ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

POLLY BROOKS

An interview conducted on

October 15, 2015

Interviewers: Melinda Holder

and Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

"War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present"

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Polly Brooks are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 15, 2015.

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The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

HOLDER: All right. This is Mindy. This is part of the *War Stories* collection, and let's start with your name.

BROOKS: My name is Polly, and I have a long name if you want the whole thing: Vivian Pauline Lahan Love Brooks Harper.

HOLDER: Okay. And where were your born, and where did you grow up?

BROOKS: I was born at the Shannon Hospital in San Angelo, Texas in 1933 and moved when mother and I were able to leave the hospital. We went to where my father was ranching on . . . in Schleicher County on a ranch halfway between Eldorado and Sonora. I think maybe Jimmy Powell and Mark Mertz may own that ranch now. My father leased it, and . . . from the Thompson brothers, and they sold the ranch to the Mertzes and Powells. And so, daddy wanted to ranch, and he found a place out in Marfa, Texas . . . is how we ended up in Marfa. And of course, this time he didn't lease. He . . . he just bought it so we would never have to move again, and so that's how we ended up in Marfa and on the ranch. But, as I was telling you, it was too far from town for me to go to school—my sister and I—so we lived at the Paisano Hotel and then would go to the ranch on weekends, and on summer vacations, and holidays and what have you. And it was the best of both worlds except being a very social . . . my sister and I both, we of course wanted to be in town with all the action. But anyway, we did spend a great deal of time at the ranch and . . . so, had the best of both worlds I suppose.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Can you tell us something about . . . again, repeat what you were talking about living at the Paisano Hotel.

BROOKS: Oh, about living at the hotel? Well, it was the time . . . it was during World War II and it was . . . the war was winding down. It was like in '45, '46. And I remember being on the street going into the Paisano, where we were living at the time, and someone announced that the war was over. Well, that didn't mean anything really to me because I was so distanced from the war to start with. But what made the war very real to my family was my mother's brother, whose name was Joe Spiller, was stationed at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed on that fateful day, December of 1941. And even that didn't affect me.

I was still just a little girl, but my grandmother was visiting us, and she was from Austin and a very devout Catholic. And when I say devout, she lived only one block from . . . from the Catholic church in Austin on Seton Avenue and would go to mass every morning and would go to mass every evening because she was only one block away. She didn't drive a car, so she'd walk. And when she was out visiting us, she was . . . you know, we were on the ranch and we were 45 minutes from town and . . . however, that day, when the news was received about Pearl Harbor, my father took his mother-in-law into Eldorado and took her to church because that was the only place that she sort of received whatever it was that she needed because her son was serving in the military in Pearl Harbor.

And so, you know, that was . . . that was the way I remember hearing about a war, which meant very little to someone that young. But I could tell from family faces of older ones that there was great concern. And, of course, the war . . . it did last a very long time. But my uncle that was serving over there, he was a gunner and—that was serving at Pearl Harbor—came home just fine and lived to be a ripe old age, and married, and had sons and, you know, had a very

normal life. But he, whenever we were together, he could still . . . it was still very much in his mind—the actual day of being bombed and what it meant. It meant nothing to me, but it certainly did for all of my . . . the elders all around me and they realized we'd be going to war, which we did do.

HOLDER: Did he continue to serve after Pearl Harbor happened?

BROOKS: Well, he served his time, but he was not regular Army so, no. When the war was over, well, he came home as well. And he lived the rest of his life a very normal life in . . . in Austin. So . . . but he had stories to tell, you know. And I wish . . . I was just too young to . . . to really realize the importance of some of those stories. But he had his family over. His wife was over there for a while until they sent all the families of military home. But it . . . you know, we were so far removed, and yet it was so close to our mainland that it made everyone realize that it could easily continue and be at California, you know.

HOLDER: And what was the name of . . . what was your uncle's name?

BROOKS: Joe. Joseph Spiller.

HOLDER: Joseph Spiller. Okay.

BROOKS: We called him "Uncle Joe."

WONGSRICHANALAI: What do you remember about him?

BROOKS: Well, he was kind of a heavy-set man, and of course he was tall but that was because I was so young. So, he probably was normal and on the heavy side. And he had blue-green eyes, and the reason I remember those—well, they were kind of gray eyes—was because all mother's people had brown eyes and . . . but he had different coloring. But he already had lots of gray in his hair, and I guess you would say, "prematurely gray." And I'm sure the war made it turn gray even faster.

But he . . . we used to play . . . he taught my sister and I a card game. He was fun to be with. He was good with young people, and he taught us to play hearts. Do either of you know how to play hearts? It's a card game. And, anyway, one of the . . . what you attempt to do is to "shoot the moon," which meant taking every trick, 100%, all the tricks. And at some point, it dawns on your opposition that this is what they're going to do is to shoot the moon. And he was just so much fun with young people. And he would say, "Uncle Joe's going to shoot the moon again, shoot the moon again." And sister and I would go, "Oh, no!" You know, he was just fun to be with—a jovial person and fun to be around. He liked children, and children liked him. But . . . and his . . . he had boys, but they were . . . they were much younger than my sister and I, so I never really . . . they were first cousins, but I never did really know them. He, of course, didn't marry until after the war, and then he started a family, and so, you know, they were cousins that I really never knew.

