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## Interview no. 804

Tommie Gillespie

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Tommie Gillespie  
INTERVIEWER: Jeff Georges  
PROJECT: World War II  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 11, 1993  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO: 804  
TRANSCRIPT NO: 804  
TRANSCRIBER: Jeff Georges

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime El Paso nurse; active in the American Red Cross Nursing Division during World War II.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recalls nursing and nursing training during WW II; El Paso health care facilities including Providence Hospital, Hotel Dieu, Southwestern General Hospital, and William Beaumont Hospital; discusses bond drives; involvement in Civilian Defense and other homefront activities; El Paso physicians and the medical profession in general.

Length of Interview: 50 minutes Length of Transcript 14 pages

INTERVIEW WITH TOMMIE GILLESPIE

BY

JEFF GEORGES

NOVEMBER 11, 1993

JG: I thought we would start out with some personal information.

When and where were you born?

TG: I was born in Clyde, Texas November 25, 1912.

JG: And how did you come to El Paso?

TG: I came to El Paso naturally after I graduated from high school, to enter Hotel Dieu School of Nursing; 1932.

JG: Ok, Where were you when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

TG: By that time I had married and I was in Brownwood, Texas. We were driving around one Sunday afternoon and all of the newspaper boys were shouting to no end, there were just nothing but the emotions of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Everybody was just so emotional, and naturally it was a field day for the newspaper boys because they were selling papers like nobody's business.

JG: What kind of activities were you involved with before the war, what did you do before the war?

TG: I was a graduate nurse, and I was in the city/county health department. I had married in 1929, and there was still a policy - leftover from the depression - that a married woman could not have a government job if she married and her husband had employment. And so naturally I was cut off when I married in 1939. After then I went into private

nursing, and my husband had formerly been from Dallas, so we left El Paso and went to Dallas, and he was a field representative of the John Deere Plow Company. And he was sent to various places, actually not to recover the farm implements, but to help the farmers who could not pay for their equipment. And as I recall now, in 1940, we were located in Spur, Texas, and there was nothing for me to do. I had not been accustomed to housework, but by the time I cleaned the house in the morning at ten o'clock, well then there was the day's work. I could sit and listen to the radio, and even at that time, they were still begging for nurses in the hospitals, but my hands were tied, and there was not a thing in the world I could do about it.

JG: What finally got you into nursing, how did you finally end up in nursing?

TG: Well, I had already graduated from school, and I felt myself useless and worthless because I was with my husband and we were located in this very small community. To El Paso I am going to say it was in comparison to about Las Cruces at that time. Now, right now, Las Cruces has a good size population. But I wanted to read and there was no reading material, nothing, absolutely nothing to do! But within time we were transferred to Brownwood, and that is when the war was declared. He no longer had his job because they realized it was the rubber for the tires, all the farm equipment; we were facing gasoline rationing, facing so many things I can't recall right now. The companies

called him in, so we returned to El Paso and that is where I picked up continuing with my work as a private duty nurse, and I was trained as a public health nurse. From that, then, I was employed by the American Red Cross. I don't know how I got that job, but I was already secretary of the district American Red Cross nursing division; volunteer basis.

JG: Ok, what attracted you to nursing initially? What was it about the medical profession that you really...?

TG: My mother had a brother who was Dr. Arthur R. Thomason from Dallas, and he had the Samuels Clinic - well known throughout the Southwest - about his surgical procedures and success at that time. And so naturally it was always nothing that I would go into the nursing service.

JG: What kind of training did you have to go through to be a nurse at that time?

TG: At that time we had to have our complete rounded figure as I remember. We had to have so many hours in the diet kitchen; so many hours in the general service of nutrition; so many hours in the dressing - we called it dressing - room, and that was getting surgical and medical dressings out to patients over the entire hospital. And, of course, we had a certain amount of medical service, and that probably was floor duty, and that was probably more, longer than any other services were. We had so much in the emergency rooms, and so much time in surgery; so many - and this goes in months - on the obstetrical floor. We did not have as much

specialized services as they have today. Like in the cancer service, that was not divided from the medical service at that time.

JG: After the war started, how did you utilize your nursing skills?

TG: After the war, after it started, and I returned to El Paso, I was employed by the American Red Cross, and teaching women, girls, young brides to do volunteer service in the hospitals; to help out the nursing service because the nurses... also the secretary of the Red Cross nurse's aids, and that the nurses were going into the military service, so we needed something to fill in that space. We were losing nurses. The hospitals were desperate for assistance in the hospital. People who were left behind - of course our young men were leaving - it was just a greater need than what we could ever expect to supply of help.

JG: What hospitals here in El Paso were involved in that kind of thing?

TG: At that time we had, of course, Hotel Dieu, considered our leading hospital; largest hospital. We had Providence Hospital, that was before we had the Providence Memorial Hospital, and a hospital called Southwestern General. [It] had been converted from a tubercular hospital to a regular medical and surgical facility, and obstetrical; and the city/county hospital and the Masonic Hospital was in operation then, here at Five Points.

JG: What kind of things did they do? Was it a different kind of hospital?

