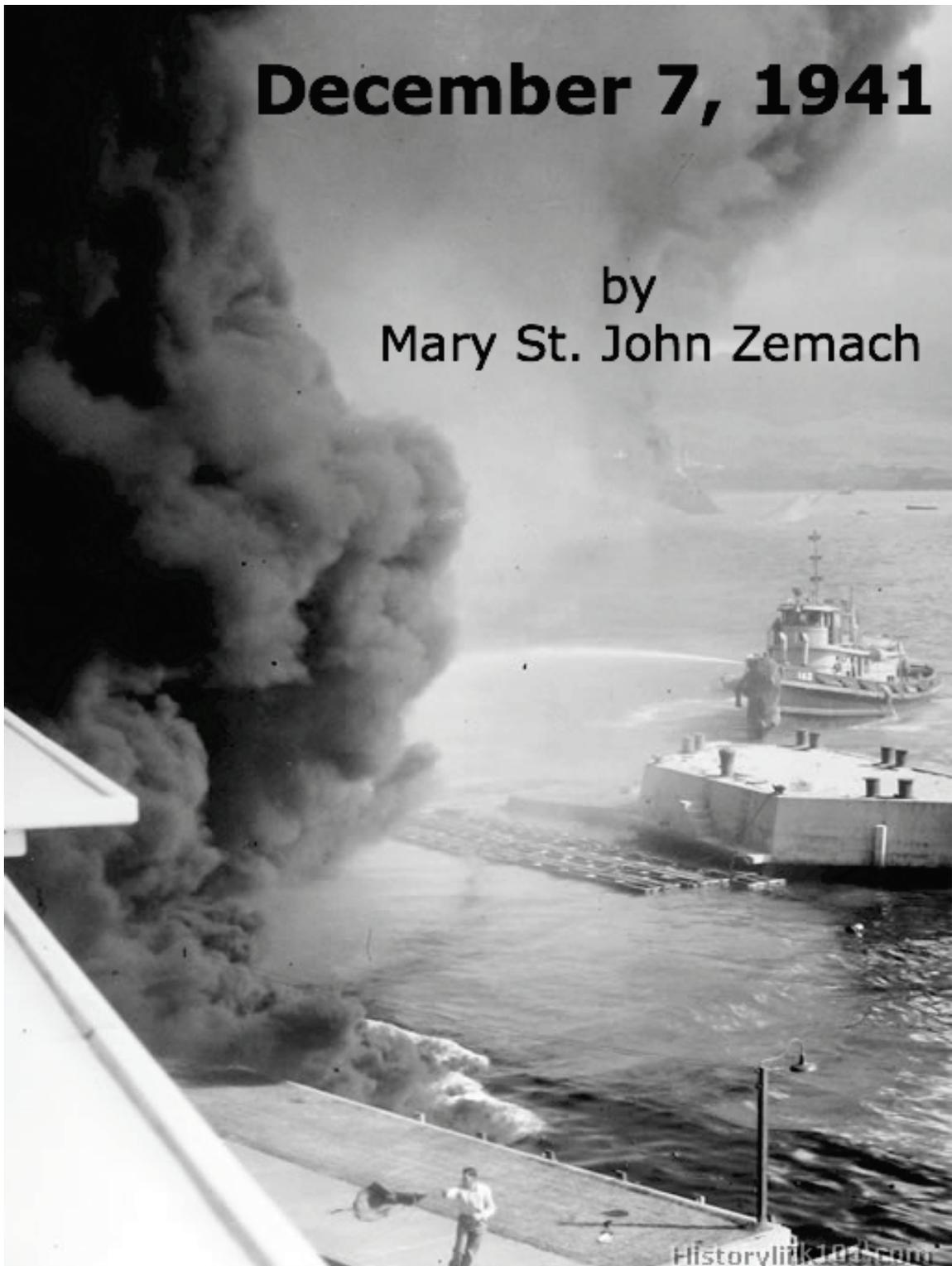


December 7, 1941

by
Mary St. John Zemach



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War came as a complete surprise to civilians. Friday, December 5, was my 11th birthday, and I had a party for friends on Saturday afternoon. Sunday, December 7 was to be a hike up Puu Kanehoa in the Waianae mountains. My father, Dr. Harold St. John, head of the botany department at the University of Hawaii, took a group of botany students on an all day collecting trip in the mountains one Sunday each month during the school year. He also welcomed non-botanists, whom he referred to as “camp followers,” to accompany us, especially if they could transport students in their cars.

