

Leola McDonald

Hillsborough Remembers

Leola McDonald tells a story of being a new mother with a six-week old infant when her husband left for war. She also tells of living up north and working in a factory while her husband was away. She relates the differences of how the north and the south fared after the war.

WWII

At Home & Abroad

Sarah Pachelli: My name is Sarah Pachelli. I'm going to be interviewing Leola McDonald, on November 24, 1999, in Plant City, Florida, at Bealsville Historical Sight.

When did you start teaching?

Leola McDonald: I started teaching in 1953.

SP: 1953, Okay so the war was already over when you started teaching?

LM: Yes it was.

SP: What were you doing during the war?

LM: During the war I had gone to school as a beautician, and I was working in Plant City in a beauty shop.

SP: During the war?

LM: Yes.

SP: That's what you were doing? Okay, when you found out about the war what did you feel about it? What was your reaction to it?

LM: Well, I felt like my husband was going to be involved because he was in the age area.

SP: Okay, how old was he?

LM: He must have been about twenty-four.

SP: So he was like the perfect age--?

LM: Right.

SP: Right.

LM: We had just got married and I was really, really upset because I

didn't want to be alone--and I didn't want him to be alone.

SP: Right.

LM: And I didn't want to travel.

SP: Right. So did he have to end up going in the war?

LM: Yes he did. We went to live in Illinois--

SP: Uh huh--

LM: In April. It broke out in what, December?

SP: Yes, that is when we entered--

LM: Yeah, I remember (). The following year, forty-two--

SP: Forty-two, right.

LM: I went to Michigan--to Illinois, to Chicago, Illinois. He came up in June. The following year in December I had the baby. In February he went to the service. Had to go six weeks after the baby was born. That just broke my heart.

SP: Had did you feel about that too? Was that upsetting to him that he had to leave you with the baby?

LM: It was upsetting, but he realized that he had to go. He couldn't say no. [Background noises]

SP: Yeah. So were you nervous when he was over there?

LM: Well I was, but I lived with very good people that were just like family to me. They were strangers but they were just like family to me--.

SP: Oh that's good.

LM: People to nourish me, and take care of the baby. So finally my mother came to stay with me for a while. At least until the baby was--

SP: A little older.

LM: A little older. Then I got a job at the war plant while my mother was staying with me in Illinois.

SP: Oh really?

LM: I worked in a defense plant, making mosquito nets for the soldiers over in Okinawa.

SP: Oh really?!

LM: That was quite an experience.

SP: Did you like doing that?

LM: Oh oh yeah, it was the first time I ever had a chance to work back towards something, because I was brought up on the farm--

SP: Right.

LM: (). [Background noise increases]

SP: So you did that and weren't doing any hair?

LM: No not then. I did only a little but when I left from there and came back home I did quite a lot.

SP: Okay. So that time you were mainly focusing on--

LM: The factory work.

SP: So did you find that you had to work, you were required to work because there was a need of people?

LM: There was a need for us because we had just gotten settled up there.

SP: Right--.

LM: And we didn't have the finances.

SP: Were things more expensive during the war? Did the prices go up?

LM: They were kind of normal, I guess. But then I knew they were going up because, you know, the food and everything and clothing and what not--So I decided I would come back home while he was still in the service. That's when I came back, in about September.

SP: When you found out about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, how did you react to that?

LM: It was on a Sunday night, I think it was--And oh we were all upset. And he really was upset because of his age and everything, like I said before. He really felt like he would have to go and he was worried about getting back! [Laughs] Right.

SP: Yeah. So it was a hard time--.

LM: Well it was in December.

SP: Yeah.

LM: We got married on the twenty-first of December.

SP: Oh my gosh! Of November? Of--?

LM: Yeah.

SP: Of November?

LM: No, December.

SP: So it was before you guys got married?

LM: Yes.

SP: Okay.

LM: We were married the twenty-first of December in forty-one, and my baby came the twenty-fifth of December the next year.

SP: Okay I see.

LM: You understand?

SP: Oh, I got it!

LM: Okay. So we were really only ().
[Background noises too distracting]

SP: Yeah!

LM: He was oh--I didn't realize too much about it because I guess I was too excited about getting married.

SP: Right. So he had to--so that was one heck of a honeymoon, right?!

LM: Yeah, but we managed to get through it.