His being at Pearl Harbor when it was attacked certainly got the attention of his family. And like I say, we were on the ranch in Eldorado. And it was all sort of going over my head, but not my little grandmother. She . . . she had her rosary out, and, you know . . . saying it

continuously. And it would be scary. Our communication back then was, you know, not what we know today. And so, you'd get bits and pieces, you know, on the radio about the Japanese that bombed Pearl Harbor, and that's about all they knew. So, there was no way to . . . you had to use your imagination to think what it must be like. And . . . so we spent a great deal of time—and this was true of a lot of the early days of World War II—in front of a radio. That was what we had for communication, and it was always on the 6 o'clock news. I mean, you know, your favorite football team might have been playing, important things happening, but everything stopped to get to that 6 o'clock news. Or that was the way it was in my family. It was very important to my father and mother what was going on in the way of the war.

And finally, you know, when war was finally declared, it had already seemed to me like it had been going on for a long time. But it was finally declared, and then . . . you know, you . . . so? So, what's new? But anyway, I have those newspapers back then. They used, you know, the whole front page would be, "U.S. Declares War." You know, it was . . . I'm glad we kept them. And because they're in a cedar chest is, I guess, why they're so well preserved, and I . . . I need to talk to Susanne Campbell and see if she'd be interested in them. I just assumed she'd have those.

HOLDER: We'd at least be interested in scanning them.

BROOKS: Mm-hmm. Well, I'll check with her and see if she'd like them. When she worked at . . . I don't know what they do with the newspapers now. I don't know if they make pictures of them or something and put them . . . keep a film . . .

HOLDER: I'm not sure what they do.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Might film them perhaps.

BROOKS: Mm-hmm.

HOLDER: So, how long . . . how long did y'all have to wait before you knew he had survived?

BROOKS: Well, it wasn't instantaneous. I can tell you that. Because it was just hard. Communication, like I said, was very primitive for a better word. And . . . but his wife was living in Austin—that would have been my aunt—with my grandmother while he was serving overseas. So, it would have been through her. She would have been his first contact, and I'm sure she stayed on pins and needles waiting. I don't know that our young people today realize not to have instant communication. Now you have your cell phone. You can just whip it out and talk anywhere in the world, but then it was just different. You had to wait until it was on the radio. And . . . but that was something we always did was get the 6 o'clock news on the radio to find out what was going on overseas and . . . so, you know . . . and that [dog barks] . . . he just said, "That's right."

HOLDER: All right. So, you said he was in the Army, correct?

BROOKS: He was Army, uh huh.

HOLDER: Army.

BROOKS: He was . . . and I'm sure there's a . . . a military term for it, but what he was . . . he was . . . he was a . . . he wasn't an officer. He was, I guess, an enlisted man. And he was drafted, and his job was . . . he was in charge of the ammunition that went into the guns that would shoot at the planes. His job was to feed that ammunition, keep it from getting tangled, and feed it so that it could go into the machine guns. And . . . so, it sounds so elementary now, you know. You wouldn't need a person. That's—I'm sure—all automatic now. But then, I guess you'd call him a gunner is what his position was. But those planes . . . I remember him telling me once that those planes would—during the bombing—those planes would come low to where you could see the pilots in the . . . in the planes as they were doing their dive-bombing and what have you. And you stop and think at what a beautiful paradise Hawaii is for it to have known this, have this blur. And I think we're just fortunate that it was held from the actual shores of the United States. I mean it was just . . . it got the attention of the military, and then we were able to defend ourselves better, but Pearl Harbor sure paid for it. Have you ever been over there?

HOLDER: I have.

BROOKS: Have you?

HOLDER: I went with my high school for Hawaii's 50th anniversary of being a state with my marching band. And we . . . they played at Pearl Harbor, actually. And so, I got to see the memorial and the ships and everything. It was creepy.

BROOKS: Right. Well, we . . . and that was . . . it was real creepy. I'm glad to hear you say that. I think what was so creepy about it was, in the first place, it was out of respect, out of awe, something . . . none of us wanted to talk. We were very silent, and also you knew that you were standing on a ship that was . . . or it was a ship, I think, and all of those ships that had been sunk with all the men on board were down underneath you. It was an eerie feeling. And out of . . . did you have that feeling?

HOLDER: Oh, yes. And the oil coming up from the ships still buried down there.

BROOKS: On the water?

HOLDER: On the water.

BROOKS: I don't remember the oil, but I do remember the names of all those that had perished.

HOLDER: Yes.

BROOKS: And they had all that listed. But it was just . . . that's an awesome . . . It was to me, a very awesome, humbling feeling to know that you were standing on top of all those men that went down with those ships that were sunk that day. And it's just something we haven't known, thank God.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did Uncle Joe ever go back to visit?

BROOKS: Beg your pardon?

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did Uncle Joe ever go back to visit Pearl Harbor?