(All who came on our trips had to submit a stool sample, which was given to the Board of Health, where it was examined for tapeworms and other noxious intestinal parasites that might be released into the water supply in case we had to defecate in the woods. So we were allowed to go behind the KAPU: WATER RESERVE signs posted around all the higher mountains.)

Saturday night, Father, brothers Charles and Robert, and I made our lunches for the next day – plus dog biscuits for our pet dog Cinders. It was judged to be too strenuous a hike for my younger sister Martha, who stayed home with Mother.

Father woke us early the next morning, and after a quick breakfast we got in the car, drove to pick up two students, and headed for a rendezvous point near our destination. After all cars had arrived, we drove up through pineapple fields on dirt roads to the edge of the fields and parked our cars. Just after we all got out of the cars, a shell exploded rather near us in the fields. It was so close that Cinders and the Richardson’s dog, Clootie, ran under the cars to hide. Camp follower Mrs. Richardson was secretary to an admiral at Pearl Harbor, and she was particularly incensed. She planned to give the admiral an earful on Monday morning. “Someone could have been hurt!” she exclaimed.

At that point we looked up and saw a great deal of smoke from the direction of Wheeler Field, the military airport several miles away. Although it was already daylight, the sky was overcast and visibility limited. We could also see a number of planes circling above. One by one they dropped down and let out a single bomb; then climbed up to rejoin the line. You might think that we would have guessed that something bad was happening, but that was not the case. Saturday’s newspapers had announced that the military forces were planning war games. The “red” team would attack the island, and the “blue” team would defend it. Civilians would please stay out of the way.

All the adults discussed this, and decided that the planes were dropping practice duds on the guava wastelands beside the airfield. That would account for the great cloud of smoke or dust. We saw no flames from the airfield or any planes being shot down. We could not see the rising sun on the wing tips, and no one knew the difference between American and Japanese airplanes. Even my father, a combat veteran whose unit had seen extensive action in France in WW I, saw nothing sinister in the affair.

We all put on our backpacks and started up the trail. As was our custom, my brothers and I were barefoot. (I didn't wear shoes to school until the 7th grade.) After gaining some altitude we were able to look towards Pearl Harbor, where we saw a huge column of smoke. Now, what could that be? we all wondered. After some discussion it was decided that if some excited recruit had been stupid enough to launch a stray shell at us, the same thing was likely at Pearl Harbor.

The Standard Oil Company of California had built 50 above-ground oil tanks to supply the ships. (It was reparations for the Teapot Dome Scandal, Charles told me years later.) Each tank was surrounded by an earthen berm to contain the oil if a leak developed. If a shell accidentally hit one of the tanks and set it on fire, that would account for the smoke. It was, of course, the battleship Arizona and other vessels burning. However, from our distance we saw no flames, and the smoke obscured the sinking vessels. We did see planes overhead and other ships in the water with their guns blinking. But the planes continued to circle, and we saw none of them hit. (Of course, one of them was hit and landed on Niihau. My father in later years, on a botanical collecting trip to the island, was guided around by Benny K., the Hawaiian who, after being shot in the stomach, killed the Japanese pilot and ended the brief occupation of Niihau.) So, after some comments on badly supervised maneuvers, we continued our hike, soon crossed the ridge, and saw nothing more in that direction all day.

Botany was the purpose for the trip, and as usual Father was busy showing plants to the students and supervising their collection of specimens to be pressed and mounted later. If any flowers, fruit, or seeds were to be found only high in the trees, we children, being lighter than the adults, were sent up to collect them, with careful instructions on not breaking branches.

