



## THE WAR BABIES OF WORLAND: ORAL HISTORIES FROM THE CLASS OF 1960



### JOAN WALSETH PURCELL

Extended conversation after videotaping

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*This transcript expands from the video due to additional conversations.*

This is **Laine Bailey DeFreece**, on Thursday, June 30th, 2022, at 1:15 pm in the afternoon and 3:15 pm your time. I'm in Denver, Colorado.

We thank you, Joan, for adding to the oral history collection of the Washakie Museum and Cultural Center in Worland, Wyoming.

So to begin, we have some questions of introduction where you can introduce yourself. We want to know your full name, including your maiden name.

**Joan Walseth Purcell:** My name is Joan Walseth Purcell, and I am in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Laine:** Was there another name that you or a nickname that you were known by in your Worland days?

**Joan:** None that I was aware of.

### WALSETHS ARRIVED IN WORLAND IN 1948

## The War Babies of Worland: Oral Histories from the Class of 1960

**Laine:** If you were born in Worland, how old were you when your family arrived, and when you left?

**Joan:** I was not born in Worland. I was actually born in Georgia. When my father came home from overseas in World War II, he went back to work for Mobile Oil, where he had worked before he was called to active duty. We were moved to Casper. I spent a year or two, I think kindergarten and first grade, in Casper. Then my father was transferred to Worland. That's why we ended up in Worland, and I started in Worland in second grade.

**Laine:** We're glad you came. The second part of this introduction is your memories of Worland. Was your home in town or did you live outside of the city limits?

**Joan:** We lived in a couple of places when we first came up to Worland. I think my father came to Worland before my mother, my brother, and I did. But one summer, we came up to visit him. That summer, we lived in a trailer in a Mobile Oil camp just outside of Worland. I don't remember where it was, it wasn't a very fancy trailer. It didn't have a bathroom, but it had a kitchen, and there was a bathhouse down the way to use as a bathroom or shower that you went to. We lived there for the summer, and then, I believe, we went back to Casper for a while.

Then we moved into Worland, actually in a company house, a mobile house, on North Eighth Street that was a couple blocks from downtown. The house is still there, but the neighborhood around it is sort of industrial, with warehouse-looking buildings. I couldn't believe how tiny the house was when I saw it as an adult. I knew it was small, but it was really tiny. It had a living room, a kitchen with room for a table, and two bedrooms. It had one larger bedroom and one smaller bedroom. Initially, my mother and father and my brother, who was in a crib, were in the larger bedroom. I was in the smaller bedroom. At one point, they switched us, and they sort of divided the room into two, with my brother on one side and I on the other.

I think when we moved to Worland, there wasn't a lot of housing available because a lot of people were moving there. Four years later, my parents built a house. They were reluctant to do that right away because they weren't sure how long we were going to be there. And it turns out we were in Worland from the time that I was in second grade through high school. My parents then moved a year or two after I graduated. When we moved from the mobile house,, we moved into a new area called Circle Drive Road. My parents built a house, and it's still there; I drove by it recently. It happened to be that Jimmy Hagen lived nearby, and Judy Schlothauer lived close to us too. Eventually, Sonia Song's family moved there. They had lived about a block away when I lived in the first house on North Eighth Street.

**Laine:** Think back on all those years of your childhood and teenage years. As you think back on them, close your eyes. What do you remember about the sights, the sounds, or even the smells of this community?

## **CHILDHOOD: SUGAR BEETS, MATINEES, SODAS, LIBRARY**

**Joan:** I remember watching the sugar beet trucks drive down the street. That was by the railroad tracks, which was about a block away from our first house. I remember racing down and grabbing a sugar beet off the road, thinking that had to be delicious. I remember coming home, scrubbing it in the hose, chopping it up, tasting it, and thinking, this doesn't taste anything like sugar. I also remember being able to walk to the movie theater. There were matinees on probably Saturday afternoons. If you had a quarter, you'd pay 20 cents for the movie and five cents for a treat. I think that popcorn and candy cost a nickel.

I also remember that we had quite a nice little shopping area there on Main Street. There were a number of stores that had most anything that you needed. I remember my family going to Billing sometimes when we needed winter coats or furniture. But pretty much we had what we needed in Worland. Sometimes I would go shopping in the stores, and if I found something I liked, I would race home and try to get my mother to go back to the store, approve the item, and hopefully buy it. I remember going to the drug stores, sitting at the soda fountain, and ordering those sour, fizzy things. What were they called?