SP: Can you tell me anything about the ration coupons?

LM: Well I was given some because I had a baby. The sad thing about it is that I had been given my coupons about, I guess about two months. For my exercising for the baby to get out I'd always walk down the street to meet my aunt--just about the time she would get off from work. And I had some letters to drop into the post office. I just popped my little baby carriage on the outside and just walked right in. I walked in and when I walked out someone had snatched all my coupons.

SP: Oh my gosh!

LM: I said thank God they didn't snatch the baby!

SP: Oh no!

LM: Ohhh, I was upset! But as a consolation, I told myself that they only snatched the coupons, they could have taken the baby too!

SP: Yeah, it really makes you see what's important to you.

LM: Yeah. I struggled through because we went on because others have it worse. You know how that goes . . .

SP: So what did you do after? You got (the ration coupons) from other people and stuff like that.

LM: Well I was living with relatives and they would come and help me.

SP: That was good.

LM: Until I got back--

SP: Back on your feet. Right.

LM: Yeah.

SP: Okay. Was your salary affected during the war, because you were working in the factory. Did you get paid more than you would have, less, or--?/

LM: I was pretty--I didn't stay there too long. I guess about five months.

SP: Okay.

LM: I thought that was pretty good. I get a chance to ride the elevators. All that was an experience because I never had any experience like that before. It worked out pretty good!
(Laughs)

SP: Do you have any overwhelming memories of the war, of things that happened? Like when you think of

World War II, what sticks out in your head?

LM: I think it's really when (my husband) was in Okinawa. He would tell me about--or write me about the pythons, you know the storms?

SP: Right.

LM: The big storms that would come up--

SP: Like the typh--from the water, those storms?

LM: Yes, but they would call them pythons. And they were scary! Sometimes they would have to go down in mudslides. I mean they'd go underground for protection. Because the winds were terrible and the floods were terrible. Those were the things he would tell me about.

SP: So he wrote you letters from over there?

LM: Well I didn't get too many, like maybe two a month.

SP: But still that's--do you still have those letters?

LM: I may, but I could never--.

SP: Find them.

LM: It would take me some time. I tried keeping things, but I keep so much junk.

SP: (Laughs)

LM: (). But anyway, I did keep some of it. But I don't have it with me.

SP: Well right, but I was just curious if it was--yeah.

LM: Right.

SP: So that was probably the most-- Did you know anybody else that was in the war?

LM: I had other relatives, but none with him--.

SP: Right.

LM: Some others went into--he was in the Air Force.

SP: Okay. So, was it hard being separated like right when you got married?

LM: Yeah it was hard! It was hard at first, then I realized that the war was on and we had to. We just couldn't fall apart. I had a baby.

SP: Right.

LM: I was so excited about my baby!

SP: You loved him.

LM: Oh yes, he was--I always wanted to have a boy first. I wanted a big family because I thought that big families got along just fine. Well see with us at home, there was just the two of us. We got along fine but uh, it was like other families had five and six ().

SP: When your husband came back was it hard to adjust to that family life? Since you were with, it was just you and your son for a while. Was it hard to adjust to--?

LM: No, because he had--I think he came home about two times. He ain't come home too often. (). He had talked about wanting to go back to the war. He wanted to go back, he didn't want to stay. You know like when () came back. Well I had been getting enough of it. But we went back after he got out of the war, in forty-six I

think it was. We went back up (to Illinois) and stayed a while.

SP: Did you notice a difference since you lived in the north and the south? Did you notice a difference in how the war affected the north and the south, a difference?

LM: Yeah, it looked like the people in the north were getting along--to me--better than the people in the south. I was able to get my stamps right away, and with the baby, I had support for myself. And when I got home--well see, our families had never been on Welfare. My daddy said no, no, no. So I had to get adjusted to doing work. You know, doing stuff out on the farm. And then I would work in Plant City uptown on the weekends doing hair. I did real well.

SP: So you had, wow, you were busy!

LM: I was busy.

SP: So down here, why do you think the south didn't adjust as well to the war as the north did?

LM: I feel like (the north) were better prepared for the war. I don't know. I felt things were better for them. And we lived out in the rural area too.

SP: Yeah.

LM: But in Chicago it was a big city. I had relatives there that knew the swing of things. But we had never been on welfare (). My dad said nope, we gonna work! And we did, we worked. We had a farm and we worked on it.