TG: No, it was the same kind. In fact they had a nursing school there up until - I'm going to say - 1936 or 1937. They had closed the nursing school and it was in the nursing quarters of where we held our classes for the nurse's aids. And the Masonic Hospital is now where the police department is located here at Five Points, and prior to that it was the Sears and Roebuck building, after they tore down the Masonic Hospital. Several people thought they would tear down the building, but it was built by the McKee Construction Company and it so happened that it is so well constructed that it has never been torn down. They have remodeled it, but it still remains after it was originally built.

JG: What kind of training did you put the new nurses through? What kind of training did they have to go through? Was it specifically war related?

TG: No, I consider it the basics. To assist the nurses, and at that time, we did not get patients out of the bed as early as they did now. They had to have daily baths, and personal items: brushing their teeth, or having their dentures brushed, and they were taught to take temperatures, pulse and respiration, and the main duty, of course we did not have the private rooms as we have now, the so-called bed pan facilities had to be performed. [We] had to teach them how to make the bed, how to get the patients out of the bed, and sit in a chair,

and how to support them when they were walking, and get them into the wheelchair. It is amazing how those simple duties help relieve the graduate nurses.

JG: What types of patients were they?

TG: It was all kinds. Mothers with babies; we trained them how to work in the nursery also, and giving the baby the bottle for feeding. Of course they were not permitted to go into any communicable disease. Later if they had so many hours, 150 hours I think, then they were able to go into the government hospital, which was William Beaumont. Then we had a facility out by Fort Bliss, where the boys were beginning to return from the war zones, and the girls, or women, were permitted to go out to go out there. I did not go out there so much, other than just to assign the women to their respective places, that was Biggs Air Force Base, and Beaumont.

JG: What kind of people would come to Biggs? What types of injuries would come to Biggs?

TG: I don't remember what all, but some of them were psychiatric, and that is the reason I had to be very careful about who went over there, that they were well trained. It was all kinds of injuries: feet, hands, arms, legs, bodies. So, anything depressing, that they needed more training for, they were not permitted to go into that service. Maybe if they could write letters for the boys, or simple duties like that.



JG: How did the nurses feel about the soldiers?

TG: Well, many of them could put themselves in that palce because it could have been their husbands. Because many, many of them were already married and their husbands were gone. So they spilled over, and there were volunteers, young girls, who worked in the office during the day, and then helped out in the hospitals at night. I would teach the class, and then after I got through with the class, each one that wanted to go in certain various hospitals, maybe closer to their home; we had gasoline rationing then so we did not do any extra driving around, and I would take them to the hospital and assign them to their floors, and the nurse, then, would assign them to their work, their duties; what to do. Even the simple thing of taking fresh water to the patient, to the patients relieving the nurses.

JG: Before we began you mentioned nurses quotas. What were nurses quotas?

TG: It was a Texas quota, and each city had their quota, and the first year our quota was one hundred and one percent; Texas, for the entire nation. I don't remember what our hour quota would have been, but they were satisfied what we produced, because we supplied what we should have. Then the following year - of course each year we had our quotas - but as the war was winding down we had less and less nurses going into the military, but in a way we didn't have the nurses, because they had to take care of what was here, what was needed in this area.

JG: What kind of assignments would they get when they left here?

TG: One girl went to Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio. Generally we thought that was where they were going, but in my book, in the information I have there, one was sent to Washington. And, so, wherever the needs were, the Army or Navy, where they needed the new recruits, well then that is where they would be sent. The military used the Red Cross for the beginning, central, place for recruiting nurses. They had to be graduate, and between the ages of eighteen to thirty, I think; in good health, and had to have a physical examination. From the application I gave them there must have been some central place, and I am sure it was their recruiting office of the military, then took over and we got the nurses.

JG: Were they generally sent to Army hospitals then?

TG: Yes, to the area where they would be trained before they were sent overseas.

JG: Were most of the girls you trained local girls, or would they come in from other parts of the United States?

TG: No, no...

JG: Was El Paso some sort of major training center?

TG: It was our local girls; Masonic Hospital and Hotel Dieu, and then any other girls that had moved here for some reason after they had received their training, they would be referred.

JG: In one of the articles it mentioned that the Red Cross

was involved in war drives. What kinds of war drives were they involved in? Were you involved in any of those?

TG: Well, with the Red Cross, of course, they were involved in knitting projects in order to send clothing to areas that were in bad need of sweaters. It was also sent to military hospitals for the men who were recovering and needed warm clothing; knitted sweaters - Oh! there was a big project of knitters. I don't know what all they did send, but that went on for years. Part of the knitting project - they called it "Bundles For Britain" - is where our present Museum of Art is located. And they had volunteer women, had luncheons there, in order to make money to send to various... or whatever monies were needed. Since it was labeled "Bundles For Britain," I am going to say that after England was so badly bombed, and I am sure that is where most of the sweaters went, and if there was any money through the Red Cross, that is where it went. That place was used for years and years, all doring the war, for luncheons; very popular place, all done by volunteer work. And then later the building was willed to the city by the Turney family, and then the war is over, and somebody decided to turn it into the museum, and it has been there ever since.

