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Eleth Lee Chappat

Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Sarah Selvidge
in 2010

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Eleth Lee Chappat

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Interview #1 August 11, 2010
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01-00:00:00

Selvidge: Okay. So this is our tape one, August 11, 2010. This is Sarah Selvidge. Just go ahead and say and spell your name.

01-00:00:18

Chappat: My name is Eleth Chappat. Eleth is E-L-E-T-H. Chappat is C-H-A-P-P-A-T.

01-00:00:29

Selvidge: Great. So I'd like to start more or less from the beginning and have you talk a little bit about when you were born and your family and sort of your early life as a child.

01-00:00:47

Chappat: I was born and raised in Ojai, California on July 2, 1925. And then when I got a little older, we moved to Ventura. So I was raised in Ventura County. I went to several schools because my parents moved around quite a bit. So my education, I didn't get too much because they moved all the time. I don't know. My dad couldn't get a job, but when he did, then we'd have to move to it. So it was just moving all the time as a kid. So that's what happened.

01-00:01:35

Selvidge: So you moved around a lot in the Southern California area?

01-00:01:39

Chappat: Moved a lot. I think our biggest move was to Bakersfield and he wanted to become a contractor and sell houses and things. Then he took sick and he couldn't sell the houses, so we had to move back to Ventura. We went to Ojai every Sunday to my grandmother's house for dinner. That went on every Sunday of the year. This one particular Sunday, we were on our way to Ojai to go have dinner with grandma and the radio came on and President Roosevelt said, "We have declared war on Japan." And the chills and everything just went through our bodies. We couldn't believe it. So when we got to Ojai and we turned the radio on and we heard about Pearl Harbor being bombed. It was awful. Just silence all over the country. So we ate our dinner and went to church and everything and prayed for peace and stuff. Then we went back to Ventura and soon my dad got a job in San Francisco building a shipyard at Marinship in Sausalito.

01-00:03:07

Selvidge: Oh, okay. So you were just a teenager then.

01-00:03:10

Chappat: I was sixteen. I'd be almost seventeen.

01-00:03:17

Selvidge: And so after moving around and your father working in agricultural and other types of jobs, you followed him to San Francisco as a whole family?

01-00:03:29
Chappat:

No.

01-00:03:30
Selvidge:

Oh, no. Okay. Just tell me who went with your father.

01-00:03:32
Chappat:

My dad had to go and he lived on—

01-00:03:33
Selvidge:

Oh, just your father.

01-00:03:35
Chappat:

My dad. He went up there because they had to build the shipyard before they could build ships. So I think it took a year. So after the year, he called and came down and got me and took me back on a bus. I was seventeen by now. So I tried to get a job up there but nobody would hire me.

01-00:04:00
Selvidge:

Why wouldn't they hire you?

01-00:04:01
Chappat:

I was too young.

01-00:04:02
Selvidge:

Too young.

01-00:04:04
Chappat:

So my dad used to give me five dollars to go to the show or something like that. Then Roosevelt called out to the country and said that women were needed in the shipyards. By this time the yards were all finished and ready to build ships. So my dad, he says, "Come on, I'm going to get you a job." I said, "Doing what?" He says, "Welding." He says, "Now, when you start to arc—" I didn't know what an arc was—he said, "you strike it like a match." Strike it like a match. He pounded that into my head and I had to go to the class at midnight until eight o'clock the next morning. So I went into the class. I was striking that thing like a match and it didn't work. Didn't work. And I'm so upset over it because I'm not going to get a job because I can't do it. So the instructor came by and he says, "What's the matter, miss?" I said, "I can't do this job. It don't work." He said, "Well, hon, you don't have your machine hot enough." He says, "Let's turn it up," and he put the proper heat on it and I struck it. I was on my way! I did vertical, I did overhead and I passed. They hired me. So my dad bought me the leathers to go to work. My mother put them in a big suitcase. So here's this seventeen year old kid going into the shipyard.

01-00:05:39
Selvidge:

Yes, wow. I have a couple of questions before we get to the shipyard. I'm wondering, first, did the rest of your family stay in Ventura then?

01-00:05:52
Chappat: In Ventura. Yes.

01-00:05:53
Selvidge: Oh, so it was just you and your dad at the shipyards?

01-00:05:56
Chappat: Yes. Yes.

01-00:05:58
Selvidge: And how many siblings did you have?

01-00:06:00
Chappat: Well, my mother had nine children. One died. She was a young widow at age 22 or 23. She had to adopt three of them out. She was washing dishes in the Ojai hotel and she couldn't support them and everything and this rich family wanted to adopt them. She didn't want to do it but her father said, "You can't support them. They can get an education with this family." So she let them go. In the meantime, she met my dad in Ojai and they got married.

01-00:06:39
Selvidge: Oh, so she was a single mother before then?

01-00:06:42
Chappat: Right. She was a single mother. Had five children and she adopted the youngest three out. Kept Bud and my sister, Florence.

01-00:06:53
Selvidge: Wow.

01-00:06:54
Chappat: Then she married my dad and eventually he had three girls and a son who died during birth.

01-00:06:58
Selvidge: He had three girls with your mom? Together?

01-00:07:00
Chappat: Yes. So I have two sisters and I have one half-sister and one half-brother.

