

Museum of History and Industry
Historical Society of Seattle and King County

Transcript

Olive Smith and Jean Sprague - taped interview
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Side A

This is an interview with Jean Sprague and Olive Smith on the 12th of March, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. Mrs. Sprague, would you describe what Seattle chic was like in the early forties, and where one might purchase it?

Jean Sprague I'd like to think that Seattle's women were always appropriately and well-dressed, and I would say that Frederick and Nelson was a center of interest for the discriminating woman.

There were other specialty shops. I would name Helen Igoe as one.

I think you would be interested that people could spend an afternoon shopping at Frederick's with pure delight. One would lunch in the tearoom, select garments for an unending time, it seemed -

Q. Was it a beautiful room, with lots of mirrors and mahogany cases? Is that the right way to imagine it?

Jean Sprague Yes, it is. There were never any racks in the center of the floor. Merchandise, for instance, in the Designer Room, was always kept behind closed doors, and brought out one, two, or three garments. And never more than that.

Olive Smith Yes, it was always felt that that too many on view would confuse a customer.

Q. So would the customer be seated, then, and have these garments displayed?

Jean Sprague She could be, if that was her pleasure to be seated.

Then, she would be shown into a large dressing room where she was comfortable because she could place her handbag and remove her coat if it was wintertime.

Olive Smith I think Frederick's was like the stores in the east. You had your favorite salesperson, and you called ahead and made an appointment, saying, "I am going to be downtown with my daughter, and we are outfitting her for school. I'll be downtown at three o'clock tomorrow - is that okay with you?"

That woman sets aside three o'clock. She's the coat saleslady, but she'll have the dresses, the coat, the hat, the shoes - everything lined up. You don't

have to leave the room.

Jean Sprague Oh, yes. That's very true. I believe most every lady had a favorite salesperson with whom she kept in good contact. If something new arrived in the store, the salesperson would feel very free to call Mrs. Smith, and say, "Something has arrived which seems, in my mind, to be rather appropriate for you."

Olive Smith Those salespeople were so important to us that you gave them Christmas presents.

Jean Sprague Service was a high priority.

Q. Oh, my. Would you tip?

Jean Sprague No, no.
 They became friends, like today's hairdressers. They are your friend.

Olive Smith She knew why you were buying it, what your needs were, what your lifestyle was... She wouldn't bring out anything that was inappropriate to your lifestyle.

Jean Sprague And (she) probably knew a great deal about your family.

Q. Farther down the spectrum of what people could afford to spend, what other alternatives were available in Seattle if you wanted to clothe yourself? Was there a Sears?

Jean Sprague Oh, my, yes. We had retail stores that catered to certain price levels. We had the Bon Marche - let's not forget that. It was in close proximity to Frederick's, and was a good store, well-stocked, with prices comparable to those at Frederick's, though perhaps not as smart, if Olive will forgive me.

 Frederick's had been there for so many years, and it was really the primary family store.

Olive Smith As a department store, but then there was also Best's Apparel, which was the finest specialty store in the Northwest.

Jean Sprague And that was kitty-corner from Frederick's.

Olive Smith And there was I. Magnin's, too - another specialty store.

Jean Sprague Best's started on Third Avenue, and then moved up to the Fifth Avenue location. It was a charming store, and the clerks in there were well, well trained. And they knew what Olive pointed out, and what I think is so necessary - they knew all lines of merchandise, and how to coordinate clothes and accessories. That was important.

Q. Would you say there was a Japanese influence on [prewar]

Seattle fashion at all?

Jean Sprague No.

Q. Not in fabric?

Jean Sprague Well, pongee would have been a specialty item, for pajamas and so forth. But not Japanese styling.

Q. Fabrics, then? Like silks?

Jean Sprague Yes, right, but not in the styling.

Olive Smith I think everyone had a great aunt who went to the Orient and brought a pair of pajamas, and the waist was out to here on a draw-string, and the crotch was this deep. (Miss Smith sketches an enormous garment with her hands)

 That was what my great aunt brought to me from Japan - [thank goodness it didn't influence our styling.]

Q. Was silk a significant fabric in New York? Or was that a West Coast phenomenon?

Olive Smith No, it was exactly the same there.

Q. As the war began, and materials became scarcer, what were some of the consequences to the design women's clothing?

Jean Sprague Well, Olive, I would certainly emphasize our mutual love of gabardine, and how both of us enjoyed it because of the quality of the tailored garments fashioned from gabardine. As Olive said, how wonderful to stand up without a crease in the garment!

Q. (Miss Smith), you were saying earlier that skirts, under the OPA regulations, needed to change?

Olive Smith Yes, there was a government regulation controlling fabric use. Skirts could be no fuller than 72". If you wanted to have pleats in your skirt, and you were a small woman, you could have pleats within that 72", or you could have shirring. If you were a big woman, your 72" was filled up with you.

 Cuffs were banished entirely. There were no such things as ruffles.

 Blouses were limited to one patch pocket per blouse. And that certainly curtails a designer.

Q. Were vests eliminated from men's suits?

Olive Smith I just don't know. Most of my men went into service, and they all wore uniforms. [Suits per se were hard to come by so men just took better care of what they had.]