JG: Were there various hospitals involved in bond drives, that type of thing?

TG: I don't think the hospitals were, but, of course, the Red Cross was very active in bond drives; that went on for several years. I was not involved in the bond drives,

but one of our volunteers, Mrs. C.M. harvey, she gave a lot of money to support the bond drives.

JG: Were you involved in any other types of civilian activities? Civilian Defense, U.S.O., any thing like that?

TG: Well, of course the Civilian Defense, and all of the Red Cross Nurse's aids, as well as myself; I was a member of the Civilian Defense, but we all had to take Civilian Defense courses because it was just preperation. We had a professor from U.T.E.P., by the name of Ball, that spoke to our group often regarding chemical warfare, and things how to protect ourselves in case of something happening we were not aware of, and telling us 'Don't dare raise your haed and look at the sky' because you could be getting your face full of a chemical. Since he was a chemist, that was several lectures he gave us; classes. I can't remember any other Civilian Defense.

END OF SIDE A

JG: How did people feel about Civilian Defense? There have been some people who have recently written that Civilian Defense was sort of a joke, that nobody took it seriously. How did people in El Paso feel about Civilian Defense?

TG: I think they did not consider it a joke. They felt it was very necessary, and for the training, however, I was asked by a friend of mine that if we had an emergency where would we go? My answer was, to the basement of a department store nearby. Well, how many people will it hold? Well, it would not hold many people. What would we have if we had a flood; the water would be running down there? What would

the people do? About the food rationing, we are talking about the general public, you have got to have babies and young children, teenagers, adults, and elderly, what would you do? I had to carry on my car a sign that said: "Emergency," so I was asked one time what that "Emergency" was. Just in case Civilian Defense had an emergency that I would be able to go where I was needed. But, we found out in emergencies that the very one in charge, it was possible, that one, or group of people, would not be available in case of emergency. You had to think about housing, food, maintenance of living conditions. You think about it, and it just would not work. Since then there have been emergencies world-wide, and we have emergencies evn to this day. It brings on a very traumatic situation. You have had some examples, since then, which I consider, going back to the Civilian Defense days, regarding natural causes. That is an example of what an emergency is about, and how workable it is. I have had people tell me, even now, you bring foodstuffs in, or blankets, or whatever it is; tents, stove, whatever it is. They come in truckloads from other parts and that driver must get back; he has got to unload his truck. Who is going to unload the truck? Who has trained the truck driver? Who has been trained to unload that for the people that we have in the basement somewhere trying to protect from being bombed. We have false stories about, books written regarding, bombing, and what you would do, but it just satisfied the emotion at that time as far as I am concerned.

JG: Were there any Civilian Defense activities directly related to your nursing training?

TG: I would say no because my nurse's training was from 1932 to 1935, and that was during the depression years. If there was any training it was pertaining to people who lost everything, and patients would come in that were depressed. So, we did not even think about a war in my nursing training days.

JG: What I meant was, were you utilized as a nurse in Civilian Defense?

TG: No, no. Just as preperation.

JG: Going back to the nursing, who were the doctors in El Paso? What kind of doctors did we have here?

TG: Well, of course, we had our obstetricians, we had to have our surgeons, and our medical men. Each to their own likes and dislikes. In working with the doctors and getting a list of them there is only about forty or fifty doctors over the entire county. Into the smaller areas we did not have any medical men that would go into areas like Fabens or Ysleta. That was filled in by osteopaths or chiropracters. They were just not available, and that was before the war. So, for military service they had to get busy and get some doctors trained real fast. in their medical schools, they opened them up more to get more doctors trained. It was after the war that we started having more doctors in El Paso, and specialized services. As they were wanting to get out they were located at Beaumont. We had many doctors

who their last step was at Beaumont, and they were released. They went into private practice in El Paso. To this day, I don't know how many we have, but we have pages and pages in the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory, of doctors; all kinds, and specialized services. I am going to say that part of it comes from research after the war. I shall never forget one time, during the war, still working in private duty nursing, I had gone to George Peabody College, and my public health work. So, I was finishing some work by correspondence from Peabody, and I had to write an article on Prontecil, and that was after our doctors had gone into Germany, into their chemical department, and they found this odd name. Now, whether it was labeled Prontecil or our doctors named it Prontecil. Our doctors sent it to New York, and there was a woman who was going to die of childbirth. She was going to leave this world anyway, so they gave her a shot of Prontecil and she lived, and that was the beginning of the miracle drug penicillin. That pharmacist in Germany he had discovered it years before, but he didn't know what to do with it. The name later was not penicillin, but phenylomide. They only needed a step from what they needed, many experiments came from that, penicillin and all of these drugs we have today. That was the beginning of it.

That was the beginning of many recoveries I am sure during the war years, problems that they had; people who could not get well, gangrene from amputees. The war had to be over before they were able to do research on their own. That was

the paper I wrote while I was taking this correspondence  
course from George Peabody College during the war.

Side B - partially transcribed