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On our collecting trips, Father was always on the lookout for rare species, as well as new ones. Sometimes he would gather us together and describe a plant he was looking for and charge us with the discovery – and sometimes we actually succeeded. When found, he would record its location and its stage of development, so a later trip could gather fruit if it was only in flower at the time. A few years later when Charles was in

the Army and Father in South America, Robert and I went and collected fruit from a rare plant, preserved the fruit in formaldehyde in his laboratory, and pressed the specimen. Years later Father showed me the published description of the plant, which he had named as a new species, with H. St.J., R.P.St.J., and M.M.St.J. listed as the collectors. Though I was a barefoot teenager, my contribution was appreciated and recognized.

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We spent all day in the mountains. Toward dusk we returned to the car and found that the other cars had left. We were always the last car out. Charles, newly licensed, was driving, and Father sat beside him. I, frequent victim of car sickness, had the front window seat; Robert and the two students sat in back. As we approached the highway at the end of the pineapple fields, Charles turned on his headlights. The highway was a frantic scene. Cars and trucks, mostly military, raced along unusually fast. Carefully, Charles entered the stream of traffic. Almost immediately, a motorcycle roared past and the driver screamed, "Watch your lights, buddy!"

Charles asked Father what he was supposed to do – should he turn up the headlight beams? We then realized all the other cars were driving without lights, and we were quickly pulled over by a policeman. He poked his head into the car, and exclaimed in surprise, "My God, it's Dr. St. John!" Fortunately for us, he was a former botany student and instantly realized what we were doing there. He quickly informed us that the Japanese had attacked the island, and that we were at war. He was supposed to tell all civilians to spend the night on the side of the road, but because he knew Father, we could follow him to the Pearl City Police Station where we could get our headlights painted out, and perhaps be permitted to continue into Honolulu.

That trip, probably only half an hour or so, was the most frightening part of the entire war for me. Father ordered me into the back seat and told me to lie flat on the floor. Robert and I exchanged places quickly while the car was going, as cars in those days had no seat belts or head rests. The students tucked their feet around me, and off we went, following the policeman down the middle lane of a three-lane highway, with people passing in both directions, all without headlights. Much swerving, braking, and accelerating, and I could see nothing. However, it was clear to me that Father thought we were in imminent danger of sniper gunfire, and I was put on the floor to reduce my chances of being killed. I was old enough (6th grade) to know that Europe was at war, and that civilians, including women and children, were frequent fatalities. I didn't think I was any safer on the floor, as I imagined all the adults being picked off, the car crashing and exploding, and me being burned alive before I could get out. I was terrified, but realized I should obey

orders, and not argue and distract the driver. The floor was particularly uncomfortable as the drive shaft in the 1936 Nash ran along on the floor as a great lump, and Cinders walked over me and tried to lick my face. The botany students helped by pulling her up on the seat.

After we got to the police station I got out of the car and ran up to hold Father's hand, and felt reasonably safe, at last. We learned that they had run out of black paint, but had found some navy blue. We watched them use a rolled up newspaper, dipped into the paint, to paint out the headlights and tail lights.

The policeman explained that he had no authority to issue a pass giving permission for us to proceed into Honolulu, but he would let us start out and take our chances. He also warned us that civilians were nervous and were shooting at lights, and we should use our newly painted headlights as little as possible.

So we started into Honolulu, and I, without asking permission, sat up in the back seat. I certainly did not feel safe – surely none of us did, but it was much better being able to see what was going on. Even though it was dark with a starless overcast sky, we were able to see pretty well on the highway into Honolulu. My memory is that Father was now driving.

When we got to the city it was more difficult. Most city streets were lined with flowering shade trees that arched over the street, blocking out whatever light remained in the sky. At corners Father would blink on the lights to see when to turn, and each time people would scream at us to turn the lights off. Normally we would have driven the students to their homes, but now we let them off at the corner along our route closest to their homes, wished them good luck, and they walked home in the dark.

Finally we drove up the gravel driveway to our kitchen door. Mother, who had been listening for us, rushed out, leaned in the window to count heads, and said, "Harold, there's a Navy wife in the basement with a loaded revolver. Would you please take it away from her?"

