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Betsy Hess Behrens

Rosie the Riveter
WWII American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2015

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Betsy Hess Behrens, 2015

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Interview 1: April 10, 2015

Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell, with Betsy Hess Behrens. Is that how you pronounce your name?

01-00:00:09

Behrens: That's right.

Farrell: Okay. It is Friday, April 10, 2015, and this is interview number one. Betsy, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:22

Behrens: I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1923. March 5, 1923. Well, I was born during the Jazz Age, of course. My father was a contractor and he was doing very well. He had built a whole lot of houses in Buffalo and Kenmore, which is right adjacent to Buffalo. Everything was going fine. They held a lot of second mortgages on the houses and when the crash came, nobody could pay. Only one man paid off. Because he was a dentist, we got free dental care all my childhood, to help him pay off; but the others defaulted and my father and his partner went into bankruptcy. My father's partner committed suicide, and that left my father stuck with the whole thing. It was a very dreary time. I remember having to watch every penny. My father would resole our shoes. I remember seeing my mother crying, working on the books, trying to figure out how to make the money last. My father took a job as an insurance salesman, at the same time, and he went back to school to get his teaching certificate. Anyhow, it was just chaotic.

I remember one Christmas, when radios were quite new, they bought a little table radio. But they warned us children that it was our Christmas present. They could buy us a present, but they couldn't buy anything for the house for themselves because of bankruptcy. I remember feeling that wasn't quite right, it wasn't quite fair. But on the other hand, the radio was the only thing that kept you in touch with—. As far as knowing what went on, we got two papers a day: the morning paper, the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, and evening paper, *Buffalo Daily News*.

We managed to eke out enough money to go to a movie every week, but that's because you got free dishes. You'd get a cup and saucer one week and a plate another week. I don't even remember what the pattern was. But anyhow, we'd see *Buck Rogers of the 25th Century* and *Tarzan* and all kinds of things like that. But that was our only luxury, to go once in a while to the movies. But I could go on and on about what the Depression years are like, and the constant impression it has. It's never left me. I can't spend money, because everything was made over, make do. Sometimes I look at all the waste nowadays and I'm just appalled because we didn't waste anything. I remember one summer, we couldn't afford any meat. My father had an Oakland Landau sedan. It had four doors and the doors all opened out from the middle. He invented a tent-like

construction that went on top of the car and the four posts to the tent fit down into the hinges of the car. During the daytime, we would keep our luggage up there and he'd pull the posts down far. At night, he'd pull the posts up, take the luggage out, and we three children would sleep up there. That's the way we traveled one summer. They didn't have to spend any money on entertainment; we went and looked at free historical places of the Northeast, and further down, to Washington. No, to Gettysburg. So we got history lessons and had a good time and had a wonderful summer, but we just ate out of little sort of cabinets that Daddy attached to the back of the car. Mother would fix little snacks and that. When it was really bad weather, we'd stay in a little cabin. They were, I think, fifty cents a night or something like that, at the most, and we'd all pile into one cabin.

01-00:05:06

Well, anyhow, they were hard times. I could go on and on, because you have probably [heard] lots of stories about the Depression. But education was very important and my father started teaching school at Technical High school, day and night. He started teaching three nights a week, and days, also, and he had an insurance business besides. Then he started working for his Master's degree. So education and schooling was always part of our background. My mother was a great storyteller and she would keep us occupied. We had a table that was enamel. White enamel, I guess it was, in the kitchen. Porcelain? I'm trying to think what it was made of. But anyhow, after dinner, when Daddy was away teaching, if we cleared off the table very quickly and did the dishes, Mama would tell us a story and illustrate it with a pencil, a soft pencil, on this white table. Then after she told the story, we'd have to wipe it off with Bon Ami, so it would be ready for the next morning, when it always had a tablecloth on it. Then she'd tell us stories at night, to help us go to sleep. She sat in the hall. Our doors opened out into the hall and she'd sit there under a little hall light and make up stories to tell us.

The toys, we didn't have much in the way of toys. We'd get one book at Christmas and we'd get shoes for Christmas. I'm not sure whether we'd get—. Shoes at Easter, I guess. Then in the fall, we'd get shoes to go to school. Well, I could go on and on and on. There's no end to telling what life was like. But for us, it was mostly reading and telling stories and Mother drawing. My father brought home a lot of cigar boxes from some store, some man he knew, and we used those like building blocks. We would built little structures in the basement and then knock them down. Everything was what you could make, or make out of things, but we didn't have much in the way of store-bought toys, like they do nowadays.

Farrell:

Can you tell me how many siblings you had, what their names were, and a little bit about some of your memories of them as a child?

01-00:07:52

Behrens:

I had a brother two years older. His name was Robert. He became a designer. He was an industrial designer, and he also designed houses. He moved back east, to the East Coast. But he was a wonderful dancer. Because of him—he was two years older than I was—there were always lots of kids around, boys and girls. It was fun. My father made his own beer and his own wine, in the basement. If we kids helped him make the beer or bottled it, then he would make root beer for us and we'd bottle it. So that's how we got through. So there was always free root beer at our house. You'd buy a little jar of Hires Root Beer, little-bitty things. Just seems like it wasn't much bigger than this. It was an extract, and you'd mix it with water, I don't know what all. But it was delicious root beer.

My sister was two years younger. Her name was Doris. Our last name, well, that was interesting. It was Milkie; the German name is M-U with an umlaut-H-L-K-E. [pronounces it:] Muelke, sort of. When they came over, I guess a lot of the immigration officials at Ellis Island couldn't read the script and couldn't understand the pronunciation, so they just called it Milky, M-I-L-K-I-E. When my father went to the university and studied German, the professor said, "That isn't a real German name, M-I-L-K-I-E." They got out immigrations papers and discovered the correct spelling. So my father changed it to, (not with the umlaut and everything) but an Americanized version of the sound, which was M-U-E-L-K-E, Muelke. His father was happy to have the real right name that sounded better. But his brother was furious, because he said my father was putting on airs. He was jealous because my father went to college and he didn't, and he was mad at my father for talking his father into changing the spelling. It just mixed up everything for him. So that was it. But even though it was spelled M-U-E-L-K-E, all during school, kids called me Betsy Milkie. One boy—I remember his name, Junior DeCoot—used to taunt me with, "Betsy Milkie, the cow girl. Ha, ha, ha." So anyhow, my sister is two years younger. She was born August 1, 1925. My brother was born April 3, 1921. Yeah.

01-00:11:14

All of our grandparents lived in the city. Every Sunday, we went to church and then we went to my mother's parents and had dinner. Usually homemade chicken soup and chicken and stuff like that. Then we'd chat and do the dishes and that. Around three o'clock, we'd go to my father's mother and father and take them for a ride. That's what they loved to do. The grownups would talk German. I don't know what they talked about because we kids couldn't understand it. But Grandma would make Pflaumkuchen, she called it. It's like a coffee cake. We loved that. We kids would run around out in the yard, when it was nice. In the house, there was nothing for us to do, except there were two books. One was a joke book, like "when's a door not a door? When it's ajar." There was another upside-down book. When you'd turn it upside-down, the face would be frowning and so forth. That was all there was to do in there. We memorized those two books, I guess. But that was our background.