**Laine:** Phosphates?

**Joan:** Phosphate, right. They had lemon, cherry and lime, and they were in vile colors. But we seemed to all like them. There was the five-and-dime store where, if you had a little bit of money, you could buy junk that you just thought was fabulous, like perfume, nail polish, and jacks and balls. I remember that everybody in the store sort of knew you.

I also remember going to the library, which was also within walking distance from the house, and going through all the Nancy Drew books and several other series, too. I know I raced over to see if I could get the next one every few days. Reading was one of my favorite things to do. I'd look over the books in the library each time I visited. I can also remember the people, all the people knew you.

You could walk to almost any place, and you knew somebody who lived on that block. There was always someone to say hello to, and people were outside more. Kids were outside. So I would say that there was also a lot within walking distance from the Slurp and Burp – can you imagine that name? I can remember walking over there with a friend to get a hot dog and a Coke for about a quarter. We also used to go to Wilson's Drive-In with friends. Sometimes we would meet

friends and then decide what to do. We could walk everywhere in town. I remember riding my bike, even out to some of the farms. I remember riding my bike out to Janice Voss's with friends and then riding back in. I also remember the smell of silage. Remember, if you had friends that were on a farm, and they had this silage pit, which I guess was beet pulp, cornstalks, and things they fed the animals. They had a sort of sour smell.

**Laine:** As farmhouse compost.

## **SULFUR PLANT AND OIL FIELDS**

**Joan:** I also remember driving the other way in town and seeing those beautiful purple flares flaring off poison gas. I remember the huge yellow mounds of sulfur that they would chop up and put in box cars and open cars and then send someplace. I remember the smell of that.

I also remember going with my father out to the oil fields, and there was always what they called a swabbing pit, which had stuff squirting out of it, and sometimes it would catch fire and burn. It had a beautiful flame too.

All these things probably were bad for the environment. But what I remember is my father sort of groaning because, even in that day, in the late forties and fifties, the environmental agency would come and inspect the sites. If they took a well down, the oil company would have to put everything back the way it was. They'd take out the roads and plant some of the native plants back in the roadways. I guess the environmental agency didn't care much about the poisonous gasoline, although I don't remember anybody really being very sick because of it. So maybe we adapted to it, I'm not sure.

## **YOUTH ACTIVITIES: SKIING, SHATTERING PEBBLES ON TRAIN TRACKS**

**Laine:** I remember you talking about skiing—

**Joan:** Oh, that's right. On weekends I would go skiing with my brother and my dad. My mother played the organ for the Episcopal church, so we weren't allowed to go skiing until after church. After church, we would pile in the car and change our clothes on the way up to Meadowlark.

Since we arrived late, we missed the ride over to the ski area. I don't know if you remember, but there used to be a tractor with the old hood of a car upside down on the snow with ropes extending from the tractor to the hood and then a number of ropes attached to the other side of the hood for people to hang onto and be pulled across the lake. If you got there early, you could get a ride. If you missed the ride, you would climb about three feet up the frozen side of the road,

then climb down maybe six feet to get to the lake. I think it was about three-quarters of a mile to get to the rope tow.

Meadowlark had no ski patrol, no ski school, none of that. Whoever got there first would start the rope tow., I think it was a tractor engine that pulled the rope tow up. After driving up to ski a number of times, my father decided that if he had to drive us up and wait, he might as well ski, too. He had skied as a child in South Dakota, and he was from a Norwegian family. So I assume that their ancestors probably cross-country skied to get places in Norway in the winter. He started downhill skiing when he was like 50 years old at Meadowlark and skied until he was 84.

**Laine:** That's remarkable.

**Joan:** I also remember going for picnics up to Ten Sleep Canyon with my family. Sometimes I didn't want to go because I wanted to stay and play with my friends, but we would go! We would gather dead branches, build a fire, and cook hot dogs or hamburgers. We'd just go up for the day, and usually, I'd fall in the stream and get wet.

Another thing I remember doing in the summer was laying on the grass and looking at the sky and figuring out what the clouds looked like. Were they elephants or giraffes, or Mickey Mouse, or other things?

Because we lived on a street that had gravel, we would grab the rocks, get a hammer, or a couple of bigger rocks to crack them open to find ribbon agates. Sometimes it took a long time, but it gave me a rock collection. This was a pretty typical neighborhood activity, and the other thing, since we were pretty near the railroad tracks, although our parents didn't know, we'd take the rocks, put them on the railroad tracks, and then stand back and wait for a train to come and see if that would crack them open. We'd also put pennies on the track and get them squashed flat. I don't think our parents knew about that, either.

Later, swimming was a favorite activity. I remember when Worland got a swimming pool, and I spent many afternoons going to the pool, meeting friends there, and spending the afternoon swimming.