01-00:07:12
Selvidge: And, if you don't mind my asking a couple of questions about that.

01-00:07:18
Chappat: No, go ahead.

01-00:07:20
Selvidge: Did your mother keep contact with the children that were adopted or was it just—

01-00:07:25

Chappat:

She kept in contact with the youngest boy, Jerry. Alvin, the oldest, went to New York and he invested in radio. Then when TV came in, he was a big shot in TV. Then the other boy, John, became a mortician. He had three or four mortuaries there in Inglewood, and then he built a beautiful mortuary in Palm Springs. But we knew all about the boys. Yes.

01-00:08:01

Selvidge:

So you did hear news of them and your mother was able to know that they were doing well?

01-00:08:07

Chappat:

Yes.

01-00:08:08

Selvidge:

And you said you did keep in contact, in closer contact, with one?

01-00:08:12

Chappat:

With the youngest boy, Jerry.

01-00:08:11

Selvidge:

With the youngest boy.

01-00:08:14

Chappat:

He was an embalmer. Yes.

01-00:08:17

Selvidge:

And did he live close to you, then?

01-00:08:19

Chappat:

No, he lived in Long Beach, down in there.

01-00:08:22

Selvidge:

Oh, okay. But the family that adopted him did sort of maintain ties with him?

01-00:08:26

Chappat:

Oh, yes.

01-00:08:28

Selvidge:

Interesting. So it was a pretty big family then.

01-00:08:32

Chappat:

Oh, yes. At that point my mother and two sisters, they stayed in Ventura until my dad got situated up here. I stayed in a hotel with him. The police came one day and wanted to know why this man had a young girl with him. We happened to be father and daughter, so that was okay. Then my sister June, she came up and she got a job at the shipyard as a rigger. I think she was the only rigger in the United States! She did a real good job.

01-00:09:19

Selvidge:

What do you mean when you say she's the only rigger? The only woman—

01-00:09:21

Chappat: A woman. Woman rigger.

01-00:09:23

Selvidge: —that’s a rigger. Yes.

01-00:09:26

Chappat: And then my other sister, the oldest one, Esther, she got a job as a sweeper. She used to sweep. But she was real feminine, real pretty woman. She couldn’t work there. It was too dirty. She only lasted three days.

01-00:09:46

Selvidge: She didn’t like it?

01-00:09:48

Chappat: No, she didn’t like it. She got a job at Safeway. She gave that job up fast at the shipyard.

01-00:09:57

Selvidge: So tell me what you and your other sister, how you felt doing jobs that were so different from what you probably expected you would be doing. Welding.

01-00:10:11

Chappat: I loved doing that job. I was an arc welder but then after a while they gave me a rod. They called it the black rod. Smoke. The black smoke. When you lifted your hood, your nose was just black. If you coughed anything, it was all black. I knew that’s going to destroy me and my lungs. So I told the boss I couldn’t do that anymore. He said, “Well, what are you going to do?” I said, “Well, I guess I have to quit.” He says, “No, don’t quit. I got another job for you.” I said, “Doing what?” He said, “Running the union melt.” We have a union melt machine. He says, “You’d have a crew.” It’s a little machine and it fills in the seam where the two pieces of metal come together. But I did real well on that. The lady that worked for me married my brother so she became my sister-in-law. But as I wanted to tell you when I entered that shipyard at seventeen with my suitcase—

01-00:11:22

Selvidge: Yes. Tell me about that.

01-00:11:23

Chappat: I walked in there and the guys all said, “Hey, baby. Are you moving in?” Because I had that big suitcase.

01-00:11:32

Selvidge: Yes. And that’s where you had all the leather overalls and that kind of stuff?

01-00:11:37

Chappat: Yes. And when they said that, I shrunk about like that, because I’m only seventeen years old and all these men were looking and calling out to me. They were older men. So one night they put me out there on the—

01-00:11:48
Selvidge: Were there not a lot of other women around at that point?

01-00:11:53
Chappat: Oh, a lot of women were in there. Yes.

01-00:11:53
Selvidge: Okay. But in that particular area it was a lot of men?

01-00:11:55
Chappat: No, there was no women there. They were someplace. I don't know where. But they put me out on one of the ways to do some welding on the ribs of the ship. So I was welding there when I lifted my hood and I saw this young guy down about half a block away. He was warming himself and he was the most beautiful human I ever saw. To my friend I said, "Lil, look here." I said, "Do you see that man down there?" She says, "Yes." I said, "I'm going to marry that guy." So I took off that hood and I went down there and I was talking to him and I ended up marrying him.

01-00:12:44
Selvidge: You did?

01-00:12:45
Chappat: Yes, I did. We just had a good time. June really enjoyed her job.

01-00:12:57
Selvidge: That's your sister, right?

01-00:12:59
Chappat: My sister June. Excuse me.

01-00:13:03
Selvidge: Sure.

01-00:13:09
Chappat: From then on I just loved doing a man's job because you got better pay. But then when the war ended, I went to work for the Army WOD. That's Western Ocean Division. I was in the motor pool and would pick up officers to take them to get shots or whatever before they were shipped overseas to help rebuild the countries destroyed by war.