Jean Sprague And those civilians that remained at

suit, ~~and he was too old for service,~~

Q. What did women cover their legs with, in the absence of silk?

Olive Smith Silk stockings were hard to get. As Jean said, silk stockings could buy anything. Soldiers, if they could get ahold of them, were buying sex with them. Silk stockings were so important, but then silk disappeared.

Rayon was not popular at that particular time, and nylon was yet to come, so women used leg makeup. A regular cosmetic makeup, and then drawing a pencil line down the back for seams. I did it.

Q. With a mirror?

Olive Smith No, with contortions.

Q. Did you use an eyebrow pencil to draw it?

Olive Smith Yes.

Q. Now there were no panty house...

Olive Smith No. They didn't come in until the sixties when skirts got so short that they tried to cover up that garter gap. Remember the hunk of flesh between the stocking and the girdle?

Pantyhose had to come in, or men couldn't have stood it.

Q. One of the other shortages of material was of rubber. Whatever did you do?

Olive Smith Well, our bosoms suffered inasmuch as the back elastic in the bras got all soft and sloppy. You'd take tucks in it, but that didn't help the elasticity. Sooner or later, it got to be a rigid back. The little bits of elastic would pop.

You could not replace your bras; you could not replace your girdles.

Jean Sprague We treated them with care. We washed them so carefully.

Olive Smith Yes, and they took forever to dry because they were not nylon. Even if you had the money, at the time, we didn't think in terms of having two of anything, saying, "No, I won't buy a brassiere - I have one." Nowadays, you have a brassiere to go under this blouse, that blouse, this sweater - we have all different kinds.

We also had only one lipstick. We only bought another lipstick when one wore out.

Jean Sprague And the colors were limited, Olive, so we didn't have that problem.

Olive Smith Yes, we had Tangee, which brought out

everybody's own color.

Q. ^{at} Cosmetics were hard to get. If I recall correctly, perfume also. Some of the French companies were not making it, or we were not importing it any longer. I'm inclined to think that lipstick was hard to get. Was that right?

Jean Sprague Yes, I think so. We really used it down to the very core. This reminds me of my favorite perfume, which I had used for so many, many years. I was unable to get this Elizabeth Arden product, and I remember being so persuasive at Magnin's in getting a large display bottle, which was more than the ordinary customer would have purchased at a time. I was so desperate for this, and one of my nice friends at Frederick's was able to get some. And truly, it must have been a quart, and it lasted, hopefully, through the war.

Now you don't even see those big bottles on display.

Olive Smith "She bought her booze by the dram, and her perfume by the quart." (laughing)

Q. When you had silk stockings^s and they tore, did you mend them in some way, or did you just toss them out?

Jean Sprague We mended them. We had a little gadget with a very fine wire tip, and we would try to reweave the run.

Olive Smith It took good eyesight. You would try to latch on to that one little loop. Like, on a big scale, in a sweater you would try to catch that loop, and then go up and around. You'd use an embroidery hoop, and stretch the hose over that, and mend^d them.

Jean Sprague But if it was your favorite pair, you took it to a professional reweaver. And, my word, those people flourished! Remember how we used to have our clothes patched? And if you tore a garment, or loosened a pocket, you had it rewoven. They still exist today, but I doubt in such numbers.

Olive Smith And if you had a run in your stocking and it was up high enough that it didn't show, you used nail polish and daubed it on to keep it from running down.

Q. In terms of services of that kind, was it easy to come by dry cleaning during the war?

Jean Sprague I'm going to let Olive handle that one.

Olive Smith I get all the dirty jobs! (laughing)
Right now, my hands are burning just thinking about it. We had our clothesline out in the yard, and usually it went over the grass, but we made sure it went over the cement part. We used white gasoline, and I would wash my clothes in gasoline on Saturday and Sunday, and hang them out, and pray for a nice sunny day.

Then we would press it. There were no steam irons at the time, so you would just use a damp cloth [with a hot iron], and on Monday you often went to work with a stinking dress. The whole office smelled like a garage.

Q. Was white gasoline the kind of gasoline you needed coupons to purchase?

Jean Sprague Yes, we needed coupons.

Q. So you're taking it out of your automobile to clean your clothing.

Olive Smith That's right. And it was more important at that point - you had to go to work. And you had to be clean.

You'd sieve it when you were through. You'd use a piece of linen, and sift it through there so that all the dirt would stay in there and you'd have white gasoline for next time. But it wasn't as white.

Jean Sprague Remember how it settled on the bottom? There was always a black spot, like washing a paint brush today, and letting it settle in the cleaner.

But we saved it, as Olive indicated.

Q. What about shoes and luggage and handbags - things that used leather?

Olive Smith Shoes were rationed and they were very difficult to get. Handbags were not rationed, but they didn't expect you to have any - shoes were a necessity, handbags weren't. So you just lived with the handbag you had.

You could replace your shoes, but only if you had a ticket. And you had a ticket because you had a friend who gave you one for your meat ticket. Say, you had too much meat, so you swapped tickets. And that was the only way you'd get shoes.

