

**NASA HEADQUARTERS NACA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

IRENE M. GEYE
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
OLMSTED TOWNSHIP, OHIO – JUNE 5, 2014

WRIGHT: Today is June 5, 2014. This oral history session is being conducted with Irene Geye at her home in Olmsted Township, Ohio, as part of the NACA Oral History Project, sponsored by NASA Headquarters History Office. Interviewer is Rebecca Wright, with Sandra Johnson assisting. Thank you for allowing us to come today and asking us to sit with you during lunch. We don't want to keep you from eating.

GEYE: No, that's okay. I can eat and talk at the same time.

WRIGHT: You were telling us a few minutes ago how you started with NACA when you were 17?

GEYE: Yes, I was only 17. I had to get a work permit. I had intended to go to college, but my brothers were all in the service—I had three big brothers and they were all in the Army and Navy—and so, I decided not to go to college. I started work out there in 1944. I was born in '26 and I started work out there when I was 17.

I worked in what they called the steno pool, where we were trained to learn NACA rules and regulations on how to write letters and everything. I was down there for maybe just about five or six months, when the administrator's officer came to me and asked, would I like to work for the director temporarily because his secretary had gone home to Virginia on vacation and

never came back? I was just green, I was scared to death, and the administrator's officer was John Tousignant at that time. He came down to the pool and he said, "Irene, how would you like to work for the director for a while?" I was scared to death, and I said, "Well, if you think I can do it." It lasted a long time.

I'm not 18 at that time—I was 17, and I worked until I was 30, and then I went back later and got my 20 years in. After the children were born, I went back and got my 20 years in. I loved every minute of it. We worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, during the war years, and we had a lot of fun in the evenings. We had wonderful picnic grounds out there, and also an auditorium, when the weather was bad. We'd get together after work and party, and we had a lot of fun. It was seven days a week, but we enjoyed it. I was very proud to be part of it.

WRIGHT: What did you know about NACA before you went out there?

GEYE: Not a whole lot because it was very secret at that time. When I started out there, it was 1944, and there was not much in the newspaper or anything. There wasn't much said about it. It was only after that, when they started advertising what they were doing. I had to get inspected or looked over by the people in charge, and I remember, they sent people out to interview my neighbors to see what kind of person I was. They'd come over, "There was somebody over here asking about you, Irene."

WRIGHT: Were you with Dr. [Edward R.] Sharp that whole time, or did he leave at some point?

GEYE: No, he stayed. He was there all the while I was there, the first time, and then later on, when I went back to get my 20 years in, there was a different director. I worked under Dr. Edward R. Sharp for many, many years, and he was a wonderful, old, white-haired gentleman with a marvelous wife. She and I got along real well together, and I'd call her and she'd call me, and I'd call her, "Did you know?" and she'd call me, "Did you know?" We kept in touch with each other as to what he was doing so we could keep track of him. A wonderful man, and everybody knew him and loved him.

Wherever he went in the world, he'd say, "You ever get to Cleveland, come and see us." We never knew who was going to pop up. One day, the front gate called me and said, "Irene, the Duke of Windsor's here," and I started to laugh. "Irene, the Duke of Windsor's here." Sure enough, he'd been in Cleveland for something, and he remembered Doc Sharp's offer to come out there, so he just walked in. I called my boss, and I went in, I says, "You won't believe this, but he's down at the desk." He got up and he ran down. I never saw him move so fast.

WRIGHT: Did you meet the Duke of Windsor?

GEYE: Got to meet him. My boss was so funny—when he arrived there, the main desk called and said that he had arrived, so my boss went flying downstairs. My boss was a big, white-haired, old gentleman. I never saw him move so fast. He went downstairs to greet him and took him on a tour of the laboratory. About 12:15 or so, I was at my desk and the phone rang, and my boss was on the phone, and he said, "Irene, would you pick up that folder in the corner of my desk and bring it over to me in the dining room?" I said, "What does he need that for?" I went over to his desk and I found something there. He did it so I could meet the Duke of Windsor.

He stood up and shook my hand, “How are you?” and called me a lady. I was just a kid. I was so thrilled.

WRIGHT: Could you tell people what you were doing out there?

GEYE: We couldn't do much talking at first because it was pretty secret. Eventually, it got more in the paper about who they were and what they were doing and everything. In the early years, 1944, there wasn't much in the paper about it. It was kind of secret—it was at the corner of the airport and nobody knew it was there and what was going on there. We had wind tunnels and all the things that they do for research on aircraft engines and planes and things. There was never anything in the paper about it, but it was after the war years, and more and more people wanted to know what was going on out there. A lot of people asked, “What is that place out there?” We were at the corner of the airport, and we were back off the road, and people would drive by there and say, “What is there?” Finally, after the war ended, they start doing more publicity about what was going on there, but at the beginning, it was very secretive.