01-00:13:33
Selvidge: I have some more questions. I'd love to hear about that. The sort of transition after the war is over. But I have some questions first about the war time period. One question is if you can explain to me a little bit about how things worked in the shipyard in terms of your boss and who managed you and the other people you worked with and how that was sort of setup, if you remember.

01-00:14:05
Chappat:

Well, that time I walked in with a suitcase and everything. I met this boss and he's very nice. Treated me with respect. So did all the men. There was no nasty stuff or anything. They just treated us like ladies. But it was hard work. And this particular night, I just got hired, remember, and he told me to put these lift pads on this piece of metal that was going to put on the ship. The lift pad is like a U with a big hole in it and you weld those to the metal. And you weld it on there good because they're going to be lifted by the cranes. So I put four of them on. It took eight hours to put them on. And here comes my dad. He works the graveyard. And he said to the boss, "Who put those lift pads on?" "She did." He says, "Take them off." He says, "Why?" He says, "Because I know that girl, and she just got out of school. Take them off." The man took them off. I didn't question anything because I was too new to ask anything. So the next day I asked the man, "Why did you take those off?" He said, "Because when they lift them, if one breaks or two breaks and there's people underneath, you could kill them." But he said, "I have to tell you, every one of your welds was good." So I was very happy about that. But I never did question my dad about it. And he didn't know that he was my dad.

01-00:15:53
Selvidge:

The supervisor didn't know that that was your father?

01-00:15:57
Chappat:

No, no.

01-00:15:59
Selvidge:

But your father didn't want you to have the responsibility of—

01-00:16:03
Chappat:

Well, he knew I just got hired. How come they're putting me on such a dangerous job for somebody to get killed and I don't know what I'm doing. Well, I did know what I was doing, so I did a good job.

01-00:16:19
Selvidge:

Yes. Tell me more, if you can. Do you remember other sort of experiences or occurrences when you really were confronted with how serious and dangerous the job was? Is that something that you felt every day?

01-00:16:38
Chappat:

Well, yes. We needed those ships bad because I think we were pushing a ship out about every two months. They were really needed because we didn't have any oil tankers or enough ships to fight the war. It was very important. I knew it was important. There was no slumping off on your job or anything. You knew you had a job and you did it because it was needed.

01-00:17:08
Selvidge:

So people really had a sense of contributing to the war effort.

01-00:17:10
Chappat:

Right. I never took a day off. I did my job.

01-00:17:18
Selvidge: How many days a week did you work?

01-00:17:21
Chappat: Five.

01-00:17:22
Selvidge: Five.

01-00:17:23
Chappat: And if they wanted six or if they wanted seven, we did it. I had to take a bus. Sometimes I took a ferry over there. We didn't have cars. You couldn't buy anything.

01-00:17:36
Selvidge: Tell me about where you lived. You were working in Sausalito, right? Where did you live at that time?

01-00:17:46
Chappat: Well, we lived on Willard Street above Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. We had a nice flat there. It was a beautiful place. Back then there was no place to live, so my friend Grace and her husband, he was a Marine, they lived with us. After—

01-00:18:08
Selvidge: With you and your father and your sister eventually?

01-00:18:11
Chappat: Yes. We had my sister and her husband. He was in the Navy and me and my husband and my mother and dad all lived together.

01-00:18:24
Selvidge: So your mother eventually came then from Ventura?

01-00:18:27
Chappat: Well, yes. My family finally moved up here when he rented that house on Willard Street.

01-00:18:32
Selvidge: Is that the one way up on the hill where UCSF is? No?

01-00:18:35
Chappat: It's right on the hill. Right straight up. When you park, your car will look like it was going to tip over. But we really had a good time up there and it just was wonderful.

01-00:18:53
Selvidge: So you had sort of the whole family living together over there.

01-00:18:56
Chappat: Yes. There was no fighting or nothing. We all got along and then I got pregnant and Esther was pregnant and Grace was pregnant. My dad used to

say, "You guys better quit drinking all that water up here." We had fun. It was nice.

01-00:19:17
Selvidge:

Tell me about your impressions of San Francisco, then, because I know the places you were talking about living when you were growing up, even though there were a number of places, they were all in pretty rural sort of agricultural areas.

01-00:19:32
Chappat:

Yes, right.

01-00:19:33
Selvidge:

What did you think of San Francisco when you got there?

01-00:19:34
Chappat:

When I got there, I couldn't believe San Francisco. It was theater after theater. Theater. Lights. Oh my god. Because I come out of a little hick town that had one show, one grocery store. That was it. We didn't have no money. But, gee, my dad used to give me five or six dollars to go to the show in San Francisco while he went to work.

01-00:20:00
Selvidge:

That's a good bit of money then.

01-00:20:01
Chappat:

Yes, back then. Well, he was working, too. And another man, a friend of my dad, he used to give me some money to go to the show. It wasn't just my dad. And I used to go to one show after another, because I couldn't believe it! And then you could go to the newsreel, my dad used to go to the newsreel. That's the only place we could get news. We didn't have a radio with us.

01-00:20:32
Selvidge:

Oh, you didn't have a radio with you?

01-00:20:33
Chappat:

No, not until we moved up to Willard Street.

01-00:20:36
Selvidge:

Willard Street.

01-00:20:36
Chappat:

When my family came up.

