

Oral History: Marybelle Ashton
August 12, 2010

Mrs. Stuart Ashton is originally from Iowa. She met her husband at an Episcopal church in Bethesda, Maryland. She married him in 1945 in Jacksonville, Florida where he was stationed with the Navy. He was a supply manager at the time, and was a shipmate of Henry Fonda. The two were good friends. Marybelle remembers seeing Henry Fonda in "Mr. Robertson" in D.C. and also in "First Monday in October." At the second play Fonda invited them backstage and signed her program. Unfortunately, she has since lost the program. Soon after they were married, Stuart and Marybelle Ashton moved to New Jersey.

After their time in New Jersey the couple moved to King George, Virginia. Her husband Stuart was one of eight children born into one of King George County's oldest families. His father, Lewis Ashton, was the first postmaster at Dahlgren when the post office was actually on base. The Ashtons are related to many other King George families like the Grimes, Lewises, Washingtons, Hoes, and the Stuarts. A Dr. Stuart from King George treated John Wilkes Booth when he came down through the county after he assassinated President Lincoln.

The Ashtons had four children, three boys and one girl. Mrs. Ashton's husband's older brother Lewis and his wife (the niece of John Lee Pratt) were unable to have children. For this reason Marybelle named her oldest son Lewis, and her second son Stuart. She also had a third son, Johnny, and a daughter named Caroline. Her grandsons are also named Lewis and Stuart, and she thinks it's funny that Virginians pass their names down generation after generation. She noted that her husband, son Stuart, and grandson Stuart have all been in the Navy, her son Lewis spent a year in Viet Nam with the Army, and her son Johnny was in the Coast Guard. She remembers that telephones didn't arrive in King George until 1953, and at that time the family shared a party line with 10 other people. She remarked that at least they always had telephones in rural Iowa when she was growing up!

Stuart Ashton Senior was the third person to run the Dahlgren Store on base. This was before there was a commissary at Dahlgren. Only people who actually lived on the base could go to the Dahlgren Store. Marybelle remembers her husband making many special trips down to Richmond stores to purchase supplies for all the formal parties at Dahlgren. She remembered this as a time when there were always tea parties and calling hours happening on base.

The family lived above the Dahlgren Store in a second story apartment. She had three sons at the time. There was one other second story apartment in the building, and it was occupied by Dick Wheat and his wife (Gladys "Smitty" Wheat) (they didn't have children at the time). The first floor of the building contained dormitory rooms for the "working girls" (single women working on base). One of the women living there when the Ashtons lived on base was Stuart's cousin Rosalie Dwyer. The Ashtons lived on base for three years. (Mrs. Ashton never mentioned it, but she taught at the Dahlgren School for several years.) During this time Rear Admiral Irving T. Duke was the base commander (July 1951 – June 1952). Her husband Stuart was good friends with the Admiral and his

family because he often delivered messages between the Admiral in Dahlgren and his parents in Richmond. Marybelle accurately remembered the order of the base commanders beginning when they arrived at Dahlgren in 1946 (when Rear Admiral Charles Turner Joy was the commander).

Her son Lewis inherited the family farm, called Waterloo Farm, off of Little Arc Road. The farm has “the best beach on the Potomac,” which is at least a mile long. When her husband Stuart was growing up, people from Dahlgren used to swim at the beach because it was long before they built a pool on base. This is just one example of the stronger relationship Marybelle remembers the base and surrounding community once shared. At one point in time the Navy field ambulance would come and take King George residents to a hospital if needed. The Navy also used to come out to remote areas of the county to clear the roads after a large snowfall.

Other Information from this interview:

- All three of her sisters-in-law worked on base.
- Mary Ashton married Admiral Boynton “Buddie” Braun, who commanded the USS Bennington and led the first wave of the fighter pilot attack on Japan. He often wrote letters to Marybelle’s son Stuart and his wife Mindy. They still have a lot of information on him as well as some of his original flight logs from around 1935. Mary Braun was secretary to Admiral Stark (although he was Captain at the time).
- They have a lot of information about Admiral Stark, and gave us a folder full of articles they’ve saved. Admiral Stark was the Chief of Naval Operations at the start of WWII and tried to warn President Roosevelt to move the fleet from Pearl Harbor. After the attack he was blamed anyways and demoted to Chief of the Atlantic Fleet. Marybelle remembers his large house near Rock Creek Park in D.C. that had an elevator.
- Lucy Ashton married Russell Lyddane, who was a very influential technical director at Dahlgren.
- Marybelle’s husband Stuart was on the county school board when the school system was integrated in the early 1960s. King George County was one of the first Virginia counties to integrate, and Marybelle remembers it being a surprisingly smooth transition.