WRIGHT: Did your job take you all around the Center, or were you pretty much confined to your office?

GEYE: I was there in the office, but I went over to lunch and stuff. I wandered around the place.

WRIGHT: You said your husband worked there as well?

GEYE: My husband was an aeronautical engineer and worked there.

WRIGHT: Was he working there when you first went there, or did he come after you started?

GEYE: He came while I was there. I was just right out of high school, and he was in college at that time. He came to work there, and that's how we met there. We had many, many good years together. He died just last year, but we raised three great children, they're wonderful. My oldest boy is an aeronautical engineer. My youngest son is a schoolteacher. My daughter's a nurse. They all were educated and loved what they're doing, and very, very happy.

WRIGHT: You had said earlier that you chose not to go to college because your brothers were in the service. What did you want to do?

GEYE: I wasn't sure. I knew I wanted to go to college, but I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to study. It was just in my head that I wanted to go to college, but then, like I said, my brothers were all in the service and I decided not to go. I started to work at NACA and I advanced quite quickly, and I was the director's secretary before too long, so I never went to college.

WRIGHT: Were your parents here in the Cleveland area?

GEYE: Our parents were still alive at that time. They've been gone now a long time. I had a good life, I really did. I don't regret not marrying till I was 30 because I had such a good life. I had such a lot of fun.

WRIGHT: Tell us about some of those times. I understand that the early years of the NACA, you had a lot of social activities out there and people were like family.

GEYE: We were like one big, happy family because everybody worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. In the summertime, there was a picnic area there and we'd have beer and sandwiches and stuff. In the winter, we'd have it in the hall in the building. It was a very close-knit group because most of them were from out of the state, engineers from all over the place. We secretaries were from the area. It was very close-knit, and we had a wonderful time.

WRIGHT: I understand Charles Lindbergh visited the center one time.

GEYE: He sure did.

WRIGHT: Do you recall being there?

GEYE: My boss was a doll—he went down to meet him, and I kept thinking, “I wonder if I'll get to see him.” My boss had a trick. He would call me from lunch and he'd say, “Irene, would you bring me that folder in the corner of my desk?” so I would meet these people. I got to meet Lindbergh, General Jimmy Dolittle and a couple others, but I was very young and very excited.

WRIGHT: Do you recall a lot of changes that were made once the war years had stopped? How things changed? Must have had a lot of changes in that time period for technology. I have to think you started there with a pencil and a steno pad.

GEYE: A typewriter where you had to make carbon copies and erase them when you made a mistake. You couldn't correct it—you had to erase it and type over it, or type the whole thing over again. I don't know how many times I'd spill something on it and I'd have to stay after work and re-type it. We worked long hours, but we were a big, happy family. We enjoyed what we were doing, and the engineers were great with us and treated us like ladies.

WRIGHT: Were they still doing the air races at the airport and at the center when you were out there?

GEYE: At the time when they started, they would park their airplanes there at NASA, and we got to meet a lot of them. We had little get-togethers for them in the hanger, we'd have drinks and stuff and have parties with the pilots and everything. Just a lot of fun.

WRIGHT: I know during the wartime, things were so tight with supplies. Because you worked at a government center, were you able to get enough gas and a vehicle and to go to work?

GEYE: Not really. I had to go along with the rules. I took a bus to work because I didn't want to drive, and no, we didn't get any special benefits for that.

WRIGHT: What about lunchtime? Did they have a lunchroom for you there, or did you bring your lunch from home?

GEYE: Yes, at first, I carried my lunch, and then they had this huge dining room, which I didn't like to go into. Then, they opened a smaller, almost a café-type of thing, and I used to like to go over there for lunch. I always hated to walk into that great, big dining room by myself.

WRIGHT: There must have been a lot of men in that room.

GEYE: Oh, there were.

WRIGHT: Not many women on the center?

GEYE: No, mostly men. Of course, there were a lot of secretaries, but there were mostly men. Like I said, we were just like one big, happy family. Everybody got along well, and we all had a goal, we all had things to do, and worked seven days a week and never complained about it. After work, we'd go down to the picnic grounds and have a beer and talk and have fun. It was like one big, happy family.

WRIGHT: When you were down even relaxing and recreating, were people talking about the projects they were working on?

GEYE: Some of them did but some of them didn't because a lot of them were secret. I, personally, did not have a chance to get to know a lot of them, but I got a chance to see all the things that were going on out there.