01-00:20:41
Selvidge:

So the news reels is really the way that you learned about the war.

01-00:20:46
Chappat:

We could see all about what Japan was doing and the bombs and the soldier boys getting killed and hitting that Iwo Jima beach. Oh, boy, it was scary.

01-00:21:02
Selvidge: Speaking of this kind of fear, do you remember feeling like either the shipyards or the San Francisco area was a target?

01-00:21:16
Chappat: Well, yes. We did. When we were home, we couldn't have the lights on. You had to pull the shades down.

01-00:21:26
Selvidge: At night.

01-00:21:26
Chappat: The lights would be dim. That happened down in Ventura a lot, too.

01-00:21:31
Selvidge: Oh, really?

01-00:21:31
Chappat: Because we were on the coast and you had to pull the shades down.

01-00:21:37
Selvidge: So they were asking people to—

01-00:21:38
Chappat: Well, yes. If you had your shade up and light was showing, they had guys with white hats on. What did they call them people? Oh, gee.

01-00:21:49
Selvidge: I'm not sure.

01-00:21:50
Chappat: But they'd go around and tell you to shut the light off or pull your shade down. Because we could have been bombed at any time. It was scary.

01-00:21:59
Selvidge: Yes, I bet. Did they also turn the streetlights down at night?

01-00:22:03
Chappat: Yes, they did. Dimmed them. Yes.

01-00:22:05
Selvidge: Dimmed them. So there was some light but not—

01-00:22:08
Chappat: Not much.

01-00:22:08
Selvidge: —much.

01-00:22:08
Chappat: You didn't go out mostly at night. No. No.

01-00:22:15
Selvidge: But your dad worked the graveyard shift, right?

01-00:22:17
Chappat: Yes, he did.

01-00:22:21
Selvidge: But you all mostly stayed home at night?

01-00:22:23
Chappat: Yes. Well, I worked the swing shift, 3:00 to midnight, and he came midnight to 8:00. That's why on Sixth Street—Sixth Street wasn't like it is today.

01-00:22:36
Selvidge: Sixth Street in Sacramento?

01-00:22:37
Chappat: In San Francisco.

01-00:22:39
Selvidge: Oh, in San Francisco. Oh, downtown.

01-00:22:42
Chappat: We had a hotel room.

01-00:22:43
Selvidge: Oh, so that's before you moved to Willard?

01-00:22:46
Chappat: Yes, before my family come up my dad and me stayed in this hotel.

01-00:22:50
Selvidge: So you stayed in a hotel near Market Street?

01-00:22:53
Chappat: On Sixth Street.

01-00:22:55
Selvidge: On Sixth. I'm sure it was very different then.

01-00:22:58
Chappat: Oh, it was. The bed never got cold, because when he went to work it was midnight and then I would come back and go to bed. Oh, gee.

01-00:23:11
Selvidge: So you and your father switched off in the bed?

01-00:23:13
Chappat: Yes.

01-00:23:13
Selvidge: So you rented one bed?

01-00:23:16
Chappat: Yes, we just had one bed.

01-00:23:18
Selvidge: Can you tell me what you remember about some of the other people who you knew that were staying at the hotel?

01-00:23:27
Chappat: Well, you didn't have time to meet too many people, I'll tell you that, because you're working. They hired chippers, and they were deaf. So you couldn't talk to them. But they'd use this gun and the noise, oh, you couldn't hear yourself think. But that's why they hired deaf people to do that job. I met one man, he was really a nice man. Most people I did meet were nice.

01-00:24:01
Selvidge: Do you remember what parts of the country or the state they mostly came from?

01-00:24:06
Chappat: Well, a lot of those people came from Oklahoma, Texas.

01-00:24:13
Selvidge: So much farther away than you and your family.

01-00:24:15
Chappat: Well, yes. They came.

01-00:24:18
Selvidge: And did you notice much of a difference in the people who were coming from farther away and the people closer? Were there sort of cultural differences that you noticed?

01-00:24:30
Chappat: Well, back then a lot of them had different slangs, different way of talking. But what I noticed, there was no black people. I said, "Well, how come they don't hire blacks?" Well, they separated the blacks from the whites for some reason. I don't know why.

01-00:24:54
Selvidge: On the shipyard?

01-00:24:54
Chappat: In the shipyard.

01-00:24:58
Selvidge: What about in the hotels and stuff? Was it mostly white people, as well?

01-00:25:03
Chappat: Yes. There was a shortage of places to live, so they built Marin City. They were all little shacks. They had one bedroom or two bedroom. That's where a lot of people lived.

01-00:25:24
Selvidge: So a lot of people lived in newly built kind of housing. Housing.

01-00:25:28
Chappat: Or just little shacks. They were made out of wood. They were not anything special, but people made do and got along.

01-00:25:36
Selvidge: Were people happy to have those?

01-00:25:38
Chappat: Oh, yes. They thought they were in heaven. Yes. My sister even lived over there.

01-00:25:46
Selvidge: Oh, yes?

01-00:25:47
Chappat: My sister June.

01-00:25:48
Selvidge: When you and your father were still in the hotel?

01-00:25:51
Chappat: No, when we lived on Willard Street.

01-00:25:52
Selvidge: She lived and rented.