Q. Were the tickets annual? Were you expected to live on one pair of shoes a year?

Jean Sprague I think it was only as frequent as the coupons you could obtain. It wasn't dictated by number of pairs.

You asked about luggage, and that was very interesting. We traveled on the train, which was the frequent mode of travel during wartime for civilians. Remember, Olive, how terribly heavy all that luggage was? And, of course, you didn't renew your suitcase during wartime.

Olive Smith Oh, it was terrible. I'd forgotten all about that, Jean.

Jean Sprague Well, it was important, because you usually had to carry it down the train platform, and, once

because he had priority. I had to take the Twentieth Century. I sat up for four nights, and I only left my seat to go to the bathroom or to eat. When I came back, there were soldiers and sailors with girls, doing it in the aisles, and I was right there with my luggage. It had to be with me because there was no place to put it, and as Jean said, I had to lug it on the train and off the train. There were no porters; there were conductors who said, "All aboard!" And that was the end of it. The porters were doing war jobs. You lived with your luggage and it was terribly heavy stuff.

Q. Do you remember whether there was any military influence in clothing?

Olive Smith I think there was military influence. We didn't wear pants before then, but Rosie the Riveter and women working in factories wore pants then. I think that influenced future pants.

I think the shirtdress came from that era, because there were no ruffles and no folderol on a dress. A very tailored look came in during the day, though we got just as dressed up as we possibly could in the evening. But that was in dresses that were left over [from prewar], too. [Women wore cropped jackets calaled Eisenhower jackets and mechanics overalls.]

Q. In outerwear, in looking at photos of the time, it looks as though trenchcoats or very tailored outer garments, were quite common.

Jean Sprague Well, they were utilitarian, for one thing.

Q. But they were not mimicking military uniforms?

Jean Sprague Oh, I think the epaulet influence came in, don't you?

Olive Smith Well, they certainly kept us warm, but did we have epaulets?

Jean Sprague We had little straps up here, and I was thinking so strongly of the Lindy coat and what a strong influence that had been, though at another time. I'm changing the subject on you, but I do think there was some influence of the trenchcoat in our outer wear.

Olive Smith I think you're right about trenchcoats, but I don't recall epaulets. That would have been extra fabric.

Jean Sprague You're right. You correct me.

Q. But hats were not masculine or simple at all...

Olive Smith We wore the most simple black or navy dress, and on top of that we wore the most magnificent veiled hats, sequined hats, with flowers, feathers - things that

were not on the regulated list.

Jean Sprague And a string of pearls.

Olive Smith Yes, and gloves, always gloves. And painted legs. And resoled shoes. (laughing)

Q. How would the well-dressed woman walk into her office in Seattle or New York in 1943?

Olive Smith I happen to have been in the fashion business at the time, where woman looked as chic then as now. Well, actually more chic then that now, because now there's too much personal taste allowed. I shouldn't say "allowed," because we couldn't stop them, but there were certain ways to look and women looked that way. And it was a tasteful way. They were dressed appropriately to their incomes and jobs. The women in the fashion business all looked very nice.

Q. What might they wear to the office?

Olive Smith She would wear a suit or dress - gray, black, navy, or brown. Skirts were frozen at the length they were when the war broke out, and that was just below the knees. And toward the end of the war, women got tired of that, and they wanted to lengthen their skirts and almost everybody added 5" to 7" of black faille or black grosgrain around the bottom of their skirts.

 It was so incongruous. It looked like an after-thought. I never did it, because I always thought I'd want to do something to the jacket to tie the black in somewhere. But they'd wear a gray flannel suit, and this much black faille (indicating about 6").

Jean Sprague Oh, I remember that with interest! I worked on the West Coast and I worked in a large company. We dressed appropriately, as Olive indicated. We wore suits. Some girls would wear a skirt and a blouse, but never casual clothing in the sense that one thinks of it now in the office. It was clothing that was simple and unadorned, during office time. A watch, perhaps a necklace, and that was enough.

Olive Smith Tell her about the black dresses on salesgirls.

Jean Sprague Oh, yes! You (the interviewer) were interested in Frederick and Nelson. Any of the clerking staff would wear a black dress; any of the staff that presented herself to the public would be in black attire.

Olive Smith And they would be sent home if they were not in proper attire. If they did not have on that black dress, home they went.

Q. How did women wear their hair? Did women go to salons?

Olive Smith No, I don't think so, not during the war.

That was after the war. In fact, when hats went out, beauty salons opened. Women paid \$5, \$10, or \$15 or whatever it was to have their hair done, they were not going to smash it down with a hat. That was after the war. During the war, we wore hats for everything.

They were simple hairdos - soft and loose, or swept up in curls. Some wore a sort of "Tootsie Roll" all around the back - the Ann Miller and Joan Crawford look.

Q. How were you wearing your hair? Describe it to me.

Olive Smith I wore it parted. My hair's curly, and I had a tough time smoothing it down. I remember I used to get Jocur Waveset - that green gel. And you'd smooth it all over your head and get it all plastered down. Anyway, I'd get it all smoothed down as much as I could, and comb it down into a pageboy, and tuck it up underneath, and then put a rat underneath that, and maybe a hair-net.