JOHNSON: Do you have any idea why they picked you for the director's secretary?

GEYE: I don't know, except that I think I was a nice person. I was friendly and outgoing and I dressed nicely. I always made sure I dressed nice when I went to work. I wore suits and slacks, slack suits or dress suits, and I never came sloppy to work. I lasted working for him for 13 years before I retired and got married.

WRIGHT: Before that, as a steno pool, did they just send you out to where somebody would need you for the day?

GEYE: Yes, or they brought work down to us, or they would send us out where we were needed. I got to meet a lot of people. I'm quite sociable, and I got to meet people and like people, and they liked me. I didn't get married till I was 30 because I was having such a good time.

WRIGHT: That was nice you had that choice, wasn't it?

GEYE: Right.

WRIGHT: Your husband must have been special for you.

GEYE: He was, he was. He tells me I was, too.

WRIGHT: What did you do in your spare time? I know you worked a lot of hours, but being local, were you close by? How long was that bus trip, getting to work?

GEYE: I lived down over on the Upper West Side of Cleveland. First, the Lower West Side, and then we moved out farther. I took a bus out there and then eventually, when I started to work and make some money, I bought a car, so I drove to work. I think I was 18 or 19 when I bought a convertible. I forget now what it cost, but a ridiculously low price at those days. I drove out to work with this blue convertible with the top down.

WRIGHT: That must have gathered some attention. Do you remember what kind it was?

GEYE: It was a Ford convertible, and it was blue, and I drove around with the top down all the time. I had fun.

WRIGHT: What was Cleveland like during that time period? Was it growing?

GEYE: It was growing, but it was a very serious town because it was the war years. The men were all away in the service, and my brothers were all gone. They were in the Army and Navy. Two of them came home, but one didn't. One of them got killed during the war. We were really dedicated to what we were doing. The work out there was pretty hush-hush at that time. We had

to get inspected by the FBI. I remember my neighbors came over one day and wanted to know what was going on because they had been interviewed, the FBI came to see them to talk about me, about my character.

WRIGHT: It's a good thing that neighbors knew neighbors back then, or they might not have been able to tell them things.

GEYE: I was so surprised, my one neighbor came over and he said, "Somebody came over here yesterday and asked me about you," and I says, "Who?" He says, "I don't know who he was—he wanted to know what you were like and your personality," and was I loyal to the government? Asked him all kinds of crazy questions.

WRIGHT: What did your parents think at that time, about you going to work?

GEYE: I had wanted to go to college, but like I said, my brothers were all in the service, so I decided to go to college later—which I never did because I had such a good job, I never went to college. They were very proud of me, that I did so well. I worked from the time I was 17 until I was 30, when I got married. Then, I went back later to get my 20 years in.

WRIGHT: Was that your choice, to leave at that time?

GEYE: Yes, because I got married and I had a family, and I told my boss, I said, "I'm getting married and I'm having children; I'm leaving." He was so mad.

I warned him. In fact, he came to our wedding. I told him at the time, I said, “Well, Dick and I want to have a family, so be warned.” After I started having the children, I stayed home until our youngest was in school, high school, and then I went back again and got my 20 years in. I have a nice little pension now, and it’s good.

WRIGHT: When you were first out there and you had friends, were they also working? Did some of them work at NACA?

GEYE: Most of my friends were NACA people because we worked 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, at that time, so most of my friends were NACA. I had some friends from when I was a kid, but most of my friends developed out of that relationship. I still have friends that are still alive like I am.

WRIGHT: Were they all in the steno pool or secretary-related or were they different?

GEYE: Some of them were secretaries, some were engineers, and my husband was an engineer out there. He was single, he came to Cleveland from Fort Wayne, Indiana, and he was an aeronautical engineer. I was working in the director’s office at the time, and that’s where we met. We didn’t get married till I was 30 then I stayed home until my youngest was in high school, and I got a call from somebody out there and said, would I be interested in coming back? We laughed about it at the time and my husband said, “Well, it’s up to you. Kids are in school all day, if you want to go back and get your 20 years in.” I went back and I worked, I think, a total of about 25 years.

WRIGHT: You went back to the Director's Office to work?

GEYE: Not at first. I worked in the pool again, and with a series of luck again, I was called upon to work up there.

I had a really good job, and [Dr. Sharp's] wife was an absolute doll. She was the nicest lady, and she and I were partners. I'd call her and she'd call me and we'd keep informed of what was going on. I'd call her up at 4:00 in the afternoon and I'd say, "Did you know he's bringing 20 people home for cocktails?" She never flinched. [Dr. Sharp would] come out from a meeting, and he'd come out about 3:45 and he'd say, "Tell Vera I'm bringing this gang home for cocktails." She never expected that, but she knew, she expected it, really.

