed him with a teaspoon that way until they got to Oklahoma.

And then I was born there.

And, it wasn't too long after they got there, the mines all closed there too. They didn't know what to do so finally they came back to Pennsylvania. I was three-years-old when we came back and my father got work in the mines. He was always a coal miner.

When I was six-years-old I started school. I didn't know how to speak English at all. It was all in Italian yet. There were two other children [in my class] who weren't speaking English either. So the teacher kept us after school and she was teaching us: she'd hold up a pencil and a piece of paper. And finally I got to speak the English language. This was in Leechburg, Pennsylvania.

bc: Do you still speak Italian?

AV: Just a little bit of it. When you don't use it, you lose it.

bc: That's right.

AV: As far as when my mother was living, I always spoke to her in Italian.

And she would say, Why do you always speak to me in Italian?

I said, Mom, as long as you're here and I use it—if I don't then I'm going to lose it. And it's the truth.

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I managed to stay in school till I was 13. It was during the Depression and my father and mother just couldn't send me to school anymore. In fact, I needed school clothes and shoes and things.... But I'll never forget the day that my Dad told me I couldn't go back to school. I think I cried for two days.... Anyhow, there was a lady who needed help and I went and helped her in the kitchen and doing her laundry.... I got five dollars-a-week, seven-days-a-week. That bought me a pair of shoes—Red Cross shoes—Red Cross shoes were five dollars. I had to work all week long for five dollars for a pair of shoes. I ate my noon meal where I worked—a sandwich. She was a widow with five boys and she would cook supper for them. (I never sat down with them at suppertime. I would wait and do the dishes and go home.)

I was sixteen [and] the distillery opened up in Schenley. I put my application in and lo-and-behold! I was called. I had to go to school to get a reference that I was eighteen, but I wasn't eighteen. But the school, at the time, just signed the paper and gave it to me and that was it. I worked at Schenley Distillery for a couple of years. And then I was laid off. It was during the War. I went out to Cleveland, out to Firestone and I got a job there.

bc: What did you do?

AV: "Rosie the Riveter."

bc: Really.

AV: Yes. We made wings. We didn't make the plane, we just made the wings and we had little midgets inside the wing to buck for us and we were on the outside to drill and rivet.

bc: Wait a minute: are you really talking "midgets"?

AV: Yeah.

bc: I've never heard that before.

AV: They were short. [They] were really nice. They were small enough that they could fit in the wings. And they would buck for us—that's what they called it at that time....

bc: "Buck" meaning....

AV: They would hold a heavy thing so that when you riveted, the rivet would go in.

bc: It would act as a brace; it would give you something to whack against.

AV: That's right.

I worked there and, in the meantime, my father got hurt in the mine. My mother called and I thought—she needs me—so I went home. I was already married then, but my husband was in the Service. My brother was in the Service [as well]. So, I thought I better stay home. In the meantime, they called from Schenley and I went back to work a little bit there.

The War went on and it was terrible. Every day I wrote to two brothers and my husband. When Albert was born, Joe was over in France. After a month they finally got a letter to him that the baby had been born.

I got 50 dollars a month while my husband was in the Service.

I never moved out of Leechburg.

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In 1946 we bought the house that I lived in up till now and it's still there and it's still mine.

My father died in 1952. He was next door. My husband and I had bought the little house next door and, running back and forth, I took care of my father. When my father died, my mother wouldn't live alone. In 1953 my husband passed away. I went to do housework because that's all I knew to do. I worked for three dollars-a-day—a dollar-an-hour is what I'd get.

bc: You knew more than housework. You'd had the jobs at the distillery and at the aircraft plant....

AV: But there was no place around town that I could get a job like that....

I had gotten a job at the A&P [supermarket] but that was in Vandergrift, which I had to take a bus. And, what made it harder—I had a son five-years-old and I wanted to stay home with him. So I thought: it's not fair for my mother to keep him all the time. I want to raise him. So that's why I didn't go to the A&P. Of course they only paid a dollar-an-hour, but it was eight hours-a-day.

For five years I scrubbed and I cleaned and I scrubbed...and, with taking in ironing at night, going to work during the day [I paid off the medical expenses that my family had incurred.]

[So much of my life was] taking care of sickly people: my father, my mother, my first and second husbands, a sister-in-law...and then I lost my son when he was 53.

It was only God that took care of me.

bc: That's basically what I wanted to ask...what took your mind off of all of this?