Farrell: You had mentioned that education was important in your family. Can you tell me a little bit about your time in grade school, maybe what your favorite subject were, or if you had any teachers that were influential?

01-00:12:57

Behrens: We started kindergarten in a former church. That was only one year. Then the church was sold and a brand new elementary school was built. It was Public School Number 81. It was unbelievable. It was, of course, during the '30s and during Roosevelt's time. I deplore the schools, the public schools my children went to, compared to that school. It was magnificent. We had an auditorium that had seating on an angle, so everybody could see, and regular seats that folded up and had an arm rest. There were WPA murals on the wall. Beautiful murals of the pilgrims, and I think there were Indians but I don't remember that. But I remember all the color, and on both walls. The stage had velvet curtains and footlights and wings. It was just unbelievably beautiful. One whole part of the top floor of the school was for art, and we had a great big art room, with storage and tables, and sinks to clean up afterwards. Everybody had to take art; it was a regular part of the curriculum. In addition, we had a music teacher—full-time—and we had an orchestra and a band.

There was another whole room for girls, for domestic arts, it was called. In the seventh grade, you learned how to cook and how to keep house, even how to do dishes properly. There were four sinks, four beds, and you learned how to miter the corners, how to make a bed properly, and the order in which you did dishes. And we had to learn to cook. We had little books. Every week, or whenever it was, we'd get little written pieces about—I can remember for example—how to make a basic white sauce. That was in seventh grade. We learned to be good housekeepers. In eighth grade, we learned sewing. We had four sewing machines. And we had to learn how to darn socks. We had to learn how to make all different kinds of mending. Right angle tear. We had to learn how to make all different kinds of seams. I remember a flat fell seam and a French seam. At the end of the year, we had to, each of us, make a garment that we could wear for ourselves. I don't know what possessed me, but—people made a blouse or a skirt or something—I decided to make a two-piece wool suit that was lined. It was the most God-awful-looking thing. It was beautifully made. I was very [precise]. I love sewing. But I was so skinny. I was anemic, so I didn't have much color anyhow, and it was brown wool, which was an awful color for me. And a straight skirt. I have a picture of me wearing that. I was so proud of it, and I look like a skinny little nothing. It was terrible. But it was fun making it. I was very proud of that. But in addition, while the girls took domestic arts, the boys had manual training, they called it. They had a whole metal workshop and a wood workshop, in the basement of the school. We were really being prepared to be homemakers. They learned how to use all the tools that they'd need for metalwork and woodwork.

01-00:17:21

Then in addition, we had two gymnasiums, completely outfitted. They were never used for anything but gym. And changing rooms, little shower rooms, for the boys and the girls. I think, if I remember right, the gyms were separated by a movable wall, partitions. I think I remember for seventh grade, we had a dance, and we were able to move the walls aside, so we could have one great big space for the dance. There was a theme for the dance. It was, I think, the pilgrim period. I remember everyone was wearing fancy dresses. It was probably 17- 1800s, and everyone had big full skirts and stuff their mothers made however they could. I had in my head I was going to be a pioneer woman. I had a straw hat and a pipe, and I carried my brother's BB gun. I don't know what got into me, but anyhow, that's what happened. People came around every week to teach musical instruments, band or orchestra instruments. I had to take violin lessons—and so did my brother and so did my sister—because we owned a violin; my father had one. Although I desperately wanted to take piano lessons. Piano lessons, you had to take outside of school, and they were a dollar. Violin lessons were only fifty cents in school, so we all learned to play the violin. But none of us particularly liked it. But at least we learned something about music. They had a solo club. And a great big playground and a cafeteria.

There was a huge cafeteria, where people could eat lunch; but most everybody went home for lunch if they lived near enough because they couldn't afford to eat in the cafeteria. But it was there. When I think of all everything we had available to us—. My children, at one point, went to school down in Palo Alto. They had room called a multipurpose room, and that's all. They had fold-up chairs, so if they had any kind of a show or something, you'll pull the chairs out. I remember going to an art class there. They had only—what was it—fifty minutes. That was all the time they had to set up the art stuff, have their art, clean up afterwards and leave. That's ridiculous. They had to leave it spotless for the next class, which might be, I don't know, some history class or program or whatever. I think during the Depression, what Roosevelt made available to us, compared to what, in an upper class or whatever you want to call it, affluent neighborhood like Palo Alto, how little they had—it's just astonishing. So anyhow, did I answer your question?

Farrell: You did. So then you, after that, had gone to Buffalo State Teachers College. Was that right after high school?

01-00:20:59

Behrens: Yeah.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to go to Teachers College and your experience there?

01-00:21:04

Behrens: Well, my father had been a teacher, and his cousin Edna—I can't remember her last name—had been a teacher. My father talked me into going. I had no

desire to be a teacher, but I didn't know what else to do. Well, this is interesting. In high school, I can clearly remember in the senior year, they had two weeks where men came to talk to the boys, from all different professions. They got a very in-depth look at what was available. For the girls, we had a secretary, a woman who worked in domestic arts, and a teacher and a nurse. That's all. One day, that took care of us. That's all the career information that was available to us then. So of all the ones that seemed available, well, I just thought, my father wanted me to be a teacher and follow in his footsteps, so I went. It was the most ghastly experience of my life. I told you a little bit about it earlier. Do you want me to tell—?

Farrell: Sure, yeah.

01-00:22:13
Behrens:

Well, to start with, now, psychology was very new at that time. This is 1940. There was a psychology teacher and everybody had to take a psych class from her. But she started out, when you came in as a freshman, you had to have an IQ test and a personality test and I don't remember what all. We were all given an identification number. We had to go to assembly and they took attendance. We had to sit in certain places in the assembly and they took attendance, which was a regimentation that was infuriating, to start with. She had put together a profeel, she called it—she didn't call it a "profile," it was a "profeel"—of everybody, that included your IQ, your personality test, your attitude, and your grade.

Then she called in all the freshmen one by one, to tell them their report. You had to sit there waiting till your number came up, and compare yourself with all the other freshmen in the class. It was a hell of a thing to do to young kids. She called me up and she said, "Well, my dear, you don't have a high enough IQ to qualify for being a college student." She said, "You don't show any interest in your classes, your effort is very low." She said, "But, you're very successful. Your grades are very high." She said, "Now, how do we account for this, my dear?" She said, "It can only figure one thing: it's your personality." Then she said, "And 9/10th of your personality, we have to admit, was your looks." Then she said, "Someday you'll be middle-aged and you'll discover you're nothing but an empty shell." That's what my psychology teacher told me at Teachers [College]. I'm quoting verbatim. That was it.