Q. But you did your own styling...

Olive Smith Yes. You only went to a salon for an outstanding event, or something special. Salons were just not around.

Jean Sprague I recall letting my hair grow, and wearing it high on my head.

Q. In a chignon?

Jean Sprague No, it was just a great sort of bun, and I wore a big comb to keep the back hair in place.

Olive Smith I wore it back, too, with two "Tootsie Rolls" on time and with a braid up here. But it was simple.

Q. Did women get their hair colored?

Jean Sprague I don't recall that at all.

Olive Smith I don't think they got it colored. It was a home deal, and everybody was the same color. Nowadays, you see the same pale beige around the world; then you saw henna. My mother never knew what color her hair was - she had hennaed hair.

But they hennaed at home. I don't remember any woman having it done in a salon.

Q. And the range of cosmetics?

Jean Sprague Very limited, as you indicated, Olive.

Olive Smith Yes, and I think that anybody who wore makeup was considered pretty trashy. I remember that my sister, in the thirties, wore mascara and didn't clean it off at night. In the morning, she'd wake up with these two rabbit eyes.

So mascara was worn in the thirties, but I don't think mascara or makeup was very important. In the forties, the skin was matte powdered, and the lips freely outlined in vivid red, and the lashes were lightly mascara-ed.

Jean Sprague Heavy makeup was not accepted.

Olive Smith Yes, you were considered a trollop if you wore makeup.

Q. The magazines give the impression of this "fresh faced look."

Jean Sprague Yes, it was soap and water.

Olive Smith And I think there are lots of chemicals in makeup that were being used for other things.

Jean Sprague I don't know. I've washed my face all my life, but that experience was not the result of the war. I just continued to keep washing my face with soap and water.

Q. Ivory Soap? Camay? Noxzema? Pond's?

Jean Sprague Probably, it was Pond's.

Olive Smith "Pond's, of course." Wasn't that when one of the first society ladies lent her name to advertising?

Q. What were some of those other products?

Olive Smith Cutex nail polish. And that was about the only kind.

Q. What colors? Was it in a narrow range of colors as well?

Olive Smith That was bright, bright red. And we cleaned off the moons and the edges of our nails, so that the only part that was red was the part attached to the finger. Remember?

Jean Sprague Yes, I certainly do. You never painted an entire nail.

Olive Smith You took a white crayon, and moistened it, and went under your nails so that the tips of your nails were white, and this was bright red. (indicating the nail which attaches to the finger)
Ugly!

Jean Sprague I almost had forgotten all that, and recently ran across one of those white wonderful pencils.

Olive Smith You'd spend all Saturday afternoon manicuring your nails and coloring your hair. Well, I didn't color my hair, but I was Jocouring it and smashing it down, trying to get ready for a Saturday night date. Or on Sunday,

to go back to work Monday.

Jean Sprague We didn't have pedicures then, though.
We didn't consider nail polish part of our makeup.

Olive Smith But that was not held back because of the
war, that was just the fashion.

Q. What were some of the big cosmetic companies?

Jean Sprague I keep coming up with "Mavis," but I'm
not getting anywhere.

 Hand lotion was very big in those days.
Perhaps I'm prejudiced because my mother had beautiful hands
and was constantly using a hand lotion.

Olive Smith You've asked that question, and since
this isn't the end, let me do some research on it.

Q. How about Cashmere Bouquet? Or that may have been too
tacky.

Both together Oh, no! That was a very accepted
fragrance.

Q. But your cologne was imported?

Jean Sprague Well, mine wasn't. Elizabeth Arden.

Olive Smith Mine was. Je Reviens.
And I think my mother used Shalimar.

Jean Sprague Oh, do you remember that great wonderful
bottle!

Q. The suits you describe seem quite simple silhouette with
elaborate hats. And simple jewelry. How about neckwear?
What kinds of accessories would you wear besides the hat?

Olive Smith I think there was a dearth of jewelry,
but I think they wore neckwear or very simple blouses. The
hat was the thing. Whatever glamor you had in your life was
in it. [There were linen lace collars and cuffs, however, and
they did a lot to change the look of the same old dress, and
a lot for one's morale.]

Q. Did women wear earrings?

Jean Sprague Simple, if we did. I remember them only
as evening wear. One would never wear them during the day
with a suit to the office.

Olive Smith But then why did we wear all these
elaborate hats!? But we did. (laughing)

 And I also think that hats were so
elaborate... I would think the same thing applied to
earrings. If you had on a magnificent hat, the earrings
would have been redundant.

I do not think earrings were important.

Jean Sprague And we were trying to recall when the Eisenberg glass came in.

Olive Smith We wore a pin that broke into two clips. You had a heart-shaped dress, and you put your two rhinestone clips here, and then you put them together and made this rhinestone pin out of them.