She also informed us that there were 21 women and children in the basement, which she had blacked out, and that they all had been fed supper and would spend the night there. Neighbors had dragged mattresses and blankets over, and as it was blacked out, we could use lights. Then she hustled us kids into the kitchen and fed us supper. She had blacked out the kitchen, to make cooking possible. Next she led me to the bathroom (not yet blacked out) and told me to take a bath and get ready for bed. I remember protesting that it was not possible to take a bath and brush my teeth in pitch darkness. She was not at all sympathetic and said I had better learn fast. I remember envying my sister Martha, who had been able to do all that in daylight. I found I did not remember which faucet was hot and which was cold, which toothbrush was mine, and where the toothpowder was.

Martha and I joined the gang downstairs for the night – too exciting! a huge slumber party! and most of our neighborhood playmates were there! – but my brothers slept in the attic and my parents on the main

floor in their own beds. The Navy wife was seated with her husband's loaded service revolver in her lap, and declared that she was ready to pick off the first Japanese soldier who would burst in. She did surrender the gun to Father, to everyone's relief.

The next day all returned to their homes, where they began to black out enough rooms to make life comfortable; but most of them returned to us the next night. A few exceptionally nervous ones came for about a week.

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Many years later, in 1971, the whole family gathered in Honolulu for the dedication of the St. John Plant Science Laboratory at the University. Charles soon left for the mainland, but Robert said he wanted to go back and see the place where we had watched the bombing, and asked me to come along to help him decide on the exact spot. My husband Chuck and son Art also came along to see what I had been talking about for all those years. It took us a while, as it was clear that the pineapple fields had been redone, and the roads had been relocated. But eventually we found a place that sloped in the right direction and parked the car. We soon found the trail, and followed it up long enough to where we could see Pearl Harbor.



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Mother and Martha had their own excitement that day. I heard Mother describe it so many times that I believe this is a pretty accurate account.

Around 9:30, they started to walk to church, but didn't get very far before one of Mother's elderly friends called out from her porch and said, "Mrs. St. John, you must get off the street immediately!"

Well, this made no sense, so she tried to reassure her hysterical friend, somewhat afraid that she was losing her mind. However, while not believing tales of bombs and war, she went up on the porch to calm her friend and listened to the radio. Yikes, it was true! At that time, we did not own a radio (too much junk on it, Father believed), so she listened to learn everything that she could. Then she and Martha returned home.

She knew we would have been past Pearl Harbor before the attack had begun, so that unless we had had a flat tire, we were presumably safe. No way to know when we could return, though. However, she figured things would become more frantic as days went on, so she announced to Martha that they would do Monday's washing right then. And so they did. (A lengthy process, as this was long before automatic washers and dryers.)

They were just hanging the last load of clothes onto the clotheslines when the doorbell rang. It was someone from the army, furnished with lists, who explained that civilian defense was being organized, and that Dr. St. John was to be in charge of our block. Mother said that her husband was out of town and someone else should be appointed, but was told there was no time for that, and that she was in charge until he returned. Her duties were to see that everyone knew where and how to turn off their water and gas in case of a bombing attack, to patrol the block at night to make sure no lights were showing, and to keep everyone calm(!).

This was already mid-afternoon, and only women and children remained. All military personnel, active and retired, had been called to active duty; and all with medical training, including doctors, nurses, dentists, psychiatrists, and veterinarians, were called to treat the wounded. All other able bodied men were called to donate blood and/or to dig graves.

It took her the rest of the afternoon to figure out where water and gas turned off, as most women did not know. She also instructed them to fill bath tubs and jars with water in case the water supply was bombed. But what they all wanted to know was, "What do we do when they come again?" Everyone expected further attacks and bombing raids.

Mother divided the block in half and assigned them to two houses, one of them ours. There was a large rocky hill in the middle of the block, and one house on each side had a basement dug into the side of the hill and a stone wall on the open side supporting the upper floor. While no protection against a direct hit, it would certainly deflect flying shrapnel, and so made an acceptable bomb shelter.