Well, it turns out that I didn't want to take the IQ test; I didn't think I should have to. A friend had to push me in the door and close the door after me. I don't even remember taking it, I was so furious about the whole thing, all this testing at this level. Any student that didn't seem to come out right, according to this, she would call them in for a private consultation. She wasn't a therapist; she didn't have the legal right to do it. In fact, one boy committed suicide, I remember. But anyhow, that was one teacher.

01-00:25:20

Then another teacher—it was history of Western civilization—I asked her a question once and she said, “The children will never ask you that.” I remember saying, “Well, I don’t have the education of a child. I want the education of an adult.” In art class, we had to draw a picture of a human being, just so—the teacher said—she could get an idea of where we were at. I had been going to the Art Institute, the Albright Art Institute Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Art Institute of Buffalo, and so I worked really hard to make a life drawing. She said, “My dear, we can’t all be Rembrandts. The children won’t make anything out of that.” She said, “You have to make sausage arms, like a sausage where the elbow is and where the knees are, and a big round balloon for the head.” So during my lunch hour, I just made a sausage person and got an A.

And the music teacher was deaf! We didn’t learn anything about music, but we had to come in and show how we would teach a song to the children by using our hands. [sings] *I had a little donkey that’s gray. I feed it in the barn everyday. And when it hears me whistle, it knows I have a thistle. It’d rather a thistle than hay. Hee-haw, hee-haw. That is all my donkey can say.* Got an A. Well, the children could follow that and I had the words right, and that was it. I remember one boy. We had to give a report of something we’d read in the paper, something related to music. I remember somebody giving a report talking about an opera that was being shown. It was *Die Walkure* by Wagner. She accepted that, “Dye Walliker, by Wagner.” The whole thing was insane. The science teacher, to make it interesting when he was teaching astronomy, every time he’d have to refer to the sun, he’d say, “The raging sea, the spitting monster.” That was the sun. It was terrible. After a half year, I wanted to quit and my father wouldn’t let me. He said, “You need to have a full year, in order to transfer any credit.” So I quit and worked in factories, to save up money.

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about getting a job in a factory?

01-00:28:24

Behrens:

Well, that was sort of strange. The first job, I saw an ad in the paper for a tracer at Worthington Pump and Machinery Corporation. I think it started out making pumps, during the heyday of the Erie Barge Canal, and for steam engines and that. I don’t remember much what they made for the war effort. Now, this was 1941. But it was a war industry at the time, in Buffalo. But it was just steam pumps. What did I know? What did I care about it? I just needed a job as a tracer. But I didn’t know anything about tracing. My father taught drafting at Technical High School, so the night before my appointment, I asked my dad, I said, “Hey, Dad, I’ve got an appointment with Mr. Shwander at Worthington Pump and Machinery. I’ve got to take in a sample of my work.” Well, he always had tracing paper and tools and drafting tools. I said, “Would you show me how?” He said, “Kids take a year to study drafting and tracing.” He said, “You want me to show you in one night?” He was just

furious. “Well,” I said, “I’ve got the appointment tomorrow, I’ve got to take something in.” I knew I was dexterous with my hands because I had been taking art classes for a couple years. So he got out some—in those days, it was linen, sort of—it was a material that was filled with some kind of goopy stuff that made it hard. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen tracing paper.

Farrell: Yeah.

01-00:30:12
Behrens:

Well, anyhow, it was fixed with something that took the ink beautifully. So I made a drawing that night, and I went to bed and got up the next morning and went in. Saw Mr. Shwander and he said, “Well,” he said, “This is fine work. Where did you study?” I said, “Well, my father taught me.” “And who is your father?” I told him and he said, “Oh, well,” he said, “He sends me a lot of students from Tech High School.” He said, “How long did you study?” I didn’t want to lie, but I couldn’t say, just last night, so I said, “Well, on an off for about a year.” It was true; it was off all year, but on just the night before. But I felt I had saved my soul that way. So I got the job. I have a picture of the first tracing I did when I got there. It’s huge. It’s a great big thing like this. I have the blueprint of it and I couldn’t find it for today. I’ll try to find it. But I sat down at this high stool in the drafting room, with all these people hard at work, and I looked at this great big thing I was supposed to copy. I thought, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know what to do. Well, nothing to do but just start. So I started. Went in and worked the other. When I got through he said, “You’re finished already?” I had been so terrified that I wasn’t going to get it done in time, I wouldn’t even be able to do it at all, that I just must’ve been going on high octane of some sort, of just terror that I would be found out. So it worked out.

Farrell: Why a tracer?

01-00:32:12
Behrens:

Well, they were making the pumps. The workers had to have blueprints to work from. We had to learn how to make blueprints, too. So in the drafting room, we would put together the designs and make them into blueprints that would then be given into the factory workers to make the pumps.

Farrell: Oh, why did you decide that you wanted to be a tracer, as opposed to taking a different job?

01-00:32:46
Behrens:

[laughs] I didn’t know how to do anything! I tried taking typing and I was no good at it. I couldn’t catch on to shorthand. I hadn’t any skills. I could sew. If I had known where to go to make clothes—. But I didn’t. I knew I was handy with a pen or pencil or charcoal or whatever, so I figured—. And there was a job opening. It wasn’t easy to get a job. All during high school, I worked as a salesgirl in department stores, on weekends. In those days—you won’t believe it—you had to wear high heels. I can remember going home on the streetcar

and taking my shoes off on the streetcar, and walking home carrying my high heels because my feet hurt so much. I tore up my stockings. We didn't have nylons, we had silk stockings. I had to mend my silk stocking, because I had made holes in them walking home in them. You always mended them. You never would throw them out, until they became too funny looking, with all the mends and the runs and everything.

Farrell: What were some of the things that you were tracing? Do you remember?

01-00:34:09

Behrens: Well, it was all the pumps.

Farrell: It was all pumps, okay.

01-00:34:11

Behrens: The different parts of the pumps. Because that's all they made there, were these pumps. I don't know enough how they were used. But I tried to Google it to find out, but I didn't use all the right inquiring questions, I don't think. But it was probably for battleships because the pumps had to do with pumping. I don't know. But in those days, you didn't think about it; you just had a job. I don't know. I would have to investigate a little further to see where Worthington pumps were used during the war, but it was a war industry; that's all I know.

Farrell: Do you remember any of the other industries in either the shipyards or by the waterfront or the industrial center of Buffalo, if they grew or—? What are your memories of them during wartime?

01-00:35:10

Behrens: Oh, well, this was a big thing for Buffalo because it had suffered terribly during the Depression because the steel industry and the granaries—. One of the big troubles that Buffalo had, it had been the conduit for—. Things that had landed on the East Coast went down the Erie Barge Canal and ended up in Buffalo to be processed and so forth. From Buffalo, they could go on Lake Erie and through the lakes to Detroit and Chicago and so forth. But the Erie Barge Canal was closed after the St. Lawrence Freeway came through. Buffalo had a very hard time during the war. I once looked it up, but I don't remember all the details. But it was really grim.