## **AFTER-SCHOOL JOBS: BABY-SITTING**

I was probably in 5th grade when I started babysitting. There were a number of families near us with young children, and my parents had friends with young children as well. Babysitting kept me busy most Friday and Saturday evenings until I was in high school. I also worked in a paint store.

## IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II

**Laine:** What do you remember about your childhood prior to starting first grade? This would have been from about 1941 to September of 1948. You mentioned that you have some World War II memories regarding your dad and your family.

**Joan:** My grandmother had come to live with us when I was born. My father had been called to active duty. He was in ROTC when he was in school and was in the reserve. Right after, my father was shipped overseas, and my grandmother got sick. It was very hard to get doctors during wartime. My mother finally found a doctor to come to see her. The doctor said her mother had to go to the hospital. My mother was worried about her mother but had no one to take care of me. She was living in a new town, she didn't know anybody. My grandmother looked up at her and said, "You stay with the baby." Sadly, my grandmother died that night.

Next, my mother had to go home to South Dakota. She was the youngest child and the only surviving sister. It was left to her to take care of my grandmother's house and make sure it was sold, and her belongings were distributed or sold. Since my parents were from the same small community, we lived with my other grandmother, and she thought we should stay with her during the rest of the war.

I was the eldest grandchild, the only grandchild, I think, at that time. My mother really wanted to be on her own. When she and Dad were first married, they lived in Southern California. She had a brother in southern California, in Santa Barbara. We then went on the train to Santa Barbara, and I vaguely remember that I got sick on the train, and I was throwing up all over the place. At one stop, my mother got off the train to try and find a doctor. She had a little room on the train, but when she got back to the train, her room had been given away. The man who now had my mother's room gave it back to her. Finally, a military doctor got onto the train. He took a look at me and said, "Well, when you get to where you're going, you should definitely take her straight to the hospital."

I remember having IVs in my leg. My mother slept on the foot of the bed because she didn't have any place to live yet. Finally, she found a place to live, and I remember that house and walking through the walnut orchards to go to town.

I remember when my father came home from overseas. It was a very rainy day. We were driving, and the water was shooting up like big fans on either side of the car. There were thousands of soldiers, and they were everywhere. We finally got to where we were to meet my father, and we found him. I remember his uniform. He hugged my mother and picked me up and hugged me too. Then, for some reason, they left me in the car. I was very unhappy about that, but my dad wanted to go to the PX and buy me a present. He brought back a cat that was covered in rabbit fur. I think I had until it disintegrated or was eaten by something. But I remember it very well. Shortly after he got home, he had

malaria. I can remember my mother bringing him ice water in a glass coffee pot. He would get “the chills,” and when he poured the water into his glass, his hands were shaking so badly that the ice would tinkle. Evidently, the reason he got malaria was the soldiers who were returning from the tropics were told they could stop taking their quinine too soon. He was really fortunate because he didn't ever have relapses after the one episode. A lot of people would have relapses every few years, but he didn't.

We moved to Wyoming because my father had worked for Mobile Oil before the war, and where they needed him was Wyoming. Actually, after college, he worked for Lockheed, and they laid him off at the beginning of World War II. He next went to work for Mobil Oil. He was called to active duty when the US joined the Allied forces in World War II. He served in the South Pacific. After the war ended, my father went back to work for Mobil. Soon we were on our way to Casper.

On the way from Santa Barbara to Casper, I remember stopping somewhere in the mountains and my father showing me snow. It was gray and gritty, but he insisted that we make some snowballs and throw them. When we arrived in Casper, I was asleep in the back seat. I remember waking up in Casper, where everything I saw was covered with about four inches of snow. It looked like everything was covered with thick white frosting. The cars were covered, the houses were covered, the roads were covered, and I thought it was the most beautiful fairyland experience that one could have. We lived in Casper for a couple of years, and then my dad was transferred to Worland. That's how we got to Worland when I was in the second grade.

## **ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: 1948-1954**

**Laine:** What do you remember about your elementary school?

**Joan:** I know that I lived a block from the Watson building, and I had a terrifying teacher who happened to live across the street from me. So I was pretty scared during my early elementary years. That neighbor who was my teacher frightened me. Later my mother said, “Yeah, I was a little worried about that.” I don't think that parents ever said anything to teachers about the horrible things that were happening in that classroom.

But the next year, I can remember Mrs. Baird reading us books every afternoon after lunch. We really enjoyed the stories. Sometimes we begged her to read a second chapter, and she would. The next year, I remember reciting poems, *The Village Smithy* by Longfellow and a few others to the class. This was something that we all had to do.