Well, no further attacks came, but night fell, and everyone in the block appeared at their assigned shelter. Mother had managed to black

out the basement – two rooms and a bathroom – and also the kitchen so she could feed people. The next morning they all went home, but most returned the next night. It was nearly a week before all felt brave enough to sleep in their own homes.

The next day Mother went and helped several neighbors to black out rooms in their own homes. In the beginning they used whatever would work: newspapers and cardboard were taped or nailed over windows, and often blankets or old curtains were nailed over the entire casement. Later people made fancier light-excluding curtains. Mother reported with amusement that one young Navy wife said to her on December 8, “Mrs. St. John, I really don’t know how to thank you – you see, I’ve never blacked out a house before!”

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Wartime in Honolulu

Military law was imposed, and a strict curfew. At first all had to be home by 6 P.M., with only block wardens and official vehicles on the streets. Later the curfew was raised, eventually to 10 P.M., where it remained for the rest of the war. Later in the war we all paid less and less attention to the curfew, and learned to duck behind a hedge and lie flat on the ground until the patrolling car was out of sight. Aliens, however, had a 6 P.M. curfew for the entire war. When later our Sunday botany collecting trips resumed – not too frequent because of gas rationing – we had to return early to get Professor Sakimura, the entomologist, home in time.

There was a census, called the enumeration, and all residents were fingerprinted, blood typed, and given tetanus and typhoid shots. Our arms were really sore! We carried our identification cards with us throughout the war. All teachers were used as the census takers, since all schools were closed for several months. That included university professors, and Father was assigned to an area near the university where many residents were pig farmers. He reported knocking on the door of one home, and when he was admitted and led to a seat, the entire family burst into tears. The cause of their grief was that while the parents were Japanese aliens, all the children had been born in Honolulu and were therefore U.S. citizens, except one little boy who had been born on a visit to Japan. Immigration laws at the time were such that he could never become a U.S. citizen. Father said that he felt the parents would have given their lives if it could have conferred citizenship on their son, but of course it was impossible. (In later years that law was changed, and I don’t doubt that the young man took advantage of it.)

At first there was no word as to when schools would reopen, so Mother quickly organized a school in our home (the St. John Academy)

for the four of us plus a dozen or so neighborhood children. Their mothers were recruited as teachers. The lessons they came up with had, except for arithmetic, very little connection with the Honolulu public school curriculum, but at least they kept us busy. Mother was the English teacher and had us memorize a lot of poems, mostly from her favorite New England authors. I still remember parts of them. At recess I would run out and climb the mango tree in the back yard, while my brothers would often run across Oahu Avenue to throw a football around on the McIntyre's front lawn. That school did not last long, as the public schools opened in a few months, and I returned to Mrs. Watson's 6th grade and Martha to Miss Frost's 4th grade at Lincoln, then an elementary school. All schools except Manoa Elementary had some of their buildings occupied by the army as defense outposts throughout the city.

But at Manoa, the principal, Miss Mitchell, heard that the army was coming, and she was prepared. She put a cot on the porch in front of her office and slept there. When a young lieutenant arrived and said he was there to occupy part of the school, Miss Mitchell stared him down and said, "No, you are not. You are here to take over the Japanese Language School next door." He was no match for Miss Mitchell (we kids called her an old battle axe), and they both realized that the language school would not operate in wartime. So the army had its base, and Miss Mitchell had her school.

All schools had their playgrounds dug up with air raid trenches. During air raid drills, we would rush out to our assigned trench and go in, unless it had standing water in it, though it was made clear that in case of a real attack we would have to jump into the water. It was one of the big disappointments of that year that I did not get to watch the rescue of Miss Frost, a stout lady who tripped and became wedged in a trench and was unable to pull herself out. The 6th grade boys were sent out with shovels to dig her out. Humiliating for the poor woman, of course, but we children laughed a great deal at her expense.

Within a few years, all the school trenches were widened and covered, and had a large pile of dirt on top for added protection from bomb fragments. It was fun running up and down the large bumps. I remember Father asking Martha what they did in an air raid drill. She described how they marched into the trenches, and then demonstrated how they put their heads down, "So the pilots will not see the whites of our eyes." Father roared with laughter, and said, "No, but they'll see the row of little white panties on all those upturned bottoms!" All girls wore cotton dresses to school, and they were rather short.