SP: How did you, what did you do for your leisure activities during the war?

LM: Well we would go out on outings like picnics on the weekends. Families

would get together, we didn't know too much about family reunions but families would just get together--especially on weekends. But Monday through Friday everybody was busy trying to work or what have you.

SP: So probably on Sundays, did you go to church?

LM: Oh yes! That was a must. We could go to church. We very typical because in the morning we'd go to Sunday school first, you had to go--they'd take care of your children! That was a good time to dress them up! Clothes on 'em, put on your new shoes, new dress. Sure. Then we would have gone to the morning service. Go back home and then go back in the afternoon. And the first night they would have church too. We kept busy on Sunday, we didn't do too much cooking on Sundays. My mother would start on Friday and I got Fridays to you know, get things prepared, you know. Because we didn't have refrigerators and things like that, that you could (). And by Saturday night, most likely the food was ready for Sunday morning.

SP: Wow! I bet it was good food.

LM: Oh yes it was! We didn't know anything about spoiling! We'd eat it! (Laughs) A lot of times we'd take covered dishes to the church, rather than go home. We didn't have cars.

SP: And plus then you wouldn't have to spend money, you know because everyone could kind of share.

LM: Right!

SP: So that was good.

LM: A little bit of this and a little bit of that.

SP: A party!

LM: And at our churches we would have box suppers, and I remember my momma used to make two or three boxes and then one or two people would buy a box. (). [Too much mumbling] It is just a blessing to be out here because, you know, I think about the history (). All the children learned about church in school. But, notice as years pass they don't put as much emphasis on the important things like we did.

SP: Do you feel like in the war, too people got more religious?

LM: Well maybe during war times.

SP: Yeah. Like during World War II, more people go to church and stuff like that?

LM: Yeah. Then you hear about (). Made a difference.

SP: Well hopefully it made a difference for the better, too!

LM: I hope so. ().

SP: Okay. Let me think, did you see any changes within your community during the war time?

LM: Yeah, everything got closer. They were building more churches, and different denominations. Once upon a time there was only one denomination, that was Catholic. Then they founded more churches like Baptist . . . Other people were coming into the community. (). [Background noise] They were outsiders, but yes we were involved in our community. And they would come in with a different denomination like Baptists--we were Baptist, but a different kind, and Methodist and what not.

SP: During the war?

LM: Yes, and building churches. They would set up a place in an empty building, like over there. They are using an empty building. They would use them for the church service. And sometimes they would go from house to house.

SP: Really?

LM: Yes and () they would have craft sales. (). We had to do something. We didn't have no radio, or television.

SP: So church was a big thing?

LM: Church was a big thing! They had community affairs, like picnics--.

SP: Right.

LM: Families getting together. You bring this and I'll bring that. And most of the older men would make barrels and barrels of lemonade.

SP: Ummmm!

LM: Get all of the oranges and--

SP: I bet it was really good! Fresh.

LM: It was good! Fresh.

SP: So do you think that during the war everybody kind of got a sense of community, and kind of willing together down here--?

LM: Yes. Togetherness.

SP: That's really good. So that everybody can get through it and--. So was it as much as a big deal here? Did everybody think about the war? Or were they really trying to not think about it and just live their lives and be happy?

LM: One thing about it, a lot of the people had children or husbands involved in the war. So you had to kind of get it--it rested on your mind.

SP: Yeah.

LM: (). Not only was my family affected, but just all of the families. And I think that most people decided that we would do a little better than that. () ().

SP: During the war were there any restrictions on your social life? Like were you not allowed to do any thing because you were a woman? Anything like that?

LM: I can't think of any. You see, we were out in the rural areas.

SP: Right.

LM: And the families were kind of close together, and we'd all join in together. Whether it was farm work or activities from the churches; we'd just join in, and the big cities just seemed like too much. We had the family life.

SP: Right.

LM: ().

SP: Was your son okay growing up during this time too?

LM: Yes he was okay.

SP: Was he interested in the war because he was a baby right when it started? Was he interested in the war?

LM: He liked to know, liked to talk to his dad a lot about it. He was a jolly child and what not. (). He was a healthy child, very loved and he loved me too. (). I was very happy.

SP: Did you do anything like that during the war, like did you like to play the piano or sing?