We had a wonderful young man, was kind of an all-around handyman, did everything. I would call him and I'd say, "Mrs. Sharp needs some stuff," so he'd go over to her house and find out what she needed, and he'd go to the liquor store and buy what she needed to entertain all these people. She was great. She was amazing. She was a wonderful wife for him because a lot of women wouldn't put up with that.

WRIGHT: It's nice that she felt part of that, his partner in his career, to do that.

GEYE: She was a wonderful lady. Of course, they're both gone now.

JOHNSON: Someone had mentioned to us that he would actually, at lunchtime, once a week, that they would have the bean soup in the cafeteria and he would ladle it out himself and that he knew everyone's name?

GEYE: He was a marvelous, marvelous man.

JOHNSON: Do you remember any of the inspections that they would have out there with the different centers, like 1957, I think, was the big inspection at the Cleveland?

GEYE: Right, we had huge inspections, yes. It was a lot of fun. We worked our butts off during the war, and after, too. We worked hard. My mother, God love her, she couldn't get used to her daughter, because I'd call her and say, "I won't be home for dinner, I've got to work tonight." She couldn't get used to that. She was a tough old Hungarian and she had dinner on the table and she wanted me to be home. I'd call her up and say, "Sorry, I got to work late, I've got to get this ready for my boss." She finally got used to that. I'd say, "Put my soup on the stove, I'll eat it when I get home."

WRIGHT: Did you travel with the director, or anything that he had to go do?

GEYE: Not too much. Usually, the men went with the director, and once in a great while, a couple of his secretaries would go along, depending on where they were going. I didn't get to travel with him too much. It was mostly the men went with the men, and the secretaries didn't

go along unless there was some very big, special occasion that they wanted us to go to. I had a good life, I really did.

WRIGHT: Do you remember any of the big meetings or big events that you sat in on that were highlights?

GEYE: We never knew who was going to call and say, “Here I am, we want to come out.” We had people from all the big aircraft companies, and I had to dress every day when I went to work because I didn’t know who was going to pop in. I had to wear a nice suit—usually slack suits, I could wear slack suits, but nice ones, like this. Sometimes wore high heels and stuff, too. If we knew somebody was coming, I might wear a regular, formal suit and high heels and everything, but if I didn’t know they were coming, I still wanted to dress nicely, so if they popped in.

WRIGHT: Did you have people that reported to you? Did you have a staff that helped you in your office?

GEYE: I had some secretaries that worked with me, some girls that worked with me. I guess I was the boss, but I never thought about that. They worked with me, they were my partners. There were two other young girls in the office with me.

WRIGHT: Tell us, if you can, about whatever transition, when NACA became NASA. Were you still there and did that affect your job?

GEYE: It didn't affect my job. We still had the same people heading it. Apparently, Headquarters approved of what we were doing, so when NACA became NASA, we were just the same, the same people and the same staff. By that time, I knew all the people and I knew what they were doing and what they weren't doing. I loved every minute of it.

WRIGHT: Do you remember the astronauts? Did the Mercury Seven come through? We know that they tested the capsule here.

GEYE: They came. Their offices were located in our hangar building because it was all very quiet and secret, but they worked in the wind tunnels. They did their training in the wind tunnels and everything. We were thrilled. I got to meet one or two of them, but they were very quiet, very secretive. We didn't get to know them well. We'd see them walking by to go to lunch and stuff, but they never associated with us very much. It was all very private, what they did. John Glenn, and who else? Off the top of my head, I can't remember, but they were all the real sharp ones, back in those days.

JOHNSON: It says in your notes that you got to see some launches.

GEYE: One or two; not too many. My husband was an engineer at NASA, and whenever he was launching, in the summertime, when the kids were off at school, I would go down, take them down with me, and we'd watch. I'd go on vacation, and I'd go to the launches and watch. My kids would get to see some of the launches, but they were the unmanned ones, at that time. It

was just the beginning of the launch program. I don't think we were ever there on the manned ones but we saw several launches, and the kids were thrilled to death.

The astronauts were just great, and they would have the kids come down to the pool and sit around the pool, with their feet in the water. The astronauts would walk around in the water and talk to them and tell them what was going on and what they were going to do. The children were thrilled. That was a great time in our life. Every once in a while, my one son still talks about it. He remembers. My two others don't remember too much—they were younger—but my one son remembers quite a bit of it, and he talks about having met the astronauts and stuff. That was a long time ago.

JOHNSON: Do you recall ever meeting a president, a sitting president?