My 6th grade class was on the second floor of the main building, and our fire escape was a metal corkscrew slide. In a fire or air raid drill, a few boys would go down first to clean off the dust so the girls wouldn't get their panties dirty. The boys were supposed then to stand behind the slide so they wouldn't see our dresses billowing up as we came down.

Those who didn't would have to report to the principal. With the playground pretty much covered with trenches, the 5th and 6th graders were allowed to cross the street and have our recess time in Thomas Square.

At that time, Lincoln was Honolulu's only English Standard elementary school (English fluency required). Soon Lincoln was closed and all students sent to their neighborhood elementary schools – judged to be safer to have us near our homes in case of bombing attacks. Two teachers from Lincoln were sent along with us 50 or 60 kids to Manoa, so we had 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade in one room, and 4th, 5th, and 6th in the other. (There was no public kindergarten in those days.)

We were the first haoles at Manoa, and the local kids, mostly children of Japanese truck farmers and shopkeepers, were afraid of us because of the war. For some reason, the older boys became aggressive, and would actually attack us on the playground. I never had trouble, but I remember one of the haole boys was attacked and thrown into an air raid trench, and his arm got broken. We were quickly given a different lunch hour, and a 10-minute head start on the way home after school. The principal, Miss Mitchell, knew just how to solve the problem. The following year she made another room available for the English Standard kids, now only two grades to a room, and put a number of the Manoa kids in each room, so they could get to know each other and be friends. It worked like a charm, and all hostilities ceased. Kids easily make friends across racial lines.

In case of an air raid, or air raid drill, only those kids who lived near the school were allowed to go home. Each year, there was a test. We weren't that close, but Mother wanted us home in case of a real attack. So we ran home as fast as we could, got Mother to sign the paper we were given, raced back to school, and collapsed behind the hedge around the property. When our breathing was normal, we would saunter back into the classroom. I finished the school year at Manoa and entered junior high at Stevenson in September 1942.

Martha, of course, made many friends at Manoa, and for several years when I rode Robert's bicycle up to Manoa Village to buy something at the store, girls would shout to me, "Herro, Marfa!" I would just wave, say hello, and cycle on. To them, all haoles looked alike, especially blonde girls with long pigtails.

At that time, Manoa Village was called "Japtown." Right away, all Japanese were called such, not "Jap" as before, so "Japtown" became "Manoa Village." It was important to all residents to distinguish between the Japanese country and military, our enemies, and the local Japanese in Hawaii, our neighbors and friends. (And soon after, the term "nigger" became "negro," again as a sign of respect. Years later, that also changed, to Black.)

When I entered Stevenson, I had to take city buses to get there. There I wore shoes each Monday to break my feet in, and all other girls wore

shoes daily. Boys generally did not do so until 10th grade, at Roosevelt High School. I wore shoes daily starting in 8th grade. My sister Martha continued at Manoa (she is Roosevelt '50).

Honolulu residents were issued gas masks, to be carried on all excursions outside the home, and I received mine while at Stevenson. Kids wearing their masks had to enter a room filled with tear gas, to test for mask leaks. Before exiting, they were obliged to remove their masks to experience the gas.

Soon all school kids were encouraged to work in the pineapple fields, but you had to be 12 years old, so I couldn't start until after my December 1942 birthday. Most kids stayed at school, where they had all-day study halls, as instruction could not go on when the rest of us were in the fields. The first year we went once a week, and the next years it was once a month. Seventh grade girls were paid 21 cents an hour – boys a little bit more. Each grade got progressively more. It was thrilling to get a check from Dole Pineapple Company once a month! My brothers, students at Roosevelt, worked for California Packing Corporation (Del Monte pineapple) and my father at the University worked for Libby, I think.

Many people have written accounts of the Japanese attack on Hawaii. These are just my personal memories. I remember Father telling me that I must remember what had happened, as “We are living history. Don't forget it.”

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