BROOKS: I don't know if he ever went back just to visit. He lived over there, you know, with his family when he was in service. So, I think they . . . when they came back to the States, mainly it was for the benefit of the children to go to school here. And . . . and, you know . . . and this is kind of just from remembering what mother and her sisters would talk about, but Uncle Joe was never the same. It affected him. And in mid-life, he did have a nervous breakdown. It was something he evidentially carried that was very heavy, heavy, heavy that we simply don't . . . it's hard for us to relate to. But to have been there that day when so many died, it affected him mentally. It was hard to . . . hard to bear. And I suppose you always wonder, "Why me, Lord? Why was I spared?" You know? But he . . . he did have a nervous breakdown many years later, and I think it was all triggered because of serving over there and the effect that it had on him. And . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did he grow up in Austin?

BROOKS: Beg your pardon?

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did he grow up in Austin?

BROOKS: Yes, all of my mother and her family. It was a big family. They were Catholic, so they were a big family, and they lived, they used to say, "in the shade of the capitol." But . . . so they lived . . . I've tried to find that street, Seton Avenue, and it's . . . it's a big church now. I don't know whether they call it a church or cathedral or . . . it's a hospital now also. Seton Hospital in Austin, and this is where my grandmother just lived one block from there and very diligently would go to mass in the morning and then again in the evening, and she'd just walk because she didn't drive. But . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was her name?

BROOKS: My grandmother's name? Elena Spiller. E-L-E-N-A Spiller. And she had . . . oh, you know. They had huge families back then. And she had . . . my mother's father had like 6 children with his first wife. That was his first family. And then he married my little grandmother and had, you know, like 6 more children. And so, they had all these half brothers and sisters. And . . . but it was the . . . the Catholic church that found my little grandmother for him because his first wife died and here he had all these children, so the Catholic church went to bat for him and found him my grandmother to be a mother to his children. Well, of course, they ended up having 6 more children. And so, it was a large family.

HOLDER: So, what was your conception of the United States during the war? What did you feel the United States' part was in the war?

BROOKS: Well, okay. If I was born in ’33 and the war broke out in ’41, how old was I?

HOLDER: ’33 . . . ’41 . . . you were like 8 or 9.

BROOKS: Yeah, so it was through the eyes of a child. It just didn’t affect me because it wasn’t . . . it hadn’t reached Marfa. But, and like I say, it was because of mother and her brother who was in Pearl Harbor when it was bombed that brought it home at all. You know, it just . . . we were so far removed. As far as that goes, I’ve still been removed. We just don’t know what war is and the horrors and the terror of it all and destruction and . . . you know, I have been blessed, and I hope you two will be and not ever witness firsthand war as . . . as people knew it during World War II. I don’t know. Wasn’t the Korean War after World War II? And that really didn’t affect me either. I was in college then, and I know that there were boys that I met that had to go to the Korean War. They’d either been drafted or else they’d served and was back in school. But, you know, that was as close to actual war that I’ve ever been. And I’m glad.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, let me ask you a little bit about the timeline here. So, what age did you move out to Marfa?

BROOKS: When I moved to Marfa? Okay . . . born in ’33, went from Shannon Hospital to where my father was leasing a ranch in Schleicher County halfway between Eldorado and Sonora. I started school in Eldorado Grade School. So, that would be . . . I went the first 5 years to Eldorado Grade School. So, if I started school when . . . in 1933 . . . what 1940, maybe? And then moved to Marfa in ’46 and daddy had bought the ranch out there, and I entered the 6th grade in Marfa Elementary School. And . . . so, I don’t know. I’m . . . I have a hard time keeping up with how old I was. You start school when you’re 6th grade . . . I mean 6 years old. And so, by the 6th grade, I would have been, what?

HOLDER: 10?

BROOKS: Y’all are kind of like, “Help me.” I was a preteen.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So, having grown up in West Texas, do you think West Texas is different from the rest of the state?

BROOKS: Oh my, yes! It’s so funny though. That triggered a memory. Marfa-Alpine, the Big Bend part of Texas, to me is West Texas. Now, if I came to, say, Eldorado or San Angelo, and I talk about West Texas, and someone looks at you and says, “Well, what do you think we are?” So, everything’s relative. But, out there in the Big Bend part—far West Texas—is . . . oh, it’s . . . you know, it was my home for so many years. And it’s so beautiful. And it’s so high, and it’s so lonesome. There’s so few people. And my family, we were in Marfa when they filmed *Giant.* And that was in . . . what ’58, ’59 maybe? And that caused a big stir in Marfa when Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor . . . and they stayed at the Paisano part of the time. And they still have the James Dean Room, and . . . did you see that or the Rock Hudson Room, you know? Actually, I think Rock Hudson . . . I think they rented . . . was it Warner Brothers that they worked for? Anyway, whomever they worked for in Hollywood rented houses in Marfa for the stars to live in. And . . . but it was just . . . you know, you can imagine a town of 1,200 people

having movie stars like Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor come to town and . . . terribly exciting. And, of course, the town just swelled overnight just because of people plopping in wanting to be part of all that. And so, it really put Marfa on the map.