The Chevrolet plant—well, I think I made a note here to remember what they made. Yeah. The P-40 was known as a Tomahawk, a Kittyhawk or the Warhawk. That was one of the famous planes during the war. The Curtiss-Wright engines were made there. That really helped Buffalo to stay alive. It was a huge plant. I worked there. I left my tracing job at Worthington, which I loved, and I loved the people there. They put a little radio in the garbage cans by their desk, by the chief draftsman. Everybody would have to go to him for questions about what they were doing, so nobody ever questioned people

gathering around the chief draftsman's desk, but we were all just listening to the radio in the garbage can, in the wastebasket.

I developed an eye problem and I couldn't work any longer. That just broke my heart, because I loved working there. So then I got a job at the Chevrolet plant, which brought a lot of money to Buffalo and employed lots of people. That is a really most interesting part of my life as a factory worker. I don't remember applying for the job; I just knew I would take any job. I needed it because I was determined to save money to go to the University of Chicago. That's why I was working at the time. The first job they put me on, I wish I knew more about it because at the time, [but] it was just a job. I didn't know anything about engines and stuff.

There was a moving conveyor belt with a great big engine on top of it, moving along. At my end of the conveyor belt, I had to get a ladder and attach—. Somehow, I had to attach a ladder to this engine. Climb up to the ladder, to the very top, which was way high off the ground, and with a torque wrench, torque a big nut or something at the top as hard as I could, to a certain tolerance; then climb down, detach the ladder, and have it ready for the next engine that came through—all within a short space of time. You were just climbing up, climbing down, with the big wrench, torque. After a couple of days, I just couldn't do it. I weighed 105 pounds or something like that, just a little teenager. I went to the foreman. I said, "I'm sorry, the speed at which you have to do it and the strength to pull that big torch wrench, I—." He said, "You get a man's pay, you do a man's job." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. I'll do a man's job somewhere else in the factory, but I can't do this one."

I found out after I quit that the man who'd had the job before was a big, hulking African American, who'd been a boxer. And *he* quit because it was too demanding and too hard. So they gave me a job then with an electric drill. I figured I must've been drilling at least a half an hour and I'd find I'd only been drilling for ten minutes. It was so repetitious, so nothingness. An animal could've done it. In fact, I'm sure it's a robot job now. And the screeching of the metal in the drill. They never had anybody have ear plugs or anything, or mask, nothing. The only thing, we had to wear our hair in either a kerchief or a snood. I don't know if you know what a snood is, but it's a little net kind of basket sort of thing, a soft net with a ribbon at each end. You take your hair in it, in the little basket part, then you'd pull the ribbon up and tie it in a bow on top, and that would keep your hair all in. That was called a snood. I have a picture of me in my outfit that I wore—I'll have to look for that, too—with the snood and the little baseball style hat.

01-00:41:22

Anyhow, I complained about that job, too. I said, "Well, I want to work for you, but I can't do this; it's too boring." We put in nine hours a day, and we had two days off a month. But that was the general idea; people worked hard. So I said, "I've got to have a job that's more interesting." So this is the job he

put me on, a vertical milling machine. Now, I don't know if you know what that is. It was milling out portions of a master rod. Again, I didn't know much about it. What did I know about machines? But there was a big, huge machine, and about waist high was this bed, set down in like that. Then you'd have this twenty-pound master rod. The conveyor belt was down low. You'd bend over, pick up that twenty-pound master rod, lift it up, and then bend over this machine and fit it on the central post, and then drop it in. Can you imagine the pull on your back? Especially a little girl like I was. I was only just a teenager. I didn't know. But lifting it to fit it, so it would go down. Then you'd work whatever levers or buttons; I don't remember now. It would drill out the different spaces around, of the master rod, for the other—. Any man listening to this is probably just cringing right now.

But after I worked on that a little while, the foreman came over. He said, "Oh," he said, "you're doing a great job. You've really found the right job for you." He said, "Now you can do two." I said, "I guess I can." So I'm bending down, putting the one in, getting it set, going down to the next one, moving it, and then dropping it back down on the conveyor belt, then going over here. I was just [pants] like that. After a while, "Well," he said, "you're ready to do three." So here I am, bending down, putting them on, moving to the next one, then the next one, then going back again, until I had all of the master rods finished. But bending down. Then the union boss came around. He said, "What the hell are you doing?" I said, "I'm doing my job the best I can. I get a man's pay, I'm doing a man's work." He said, "That job is for only one milling machine at a time." He said, "You don't realize. You're young. After the war's over, you're going to quit. You're not going to be here anymore." He said, "But the older guys, this is their life. They have to go home and mow their lawns and take care of their families." He said, "They can't keep up three milling machines." He said, "This job is designated for just one milling machine, that's all." He said, "You're changing the quota indefinitely." He said, "You've got to quit doing that." So here I was, with the company on one side and the union on the other side. I think I went back down to two. I don't remember exactly how it ended, but it was a disaster.

Farrell:

But you decided not to quit.

01-00:45:34

Behrens:

No, I couldn't because I was trying to save money and I had gone through a couple of different jobs. So I stayed on, but I think I went back to two milling machines instead of three. But it was the most fascinating job, because [of] the people that worked in my area. One was an Indian chief. There was an Indian reservation right near Buffalo. I think it was the Iroquois. He told me all about what life was like on the reservation, about his role as the chief, and how the money meant so much; that they lived in just tar paper shacks. Then there was a Jewish furrier from New York. He would tell me about living in New York and about what his life had been life, trying to make a living as a furrier. And there was a young girl who had been raised in a convent, and never saw any

man except the priest, in all her years. When she was eighteen, she was given some clothes to wear, just one outfit and a little bit of money, and just sent out, goodbye. She had ended up as a prostitute, until she found this job. It was a new chance for her. She didn't know anything about what went on. She didn't know what prostitution was. She had to feed herself. She was an orphan, and that's all she knew.

But now, here's an interesting part of it. I went to art school, nights. I was married by this time. I got married when I was nineteen, to my high school sweetheart. He worked for Bell Airplane Factory in Buffalo and I worked here at the Chevrolet plant. We lived upstairs of the Art Institute of Buffalo, Buffalo Art Institute, and I took classes in the evening. There was this *magnificent* artist. Oh, God, he was good! His name was Oliver Lomax. But he was black. I never knew any black people and there weren't any black people in my life. Buffalo was a very segmented city. As matter of fact, when I took an anthropology course at one time, I did a paper on the setup of Buffalo. It was segmented. On the West Side, near the Peace Bridge, was the Italian section. There was the old German section, what they called the Orchard, because all the streets were named like Apple and Peach Street and that. There was a Jewish section, and there was a Polish section. In fact, it was called Buffalo pole, and they had their own government. They could pass laws and do everything, as long as it didn't conflict with Buffalo laws. You could live and die, and never leave Buffalo pole. In fact, I was in school with a young fellow—Al Orlofsky was his name—from Buffalo pole. He was in a special program for exceptionally bright people. He said to me once, "Doesn't matter how good a scholar I am or how smart I am, I'm never going to make it, because I can't get rid of my accent." It was just a heavy Polish accent because he'd lived there.

