

Amber Gowen Oral History, 2020/03/24

Interviewee: Amber Gowen

Interviewer: Tori Schendel Cox

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Location (Interviewer): Evansville, IN

Transcriber: Sally Velez

Abstract: In this Interview Amber Gowen discusses what her job duties entail as an archivist in the Vanderburgh County Clerk's Office. Amber is working on a project with the Wartime Museum to highlight the women who first served in the United States Armed Services other than nurses. Amber is also working on a documentary that will highlight the research that has been conducted and the stories that have been discovered.

Tori Schendel Cox 00:01

Hi, my name is Tori Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder Curator of art here at the Evansville Museum. But we're doing a telecommunication with Amber Gowen and thank you for your time and I'm going to turn it over to you.

Amber Gowen 00:12

Hi, Tori, um, like you said, I'm Amber Gowen, I'm the archivist with the Vanderburgh County Clerk's Office, and I get to wear a lot of hats at that job. So one of the things I do is the records management portion. So that's the pretty standard, you know, technical aspect of the job where we rotate our records according to state standards, then make sure that it's compliant with all court rules. And that's a really practical aspect, and aids in a lot of aspects of of the judicial system. So attorneys asked for cases, and we provide them and, you know, make sure that those cases are preserved in case of appeal, and things like that. So that's one aspect of the job. And then another neat thing that I get to do, on the other hand, is work with over 200 years of Vanderburgh County history. So our collection is about 50,000 cubic feet. It starts with the incorporation of Vanderburgh County in 1818. And the first court was held a month after that, and then it goes up to what-what's happening today, in court. So it's really just a huge span of time. And the neat thing is, we're doing an inventory project to make sure that we know all of the things that we have, and that we can pull apart some of that history that just sort of kind of gets buried over time and you know, sits in unopened boxes, and pull that back out and share it with community. So we're kind of doing that in little small doses. You know, sometimes it's an interesting case file that no one's heard about in 100 years or, and then sometimes it's an element of the courts that people don't think about anymore, because the way our government is organized has changed. So the neat thing about the Clerk's Office, is that originally, it's a constitutional, Indiana Constitutionally appointed position. So it was one of the first when we wrote the Indiana Constitution. That's why our records go so far back. And we didn't have so many units of government, then you know, we didn't have a Department of Motor Vehicles, we didn't have Social Security Office, things like that. So you're, as a citizen or resident of Vanderburgh County, your primary connection with your local government would go through the Clerk's Office. So you would come to the us when you got married. See us sometimes when they got divorced, and then also things that people don't think about, are we have

certain types of veterans registers, and also for all types of registers for all types of professions. So at one time nurses and doctors had to come to the Vanderburgh County Clerk's Office and get permission to practice medicine in the county, they had to show that they had their licenses. And then we kept registers of that, because we didn't have a phonebook and a phone system that you could call up when you needed a nurse. But you could call the Clerk's Office and figure out which nurse you know, lived closest to you, and then call the number that will allow them to make, you know, house calls and house visits. Especially for you know, public health related things like tuberculosis, or, you know, just sort of your standard medical care or things like childbirth. So, that was one, you know, kind of one of those neat little things that we have that you wouldn't think about. Sometimes we also can come up with a box full of motor vehicle registrations from the early 1920s. So that's always really fun. Yeah, great photos that go with those. And then we've got a, you know, things like veterans registers. And that, you know, that's not something we would collect now, you know, that would be handled by the federal government, or in some cases, even the Records Office, if you wanted to record your DD-214 Make sure you don't lose that. But we did have them for the First World War, we have some for the Civil War as well. But what's interesting about the World War One Register, as you, we, you know, we kind of found it buried inside of a box inside of another box. And then it's in this register and I'm flipping through the register and it's, you know, it's really interesting. You're like it, okay, you look at all these names, and you start to recognize some of the familiar Evansville family names and and kind of know some of the stories but what those men did in the war but then in the very back is this little pamphlet, and it said 'Women Veterans of World War One'. So then immediately that became my project. And what we've been doing for the last couple of years is tracking down all of those names, and figuring out who those women were. And then also in the, in the, in the kind of course of that project, figuring out there was a lot more names that aren't on that register. Because generally, those are women that enlisted in, in the county, and not everybody did, you might have gone to visit your you know, your aunt Newberg and signed up there, but you worked or lived in Evansville. Or, you know, the other way that you got on that list is if you fall through your pension that you are entitled to as a military veteran. And a lot of women didn't do that, especially if they got married. And there was a lot of confusion at that time, sur, you know, surrounding the idea of what benefits you are entitled to if you're a woman who served in the war. So on that register, there were about 33 names. And then by the time I think I found them all, we're at 156. Now, so there was 156 women from Evansville, that served in one capacity or another throughout the course of World War One. So I've had the chance to talk about a lot of those women who were nurses. And that was obviously very important work. But what I'm working on at this exact moment, are women who served the military, in the military in other capacities. So what we're talking about, they're the literally the first women to join the Marine Corps. And the first women to join the Navy, as in any capacity other than nursing. So both the Army in the Navy knows NURSE Corps basically existed since 1901. So that wasn't new. But what was new was actually, those women getting to take the oath of enlistment, you know, get a rank and get a paycheck, and a job that was not sort of, you know, nursing or traditionally a military job for women. So what we're doing at, right now, besides that is working on a documentary to tell some of these stories. So what we've got in there, we're trying to tell the best we can little examples that highlight all of the aspects of service that women gave at that time. So we've got Helen Foot, who she is actually a civilian, she didn't did not join the military. She was a teacher at what became Central High School. And she worked in the munitions factory in Ohio, and up in Indianapolis on her summer breaks. So she was literally making (inaudible) they were firing off in a war and that factory, those jobs were all women for the most part, or young men who were too young for