LM: (). I'd practice on the piano. I did a lot of singing. I'd like to do dramas and what not at church; because the church and the school was close together. Whatever they did at the church, whatever they did at the school--you always were involved some way or another. (). Then we had a recreation center down on () Road. (). That's where the children would go in the afternoon. And when school was out they would go on the playground for basketball games, baseball games. (). They would sell all the things like sandwiches and drinks to the children.

SP: It's nice to see that during the war, although it was in the back of everyone's mind, they focused really on more important things--like community things. So during this time, when you lived down here your husband was here? Or was he not with you? Was he in the war?

LM: He's in the middle of the war.

SP: Okay, this whole time that your talking--?

LM: Yes, but he came home in--.

SP: What year did he come home in?

LM: Forty-six.

SP: Okay.

LM: And everything was kinda like normal then, or what not. Then we went back to Illinois and stayed for a while. I still didn't like it because of the weather. It was cold.

SP: Cold.

LM: (). We finally came on back.

SP: How did you feel the country changed after the war?

LM: How did it change . . . Well the people didn't attend churches anymore. They started leaning away. Not as faithful, you know, with church. ().

SP: When you look back on your life during the war, would you change anything that you did or that happened?

LM: During the war time?

SP: Yes.

LM: Would I change anything? I think jobs available in the areas where people didn't have too much would have been good. Because we had to go outside, even if we worked on the farm--it would be like winter time. Summertime we almost suffered, you know, struggled(). But jobs available ().

SP: There weren't a lot of jobs down here, like besides farming and stuff like that?

LM: Well, yes in the cities ().

SP: There were probably things to do, but over around here there wasn't a lot to do?

LM: No, not that much to do. Even if you got a job in town, like in Plant City or Tampa or Lakeland you had to be trained. People would come into the community and train us. ().

SP: Did you have any fear during the war like besides your husband? Did you ever feel like you could have got bombed over here?

LM: I'll tell you what we did. () and the planes go over our head and it was so loud and it would be horrible. In the morning and afternoon, it was so low and so loud. My little boy would run though the house screaming. It's so low ().

SP: That was kind of scary?

LM: It was scary. It wouldn't be one, sometimes five.

SP: Oh my gosh!

LM: Uniforms. They'd be practicing in the back. Backfield which was near Lakeland. ().

SP: That happened a lot?

LM: Oh yeah, it happened a lot. This is the route they were going.

SP: So maybe everyday or --

LM: Everyday for many, many days. (Laughs.)

SP: Wow. Did you ever think you were going to get bombed over here?

LM: Yeah. One crashed not too far from here but it was in this area. That was some excitement. All the children, all the families. I think the man was hurt. () but it was one of the army planes.

SP: And nobody died in that?

LM: Nobody died.

SP: But was some excitement for the town.

LM: Oh was it excitement. We went up to the plane and it was such a big one. (). But that was scary.

SP: Was that the first time you saw one of the planes, like up close?

LM: Yeah. It was the first time.

SP: That probably brought a lot of reality into the war.

LM: Oh, yes. And I think about my husband because he was in the Air Force.

SP: Yeah.

LM: ().

SP: Did your husband have any other stories? Any scary things that happened to him that he told you?

LM: Yeah, traveling sometimes the planes would start backfiring and maybe do the loop da loop. I don't know if they were practicing or doing stunts. ().

SP: He was lucky that he didn't get hurt.

LM: Right.

SP: Did he have any friends that were hurt in the war or anything like that?

LM: I can think of one death we had. He was a young man and his last name was Boyd. He was killed overseas. That family was all upset. The funeral was sad because we knew the boy.

SP: How did he die?

LM: In a crash. ().

SP: Oh really. That probably brought a lot of --

LM: Oh yes it did. (). And they showed as much sympathy they could for years and years to that family.

SP: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about? About the war and all that time.

LM: I'm glad it's over.

SP: You're glad it's over?

LM: ().

SP: Do you feel bad the fact that we went into it?

LM: I believe it was. (). [Distracting background noises]

SP: You had to deal with it.

LM: Had to deal with it.

SP: It was a reality. Do you respect the country more or less after the war? Was there a larger sense of patriotism? Were you proud to be an American?

LM: Yeah. Thank God we participated. Thank God we didn't reject. ().