So anyhow, Oliver Lomax and his wife became friends of my husband and me at the Art Institute and we went to their house once, in the black part of Buffalo, which was just an enclave by itself. I never saw black people. I didn't live in a neighborhood that was rich enough to have servants and they shopped mostly in their own area. Sometimes you'd see them downtown, maybe, but they didn't even—. The Depression was so bad that to get a job as an elevator operator, you had to have a college degree. It wasn't prejudice or anything, people just lived separately. They might as well have been different countries. You just didn't see other people. Except the Indians. They would come in in the spring and sell violets. They'd sit on the street corners with big bunches of violets and sell them. And sassafras, I think—roots. But there again, you didn't think about it much one way or another. They were just part of the scene. It sounds terrible, but that's the way it was. People would go out to look at the reservation, but in the '30s, there was no thought about integrating. They lived in their world; everybody lived in their own little world.

01-00:51:15

Behrens:

But anyhow, Oliver worked at the Chevrolet plant, too, and I went to see him during my lunch break. I thought, well, I'll have lunch with Oliver it would be nice. I went to see him once or twice at his station. He never came up to mine. But then I was called a "nigger lover." That was what was bandied around. People went by and threw things at me. I was called into the boss's office and was going to be fired. I explained to him. I said, "I'm a married woman. My husband is a friend of Oliver's." Anyhow, he didn't fire me. I was able to stay on my job. It was very unpleasant. Not too long after that, I had saved up enough money and moved to Chicago, to go to the university.

Farrell:

Did you see those racial tensions play out in other ways in the factories? Or did you see other types of discrimination at work?

01-00:52:22

Behrens:

Well, the black people all ate by themselves. There were never any riots or anything. I was shocked. I have no idea I couldn't go visit my friend. Like I said, everything was so separated. There weren't any blacks in my school. I just didn't—I was dumb. I was just a silly little girl, making some money to go to [school]. It's hard, in retrospect, knowing the history and having the consciousness that I have now. It's quite different from a little kid, a young woman, who hated the Teachers College and was trying to save money and contribute to the war effort. But I don't think I was even thinking much about the war effort, at that time. It was a job that was available. I didn't have anybody close to me who was in the war. I know I was very conscientious about my work, because I knew it was for the war effort. I was meticulous.

I don't know what to say. I don't want to sound shallow, but I didn't think about race relations. I was just working and doing my thing, and Oliver was a friend. I don't know if there was much in the way of racial tension in Buffalo. I just don't remember anything about it. As I say, people lived in their own little areas. But that was pretty shocking to me and I remember when I went into the president or the boss or whoever it was, I can remember going into his office being furious and very indignant. It wasn't a cause. I wasn't trying to prove anything; I was just trying to disprove something. Because I just never thought about it causing any trouble. I was shocked to be labeled. I said, "Well, you can come to my house and meet my husband. He works at Bell," and so forth. So anyhow, that was that.

01-00:55:54

Then when I went to the university, I had different jobs for a while. But then I went to work for Dodge, the Dodge plant where they made superchargers for the B-29 bomber. If I had known what it was going to be used for—. That was the airplane that bombed Hiroshima. But I didn't know that at the time, of course. In fact, it was right after I left there that the bombing took place. But I was working in the subassembly of the supercharger of the B-29 bomber. That was one of the best jobs I ever had. I loved it. I had a great big bin—it must've been about this big—and it had all compartments. In the compartments were

different pieces that had to go into the assembly, subassembly of the supercharger. Now, what the big assembly is, I don't know, but this had something—. There were all different kinds of cotter pins and nuts and bolts. Some things were blue steel and some were copper and some were brass. It was just magnificent. I had to pick out all these things and put them together and put them in the right place. Then I would send them across the table, to the fellow who did the wiring. So they all had to be wired together somehow. We had a very strict tolerance that they had to measure up to.

The thing is, I had a feeler gauge that I would use to check the tolerance, and I forget what else—calipers or something. If it didn't meet the specifications, then I had a little grinder that I would do, to fit it. I remember thinking, this has got to be perfect, because it's going to go into an airplane and somebody's going to be flying that airplane. I can't have anything wrong. So I remember being so anxious about having—. But to think of it nowadays. They would never check tolerances and that with feeler gauges and things, like I did. But the only thing I remember about the people I worked with—. It was a different sort of a situation.

But there was a Russian fellow. He was always trying to teach me to sing, [sings in Russian]. He would just nearly weep because I couldn't get it right. I remember him bleaching his hair, because he had always been blonde and he wanted still to look young, so he told me he bleached it. I went to work at four in the afternoon. I'd have to take a streetcar and then transfer somewhere, to get out to the plant. It was out in South Chicago somewhere. I have some statistics here on it. It was the largest, under one roof, in the country. They built engines for the B-29 super something. It was 6.3 million square feet, and thirty city blocks; that's how big it was. That was a huge plant. You could easily get lost in it. It was Dodge Chicago. What's that super—? Looks like super fabulous, but that isn't it. But I wrote it in a hurry.

Farrell: What were some of the differences between working at the Chevy plant and then working at the Dodge plant?

01-00:58:58

Behrens:

Well, for one thing, I was older and more tired. But the Chevy plant was not too far for me to get to. The Dodge plant, I remember coming home in the winter at—. Well, I went to work at four; it must've been three or four in the morning, because we worked nine hours. I remember standing on the street corner in the snow, in the middle of the night, waiting for the next streetcar. It was huge, as I say. That was why I gave you those figures, because it was a huge place. I don't remember so much the whole plant, because it was so big. I just remember my little table and the man across from the table. He was a black fellow. The only thing I remember—we didn't talk much because we were so busy and it was the middle of the night—but he had the longest, most beautiful fingers, and I used to love to watch him doing the wiring, with these wonderful long fingers. He was pleasant. Mostly I remember eating my dinner

in the middle of the night, because I left too early to eat dinner at home. I remember everything was leftover from the day shift. I can distinctly remember the salad was all limp and greasy. I don't remember what else we had to eat, but that leftover salad with the dressing on it was pretty grim. I was so tired. I just dragged myself home, and then I had an eight o'clock class at the university, on Wordsworth. Actually, it was taught by [Norman] Maclean, the guy who wrote *A River Runs Through It*. That's a real funny story, because I was so tired. The university was on a quarter system, so you only had three months for one class. You'd just get into it and then you had to start writing your paper. Your grade depended on your paper. I was so tired I didn't have time to do much in the way of extra reading. I was trying to keep house, too and everything. I remember my question. The question was to discuss the symbolism in Wordsworth's poem about Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802 or something, a poem about a bridge. I don't know, do you remember what it is? I don't know.

