

An Adventurousome Spirit

Dot's sense of history explains many of the items she has kept over her long life. Each time she moved, Dot sorted her belongings as she packed boxes. She undoubtedly donated or threw away some personal effects, saving what she saw as important keepsakes at that point in time. Understanding this, there is one item that survived many moves. It is Dot's high school graduation announcement from May 1940. In all likelihood, it probably did not accompany her to Detroit some days after the ceremony. Over her childhood and adolescent years, Dot had accumulated a treasury of personal possessions. Like them, the graduation announcement would have been left in her room at home. Later in her life, Dot re-claimed it from the family farm. Since that time, she has kept the small, folded piece of paper in spite of several moves.¹



The front of the announcement clearly addresses the desire of a graduate to advance to the next stage of her or his life. Two primary means of transportation dominate the graphics. A small airplane flies in the sky above a much larger object, a boat with a billowing sail. A male and female graduate sit in the craft. What Dot could not have known in May 1940 was that the graduation announcement served as a harbinger of another stage in her life that began four years after she left Farmersville High School--her military service in the United States Navy.

From the summer of 1940 to the fall of 1944, Dot kept one foot in her familiar world of family. Except for a brief period of time, she always lived with a sister and her husband, either Ethel and Bill ("Red") Byard or Edith and her husband Ansel ("Axe") Kemp. At the time of her enlistment, she was staying with her brother Floy and his family. Yet in these same four years, Dot put her other foot "out there," testing her independence as she moved from one job to another. She worked for a pharmacy, a charity organization, a major department store, a manufacturing company, and an aircraft manufacturer. The first three jobs were all in Detroit, Michigan where Dot lived with either the Byards or the Kemps. The last two positions were in Evansville, Indiana where Dot stayed with Ethel and then with Floy. The years between Dot's high school graduation and her enlistment furnish added examples of the adventuresome spirit that is so much a part of her character. That same spirit led her in August 1944 to a Navy recruitment office.

Looking back, in Dot's mind the four years after her high school graduation "seem [like] such a long time ago, but [they really were] no time at all." Certainly the passage of seventy-some years is "a long time ago." What Dot seems to be concluding about the period in her life from 1940-1944 is that the time passed by quickly for her. One could judge the four major jobs she had in four years as an indicator of a young woman who wanted to move on with her life, although she had no clear goal of where she wanted to end up. All Dot understood was that there were always new opportunities to be taken. No, she would not be stationary, content to stay in one position while the world offered so many possibilities.

After arriving in Detroit with Ethel and Red, Dot took what she calls “a few temporary jobs” in the summer of 1940. The one that she remembers was with a Rexall Pharmacy where she worked as a soda jerk. Dot was then living with Edith and her family. A transportation problem made her employment there short-lived, lasting only about two or three weeks. The store was quite a distance from Edith’s home. Dot rode a bus to get back and forth, but even the bus stop was far away from the Kemp residence. This situation, in conjunction with what Dot judged to be “a monotonous job” without “much of a future,” led to her decision to seek another position. Dot found one that she clearly enjoyed much more than the one at the soda fountain.

Red Byard’s sister worked at the Salvation Army’s Evangeline Residence in downtown Detroit. She recommended Dot for a job there. Dot remembers the hotel as a place that “catered to working women.” The hotel’s logo, as she recalls it, promised them “a Home Away From Home.” The eight-story building that housed the hotel had two hundred and eleven rooms.² Dot’s responsibilities were to clean some of them and help serve the meals in the dining room. In addition to what she characterizes as “a small [weekly] salary” of between twelve and fourteen dollars, Dot received room and board. She shared the room and its bathroom with another female employee, but she did not mind that. Indeed, Dot describes her position at the Evangeline Residence as “a life memory.” It was, as she puts it, her “first real job.” It also required that Dot live away from her family for the first time in her life. In more than one way, with her hotel job she was an independent woman at age eighteen.

