

Family members often write journals. Those writings can be a gold mine for information. For many years' mom wrote us kids a chapter and that was our Christmas present. I don't think I've ever enjoyed a Christmas present for so many years. One that I thought I could keep learning from.

I'm sharing a small bit of her writings which make me think about today's world.

"I was seven years old when, on December 7, 1941 the Japanese declared war on America by bombing Pearl Harbor. Within a short time, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on the Japanese. Eventually more countries became allies of the United States and it became World War II. (WWII)

This brought many changes in lifestyle in every country worldwide—not just the countries where there was fighting on their soil. There was rationing of nearly every commodity, and patriotism was at an all-time high.

Rationing included every imaginable item from toothpaste and food to tires and gasoline for cars. No one was exempt from rationing. Ration books were assigned to every person regardless of age. The newspaper informed the public which stamp from the rationing book could be used on any given date. Rationing created lines at service stations, grocery stores and clothing stores, etc.

By 1942 new cars were unavailable because car manufacturers stopped making cars to build war equipment, like tanks, jeeps, torpedoes, helmets, ships, submarines, etc. Owning a car meant using ration stamps for gasoline and tires, and lots of times searching for parts and used tires from auto scrap yards. If you were very lucky you might find what you were looking for. Sometimes car owners mixed gasoline with kerosene trying to extend the gas mileage. The Japanese cut off supply of rubber and making new tires impossible to find. Use of the car was limited to only emergencies: driving to the store for groceries was not an emergency.

Rifle companies quit making weapons for the individual and began making military weapons such as rifles, cannons, bazookas, bombs, etc. Ammunition manufactures also retooled their equipment to make the ammunition for military weapons.

Ladies' silk stockings and underwear because items of the past. The material was needed for parachutes for the crews of fighter planes. No ration stamp needed because there was no supply of those items.

Leather items were scares. The leather went first to military, then to the public. Another ration stamp used. Though each person had the same number of ration stamps, in most families the one who, for instance, needed shoes the worst got them first. It was not unusual to see children with the top of the toe of their shoes cut out, having outgrown them and no ration stamp to buy a new pair. If the shoes were still in good condition they were handed down to siblings or given to or traded with relatives or friends before the toe was cut out.

A tube of toothpaste required that the old tube be turned into the store at the time of purchase. At that time toothpaste tubes were made of some sort of soft metal.

Food--amazing how the War Effort affected the grocery shelves! Almost everyone remembers the rationing of sugar. But that wasn't the only item rationed.

Both sugar from Hawaii, and coffee from South America were transported by ship—but ships couldn't be spared.

Oleomargarine needed shortening—and a new product was born—margarine that had to be colored. Inside the package was another small envelope type package, about the size of a half dollar, with a yellow-orange substance that needed to be mixed with the white margarine. My younger brother of six loved to color the margarine. It was then pressed into a mold that had four 1/4-pound sections. I don't remember anything about the taste, but I doubt that I knew the difference.

Candy...oh, my! Mom worked as a clerk at F. W. Woolworth & Co. in Independence, Kansas. Candy—particularly what we called Mountain Drops—was delivered the first week of every month. Each employee was allowed one pound before it was available to the public. When she came through the door with that candy—I knew it was there!!! Mom always said I could smell chocolate no matter where she hid it!

Meat was another commodity that went first to the military. Availability to the general public also included a ration stamp. No stamp---no meat.

Everyone knew when the cigarettes were available because long lines formed outside the store. Tobacco companies sent cigarettes to the military first, no matter which front they were fighting on. The servicemen often used cigarettes as gifts to the people at the war front in other countries. The American public got the leftovers---but no one complained.

My dad had a cigarette vending machine route, besides his regular job at the M&M Manufacturing plant. We often helped him put 2 pennies in each cellophane-wrapped pack—the change from the two dimes deposited. Can you imagine getting change like that today? Dad or my older brother Bill would carefully slit the narrow side of the outside cellophane with a single edge razor blade, being careful not to cut into the cigarette. I put the two pennies in the slot, and little brother Jack taped it shut.”

By reading only a small amount of Mom’s journal I can learn some facts about her life. Where she grew up, her brothers’ first names and who was oldest; how old she was in 1941; where her parents worked and that her father took on a second job to help support the family. Her writings also give some insight on life growing up during WWII. Had I not known the person that wrote this journal, I would still value this information to start researching her and her family.

My mother saved every Christmas letter and every card and note she received from family members for decades. She has been able to pull out family information from ancestors. Sometimes it’s just one sentence in the middle of a letter that has nothing to do with anything else, but that information is important. Mom still holds these letters so she would be considered the ‘repository’. The letter is dated and signed so there is also the ‘proven source.’

So, think twice and maybe 3 times when re-reading those letters your grandmother or parents have in that shoe box. Maybe you don’t want to toss them out just yet.

Kenai Totem Tracers will be offering beginner genealogy classes sometime in the future. We will keep you posted once we re-set the date of those classes.