Farrell: No.

01-01:01:37

Behrens: Well, anyhow. I thought I had done a good job, but I failed. I went into him. Oh, on my paper, it just said—my name was Harmon, at the time—it said, “Too much Harmon, not enough Wordsworth.” That was all. The total comment. I went in and I said, “What do you mean? He said, “Well, this symbolism is your symbolism and not Wordsworth's.” I said, “Well, I'm not Wordsworth, and neither are you.” I was a snippy thing, I guess. I said, “Internally, within the poem, the symbolism makes sense, and that's how I saw it. I haven't had a chance to study Wordsworth's life, I haven't had a chance to read all of his other poems, so I can't relate it to anything outside of the poem, so I've only done the symbolism within the poem.” He changed my grade, which I thought was wonderful. The funny thing is—the *very* funny thing is—that later, I married a professor at the University of Chicago and we all lived in the same building.

Farrell: What did he end up changing your grade to?

01-01:02:52

Behrens: I don't remember, but it was a good enough grade. Probably a B. But I think he must've been astonished, because he was so famous, such a great teacher, for me to criticize his test. But it meant so much to me to go to the University of Chicago. I loved it so much. I remember just leaping up in the air after one class. I was having the kind of education I wanted. It was worth everything to go there.

Farrell: Do you remember what effect the war had on the campus culture?

01-01:03:38

Behrens: At Chicago?

Farrell: Yeah.

01-01:03:41
Behrens:

Well, there were a lot of sailors, I think. It was just sort of subdued. I was involved with a magazine, *The Chicago Maroon*. Being married, I didn't live in a dorm or I didn't partake of social activities very much, so I don't know. I just remember there were a lot of people that were in the navy there. I hate to sound like I was so outside of it, but I kind of was, working in a factory and trying to keep house. I couldn't even go to the extra sessions. I could go to the lectures, but I couldn't go to the group meetings for anything. It was just hard. It was a hard time for me.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about maybe some of the things that you experienced in the factory in Chicago? Were there other women that were working in the factory?

01-01:04:51
Behrens:

Oh, yeah. There were, because a lot of the able-bodied men were in the service, so there were a lot of women. I remember there was a USO in Chicago, and they had various affairs—contests and promotional things going on. And I do remember V-J Day very clearly, in Grant Park. That's where everybody collected, in Grant Park and along Michigan Boulevard. It was a riotous affair. Everybody was so happy. There were sailors and all kinds of people, and everybody was singing and shouting and drinking. It was such a relief from all the tension. And all the worry, of course, and tragedies. My life as a student during the war was sort of an isolating life. I'd go into a classroom and I remember when I first went to the university, I'd have—. I don't remember breakfast, but for lunch I'd have a peanut butter sandwich, because that cheap and protein. For dinner, I'd have a sandwich that was with meat in it, and that was it at first. That's all I could afford. So it was a time when the Depression still hung heavy. And the university was an isolated world and my working was an isolated world; and then I'd go home to trying to keep my little apartment and do the laundry. I didn't have a washing machine. I was kind of out of it, at the same time I was in it. It's sort of hard to explain. Since I didn't have anybody close to me in the service, my brother—. Well, that's an interesting thing. My brother wanted to be a Conscientious Objector. I don't know where he got it from. My father had been in the service in World War I, but he had been a draftsman during World War I. He had belonged to the army, but because of his technical background, he was sent working on Curtiss airplanes in Long Island. But he was no Conscientious Objector at all, so my brother didn't get it from him. But I think it was because he was given a BB gun one Christmas, and my father took him out and had him shoot a bird. When he saw the bird drop at his feet and realized he'd killed it, he said, "I'll never pick up a gun again as long as I live." So he tried to be a Conscientious Objector, but he wasn't accepted. He said, "I'll be an ambulance driver, I'll work in an office, but I will not pick up a gun." Well, you can't be in the service if you don't go through basic

training; you have to pick up a gun. He said, "Well, I'm sorry, I can't." So they put him in the hospital for observation for two weeks. It was right on Main Street, and he spent a lot of time looking out the window. He didn't have anything to do; they just kept him in a room and interviewed him now and then. He tells of one time they interviewed him and asked him if he ever heard voices. He said, "You mean the kind that sits on one shoulder, you hear it in one ear, and then he pops over to the other shoulder and you hear it in that ear and it tells you things to do and how to think?" "Yeah, yeah," they said, "Yeah, yeah?" He said, "Nope, never heard them." So they decided he was not fit for service for 4-F, psychological reasons. He carried that with him all his life, and it really hurt him. But he went to a Lutheran church and the Lutheran church did not oppose being a member of the service. He'd never written any papers of any kind, he'd never joined any organization. He had nothing to prove that he was a sincere [Conscientious Objector], just that he said he'd never pick up a gun, so they didn't credit that at all. So that's why my brother wasn't in it.

01-01:09:44

My husband was 4-F. So kids I went to high school with, I kind of lost track of, because I was off in Chicago. So it was a strange thing, to be part of it and not part of it. I would see the newsreels and I would agonize over the destruction. I remember seeing *All Quiet on the Western Front* when I was in high school. On one Memorial Day, we had to write essays. I remember writing an essay against war, that was very intense. I don't know what to say, how to think about it. There was so much hoopla, so much marching and so much going on, so much destruction. Having come from a German background, this was very hard, because my father had spoken German before he spoke English. He went into my grandmother, his mother, one day crying because the children wouldn't play with him. They called him a dumb heine. He said, "Someday I'll speak better English than all the rest of them." And he did. He ended up with a magnificent vocabulary and quite a prestigious job with the state. But for me, German was songs and games, and I said my prayers in German. I couldn't speak German, but we were taught these little childhood things. When my grandparents would all be together, they'd all speak German. My mother had heard German in her home and took it in high school, so they could converse with their parents. But they wouldn't speak German to us children. They taught us the little prayers and things, and we ate German cooking and we knew quite a lot about German culture. But I remember how awful it was for my grandparents. My grandfather Berns had been a member of the Socialist Labor party, and they were all very liberal-minded people. I remember how awful it was for them. They would see the destruction of German cities and Germans, and knew that there were Germans who were not Nazis. But even as recently as ten years ago, one of my friends, who knew I had a German background, twice said to me in a conversation, "Well, the only good German is a dead German." Well, that was the way people felt during the war. It was awful. Sometimes when people would say, with my name, "Oh, you're German, aren't you?" "No, I'm Swedish. There

was just a German married into somebody.” Because it was incomprehensible. We’d know from the news and from the newscasts. You’d go to the movies, you’d see Pathé news. But they were all old; it wasn’t at the moment. But you’d see the bombers and you’d see the destruction. And having seen *All Quiet on the Western Front*, you knew it was that and more, much more, larger scale. It was just hard to hold it all in, to figure how it could be.