01-00:25:53
Chappat: For some reason, she liked it over there and she met this lady, her father and mother were living there, so they asked her to stay with her, so she stayed over there and rented from them.

01-00:26:03
Selvidge: Oh, so she lived with a family.

01-00:26:04
Chappat: She didn't have to travel as far as I did. Yes.

01-00:26:08
Selvidge: So tell me, how did you get to Sausalito from San Francisco?

01-00:26:13
Chappat: How did I get over there?

01-00:26:14
Selvidge: Yes.

01-00:26:15
Chappat: Well, I took a street car on Judah Street and went over to 19th Avenue and picked up a Greyhound bus. Went across the bridge on a Greyhound bus. Let

us out right in front of the gate. Sometimes I went down and caught a ferry and went across on the ferry. I liked that.

01-00:26:36

Selvidge: You liked the ferry?

01-00:26:37

Chappat: Yes. A lot of people, those real San Franciscans, when they went downtown, they were all dressed up. Gloves, hat. But here, we were going to work in jeans and stuff. They kind of looked down on us. Kind of snubbed us. But now look at what goes on today.

01-00:27:06

Selvidge: Yes. But you did at the time feel like there was a little bit of tension—

01-00:27:09

Chappat: Oh, yes, there was.

01-00:27:10

Selvidge: —between the newcomers and the—? Were there other ways that you saw that tension?

01-00:27:19

Chappat: Well, yes. They looked at you funny. Like disgusted. But we were helping a war out. It was nice to have a little money in your pocket, too. When I was eighteen I wanted to buy a car. We couldn't buy a car.

01-00:27:44

Selvidge: Because of the war?

01-00:27:46

Chappat: Yes, because of the war. There was no iron or nothing and you couldn't buy tires and you had to get gasoline on a certain day. You couldn't just pull into a station anytime you wanted to. You had to go on a certain day. You had a book of stamps to get meat, milk. Everything was rationed. So when I was eighteen, I got knocked out of everything. Like these kids today at eighteen, golly, they're driving brand new cars, Thunderbirds, everything. How lucky are they?

01-00:28:24

Selvidge: Did you feel lucky, though? It's interesting that you say there was this scarcity of metals and certain things and rationing. But at the same time you had come from a very poor background where you were saying you really didn't have much money. So here you have money in your pocket but not so many options of what to buy. How did you—

01-00:28:50

Chappat: I was pretty happy no matter what. I was grateful just to have the job. Grateful Thank God for that. We never had a Christmas tree in our house in Ventura. We always had to go to grandma's and grandma who put their Christmas tree

up on Christmas Eve. But when we came to San Francisco, my dad bought us a beautiful Christmas tree. We had the best Christmas I ever had. He bought us all a bathrobe and slippers. He had that tree flocked, made it all white like snow. That was the best Christmas we ever had with the family. Christmas in my days, kids got one thing. One pair of skates or one doll. Listen, that Depression was hard times. You got one pair of shoes a year and if you didn't take care of your shoes, you got a hole in them. My grandmother would put a piece of cardboard in there to cover the hole up. Bad times, but it was the best of times.

01-00:30:09
Selvidge:

During the Depression?

01-00:30:11
Chappat:

Yes.

01-00:30:11
Selvidge:

What was good about it for you?

01-00:30:15
Chappat:

Well, you could walk around and just go anyplace you want. If you got a bicycle, you could go downtown and just wander around. Nobody ever bothered you. You were free. Then I got onto a softball team, girls softball team.

01-00:30:36
Selvidge:

When you were in school?

01-00:30:37
Chappat:

Yes. You just could have a good time. We entertained ourselves. We played marbles, played jacks, jumped rope. Played kick the can, hide and go seek. We entertained ourselves. We didn't have television. We didn't have computers. We didn't have all that stuff.

01-00:31:01
Selvidge:

Did you have a radio then?

01-00:31:02
Chappat:

We had a radio in the house. We used to listen to a story called Old Ma Perkins. That was a story that continued every day and it was kind of interesting. My grandmother and I would sit there and listen. On my vacation, I'd go up there and stay with her. It was just fun to be in Ojai.

01-00:31:24
Selvidge:

So you had a lot of kids around you that you grew up with?

01-00:31:28
Chappat:

Yes.

01-00:31:29
Selvidge:

Like neighbors and siblings?

01-00:31:31
Chappat: Oh, yes. Kids.

01-00:31:32
Selvidge: Kids.

01-00:31:33
Chappat: But you see, what I miss is moving around like we did, I became closely acquainted with any school chums. Like my daughter has girlfriends that she still associates with because she went to school with them. I didn't have that.

01-00:31:53
Selvidge: Did that bring you closer with your sisters?

01-00:31:57
Chappat: With my sister?

01-00:31:59
Selvidge: With your sister? Sorry. Yes.

01-00:32:00
Chappat: No.

01-00:32:01
Selvidge: No?

01-00:32:02
Chappat: No, it didn't. My sister June used to tell on me all the time. Sometimes I'd go behind the barn and smoke a little cigarette. She'd tell Momma.

01-00:32:13
Selvidge: And your sister would tell on you?

01-00:32:15
Chappat: "Mom, Elith's out there smoking." Boy, would I get it.