Jean Sprague I recall - oh, you're doing wonderful things for my memory! My favorite photographer in Seattle, whose name was Leonid Fink, was a very fashionable photographer. I had my string of pearls, my square necked dress in black, and then a jacket. I did own a mink at that time, but this was standard. You could go to a party at this time, and there might be thirty women in a similar dress, with a string of pearls, and a little hat - a little beanie with a feather and a veil - and white gloves.

Q. What time is this?

Jean Sprague Five o'clock on, in mid-war.
But the most simple of dresses. It was with a great pang I gave up that dress.

Q. In the fashion drawings in the newspapers at the time, the silhouette seems to be what is being sold. It's this narrow long silhouette, with an elaborate hat.

Olive Smith Do you remember Dorothy O'Hara's black crepe dresses, all draped to the side, with this heart-shaped or square neck?

Jean Sprague It was a romantic time. I keep emphasizing this. There's great romance during a war.

Olive Smith We were "over-the-table" dressing. When people went out, [seated at tables], this is what they saw.

Q. Why was it a romantic time? What is it about war?

Olive Smith There always are romantic times during war. "He's going away, he may never come back."

Jean Sprague Great drama, about everything.

Olive Smith Even those that you didn't know or care about [personally]. You were working in the canteen, and you'd see these poor guys from far off, not near home and missing people, and you just loved every one of them and wanted to take them home.

And you "fell in love" with almost every man you danced with, too. The uniforms did it! I think that was one reason why I married my husband - a mistake I made.

Jean Sprague Uniforms are pretty romantic. After the war, when they started to wear civilian clothes, they weren't

nearly as interesting.

Olive Smith Men even move differently in a uniform.

Side B

Jean Sprague ...When I spoke with you on the phone, I emphasized that (the romance of the time).

Q. Yes, and you also emphasized the femininity.

Jean Sprague Absolutely.

Olive Smith Yes, boys were boys, and girls were girls. None of this androgynous influence.

Jean Sprague They were taking care of this little woman that they were leaving at home.

Q. The little woman may have been working at Boeing... But that's a special role?

Jean Sprague Yes, it was her other life.

Q. Do you think pants for women in industry had any major effect during the war, or was that something that came later?

Jean Sprague It came much later. It was a necessary piece of equipment for the industry worker.

Olive Smith It was necessary, as Jean said. And I also think that women got tired of anything that was necessary, and just automatically would leave alone the things you had to wear. And leave it alone for five or ten years.

Jean Sprague And remember the Boeing worker was not an attractively-dressed person. There were no designers creating fashion jeans. You weren't wearing a label to go to work at Boeing. You were wearing the most practical garment to cover the body and do the job.

Olive Smith She was crawling up ladders, she was bending over, she was riveting. She was protecting her legs and covering her body.

Jean Sprague It's like visiting a ship in the Navy. You never go up the ladder first. If you're going to a wardroom to dinner, the officer always precedes you. This was part and parcel of that.

 I'm sure that if the gal who was wearing pants all day - who was Rosie the Riveter - was on a warship and was invited to dinner, she still would observe being a woman and would put on a skirt.

Olive Smith They were girls first. They were girls before they were workers.

Jean Sprague Absolutely. I don't think our war lasted long enough to have our women ever forget it.

Q. How about evening wear? To what sorts of functions would you wear evening wear and what is meant by the term?

Olive Smith Why don't you take that one, Jean? You dressed for the Opera and the Symphony here.

Jean Sprague We dressed when we were in town, but I was thinking of one glamorous vacation I spent with my favorite war hero in Chicago. We had gone to the Drake - Dorothy Draper had decorated the Drake and it was a pretty posh place.

 I don't remember people wearing an evening gown in that situation, maybe because it was a hotel. They were wearing elegant short dresses, and the everlasting hats.

Olive Smith A dressier black dress than the one she wore to the office, and perhaps a smaller hat with sequins and feathers. But that hat was the thing that did it.

Jean Sprague Nobody was looking at the legs as much as they were from the waist up. You were having dinner, having a drink, whatever.

Q. Sequins evidently were not rationed?

Olive Smith They were called "paillettes," and what were they made of? Mica?

Jean Sprague I was trying to think. It had a glimmer to it, and a wonderful shine that plastic doesn't reflect.

Olive Smith I don't want to stress the sequins too much. There were feathers and flowers and little birds and snowballs.

Q. And I was thinking, too, about what you had said about decoration on the bodices.

Jean Sprague And what Olive and I refer to as "sequins" are sequined jackets and sequined cocktail dresses - whole cocktail skirts, and so forth. And isn't it funny the number of sequined jackets that are coming back? I was absolutely surprised to see these sequined jackets on the wholesale market, and I said, "You're still selling this?!" And he said, "It's one of our biggest."

Olive Smith I don't think there were so many sequins - just that they sparkled, and were spaced on a veil, maybe only twenty-five on a veil.

Jean Sprague And we haven't talked about hat pins! Now sequins were on the hat pin that held the little hats. You see, we had more hair during the war than you do, or we have, now.

And I remember they were covered with the fabric of the hat, but they had a little glitter.

Olive Smith And the sequins I was talking about on dresses was just a little applique of an eagle or a flag - that was our "hello" to patriotism, on an evening dress. [But dresses were glamorous with fitted bodices topped by sequins, feathers, or furs, or a jewelled pin.