01-01:14:03

In fact, I’ve been writing a story—in fact, it’s a novella—about the way the Germans felt about Hitler and about the protests. We know about the protests. Protesters were people like those who tried to assassinate Hitler. We know about the people who helped the Jews escape. We know about a lot of it. But the little things that went on, the organizations, the efforts of the people who hated Hitler and were appalled by it in Germany, you don’t know too much about what went on with them and what organizations—. My first art teacher was in Buffalo, in the thirties. Margaret Hyne, her name was. She had been part of a protest moment, and her husband. I think they put out papers or brochures or something. I don’t know exactly what they did, but there was a whole organization. She had a newborn baby, and she and her husband and her parents, and his parents, too, I guess—I don’t know who all—were working somewhere putting on the protest flyers. Whatever they were doing, I don’t know. She went home to nurse her baby, and she’d only barely gotten home when somebody came in and said, “They’ve found them and they’ve killed them all. You’ve got to get out of here.” She just grabbed up her baby with what she had, and through an underground of some sort, she got to France. From France, she found sponsors in America, because she was an artist. She had actually worked with Käthe Kollwitz, who was a very famous German woman artist, who was banished by Hitler. But anyhow, she was telling me about what it was like, and about the refugees that managed to escape. But she was telling me about the anguish of people who were so opposed to everything that Hitler had wrought. But you don’t know much about all those little stories like that, unless it happened to somebody famous.

Farrell: Had you heard a lot of those sentiments or those stories during or after the war?

01-01:16:55

Behrens: Did I hear about them during or after the war?

Farrell: Yeah.

01-01:16:58

Behrens: Oh, during.

Farrell: During.

01-01:17:00

Behrens:

This was in '38, I guess, that I knew Margaret Hyne and she was my teacher. She had got out her guitar and sang German Lieder. It was so beautiful and so sad. She was a fine artist. She told me about Käthe Kollwitz. I don't know if you've ever seen any of Käthe Kollwitz's work. She was a socialist. All her work had to do with the poor. Her husband, too was a doctor in Berlin. They lived in the poorest section of Berlin. From what I understood from Margaret Hyne, if I'm remembering correctly, she was banished to some mountain retreat. And not allowed to have any of her stuff sold or distributed in any way. But they couldn't kill her outright, because she was so popular, so well-known and loved by forward-thinking people in Germany.

Farrell:

Did that affect your feelings towards working in a factory during the war?

01-01:18:21

Behrens:

That's the curious thing. Because after all, I was an American, and we had to win. The war effort was everywhere. It was everything you did. It was all about the war. Even your rationing and—. You couldn't escape it. You were so appalled at what was going on over there. We were so appalled at Hitler and Nazism. I had Jewish friends, and their suffering—. And Margaret, her story. You couldn't escape it; it was just everywhere. So working in a factory—that's the part that's so awful—to help create engines of destruction, things that were going to destroy other people and cities, whole cities. When I think of Dresden, I just don't want to think. You didn't know. It wasn't instant like it is now, instant news. You'd get stuff later and it was something that had happened. The immediacy of war in America must've been quite different from the immediacy of war in Europe. We didn't have bombings here. All we had was rationing and work, and we had our Victory Gardens and we did without. There was always the theme of sacrificing and doing without, and the war effort and support the boys. You would dread hearing reports of losses. Of course, a big assault—. I can't think of the name now. Not Omaha Beach. Well, you know. I can't think of it.

Farrell:

Normandy Beach?

01-01:20:53

Behrens:

I'm trying to think of the name of the huge assault where they pulled the boats up near the shore, in France. Just right at the moment, it escapes me. But that was so shocking. And to see pictures later, movies later, of the boys being gunned down in the water, it was just—. It's so hard to imagine—to believe, even—what was going on. Being 3,000 miles away from it—. More than that, because 3,000 miles across the Atlantic and then wherever we were here. I don't know, I don't know what to say. It's just a time that is hard to contain. But everybody felt like, we're all in this together, we've got to do whatever we can do. We do without, we donate things, we donate our time. You'd work for the USO, you worked in factories. It was chaotic.

Farrell: Those feelings of working together and doing without, and those feelings of patriotism and sacrifice, how long did that continue after the war ended?

01-01:22:25

Behrens: I don't know. I really don't know, because it was quite a time before normalcy, shall we say, returned. I think it was just exhaustion, as much as anything, relief it was over. Then the gradual unfolding of the leftovers of war and the Holocaust, and the information that kept coming out, and Anne Frank and all. There was just a generalized feeling—for me, at least, as far as I knew and everybody I knew—was revulsion and exhaustion, and glad it was over. But you knew it wasn't over. There still had to be healing and there had to be reconstruction. It was just a terrible time, all the way around.

Farrell: Do you remember how that healing and reconstruction played out, or how that unfolded? Do you remember what that healing and reconstruction was like?

01-01:23:49

Behrens: Well, not really, because my own personal life was so chaotic at the time. I was divorced and living alone in Chicago. All the people I had gone to school with were gone, back to their hometowns or whatever, and I was living in a basement apartment all alone. It was a bachelor's degree and I was back to square one. I couldn't type and take shorthand, and I didn't want to work in a factory, and the factory jobs closed down, of course. Then when I remarried, that was during the fifties, the crazy time where we all wore little aprons and had the cocktails all ready for our husbands when they came home, and raising children, which came so close after the end of the war, and trying to make a different life for them. I guess everybody missed Roosevelt, too. Things were very unsettled, in lots of ways. But also there was getting the men back into the jobs, getting the women out of the workforce. One of the things I remember most about that period were his-and-her towels in the bathrooms. Everything was geared toward domesticity, toward having lots of children and buying houses and trying to return to normalcy. Normalcy meant the status quo, as it had been. But not as it had been during the Depression, in terms of money, but in terms of role playing. All the women where I lived, we all lived the same kind of life. Everything revolved around our husbands' careers and raising children and reading women's magazines. I can remember sharing recipes, how to make meatloaf in a different way. It was sort of like everybody just wanted to get back to the good old days, but the new days, because there were—. Danish modern furniture came in at that time. Everybody was trying to fix their houses with Danish modern furniture and spun aluminum candlesticks and split-level houses. There was just a preoccupation with—. I really can't say return to normalcy, because that wouldn't be right. It was to have the good life. As a matter of fact, I went to Germany in 1970-something. I met different people, who really thought that their image of America was that everybody was rich and had two cars and everybody owned their own home. That was the image that we lived with, and I guess people in other parts of the world had of us, too. It's hard to go back

and remember how you were and things were. After all, that's half a century ago for me.