GEYE: Yes. Who was it? It was way back, '48.

WRIGHT: It must have been Truman.

GEYE: Everybody that came through town came out there. I got to meet quite a few of them. Duke of Windsor came out and shook my hand and kissed my hand. He walked from my boss's office into a conference room, and he stopped at the table, and he says, "How are you, young lady?" He took my hand and he kissed it. I was so thrilled. I was 18 years old.

WRIGHT: You may not want to tell us all these stories, but being 18 and not married in that atmosphere, you must have had quite a few offers to go out on dates and have special times.

GEYE: I did. It was a party group because it was during the war, and we worked 7 days a week, 10-12 hours a day, so we partied, too. We had a lot of fun. Most of the guys were young engineers out of college, and most of them were not married, then, yet. We were all single, so we had a lot of good times. Like I say, we worked our butts off, but we had a lot of good times, too.

WRIGHT: Was it places in Cleveland, where you went, or did you just stay out at the center?

GEYE: Pretty much out there, or we'd go to some of the local restaurants or bars or stuff, because we were worked 12 hours a day. We didn't have time to get out and booze it up.

WRIGHT: No, you had to go back to work so soon after you left.

GEYE: Right, so we'd get together, a bunch of us, and go out and have a burger and a beer and stuff, and talk about what happened during the day. We never caroused too much because we couldn't—we had to work 12 hours a day, and that's the way it was. We just had to keep our heads on straight.

WRIGHT: Before you bought your convertible, and even after that, did you get around the center on a bicycle? I know the weather's cold, so how did you get from place to place? Did you just bundle up and walk?

GEYE: My office was in the administrative building, and the dining room was in the next building over. If the weather was nice, I'd just walk over there, but there was a bus that went around. If you didn't want to walk in the rain or snow, you could get a bus over there. There was no food in our building and we had to go over to the dining room to eat. I'd wait for the bus and they would take me over there, but most of the time, I walked. The weather was nice, I'd walk over there. It was a great place to work. Everybody was very dedicated, what they were doing. My first several years were during the war years, and then I got married and stayed home for a while. I went back to work when my children were in school. My second job was different because I was just another secretary, but at the beginning, I fell into a great situation where I became the director's secretary quite young, and had a wonderful time.

WRIGHT: Did you ever work at or go out to the Plum Brook facility?

GEYE: I was out there just once because it was far away from our office. Our guys went back and forth all the time, but I was in the office and I never went out there very much. Most of my life was right there at NASA, and on the second floor of the ad building. I loved every minute of it.

WRIGHT: You had a good view, then, I guess, as you saw new buildings go up, and with the wind tunnel being built.

GEYE: Right. When I first started there in 1944, there wasn't too much. There was one wind tunnel. Then, they started developing all these other things—ice tunnel, and all those things—as

the years went on. The place just grew like topsy, just grew. I was very proud to be a member early.

JOHNSON: When you retired, did you have a retirement party?

GEYE: I retired first, of course, because I started my family, and then I went back and got my 20-some years in. I wanted to get my full years in so I'd get a full retirement, and it's very nice. I get a check every month.

WRIGHT: Did they have a big party for you when you left?

GEYE: It was really nice. We had a good time. My boss said to my husband-to-be, "Why in the hell didn't you go work for Lockheed?" I just loved working for him.

WRIGHT: What time did you normally get to work? Did you go in really early, to get there before him?

GEYE: Yes, we went in early, 7:30-8:00 I went to work in the morning, and sometimes, 5:00-6:00 before we got home at night. My parents couldn't understand it. I was still young and single, living at home.

WRIGHT: Did you stay with them until you got married?

GEYE: I did. They were great.

WRIGHT: Had they lived in Cleveland a long time?

GEYE: Yes. My father and mother were both born in Hungary, and my father came over here when he was about 17, I guess, on his own. My mother came over when she was seven or eight, with her family. They met in Toledo, Ohio, and got married there. They were both born in Hungary and didn't know each other over there. I'm Hungarian through and through.

WRIGHT: Sounds like it. What about your husband's parents? Were they here for a long time?

GEYE: He was born and raised in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Dick and I went back and forth between Cleveland and Fort Wayne quite a bit. They were a wonderful couple. They liked me and I liked them, and we got along real well together. They would come and stay with us, or we'd go visit them, but we had a very good relationship.

WRIGHT: How did your husband choose to go into aeronautic research?

GEYE: I guess it was something he always wanted to do in college. He went to college and he found out about aeronautical engineering, and he majored in that, in college. Then, he started to work at NASA, and that's where we met. We had a good life. He just died this past year, so we had a long time together.

[End of interview]