AV: Only God. Believe me.

bc: You've described so much heartache and loss what were the bright things that happened through all this?

AV: [The birth of my son; the birth of my grandson.] I have a cousin that is very good to me and she was a widow too. She had a brother and a sister in New York and a brother in Connecticut. She and I drove out to New York. And that was really a nice week that I had.

I keep myself busy. I crochet. I knit. I had a yard and I gardened and always kept myself busy that way. That was my joy of life.

bc: You've spent your life being a care-giver. Did you ever think of just running away from all these responsibilities?

AV: I was too busy to even think of running away.

bc: After enduring all these losses, there's been a lot of your life since then....

AV: I lived alone. My daughter-in-law's church has a sewing [group]. They make quilts and send them to Africa and Asia and all over the world. I got to sewing with them: once every other week we sewed at the Church and then we took them home and put them together. That was my outing. For 30 years.

My mother died in '76. She used to have a lot of things that she used to knit with and I didn't know what to do with them. So, my daughter-in-law said, Take them down to the Church; maybe they can use them. I went with her mother one Wednesday. [I said to them,] Let me see what you have and whether I can give

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you what I have. When I went down, they asked me if I wanted to sew with them. I said, Yes. I stayed that day. And they said, If you want to come back every Wednesday when we sew, you're welcome. (I'm Catholic and they're Lutherans; and I thought, well, it doesn't matter to me. So, I went; and the Minister and his wife were real nice to me. In fact, I was even invited to his son's wedding.) I'm very close to all those women that are still sewing there. In fact, right now I'm still crocheting lap-ropes; I send them down and then they bring them down to the Church.

bc: You mentioned that you turned 90 in January. I'm guessing that everyone in your sewing circle is younger than you.

AV: There are some that are my age, but very few. That's why it's kind of breaking up a little bit now. There used to be 15 of us. There's only eight of us left.

bc: Do you still get out there?

AV: I've only been out there once.

My joy right now is those two great grandchildren.

My home and my family are the only things I know.

bc: How long have you been here?

AV: It'll be a year tomorrow.

bc: How has your world changed?

AV: Oh something terrible.... [AV laughs.]

We've just had Easter. All anybody thought about was the Easter Bunny and Easter eggs and all that—never really thinking what Easter really is. Christmas the same thing. Too much commercialized. It's time for the world to get back to knowing that God was born, and that God died for our sins; but they've forgotten that. It used to be on Thanksgiving everybody was so thankful for something and it was...Thanksgiving all over. You go out on Thanksgiving you can hardly buy a card anymore. It's all Christmas. They start in September with Christmas. No.

People have changed. Children have changed. It used to be—you went to school and didn't behave, and the teacher scolded you or gave you a whipping, when you went home you got another one. [AV tells stories about how she disciplined her son and what her expectations were of his behavior when he was growing up. Also she talks about his service in the Navy.]

bc: You were never spoiled were you?

AV: No, no, no.

bc: You didn't spoil your child.

AV: No, I didn't. And I don't spoil my great grandchildren either. I don't believe in spoiling. My grandson is a wonderful man.

My son, he built two homes. [And the people for whom he built the homes] told me, We couldn't have found a more honest man.

bc: How often did you make it into Downtown Pittsburgh?

AV: Once a year or so. Very seldom. [AV and her family did most of their shopping in downtown Leechburg.]

bc: Did you dress up?

AV: Oh yes—with your gloves and your hat....

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And when you went to church, you had to have gloves and a hat and your Sunday clothes. Then, when you got home, you took them off and put on the everyday clothes on again. Today you go to church, they've got scarves and shorts....

[Going to Downtown Pittsburgh] was a trip. That was a treat.

You [put me in mind] of something that I have at home yet. My first husband and I and my cousin and her husband went to Pittsburgh one day. We shopped. And the men both bought something that, when they got home, they said, Surprise, We bought something too! We opened it up and we looked: here it was a slicer; and you can slice anything you want pretty thin. After all those years I still used it when I was home. I know that has to be at least 50 years or more....

bc: And it still works.

AV: It still works and it's not automatic.

bc: Aside from that one stint you did as "Rosie the Riveter," you've essentially been a homemaker and, in the best sense of the word, you've been a "servant." You've taken care of people, you've been there for them. In that sense you've lived a very "quiet" life. Also, in the process, you've experienced a lot of pain....

AV: Just put down that, with God's help, you can do anything....