01-00:32:20
Selvidge: So you would get in trouble. What other kinds of things do you remember that you weren't allowed to do?

01-00:32:27
Chappat: Well, I think we were allowed to do most anything. But when I was a kid, I went up on the mountains where the horses were. Just to get some money, I used to get gunny sacks and fill them up with horse manure and I'd sell that. I'd get fifty cents a bag. Then my sister, she would catch me doing something I shouldn't and tell me she was going to tell on me if I didn't give her my fifty cents. She took all my money. But anyway, I used to collect bottles, Coca Cola bottles, get two cents a bottle and stuff like that. But really, in those days they didn't worry about kids being out running around. I don't think my mother ever knew where I was at. But she didn't have to worry about it.

- 01-00:33:19
Selvidge: As long as you came home for dinner?
- 01-00:33:22
Chappat: Dinner's at five o'clock and you better be there. Like today, the family don't even sit down together, where we did. We all had to be there at five o'clock when Daddy came home. We'd all sit there and discuss the day and he told us what happened during his day. And it was fun.
- 01-00:33:46
Selvidge: So you must have had a very different routine once the whole family was together in San Francisco and everyone was working?
- 01-00:33:54
Chappat: Everybody was working, making money.
- 01-00:33:55
Selvidge: On different schedules.
- 01-00:33:57
Chappat: Yes. But we all got along. And I think Grace and Esther went to Safeway, they got a job. Gayle, Grace's husband, was a Marine. Ross, Esther's husband, was in the Navy. During the day I guess they all went somewhere. I know I wasn't there. I was in the shipyard some place.
- 01-00:34:23
Selvidge: Yes. Were the men, then, were they shipped out serving in the war?
- 01-00:34:30
Chappat: Oh, yes.
- 01-00:34:31
Selvidge: Yes. So they weren't around—
- 01-00:34:33
Chappat: Yes. No, they weren't—
- 01-00:34:33
Selvidge: —during that time.
- 01-00:34:35
Chappat: Sometimes they got shore leave and then they'd come into San Francisco. Then they'd be here for maybe three or four months. But we had a lot of fun. It was fun being together. And I miss all that.
- 01-00:34:50
Selvidge: Yes, that sounds—
- 01-00:34:51
Chappat: Now, here I sit all alone.

01-00:34:54
Selvidge:

Yes, yes. And was your mother the one who sort of did the shopping, the cooking and cleaning and all that?

01-00:35:02
Chappat:

Yes. Well, when I got so pregnant, when I was big, Grace and I, we had to cook once in a while. Go shopping. And then when Grace was ready to deliver, they moved. Got a little house. By that time they could get a place. So she moved out. Esther and Ross, they moved up to Chico and Arnold and I, we stayed there.

01-00:35:31
Selvidge:

Tell me more about when you met your husband. You told me about the first sighting of him.

01-00:35:36
Chappat:

Yes. That was love at first sight with me. I don't know about him. But anyway, he asked me to give him a ride home to Sausalito. He lived in Sausalito. Well, my sister had my dad's car. I told my sister, I said, "I'm going to give Arnold a ride home." That was his name. Arnold. She said, "Where'd you meet him at?" I said, "He works over there by me." So we took him home and he asked me to call him. He gave me his telephone number. Well, went home. I went home and I forgot all about him, so I didn't call him. I saw him at the shipyard the next day and he said, "How come you didn't call me?" I said, "Oh, gee, I forgot." So that's how it all started. He fell in love with me and I fell in love with him. That's the way it was.

01-00:36:36
Selvidge:

Yes. Had you dated much before that?

01-00:36:40
Chappat:

No. My mother didn't like him.

01-00:36:45
Selvidge:

Oh, your mother didn't like your husband?

01-00:36:47
Chappat:

No. So I told her, I said, "I'm going to marry him." She said, "You're not going to marry him." Well, she went down to Ventura to visit her sister and when she went there I went to Reno.

01-00:36:56
Selvidge:

Really? [Laughter]

01-00:37:00
Chappat:

I loved him. What was I going to do?

01-00:37:03
Selvidge:

Yes. Was there something particular she didn't like about him?

01-00:37:08

Chappat:

Well, I don't know. Maybe she saw something in him that I couldn't see. He was just a good guy. He liked to play around. He was too good looking for me, I think. All the women wanted him.

01-00:37:26

Selvidge:

Oh, yes?

01-00:37:27

Chappat:

Oh, yes. He was very handsome. But what he saw in me I don't know. But anyway, I had Barbara by him. Something good came from it. But he just didn't like to work for some reason. He wanted me to live with him and travel around in a suitcase. Well, that's not for me. No. No.

01-00:37:54

Selvidge:

Yes. Had you had other boyfriends before that?

01-00:37:57

Chappat:

Yes. I was engaged to a gentleman named Jimmy before I met Arnold. He was in the Seabees. When I met Arnold I gave Jimmy his ring back. I guess I should have married him. I don't know. Anyway, I was happy with Arnold. We parted as friends and he always came back to see Barbara. He never supported her but he always came to see her. I never talked bad about him to her. I said, "Some day she'll find out what he is." Well, she did. He's a "good time Charlie" she called him.

01-00:38:42

Selvidge:

So did you eventually get divorced then?