Q. You said earlier that some women had their fiance's or husband's epaulets?

Jean Sprague Oh, no. No. All officers would wear an insignia, and they were given to them according to their rank. They would try to sneak you one, and try to replace it as lost or stolen or something. By war issue, they were never supposed to be given away.

Olive Smith In the Army, the single bar was for second and first lieutenants, the double bar was for the captain, the maple leaf was the major, the colonel had a single leaf, and a full colonel had a bird, "the chicken," on his shoulder, and the general had stars.

 If you could get the colonel's chicken...Well!!

Q. That, and a pair of silk stockings!

Jean Sprague It was a great life, in a sense. I'm sorry we were at war, but I'm glad to have been part of that life.

Q. There were a lot of uniforms around, weren't there? Not just on men in the armed forces?

Jean Sprague WACS, WAVES, SPARS.

Olive Smith Seabees, Marines.

Q. How about homefront, like Red Cross?

Jean Sprague I don't remember so many women in Red Cross uniforms unless they went to the front.

Olive Smith Yes, I was in the Red Cross in Philadelphia, and we rolled bandages, and the women who were doing it sat around in their uniforms and their aprons. I was just a visitor doing it once in a while and I didn't wear it. I never had one, was asked to wear one, nor could afford one, nor had the fabric.

Jean Sprague I don't recall other services having uniforms because there wasn't the fabric to indulge this.

Q. During the war, we've talked about Seattle chic - how about American chic? The influences of European designers were probably disrupted by the war. Did America generate its own designs?

Olive Smith No more imports, consequently people who were designing and didn't have any name, and were just doing a small business, like Claire McArdle, Norman Norell, Hattie Carnegie, Bonnie Cashin, suddenly became very important.

Q. What was uniquely American about their work?

Olive Smith [They designed for working women - not the idle rich.] They were simpler. Most of the ones I talked about with the exception of Norell - though Norell was simple, too - were famous for shirtdresses, which was what we were all wearing at that time. They were appropriate for all ages, with just certain variations.

Q. What was the usual fabric of those dresses?

Jean Sprague In summer, they were cotton and silk.

Olive Smith And in the winter, they were wools. "Nun's veiling", or a heavier wool - whatever was available. And Bonnie Cashin was very famous for her leather trims.

Q. On dresses?

Olive Smith Yes, and on suits and coats.

Q. In terms of other kinds of style, like the style of entertaining or the style of home decorating, is there anything that seems significantly part of World War II? How did people entertain during the war?

Jean Sprague At home.

Q. There were no fine restaurants in Seattle?

Jean Sprague I don't recall any fine ones at the beginning of the war. There were small bars where one could go, and then the clubs where one brought one's liquor. There were little cubbyholes allowed to a member, and his name was placed on the bottle and in the cubbyhole, and as you entered, you requested your supply. I don't know how many of them were watered down - we used to suspect that that was the case.

Olive Smith Where I lived, there were restaurants, but there was a great deal of home entertaining, and you got together. It was very common to have BYOB - Bring Your Own Booze - parties, or bring your own steak parties. I think that outdoor entertaining, like barbecues, became important at that particular time. Just because you couldn't get steak, even though you could afford it in many cases. You couldn't get liquor. So it was not at all unusual to bring your own liquor - it was expected.

Jean Sprague We got rather dressed up for those parties, getting back to fashion. We had pretty things we wore that were "at-home."

Olive Smith Much more so than now. Now, somebody says come over to dinner and wear your jeans, and I hate it.

Q. So the style of entertaining was casual, but you dressed well.

Jean Sprague And it wasn't always that casual, if it was served in the home. I recall doing things where we really paid attention to the table, to make it attractive, and especially if we were entertaining any servicemen.

Olive Smith Very often your table outshone your food. We did try to make things nice for them at the table, because they were eating in a mess hall, but there may have been a tiny steak for each one. They may have gone someplace else to get another meal but at least it looked pretty.

 We were making do. We did everything to buoy up our spirits, by making ourselves prettier, making the table prettier, because life was meagre.

Q. How about your homes - was it possible to buy carpeting? Furniture?

Jean Sprague Oh, yes.

Q. Sheets? Linens?

Jean Sprague Well, that was a little tough.

Olive Smith I wasn't doing anything about a house at that particular time, but I think it was hard to get sheets.

Jean Sprague I recall that, and even though I worked for Sears-Roebuck and Company, and would have a little better chance as an employee at the availability of limited kinds of goods, we did have furniture (available in the store). Fortunately, we owned considerable furniture before the war, so that was not a problem.

 We just made do.

Olive Smith But I do think the furniture that was coming out in wartime was junk furniture. I remember when I was married in '43, our friends admonished us, "If we catch you buying any furniture, we'll kill you, because it's all garbage right now."

 You could buy a day-bed - a davenport that opened out - for \$69.00, and in one year, it would have fallen apart.

Jean Sprague Yes, because the labor was not a professional type of labor.

 You asked if it was available, and I answered your question by saying yes. But the quality, as Olive indicated, was not good.