SP: When you and your husband were reunited after the war was that an exciting feeling?

LM: Oh yes, I hoped he never went anyway again ever.

SP: You probably really wanted him to be right next to you forever.

LM: Forever and ever and ever.

SP: So I see how later when he was sick you wanted to take care of him.

LM: () He was very sick and had a stroke and heart attack.

SP: And you wanted to stay with him as long as you could.

LM: And he stayed around for 10 years.

SP: Then you started teaching. Did you feel your students were interested at all about the war or were they too young . . .

LM: They didn't talk to much about the war. Some of them had relatives, like their dad. They would say . . . My dad told me such and such about the war. But they didn't seem too worried about it.

SP: Did you teach any history or did you have to teach-

LM: I taught elementary. 5th and down. With history we didn't talk about too complicated things.

SP: Did they have history books or anything like that?

LM: We had science and history together.

SP: And did they say anything about World War II in the books? Or was it so new that didn't-

LM: They might show a plane or something. And have two or three sentences about it but it was mainly. My dad told me this or that.

SP: They'd have a story then.

LM: My dad was in a plane.

SP: Let's see if there are any last questions we can ask? So you taught at this school?

LM: Yes.

SP: And then you went to Turkey Creek?

LM: I came here as a substitute. There was a teacher and she got in a coma and I got hired as a sub. I got the job because the situation didn't get better for her. ().

SP: What made you decide to become a teacher?

LM: I always wanted to work with children. Since I didn't have but one, I felt like I was robbed but I didn't feel bad. I loved it.

SP: Yeah.

SP: So you like to work with children?

LM: I love children. I still am involved with Sunday School.

SP: And do they love you too?

LM: Ohhhh-

SP: I bet they love you so much.

LM: We get along real good together.

SP: ().

LM: ().

SP: So teaching was always your passion. Did you like doing that more than being a beautician?

LM: I loved them both. I worked awhile and I was tired. I still do hair every once in awhile. But I enjoy teaching. I love to work with the children. I'm a pretty active person like I said. (). But I love working with children. ().

SP: During the war times. Did you get sick at all or were you pretty healthy then.

LM: I was pretty healthy.

SP: How about the hospitals. Were there more people in the hospitals or anything like that-

LM: (). Different hospitals were- I had very opportunities to visit someone that was sick. I didn't too much of that. Around here I don't know too much about hospitals. And you know the people have their babies. They have midwives to take care of them.

SP: Really? How about you did you have your-

LM: You see I had my baby in Chicago. I went to the hospital. I had to stay in there for a whole ten days. Which is kind of strange. ().

SP: Is there any reason you didn't have any other children?

LM: My family was real small. (). My mother had 2 kids, nobody had 3. (). (laughs) ().

SP: So when you look back on the war you don't regret it. It was fine.

LM: Well since everything turned out just fine, there is nothing I want to change.

SP: You were lucky.

LM: Yes I was lucky.

SP: Very, very lucky.

LM: A lot of people went to the service and my husband went to the service almost like my daddy did. I was about two months old. And my daddy went to World War I.

SP: Just like your son was a couple weeks old.

LM: Yeah.

SP: Wow. That's really interesting.

LM: And I lost my son the same month. March 20th. I lost my husband March 19. Not the same year.

SP: Right. What year did your son die?

LM: Sixty four.

SP: And your husband in eighty nine?

LM: Eighty nine. Same month.

SP: Wow. So March is probably well-

LM: I dread March. I mean it's not always like that. It's just a coincidence.

SP: Just a coincidence. Well you enjoyed your life.

LM: I tried to look on the bright side. (). Cause I know it could have been worse. It was hard for me to accept my kid was killed. ().He died on a Friday night. He just left the house. But he's still with me now. Because he has a little boy. He's my little sweetie. He's now graduated from college and he's working.

SP: So your son just went right outside?

LM: No, they were drag racing. Do you know what that is?

SP: Yeah I saw some kids doing it.

LM: Three boys and he was on the side of the road and a car comes by and hits him. ().

SP: Did that bring you and your husband closer?

LM: Oh, yes it did. He didn't like to talk about it but I talked about it. I got

relieved of it. (). I'd talk about it. I could be talking about it forever.

SP: OK well thank you very much, Leola. This interview and letting me learn about your life.

LM: I hope you learned something.

SP: I did.