With her first paychecks, Dot bought two pieces of furniture that she still has today--a cedar chest and a bookcase with glass doors. It was customary for young, single women of her era to store in a cedar chest articles that they would one day use in their home as a married woman. This is why the trunks were known as “hope chests.” Dot remembers others commenting on the chest when she bought it, observing that she must have been looking forward to marriage with its purchase. No, Dot replied, she bought it to keep some of her clothing in since she “loved the scent of cedar.” Dot explains that when she entered the first grade, she sat next to a girl who “smelled like a cedar chest--clean, fresh, and fragrant.” (She reasons that the child’s mother probably kept her daughter’s clothing in a cedar chest.) Dot thus dates her love for the scent of cedar to her elementary school years.



The second item she purchased, the bookcase, relates to her love of reading. While living in Detroit, Dot joined not one, not two, but three book clubs that monthly offered her the newest publications for purchase through the mail. She clearly recalls the names of the book clubs some seven decades later. They were the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Doubleday One Dollar Book Club, and the Heritage Book Club which, Dot points out, sold only the Classics. She still has some of the volumes from her enrollment in those clubs. Dot’s name appears in neat, block print at the front of each publication--“Dorothy Helen Farmer.” In her mind, such a bold entry represented “a pride of possession.” As Dot explains, in her earlier life on the family’s farm, owning a new book was a luxury she seldom enjoyed. The town of Princeton had a drug store that sold secondhand books, but even at a reduced price, books were not something her parents

could afford to buy for her. And while Princeton had a library, Dot adds that “We did not go into town enough to use it.”

Eventually, after several months at the Evangeline Residence, Dot quit her job there for one that in her view offered “more opportunities.” Dot’s new position was with the J.L. Hudson Company, commonly known as Hudson’s, a department store chain with headquarters in Detroit. Its downtown store on Woodward Avenue occupied a twenty-five-story building that ran the length of an entire city block. Dot believes there were four basements in the structure. On special days, what Hudson’s identified as the world’s largest flag hung from the front of the building. (It measured 3,700 square feet. Dot remembers seeing it displayed.) Edith worked at Hudson’s as a cashier in the beauty department. Dot stresses, however, that she got her job at the store on her own initiative, without any help from her sister. At first, Dot worked in women’s clothing. It was her responsibility to check the stock before it went on the floor. Hudson’s took pride in its merchandise, working to insure that the stock was, to use Dot’s words, in “first class condition.” As she explains, if a blouse appeared to be wrinkled, it was pressed before it hung on a rack for customers to look at.³

Dot hurt her ankle at one point, though, and the injury led to her transfer from women’s clothing (which demanded constant walking while on the job) to another department. She now



Dot (front right) and co-workers in hosiery

worked in hosiery repair, a position that allowed her to sit for hours. Women customers mailed in silk stockings with a run in them. Dot repaired the stockings which had been deposited in bins that, as she observed, were “always full.” She used an electric needle, about the size of a fountain pen, and an egg cup. Dot placed the hose over the cup and “sewed up the run,” as she puts it. When she was done, the only part of the stocking where a repair was clearly visible was the very end of the runner. The job led to eye strain, however, with Dot getting her first pair of glasses because of it. She paid for them with her own salary. Weekly, Dot gave Edith or Ethel (depending on which sister she was living with) “a little bit of rent.” When she could, Dot sent some money home to her mother in Kentucky.

As with her position at the Evangeline Hotel, Dot speaks with clear delight at the camaraderie that developed among the women who worked in the hosiery department. She explains how she “melded with a group of girls of different heritages.” Some, for example, were Italian, others Polish or English. They regularly went to each other’s homes for dinner. It was not unusual for Dot to take a trolley or street car to the gatherings, although “that got to be a little tricky at times” as she made her way through areas of Detroit in darkness. The hostess cooked a meal reflective of her own ethnicity. Edith made fried chicken when Dot became responsible for the gathering. Since she did not date during her few years in Detroit, Dot’s social world centered on family and girlfriends she came to know through work.



Dot (at back, behind flowers) with her co-workers at Edith’s home for fried chicken

As noted earlier, Dot arrived in Detroit in the summer of 1940, after her high school graduation. She remained there throughout the rest of the year and all of the next one. Dot remembers still being in Detroit at the very end of 1941. On Sunday, December 7th of that year, the Japanese attacked America's Pacific Fleet based at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Dot was living with Edith at the time. The two sisters were wrapping Christmas presents in the dining room when the news came over the radio. Like so many other Americans, at first Dot had no idea where Pearl Harbor was. The attack resulted in a Congressional war declaration against Japan. Because that country was an ally of Germany, Americans ended up in a two-front war in the Pacific and in Europe.

