U.S. Capitol Building Was a Great Playground

I WAS BORN and raised in the shadow of the Capitol, in Washington, D.C., as were my parents and my mother's parents.

Our row house was on a tree-lined street just blocks from the building that was the heart of the federal legislative branch. When I was a child, in the 1940s, friends and I would pack a lunch or ride a streetcar to the Capitol. If we roller-skated, we hid the skates in the bushes in the park across the street before entering the building.

I knew every corner of the Capitol. We'd play hide-and-seek and pretend we saw ghosts in the halls and stairways. I don't know how we got away with it.

I remember the beautiful ladies' rooms, with their marble floors and sinks. I pretended that I was a fine lady in them.

In those days, you could walk around the Capitol dome, which was a little scary for me. I loved the wonderful paintings and statues and the subway rides to the Senate Office Building. It was like an amusement ride.

I even used to sit in the gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives —until I became bored with all the talk and went on another adventure.

Whenever I ran up the steps to the huge bronze doors of the Rotunda, I would look back to the world below like a hero. As soon as the doors were opened, the aroma of antiquity surrounded me, and I knew it was someplace special.

Those were lucky days, when an American citizen could roam the Capitol and be a part of history.

Once war was declared, some things changed in the nation's capital.

Because of concerns that Washington might be attacked, as London had been, everyone prepared. Kids at my elementary school wore dog tags, and each of us was fingerprinted.

My father, a master plumber, became a civil defense warden. During an air raid, his job was to turn off any leaking gas. Since he always had a cigarette in his mouth, maybe that was not a good choice, but he had a gas mask and flashlight hanging in the rafters of our basement…the mask looked like a monster in the ceiling.

My 15-year-old brother was a ju-nior civil defense warden. During air- raid drills, he knocked on doors and asked people to put out their lights. I remember huge searchlights that crisscrossed the skies during the drills, looking for enemy planes.

I earned a Girl Scout badge for collecting 100 pounds of newspapers for the war effort. I was pretty skinny to lug all that newspaper, but I was doing my patriotic duty.

Because of a housing shortage, D.C. residents were asked to open their homes to women who came to work for the government during the war. One older, slightly stout woman named Louise took over my parents' bedroom, while they slept in the dining room on a studio couch.

Louise was like an older sister to me, and I loved her. She braided my hair in French braids so tight that my eyes slanted. She had her own shelf in the refrigerator but ate with us most of the time. She stayed with us for 2 years until she fell in love with a returning vet who lived with his mother down the street.

Those are a few of my memories of a different time…and a wonderful place to live.

—Elaine Myers, Berkeley Lake, Georgia