Q. You could not, though, purchase a refrigerator during the war, could you?

Jean Sprague Those were pretty limited.

Q. When you set up housekeeping in '43 -

Olive Smith Well, we didn't. My husband was in the process of going overseas, so we were in furnished apartments.

Q. From the newspaper ads, there just doesn't seem to be much available, or, at least, it's not advertised. Outfitting homes just doesn't seem to have been much of an advertising drawing card then.

Jean Sprague Well, not with a mobile population. There were wives following husbands going overseas, and it was a moving time. I recall at one time I owned a house in Port Townsend, though I was not there during the war. I recall some of the native people telling me that during the war when they divided the Victorians, people walked away with a good deal of the older furniture.

 People would say, "You've got a ready-made supply of furniture." And people furnished little apartments with their extra furniture, and some of the prize stuff left in the middle of the night.

Q. In terms of mores, during wartime, there is some talk in books of a wartime morality, about more women smoking, about promiscuity - thought a pretty limited promiscuity, more women drinking in public and in taverns... Did you see this?

Jean Sprague Of course, and I don't think you should underrate the promiscuity. Olive touched on this before - it was a romantic time. You'd fall in love with the fella you were dancing with because you thought you'd never see him again.

Olive Smith You fell in love fast.

Jean Sprague There was an atmosphere of promiscuity. Perhaps more girls went to bed with fellas going overseas than they every would have thought of it that fella had stayed home.

Olive Smith Uniforms had so much to do with it! When the war was over, and these men came home and you saw them in their civilian clothes, they lost something. But, in uniform, they all looked smashing. And you fell in love with the look.

Jean Sprague There was an excitement in the air, because you knew it was for the moment. There was no longevity, even if you married the fella and he went away to war. There was an excitement that we don't have in our lives now - we have a different kind. I find it to be quite different, not because I'm seventy years old, but because it's different around.

Q. In terms of smoking, weren't cigarettes difficult to get? Why did more women smoke?

Jean Sprague Yes, but the military had them. They had no shortage.

Olive Smith But was tobacco rationed?

Jean Sprague I don't remember having difficulty, and I think I smoked at that time. I'm sure I did.

Olive Smith I smoked, too, and I don't remember having a difficult time.

Q. Do you think more women were smoking in '45 than had been in '35?

Jean Sprague Yes, yes, I do. It was an exciting time.

Olive Smith [The energy level was extremely high.]

Jean Sprague Once again, the dress-up, the big good-bye, the final embrace...

Olive Smith The movies did a lot for that. The movies were so elaborate. You always saw Bette Davis or Joan Crawford walk over to a table, and pick up a silver cigarette box, and light a cigarette with a lighter. My house is full of cigarette lighters at this particular point because when I got married in '43, all my wedding presents were silver lighters or cigarette boxes. That's what everybody gave!

And there they were in the movies, and they blew their smoke and that was very romantic, to look at a guy through smoke. Now it sickens me!

Q. You make me think of dancing - what kind of dancing were you doing?

Jean Sprague Oh, it was good, and the music was divine!

Olive Smith Good kind and terrible kind. The kids did the zoot suits, and dippy doodle kind of thing.

Jean Sprague This was the big band era.

Olive Smith We went to the Pennsylvania Hotel - "Pennsylvania - six- five thousand!"

Jean Sprague I hope you're sentimental about big band music. It was good music.

Olive Smith Helen Forrest, Jack Leonard.

Jean Sprague And it was wonderful, romantic, dreamy.

Q. Where did you dance here in Seattle?

Olive Smith How about the Biltmore Bowl?

Jean Sprague And the Olympic Bowl. (in the present
Four Seasons Hotel)

Olive Smith I know when I arrived in '48, everybody
talked about it as though it was the thing they had been
doing all along.

Jean Sprague It was a wonderful place to go, and
that's where Freddy Martin was.

Q. Did you go to the Trianon ever?

Jean Sprague A couple of times, but it wasn't the
acceptable place to go. Ballroom dancing... Well, the
Trianon was kind of off limits for my family.
We danced at the Olympic Hotel a lot, and
the military balls that were given at the Olympic were very
formal with long dresses, and were beautiful occasions with
the variety of uniforms - the Army, the Navy, the Marines.

Olive Smith And foreign countries, too. The
decorations from these foreign countries! I remember going
back to Washington for a big party at the Shoreham, and there
were men in these magnificent uniforms with braid, and the
orders across here (their chests), and medallions, and even a
turban! Countries I'd never even heard of! They were
stunning.

Jean Sprague Because Seattle is a port, we had a great
deal of mingling with the Navy, and we'd go to dinner and
then go to the movies, and always be given their cape to wear
on deck. The whole thing was so romantic.

Q. Well, this is a kind of unromantic question, but did more
women drive in the forties?

Jean Sprague We had to - there weren't any men.

Olive Smith But there was less driving by virtue of
the gasoline shortage, so it evened itself out.

Jean Sprague I didn't have a car until one of my
friends left for the service, and I remember buying that car
- a LaSalle convertible!