Even before December of 1941, the economy had been on a war-footing for a few years. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had ordered an increase in the armed forces. Additionally, industries had been producing war materials for the Allies. Dot's two Detroit brothers-in-law had no problem keeping their jobs in such an economy. But still, Red and Ethel wanted to relocate to Evansville, Indiana about a year after the United States openly joined the Allies. Red had been working at a General Motors automobile factory in Detroit. While he could have remained there, the Byards were attracted to Evansville. It could very well have been that the location of the Indiana town, so close to Kentucky's border, helps to explain the move. Evansville would put Ethel within a few hours' drive of the Farmer homestead in Kentucky. That alone made the move a desirable one. Their second child had recently been born, a fact that must have added to the attractiveness of being closer to the family. Without hesitation, Dot decided to accompany the Byards to Indiana.

Dot does not recall exactly when they relocated to Evansville. It was probably sometime late in 1942 or early the next year. An April 1943 publication she has places her in the city by that date. Evansville's location on the Ohio River as well as its excellent harbor made it a transportation hub long before World War II. On the eve of the United States' entry into that conflict, the city's factories numbered over two hundred.⁴ Just months after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, the United States government announced major defense contracts for companies in Evansville. Chrysler received one of them. Like all American automotive factories, the Chrysler plant in Evansville put aside its pre-war production of cars and began manufacturing

Dot, April 1943



war-related goods. By the early fall of 1942, assembly lines at Chrysler were turning out ordnance. In fact, most of the .45-caliber ammunition used by the Allies in World War II (in excess of three billion bullets) was produced at Evansville Ordnance, in the building that had been the Chrysler automotive plant. One year later, Chrysler workers were repacking ammunition for the Pacific Theater and rebuilding Sherman tanks and Army trucks.⁵ In all likelihood, it was sometime in the months between the fall of 1942 and the spring of 1943

that Red Byard joined the Evansville Chrysler labor force to produce military weapons. Upon their arrival in Evansville, the Byards rented an attractive two-story home outside of the downtown area. The family "lived more in the suburbs" than the city proper, Dot explains.

The keepsake Dot has that places her and the Byards in Indiana in the spring of 1943 is a Sunbeam Electric Manufacturing Company newsletter. Simply entitled *Sunbeams*, the five-page publication is dated April 2, 1943. The company printed it for its employees, and Dot appears to have been one of them by the spring of that year. Before World War II, the factory produced refrigerators for domestic consumption. With the war, however, it manufactured artillery shells. Refrigerators still came off the assembly lines, but they were produced for the Army and Navy.⁶ The Sunbeam personnel staff, after interviewing Dot, placed her in an office position, not on the factory floor. She became a timekeeper, meaning she worked with the time cards employees used to “punch in” and “punch out” of their shifts. The cards furnished Dot with the information needed to calculate hours on the job per pay cycle for every man and woman at the plant. Her high school degree may very well have been a factor in her placement. Recall that she had taken “commerce” classes and excelled in them. Dot stood out from other female job applicants who did not have her educational background.



Sunbeam employees (Dot is top row, 6th from the left)

The patriotic atmosphere that pervaded the country was very visible at Sunbeam. The newsletter Dot kept testifies to that. In the summer of 1944 when she enlisted in the Navy, one can argue that she did so for two basic reasons--her patriotism and her sense of adventure. (It was certainly “not for the money,” she adds.) Support for the war effort dominated every page in *Sunbeams*. The April 1943 issue she saved gives ample evidence of the commitment by Americans to do everything they could for the war effort. Thus the newsletter reflects Dot’s attitude during her time in Evansville; at the same time, it probably helped to shape it. The *Sunbeams* copy Dot held onto details four wartime topics that were undoubtedly repeated in other editions--war bonds, absenteeism, Victory Gardens, and military service.