01-00:38:45

Chappat:

We got divorced, yes. And he passed away here a few years ago. I buried him. And he had several women, I don't know, married to him or what. But I met every one of them and I thought, "Gee, how lucky you are." But it worked out all right.

01-00:39:11

Selvidge:

So let's see. Maybe we can talk a little bit more about working in the shipyard. So one of the things I want to know about is things like the cafeteria and the lockers and all these kinds of little things that you remember. Kind of a day in the life, for example.

01-00:39:35

Chappat:

Well, we reported to work. We'd go into this big room and they had a big round sink, about half as big as this room. You stepped on a thing on the floor and the water came out. It would take about twelve or thirteen women around that thing, wash your hands and wash your face. You'd kind of clean up. But they had no cafeteria. You had to go out of the yard and run up a hill, up there behind Marin City. You only had a half hour break. By the time you run up there, got your food and run back, you were exhausted.

01-00:40:22
Selvidge:

So there was a little restaurant or a couple?

01-00:40:23
Chappat:

Not really a restaurant, just a place you could go to get something to eat that was better than the canteen truck. They called the canteen trucks cockroaches. And then welding and everything. They treated us good. The only time I really got scared welding when it rained, because you're sitting out there and you got all this electricity in your hand. This was with arc welding. You kind of get scared you'll get electrocuted. That kind of scared me a little bit. But then when I went into that union melt, we were under a big roof. So that was nice.

01-00:41:06
Selvidge:

So conditions were pretty good, then, for the most part on the shipyard?

01-00:41:10
Chappat:

Yes.

01-00:41:13
Selvidge:

Did you get to know a lot of people who you worked with?

01-00:41:16
Chappat:

No, I didn't. The only lady I knew is this lady Lil and her husband. That's about all. I never really could get acquainted with anybody because they're all working and had no time for talking. And my sister-in-law, Amy. She was a friend, and then she became my sister-in-law. So I knew Amy, but that's about it.

01-00:41:41
Selvidge:

What about when you were on the ferry and on the bus? Were there people you knew from that?

01-00:41:46
Chappat:

I played poker.

01-00:41:48
Selvidge:

You played poker on the bus and the ferry?

01-00:41:49
Chappat:

On the ferry.

01-00:41:51
Selvidge:

I guess it's easier than on the bus.

01-00:41:55
Chappat:

I played poker with the men. I was the only women with all these men. I got a royal flush. I've never had one before. But I'm telling you, the money, and I kept betting them and raising them, betting and raising them. I knew I couldn't lose because I had the best hand there ever was. I won. Oh, man, that was something. Yes, I used to like to play poker. Sometimes I'd get a break.

When the union melt finished at the plate, it had to be turned over and then I'd get to do the other side. So while the guys are working to turn that plate over, I'd go in the little shed and play cards with other guys. Then my sister-in-law, when it was time for me to come back, she'd come and knock on the wall. "It's time to come back."

01-00:42:52
Selvidge:

Oh, so you'd take little card breaks.

01-00:42:53
Chappat:

Yes. That was fun. I enjoyed that. I didn't do anything wrong. That was a lot of fun to do that.

01-00:43:04
Selvidge:

Go ahead.

01-00:43:05
Chappat:

Sometimes I lost and sometimes I won.

01-00:43:08
Selvidge:

But it kept you busy.

01-00:43:10
Chappat:

Kept me busy.

01-00:43:12
Selvidge:

Was it common for men and women to sort of socialize like that while they were working together?

01-00:43:18
Chappat:

Nobody knew it.

01-00:43:19
Selvidge:

Nobody knew it. Right.

01-00:43:21
Chappat:

Oh, you weren't supposed to be doing that.

01-00:43:22
Selvidge:

You weren't supposed to be doing that.

01-00:43:23
Chappat:

No.

01-00:43:25
Selvidge:

But it seems like you had pretty friendly relationships with the men who were working there, too?

01-00:43:31
Chappat:

Oh, yes. I'm friendly with anybody that wants to talk or wants to do—I've always been that way.

01-00:43:43
Selvidge: So another thing I'm curious about. Since I've done a lot of interviews with people who worked in the Richmond shipyards, I know more about Kaiser as a company than I do about the shipyards in Sausalito. So I wonder if you can tell me what you remember about sort of the employer. I don't even know the company that it was, actually, in Sausalito that you worked for. It was the shipyards that you worked at. It's Marin Ship, right?

01-00:44:25
Chappat: Yes.

01-00:44:26
Selvidge: Is that the name of the ship, the company that built them?

01-00:44:28
Chappat: Marin Ship. That was it. Marin Ship. That's about all I know. That's all I remember.

01-00:44:39
Selvidge: That's all you know. So you didn't have a lot of interaction with the—

01-00:44:45
Chappat: Big bosses, no.

01-00:44:46
Selvidge: —big bosses or anything?

01-00:44:48
Chappat: Never did see any.

01-00:44:50
Selvidge: Yes. But for you, for the most part, it was a good place to work.

01-00:44:54
Chappat: Yes. It was a good place to work. Nobody bothered you. The bosses were just regular people. They helped you out when they could and everything.
[coughs] Excuse me.

01-00:45:13
Selvidge: And you mentioned before that the workers were segregated in the shipyards.