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I believe that's the year when we started in band. I remember having to walk from the Emmet building to the Junior High for band lessons, and then we would walk back. I started on a saxophone because my father had a saxophone – he played the saxophone in high school. I hated it; it just had too many finger positions. I switched to a French horn and played in the band eventually. That's what I remember about elementary school: One being really frightened for a long time and then having some very kind teachers who were very encouraging and positive.

**Laine:** There's a balance there.

**Joan:** Right.

**Laine:** How did you fill your time after school, on weekends, or during the summers in elementary?

**Joan:** I read a lot, rode my bike, talked with friends on the phone, visited and spent time at friends' houses, walked around town and downtown, and in the summer, went swimming.

### **JUNIOR HIGH: 1953 - 1956 (FOR KIDS WHO LIVED NORTH OF MAIN)**

**Laine:** Then came our junior high years, and it was junior high at that time for seventh and eighth years.

**Joan:** Sixth, seventh, and eighth. Right. I went there in sixth grade.

**Laine:** Oh, did you?

**Joan:** Yes, we started sixth grade in middle school because, I think, that the last grade in the Emmet Building was fifth grade. So I don't know if that was different for you on the other side of town.

**Laine:** It could have been because some of us were at the new Southside Elementary School in the sixth grade.

**Joan:** I'm pretty sure that I was in sixth grade in the first year I was at the Junior High Building. I remember we had to change classes in sixth grade, and I remember losing a pencil every time I changed classes. I couldn't quite get it together to get everything together. Now, kids have these little backpacks that they use. But we just sort of carried things in our arms and went from class to class. I think we had lockers, but I don't remember much about using them. I mostly remember changing classes.



I remember the band, which was a big deal in middle school. When you first got your uniform, and you could march in one of the parades, you were delighted! Of course, Mr. Broadbent was very much a showman and inspiring! He had us doing all kinds of fun things. The band trips were a big deal in the summer. We would go to all these parades, get up early in the morning and then play and have fun, and then ride back on the bus. We would go quite a distance away. I think we would go to Casper sometimes, and Douglas, and closer places. I remember that being a lot of fun, and we thought every school district did that. I remember those green uniforms. I thought the first time I got to wear a uniform, I thought it was really something.

## **WORLAND HIGH SCHOOL: 1956 - 1960**

**Laine:** Then you moved on to senior high school, and that would have been approximately September 1956 to our graduation in 1960.

**Joan:** I remember that some of the teachers were characters. Miss. Cook used to have Kleenex stored down the front of her dress. She'd look for it and say, "Oh, I know there's one down here somewhere." I remember the Shakespeare plays that we studied. I remember Romeo and Juliet and our teacher in our freshman year. She eventually married Jack Schlothauer, Judy's older brother. I can't think of what her name was. [Miss Madson] I remember Mrs. White, I think, for junior English. I remember Mr. Schwartz, who would go screaming to the back of the class, screaming, "Help! Help! Somebody's letting poisonous gas out." I remember making borax beads, and sometimes he'd trick us and give us plain water, and we couldn't figure out what it was.

Remember Asa Brooks teaching biology? Some of the boys would ask him questions that he really didn't want to answer, and he would turn bright red.

I remember the dances after all of the events, I think I would bring a record player, and people would bring records, and there were no refreshments. That was no big deal. You just went after every wrestling match, football game, basketball game, whatever it was, and into the gym undecorated. It was very simple, but we all went, and we had a good time.

I also remember the support our school activities had from the community. I think it was unique that everybody in town went to all the basketball games. I don't remember if they went to the wrestling matches, but they certainly went to the football games. I mean, that little gym was full, and the football stands were full, too. So that was a big part of the community, I think, supporting the High school and the High School teams.

We also decorated for the proms, and you mentioned earlier, the floats. I don't remember the floats, but I do remember getting passes to get out of a class and decorate for the prom. In fact, I have some flowers that we made for one of our junior-senior proms. They were crepe paper flowers that had two colors of crepe paper put together, and wound together with some florist tape. I should really throw these away. I think I'm a little bit of a pack rat in some ways. I've got to get rid of some of this stuff, or my kids will never forgive me.

## **RADIO TO TELEVISION GENERATION**

**Laine:** You also mentioned television. You were in high school, you said, when you got your first TV. What was your first experience with television like?

**Joan:** Oh, that's right, I know that people had it, and they had big towers for it. I remember my father said, "No, his kids weren't gonna sit around and watch the TV. They were gonna do other things." So we didn't have it. But other people did, and they would call me to babysit. If I was hemming and humming, they would say, "Oh, but we have television." So I thought, okay.