service. We're also tell-working on the story of Pearl Chanley, who left the military as a Lance Corporal in the United States Marine Corps. Pearl was one of the first 304 women to serve in the United States Marine Corps to serve in the Marine Corps as a woman, in that time, you had to max out all of the scoring, you had to be the elite of the elite in what you were doing or they would not take you when they first opened that door. Within hours, they had 2,000 Women lined up to, to volunteer and they only took those 304. And Pearl was one of those. And she wrote a memoir of a few you know about six or eight pages for the Marine Corps in the 80s. So we have her sort of reflections on her time in the service and what that meant to her and all of the the times that she brought her friends together for a reunion at her home in Evansville. And, and then in a couple of cases, they then saw their daughters served in World War Two, in many cases in the United States Marine Corps. So you're starting that sort of family legacy of service for women there. And then I'm also working with the Navy Historical Bureau at the moment, trying to locate all of the women who served as Yeoman from Evansville. At first we thought it was just one. But I think we're up to six at this point. One of the confusing things about women's military service is that there's sort of an assumption that if you're a woman, you served as a nurse, so over time that those records have gotten a little bit confused, and kind of trying to peel back those layers and find out the real story is always the challenge. So we're up to six. The first confirmed per-woman who served in the Navy was Laura Schlenskart. She left the military as a Yeoman Second Class. So in the Navy women were in the whole recruiting campaign around it was to free a man to fight. So you were going to come in and take those clerical jobs, the stenographer the typist, and that kind of a thing, and then free those sailors to be posted overseas or on ships that were headed overseas. And that's what they were doing in the Marine Corps as well. But Pearl Chanley, the Marine, she's got a great quote about what that service meant to her. And she said, you know, we may not have had the opportunity to serve overseas or serve in what she would refer to as a spectacular way. They just did ordinary service. But she said, you know, our hearts were with you, our hearts wherever she's with, with you. Because, you know, one of the things that she did was she had to notify, sometimes the parents of Marines who were killed in action, she had to track all of their belongings to make sure that they were returned to the next of kin. So they were really emotionally in that headspace, for the duration of the war in that time after. You know, because they were directly contacting grieving parents and and grieving widows. So that's, I think, is an unknown aspect of their service, that hasn't been given a lot of recognition. And then, you know, all of these women had incredible lives after the war, most of them, you know, lived full lives. And they did, you know, lots of other things, some of them reprise service in World War Two. Others, you know, past the older ones passed away before that happened, but they still lived full lives of, you know, where they worked for women's rights and, and professional standards for women through labor unions. And they pushed to normalize rank for women in the military, and to fight against discrimination in ways that affected them in their service in World War One. So they really sought to improve upon the experience that they had, and pave the way for women that will come after them. So that's the story we're trying to tell with the documentary. And then maybe someday, in an exhibit with the Evansville Wartime Museum. Everything's a little up in the air at the moment, but we're still hopefully going to see that happen sometime in the relatively near future. But it's 156 women, so 156 stories, very few of them, if any have been told before. So we're really excited to highlight to highlight those stories, but also to highlight the way just a single document that's housed within a collection can, when you pull back all the layers can, you know, develop into a full and complete story that gives us an insight into our community 100 years ago, and in a way we didn't know before. Because-

Tori Schendel Cox 12:58

It's so empowering. I got goosebumps over here. Wow.

Amber Gowen 13:05

Yeah, so hopefully, we'll get it done soon. But we're excited about that story. And, and you know, they-they're just, we can't give away all the secrets. But there's just some really, really incredible groundbreaking women. And I think we've also our other partner on the project is the TriState Women Veterans Organization. And so we've been working with those women. And we've been able to get a bunch of interviews from them and and sort of our goal to be to connect, connecting those links and connect-making those ties between the women of the past and then women from all eras of service and sort of draw the line and and shows a thread that runs all the way through. So that's a great group. If you don't know about it, check them out, you know, any women in your life who served as great group of women, and we're definitely proud to have them as a partner on this project.