Farrell: Do you remember how long you stayed working in the factory, after the war ended?

01-01:28:03

Behrens: No, not very long, because—. No, I don't think so. I don't remember exactly when I quit. But they didn't need so many people. I guess I was getting near my degree, and my marriage broke up, so that's sort of a vague time for me. I don't remember.

Farrell: What did you do for work after the factory? Or was there a period where you weren't working?

01-01:28:41

Behrens: I had the damnedest job. I worked as a department store specialist for Lee and Brewer. That's all I remember, their name, but what the name of their company was—. It had to do with promoting stuff in department stores. My special area was the Cordite Company. They made plastic clothes lines, which was something brand new, and plastic clothes pins that were little, instead of the great big wooden ones. They're little plastic [ones]. Plastics were really coming in then, in great abundance. I remember these colorful plastic clothes pins. My job was to see to it that demonstrations were set up in different department stores. I'd hire the women who would have their spiel, and I'd tell them what they had to say, and check on the inventory and the ads and all that. Had nothing to do with my education or my interests or anything, but it was a job and it was something I could do, because I didn't have to type or take shorthand.

Farrell: Do you remember when the men were coming back from overseas, and how it sort of unfolded that they were getting their jobs back and the women who were working weren't anymore?

01-01:30:10

Behrens: I don't remember too much about that because I was in a university community. My husband was a professor there, and it was kind of a little closed scene down there, in the south part of Chicago. I remember racial tensions in the area where I lived, in Hyde Park. On the north side of Hyde Park were the Devil's Disciples, I think; and the south side of Hyde Park were the Blackstone Rangers. Or just vice versa, I'm not sure. The university was a little enclave in the middle, and these communities, these gangs—. In fact, it was so bad that everybody on my street had a dog or a gun. My daughter was treed once, on the way home from school. She had to climb a tree to get away. Nobody rode their bikes around because they were afraid that somebody with a chain was going to threaten to whip them in the face and take their bikes away from them. This was the time when Saul Alinsky was working in South Chicago. It was a hard time, because people in the university understood the

tensions of social problems, and were not prejudiced; but they had to watch out for themselves anyhow. You'd go to meetings with Saul Alinsky and hear him speak, and try to do the right thing. But it was sort of more turned inward, at the time, I would say, for me, because as I say, I had four children and I was in a suburban kind of a life. Doris Day could've been my middle name.

Farrell: Do you remember, after the war ended, how the cultural landscape of Chicago changed at all?

01-01:32:34
Behrens:

The culture of Chicago?

Farrell: Yeah, how that changed after the war ended, if it did at all.

01-01:32:43
Behrens:

Well, gradually, Navy Pier was not as active as it had been and you didn't see the servicemen on the streets anymore. It was all sort of like trying to turn back. The politics of Chicago itself became sort of prominent in people's minds. I just remember I was at the convention in Chicago where Roosevelt was nominated for his fourth term. I got to go to the convention, because I was with *The Chicago Maroon*, the university paper, as the art editor. I took my pad and I did caricatures of all the different people. I sat right on the floor, with all the delegates. I've still got some of those pictures that I drew. I don't know who they were now. But I'd draw a picture of one delegate, "Oh, oh, do this one. Do him." So I'd go on and draw somebody else. But I wasn't that involved with President Roosevelt at the time; I was more involved with drawing pictures. I don't mean to sound empty-headed, but at different times in your life, and different age and different situations, your social conscience, it just takes different turns and different shapes. I remember being appalled by racial problems. I remember feeling outside of it, in some way. I remember going to a black nightclub in South Chicago to hear Billie Holiday sing. That was so thrilling. We were the only white couple there. We didn't think to be afraid and nobody bothered us. It was very strange, very strange, to be so uninvolved, in a way, but right in the thick of it. I guess it's just sort of like, I knew what I believed and my husband believed, and we tried to vote and be part of what we believed in, and all this stuff is going on around. I'm sorry I can't be more helpful in some way.

Farrell: No, this is fantastic. How did your life, either maybe mentally or structurally, change after the war? Did it change at all permanently or temporarily?

01-01:35:53
Behrens:

How did it change? Well, just a minute; I've got to have a little sip here.

Farrell: Sure.

01-01:36:00

Behrens:

Well, I told you after the war, within five years, I was married and started raising a family. Between the time when I got my degree and got married again, I was just sort of surviving. I don't remember too much about that time. No, that's sort of blanked out, because I was all alone in this basement apartment. My sister came and lived with me for a year, but we didn't get along because she was a voice major. She was studying voice with Vittorio Trevisan, who had been a bass singer with the Italian opera, La Scala. We had this little apartment. It was just [a] one room apartment with a kitchen. I had a piano in the kitchen and she would practice. Her voice was so big and so loud, and I couldn't study. She had the right to practice and sing loud; I had the right to not be disturbed while I was trying to [study]. So that was only that one year. I don't remember too much about that time. It was sort of a dead time. I'm sorry.

Farrell:

No. how do you feel America changed after World War II?

01-01:37:38

Behrens:

Well, it was incredible. As I say, the whole thing was to retool, to get back to making goods to sell to people, to have babies. That was a big thing, have babies. Then there was a big market for baby furniture. That's when they started with all the formulas, bottles and formulas, and women's magazines. And movies, too. It was all to try to reestablish a good life in America. Two cars in every garage, and lots of babies and lots of furniture. I don't remember much, except that everything was turned inward, into your split-level houses and your barbecues in the backyard, and retooling for consumer goods. Actually, I think we lost a lot of sort of a moral compass, in a way, became too consumer-oriented. I may be wrong about that, because I'm not a social sciences or a political science major; but that's my feeling, that there was a stereotypical of sense of what an American good life was.

Farrell:

Is there anything else that you maybe wanted to add about this period?

01-01:39:23

Behrens:

Probably lots of stuff I'll think about. I could go on and on, but I can't think of anything right now. Because I don't know how much my experience reflects the experience in general and how much was my own turned-inward kind of world of trying to survive and go to school. And my private life was kind of a shambles. So I don't know who I speak for, except for myself. I would like to have more political wisdom. But I remember working on every Democratic presidential campaign. I remember even wheeling my babies in the baby carriage, and the carriage was full of literature that I would take to different houses and try to talk up. I remember working for [Eugene] McCarthy and [George] McGovern and I don't know who else right now—all the Democratic candidates—and being heartbroken when they didn't win. And licking envelopes and—. I always tried to do what I could, on my little personal level. But it wasn't until later—. But during that period, from President Roosevelt on up to—oh, let's see; I don't know, I guess up until

now—I've always worked, but just at the local level. So I wish I could tell you more that would be helpful, but—.

Farrell: No, this has been fantastic.

01-01:41:32

Behrens: But I would like to find that picture and those early tracings, because they're such a part of that time.

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. Well, this is a good place to leave it here for today, so thank you.

01-01:41:47

Behrens: Okay.