I think today you would throw that set away if you saw what we saw because it was all snowy. Sometimes it was only a shadow of a person across it. You could hear the voices, but you really couldn't see anything, so television wasn't a very big deal. I think we did get it when I was 16. My brother liked it, but we didn't have much time to watch it. I think it came on, maybe around noon, and signed off around 10 o'clock. I remember him watching "Red Skeleton" and "My Little Margie," a story centered around a lady in the office. I think when you don't have television until you're 16, you're busy with other things, and it's not terribly interesting.

I think I mentioned earlier that my husband worked for Comcast, which is based in Philadelphia. He didn't work for the cable part, he worked for another division. When I would say to somebody who worked for Comcast that we didn't really have television until we could have cable, and I told them the area where I lived, they'd say, "Oh, yeah, we know about Worland." Because, basically, Comcast is cable television. So the cable division was aware of the communities that couldn't get a signal in over the mountains. Worland was one of the earliest to figure out how to make it happen.

I still wasn't really a television viewer until the pandemic. Since the pandemic, I have seen quite a few series.

**Laine:** So here, here we are, the class of 1960, turning 80, and because of the COVID pandemic, we've had to postpone two sixtieth reunions. Finally, we got together in person. But over those two years, we related, and we talked a lot

about our times together, thanks to email, zoom, and telephones. May I say “phones without operators” like when we were kids?

## **IMPACT FROM WORLAND: FREEDOM, SENSE OF SECURITY, TRUST**

**Laine:** This is our chance to look back and consider: What about the experience of growing up in Worland that created the most impact on your life?

**Joan:** For me, I think it was the extreme freedom we had in our community, I mean being able to go anywhere almost at any time. If you did something wrong, your mother probably heard about it before you got home. It gave me a real sense of security. I think that it made me a little naive, which I don't take as necessarily a bad thing.

I was a speech and language pathologist working mostly with infants and young children. In the work that I've done here in Philadelphia, primarily, I've worked in a lot of underprivileged, underserved areas, and it never occurred to me to be afraid. I used to go into some of the high-rise public housing projects at five o'clock at night to see kids, and it really didn't worry me. I think maybe Worland gave me a sense of invincibility, like I'm always safe. Maybe that's how to be safe, I don't know.

But when I see that in my neighborhood, children are walked to the bus stop and are met at the bus, I think that's a little sad because we had the freedom to go most places. You knew somebody almost wherever you went.

I think it also was growing up in a community where we had many different kinds of people. I remember having wonderful fun going out with a geologist to look at dinosaur gizzard bones. Just doing things like that that were sort of unique to the area. My parents had friends from different places that had different experiences.

I think that I really wasn't aware of what anybody's father did necessarily – I had a feeling that we were all pretty equal in many ways, and Worland was sort of inclusive in that way. I think there were some groups in our community that were excluded in some ways, but for the most part, at least in high school, I think everybody sort of mixed with everybody else. It seemed like you mixed more with people that lived in your neighborhood. But I think that I was really not aware of a lot of social or economic differences in our community, and I'm sure there were. But to me, it didn't feel like that, and I think that was nice.

**Laine:** Another question that you chose is when you're chatting with your most trusted friends, do you say you had a happy time or not-so-happy time as a

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young person in Worland? So many of the experiences you've just described would lead to your answer.

**Joan:** I really was very happy in Worland. I'll tell you, I cried all the way to Oklahoma when my father was transferred from Worland to Oklahoma, and then, shortly after we moved to Oklahoma, my father was transferred to Kansas. So, post-high school, I had a sense of not really belonging anywhere. When your family moves after you graduate from high school, you really don't have friends in the new place your age. When you're in college, you go home to a new town, you only meet friends of your parents. Since my family no longer lived in Worland, I didn't really have any reason to go back there. I feel badly that I didn't work harder to stay connected. I really enjoyed reconnecting through this two-year reunion process, connecting with the people and the memories that we had growing up. I thought Worland was a lovely place to grow up.

### **WISDOM FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

**Laine:** You covered a lot of information that's been interesting to listen to. In closing, for the generations to come that may listen to your story years from now, is there any wisdom you'd like to pass on to them? What would you want them to know?

**Joan:** I think it's very important to try and stay connected to the people you grew up with. For a number of reasons, I didn't do that as well as I should have. I think the things that you share in childhood and even through high school are very special experiences that you can't have with anybody else. So I would say, try and stay connected to the people throughout your life.

### **WASHAKIE MUSEUM: THANK YOU FOR BEING INTERVIEWED**