Dot remembers buying war bonds while at Sunbeam. The company, like others in the country, helped its employees to do that through payroll deductions. These withholdings earmarked some of the workers’ earnings for the purchase. Sunbeam’s goal was to have one hundred percent of its workers allocate at least ten percent of their salary to war bonds. During World War II, the United States Treasury Department mounted eight national war bond drives. For example, the Second War Loan Drive began on April 12, 1943, ten days after the newsletter’s publication date. But the *Sunbeams* issue Dot has explains on page one that the company’s War Production Drive Committee would conduct its own “War Bond Drive” from April 5th through the 15th. Its slogan would be “They gave their lives... You lend your money.” By the end of the drive, Sunbeam wanted all of its employees to have signed up for the automatic payroll deduction for bonds. The company warned its workers that in those ten days, foremen would contact individuals who either were not yet participating in the automatic payroll plan or those who had not met the ten percent deduction rate. The foreman would ask

timekeepers’ picnic, April 1943 (Dot 2nd from left)



such men and women to sign a payroll deduction authorization that day. Sunbeam understood that as people received raises, they did not increase the salary deduction for bonds. In 1942, the editor of the newsletter noted that 99.7% of the men and women who worked at Sunbeam had signed up for payroll deductions. But early in 1943, the figure had dropped to only 70%. As the editor pointed out, “If each employee, and that means *you*, does not sign up next week to set aside as much as possible for the purchase of bonds, we are failing in our job of backing up the boys at the front.”

Sunbeam’s newsletter linked bonds to another patriotic topic--the need to show up for work every day. The chairman of the company’s War Production Drive Committee railed against those who became “slackers,” a pejorative word he used for employees who were unjustifiably absent from the job. The chair went so far as to equate “absenteeism with sabotage.” Workers who did not come in for their shift slowed down plant production of war material. Hitler would be pleased, the chairman pointed out, if American workers took unwarranted days off of the assembly line. “Let us here on the home front show our boys that we are behind them 100% by buying bonds and by being on the job, every day.”

A Home Front activity outside of the factory also received *Sunbeams’* endorsement--Victory Gardens. The national war effort urged those Americans who could do so to plant a vegetable garden since the government defined food as “a vital weapon of war.”⁷ Aside from citizens on the Home Front, food was needed for soldiers serving outside of the United States, for Allied populations, and for those in countries liberated from totalitarian rule. The government



urged its citizens to plant Victory Gardens for their personal consumption, thus allowing more United States produce to be sent overseas. Just as it supported the bond drives, Sunbeam’s War Production Drive Committee supported the national war effort to plant gardens. The company created a Victory Garden Club. It distributed kits to interested employees to help them plant their crops. A booklet in the kit shared information on soil composition, fertilizers, seeds, transplanting, and cultivation. The guide also

recommended what specific crops would do best in the Evansville area and when they should be planted. The Victory Garden Club even awarded seven cash prizes, ranging from five to twenty-five dollars, for the best gardens. Judges used a criteria based upon factors such as the variety of crops, the cultivation, and insect control. Dot remembers the importance placed on Victory Gardens, but the Byards did not plant one. As she explains, family members were never sure how long they would be living in one particular house since they rented and moved based upon job opportunities.

Given Dot’s decision to enlist in the Navy, one last topic in the company’s newsletter--the military service of its employees--is especially noteworthy. In April 1943, Sunbeam counted four hundred and seventy-three of its “folks,” as *Sunbeams* called them, in the military. The names of the most recent enlistees appear on the front page of the April 2, 1943 newsletter, while stories of the military service of other former employees fill two columns on the last page. One name that is on both pages is that of Mary Mudron. It tops the list of Sunbeam “folks” on page one-- the

only female name among workers who had most recently entered the service. Four pages later, the company printed Mary's picture along with a short paragraph on her enlistment in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). If Dot had remained at Sunbeam, the newsletter would undoubtedly have contained her name when she volunteered to join the naval counterpart of the WAAC--the WAVES.⁸ But by the time of her enlistment, Dot had left her job at Sunbeam. Looking back seven decades, she cannot remember what prompted her to quit. In any event, Dot's next position--the last one before she joined the Navy--was with a company that even more than Sunbeam was identified with war production.