Olive Smith Oh, God, that was gorgeous.

Jean Sprague I remember it was after the war, and
everybody was so jubilant in the whole town, and whistles
were going, and I remember driving up Third Avenue on my way
home, and somebody saying, "Do you stand up like the milkmen
do?" Because those LaSalles were really high up off the
road, and it was red, I'll have you know. I loved it. It
had a rumble seat. It was fun.

Q. As the war was ending, there were some major changes in

the merchandising of fashion in the United States, what were some of those changes?

Olive Smith One of the major changes was the length of skirts. Women's skirts had been frozen at the length we wore them when the war came along, which was right below the knee. Christian Dior, at that time, was a brand new designer, and he came out and said, "Every woman's skirt shall be 17" from the ground." He didn't ask or suggest it. And women came into the department stores with a yardstick in hand and they wanted their skirts measured 17" from the ground, regardless whether they were wearing high heels, or low heels, or whether they were 6' tall, or 4' short. They certainly were a funny-looking bunch of people. But he had that kind of sway - or maybe we were such sheep because we were just dying for a change of direction. Maybe we were just so sick and tired of wearing the same blasted suits, coats, and dresses all the time.

Jean Sprague And talk about the explosion of color, too.

Olive Smith I don't know whether that was a result of it, but I don't remember much color before or during the war. We sort of wore navy blue, black, and brown, and sometimes there would be dark green and wine, in a winter spectrum. And then, after the war, luggage tan, which is a dark camel shade, came into being, and navy blue shoes came into being. Up until that time, we had worn black shoes with navy blue.

 It was a color explosion, but I don't know whether that was a result of the war, or not.

Q. What about the mass production of fashion?

Olive Smith Well, it taught us the principles of mass production.

 [Miss Smith refers to her notes]

Technology made its impact, high speed cutters turned out millions of dresses in a week. The shirt waist was in solidly, because it was practical for all ages.

Jean Sprague It was the end product of having made those millions of uniforms - the technology was in place. You could go into the factories, as I had the opportunity of doing, and seeing the mass cutting which I believe had not been used previous to that. With electric cutters.

Q. Did this make fashion less expensive and more accessible to more women?

Olive Smith By all means.

Q. How about women at home, trying to permanent their hair?

Jean Sprague Oh, that's something we'd like to forget!

Olive Smith That came out after the war - those home permanents.

unavailable.

Jean Sprague Or unfashionable because they were Japanese-related? I think that was a strong influence, and that it took a very long time for people to forgive. We began to forgive when they began to buy so much from us - we have short memories.

Q. You mentioned Dior - so the European influence came right back after the war. Could you get Je Reviens again?

Olive Smith Well, it was sold to an American company, and it was just never the same. But French perfumes did come back into the country.

Q. Were you sorry to see the American designers eclipsed, if they were? Were they eclipsed by the new French designers, or did they go side by side?

Olive Smith No, they went side by side, and became even more because the French designers were only available to very wealthy women, but the American designers were less expensive, with the exception of Norell. Claire Potter and Claire McArdle, while they were considered high priced, maybe \$80, \$90, or \$100, and that was a lot in those days, they were considerably less than the European fashions. We learned how to do things ourselves, and we were all proud to wear American designer clothes. They fit our lifestyle. The other clothes, from Europe, were too elaborate.

 These people were making shirtdresses, and even if they now were able to put seven pockets on them and a full dirndl skirt, they were different and we wanted those.

Up until that time, a woman would go to the hair dresser every six or nine months for a new permanent.

Q. How were permanents administered?

Olive Smith Dreadfully. I'm surprised that women had any hair at all. There was this great big chromium dome and all these electric wires hanging down, with what looked like clothespins at the end. They would take little segments of hair, roll it in paper or rags, and then they would pull it up. A woman looked twenty years younger while she was having a permanent, because everything was yanked up. The smell was absolutely dreadful - that burning smell of sulphur!

Jean Sprague And the chemical that was used to set!

Olive Smith And there were more lawsuits, over burning in the machines, either burned scalps from the actual heat or from the electricity and from acid. Terrible!

Q. Is this the way it was done during the war, with this machine?

Olive Smith I believe it was, because it was after the war that the home perm came in, so it must be during the war when they had this.

Q. Did the home perm come in a little box?

Jean Sprague Yes, it did come in a box. It came with rollers, and papers, and that foul-smelling stuff.

Olive Smith Ammonia.

Jean Sprague They still use something like that. The odor is strong, but not nearly as strong as then. I can remember that smell, forty years later.

Olive Smith We remember the smell of permanents, and the smell of cleaning our clothes with gasoline. And the smell of the clothes after they were cleaned - there was an odor that hung around.

Q. Things like jade and pearls and silk that had been in such short supply during the war, do you remember if they became fashionable after the war, or if people had learned to do without them?

Jean Sprague Remember that Japan was in dire straits, and that production did not start in that country to the extent of exporting goods. It took a very long time for oriental silks to come back on the market.

It was not for sale during the war, unless it was here beforehand in already held inventories.

Q. Oh, I realize that! I meant after the war, whether those things became unfashionable because they had been