Tori Schendel Cox 13:59

I can only imagine. So if you don't mind me asking, How long have you been working on this project? I'm sure there's some organic aspects to it. But do you have a good time reference, do you know?

Amber Gowen 14:09

Sure. Well, it's been about four years since I originally found the register.

Tori Schendel Cox 14:14

Mhm.

Amber Gowen 14:15

And then it's it was about two and a half years of just solid research, trying to work with women's military. History is interesting. On some days, there were some challenges to it. The Army didn't necessarily keep those records for their women in service. The Navy and the Marine Corps were pretty good about it, but they had a smaller number of women in service. The Navy had about 11,000 total by the end of the war, and then the Marine Corps had about 300 ish women, the army you know, you're looking more you know, 20 different numbers are out there but between 20 and 30,000. So, confirming their service is a little bit difficult. And then of course, you know, At the fire in the National Archives, and so all and then, you know, my biggest challenge women get sometimes women get married, and then they change their name. So it was a good solid year of trying to figure out what people's names were. So you could, you know, search the record, when it changes over from the time they, you know, enlisted to even sometimes just a few years after, if you're going to hunt down their veterans benefits. So, so that's, that's been a challenge. And then we've been working for about the last year on the documentary. And we're about halfway finished. At the moment, we're working on the script, finishing the second half of the scripts and doing a little things, a little editing technical things you need to make that happen. And then at the Wartime Museum they've been involved through for about two years now. And we're, you know, conceptually looking at ideas on how an exhibit might work, how that might take shape. And then, you know, looking at what kind of fundraising might be involved for something like that, but they agreed with us that it's important that those women have a place that, you know, was in the realm of the city's military history, kind of a permanent place and that's not transitory. So, because

you don't get, you don't get everything else they talk about it the Wartime Museum, the you know, the Rosie the Riveters in Evansville, and all the women working on planes and on LSTs. Without the women, the generation before them, who went into the Evansville factories, doing manufacturing, like hard labor jobs for the first time that happened in World War One and Osiris, and there's the furniture manufacturing and the clothing manufacturing places. So they were the first woman that really breached that, that barrier. And then their daughters and and nieces and other other young women carry that torch a little further in World War Two and contributed in a massive way to how we remember the city in a second in that Second World War. So so that's a great connection between the two of them. And then, you know, we've got one woman, Stella Carmical, she was a civilian, but she served overseas with the Salvation Army, she was actually the youngest war worker in the nation to be allowed to serve in France. So she and she was routinely shelled. She's incredible experience of also trying to get up to the front to keep serving the soldiers she was assigned to and, you know, dodging commanding officers along the way, because I'd send her send her back so they'd hide behind the wreckage of shell buildings and till the commanders would pass by in their motorcade, and then they'd go back up to setting up the canteens, and, you know, serving doughnuts and hot chocolate to soldiers just off the line. And then she stayed in the Salvation Army. And by World War Two, she's in the Pacific. And they were the she and her husband were the only American Salvation Army workers in the Pacific, and they had to be evacuate-evacuated, before the invasion of the Japanese. And were some of the last civilians off the island. In that case, so you know, there's a lot of threads between war one and World War Two, and that story, so we're happy to make that link with them as well.

Tori Schendel Cox 18:25

Wow. You are right, they definitely live full lives in service, I'm sure without too, and just have the civilians attached to that type of work. It just shows the dedication and that human drive and human spirit, which is wow.

Amber Gowen 18:39

Yeah. So I mean, a little bit of everything. We even had a woman who served with well, two women who served with the precursor to the USO. So they were out in France, singing and dancing and creating theatrical shows for for soldiers. And so basically, there was a way that you were allowed to be of service in World War One as a woman, we had an Evansville woman find a way to do it, so.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:07

That's amazing.

Amber Gowen 19:09

It really is. It really amazing.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:11

Mhm. well was there anything else you'd like to share with us and our viewers?

Amber Gowen 19:16

Um, that's sort of that's what we've got at the moment. But that, you know, with our ongoing inventory projects, you just never know what store you're going to uncover next. And we've got a few in the in the queue to bring back out into the community. And we can't wait to share those when the time is right.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:35

Oh man, that's exstanding, I cannot wait to see them. But Amber, thank you for your time, the work that you're doing. It's absolutely fantastic. I can't wait to that documentary and that exhibition as well at the Wartime Museum. But again, we appreciate your time and this is an Evansville recording. So thank you for your time. We'll talk to you later.

Amber Gowen 19:52

So yeah, thanks for having me.

Tori Schendel Cox 19:56

Mhm.