Republic Aviation was one of the new industries that came to Evansville in 1942. Its parent company was in Long Island, New York. Executives wanted a factory far away from the East Coast, seen as vulnerable to enemy attack, to manufacture the P-47 fighter-bomber plane. Known as the "Thunderbolt," the first one came off the assembly line in Republic Aviation's Evansville factory in September 1942. Eventually, the plant made over five thousand P-47s.⁹ Beginning in January 1944, Dot worked in the payroll department, specifically in timekeeping.¹⁰ This position made sense given her job as a timekeeper at Sunbeam. Although Dot kept no newsletters from Republic Aviation (presuming the company printed one), the patriotic atmosphere that pervaded the Sunbeam workplace would also have existed at Republic Aviation. One message was clear--support the war effort. At the airplane factory, Dot would have once again signed up for an automatic payroll deduction to purchase war bonds. She would have heard management condemn absenteeism and encourage Victory Gardens. And most assuredly, Dot would have heard the names of Republic Aviation employees who quit their jobs to join the armed forces. This was the environment that surrounded Dot as she worked five days a week in first the Sunbeam and then later the Republic Aviation offices.

Aside from the patriotic atmosphere that helps to explain her enlistment, Dot's character predisposed her to move on to yet another job after she spent time at Republic Aviation. Recall that she had consistently left one employer for another both in Detroit and then in Evansville. The fact that Dot did not stay in one position could be the sign of a restless spirit or an adventuresome one. She worked as a timekeeper for at least eight months at Sunbeam and then another eight months at Republic Aviation. The repetition of her duties on the job could understandably result in a desire to do something different. Dot uses the word "bored" to describe why she left Republic Aviation, although she quickly added that she was also inspired by a WAVES recruitment poster. Another young woman who worked in the offices at Republic Aviation wanted to enlist in the Navy. She urged Dot to do the same. In fact, she proposed they go down to the recruitment office together. Dot distinctly remembers that, independently of this offer, she had already considered joining the WAVES. While she could have enlisted in the women's branch of the Army, Marines, or Coast Guard, Dot admits that it was the Navy uniform that she found most attractive.



As it turned out, Dot was "stood up" on the day in August 1944 when she was to meet her co-worker at the Navy recruitment office in downtown Evansville. Her friend did not appear. That did not deter Dot. She enlisted by herself, the sole woman in what she remembers as a little Navy recruitment room. Before she left for boot camp in September, Dot took her cedar chest,

her bookcase with the glass doors, her books, and the war bonds she had purchased to her parents' Kentucky homestead. Her mother would keep them for her. Dot's adventuresome spirit had taken her from the isolated family farm to Detroit and then Evansville. The small rural world in which she had spent her childhood and adolescent years had been replaced by a much larger one when she lived in those two cities. In the summer of 1944, Dot's daring spirit would take her on the greatest adventure of her life, a four-year stint in the United States Navy. The graphics on her graduation announcement four years earlier from Farmersville High School really had foretold her future.

¹ All quotations and recollections from Dot are drawn from conversations with the author that took place from 2012-2014.

² <http://upfromthedeep.com/2011/06/30/evangeline/> (accessed July 17, 2014).

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson's> offers information on the size of the department store and the flag it displayed (accessed July 13, 2013).

⁴ Compiled by the Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Indiana, *Indiana, A Guide to the Hoosier State* (New York, 1941), p. 187.

⁵ Darrel E. Bigham, *Images of America, Evansville, The World War II Years* (Charleston, 2005), pp. 7, 54 on Chrysler's ordnance production in Evansville.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 58, 61 for Sunbeam's wartime production.

⁷ Amy Bentley, *Eating For Victory, Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana, 1998), p. 127 quotes various government documents from the World War II years to make this point.

⁸ WAVES is an acronym conceived by Elizabeth Reynard, a professor at Barnard College. Reynard sat on a 1942 committee that advised the Navy on the creation of the WAVES. The acronym represents Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. Originally, the letter "A" represented "Appointed," but because that word referred to the appointment of officers, the word "Accepted" was substituted so the word would embrace both officers and enlisted women. *Joy Bright Hancock, Lady in the Navy, A Personal Reminiscence* (Annapolis, 1972), p. 61.

⁹ Bigham, *Images of America, Evansville*, pp. 7, 17, 45 for Republic Aviation.

¹⁰ Dot's "Notice of Separation from U.S. Naval Service" lists her dates of employment at Republic Aviation as January 1944 to August 1944, when she enlisted in the WAVES.