01-00:45:20
Chappat: Some of the blacks were, yes.

01-00:45:23
Selvidge: Can you tell me what kinds of jobs that the black workers had?

01-00:45:27
Chappat: They were welders.

01-00:45:28
Selvidge: They were welders also.

01-00:45:28
Chappat: Lady welders.

01-00:45:30
Selvidge: And they welded what? In different areas or on different jobs? How did that work?

01-00:45:36
Chappat: Well, it seemed like they were down from us but I never did see any. I don't know what they were doing.

01-00:45:45
Selvidge: You just sort of knew that they were there and saw people coming out?

01-00:45:48
Chappat: Well, when we go to wash up or anything, they would be in there. When we lived in Ventura we only had one black family and they lived down by the railroad track. In fact, I never even saw any black people until I came to San Francisco. I didn't know a lot of stuff until I came up here. Yes. I educated myself.

01-00:46:14
Selvidge: Well, what was that like? Coming to San Francisco and seeing so many different kinds of people that you hadn't seen growing up.

01-00:46:20
Chappat: It was amazing to me. My husband would walk down the street and say, "That guy is gay." Only he used another word for it. "What are you talking about? How do you know he's gay?" Things like that. I didn't even know what it meant. Things like that. Just a different world. But it was a better world back then than it is today.

01-00:46:54
Selvidge: In San Francisco?

01-00:46:55
Chappat: Yes. All over the country.

01-00:46:57
Selvidge: Or in general?

01-00:46:57
Chappat: The whole country. You didn't hear killings like you do today. Very rare.

01-00:47:07
Selvidge: So there was not a lot of violence?

01-00:47:11
Chappat: No. Everybody got along. Back then, people helped each other. If I needed help, they'd come over and help me.

- 01-00:47:22
Selvidge: This might be a hard question to answer, but do you remember any specific instances like that where people really helped each other or a stranger is helping you out or you helping a stranger?
- 01-00:47:34
Chappat: Well, my grandmother and grandpa, they needed a new roof on their house. Neighbors and their one son came and they put—I remember that. They all put a roof on her house. Didn't cost her anything, only for materials. I thought that was—
- 01-00:47:52
Selvidge: She got everybody together?
- 01-00:47:53
Chappat: Everybody got in together. Yes.
- 01-00:48:00
Selvidge: And people also did things like that in a different way in the city?
- 01-00:48:02
Chappat: Yes. During the Depression, my dad, he used to feed people. He had a big tub that he cooked in out in the backyard, put beans in there and gave people beans and fresh French bread, and to the neighbors because they had children but no food. A lot of people were like that. They had bread lines and everything. See, President Roosevelt created CC camps and different jobs that people could do to make a little money, get them out of the bread lines. It was tough.
- 01-00:48:47
Selvidge: Do you remember yours and your family's and friends impressions of Roosevelt during that time?
- 01-00:48:55
Chappat: Yes. I thought he was a great man myself for what he did for people. My dad did, too.
- 01-00:49:07
Selvidge: Do you remember hearing him on the radio?
- 01-00:49:10
Chappat: Yes. Oh, yes. I can still hear him. Yes.
- 01-00:49:17
Selvidge: Yes.
- 01-00:49:18
Chappat: When he announced that war had been declared. That was really scary.

01-00:49:28
Selvidge:

And do you remember continuing to listen to him on the radio? Other things that stand out that he might have talked about that might have been more comforting, perhaps?

01-00:49:40
Chappat:

No. Because my grandmother is the one that had the radio. We didn't have a radio in Ventura unless we went to the newsreel. Didn't get to see too much of him on there. But see, we were in the car going to Ojai and we heard it on the radio in the car.

01-00:50:06
Selvidge:

Jumping forward a little bit to the end of the war. Do you remember hearing news of the war's end and the bombings?

01-00:50:15
Chappat:

V-J Day. Yes. [coughs] Excuse me. We all went down to Market Street. That's when the sailors and the Army and everybody was kissing all the women. That one picture of that sailor kissing that nurse, that's a very famous picture. They were doing all kinds of things. Just so happy the war had ended. It was beautiful. Just really something nice. Yes. I remember. Yes. How could you not?

01-00:50:50
Selvidge:

What about the bombings, though, in Japan? Do you remember hearing about that?

01-00:50:58
Chappat:

That atomic bomb? Yes. I saw it on the news. Oh, boy, it was bad. Killed thousands of people. Yes.

01-00:51:08
Selvidge:

Did people have mixed feelings about that?

01-00:51:14
Chappat:

Well, yes. A lot of people didn't want it but he had to do it. He had to stop them. How are you going to stop them? It stopped them all right. And I'm scared now of what the Korean people are going to do. That's bad. That worries me.

01-00:51:41
Selvidge:

Let's see. We've got a couple more minutes on this tape. Let's just stop here.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 08-11-2010.mp3

02-00:00:00
Selvidge:

Okay. So here we are with tape two. And we were just talking about the end of the war and you were describing sort of the celebratory aspect.

02-00:00:18
Chappat:

Yes. We were all celebrating the end of the war down on Market Street. Market Street was just loaded with people kissing and hugging each other. Strangers didn't know anybody but everybody was just thrilled that that war ended. And then we all went home. We were all happy. But you know what? After the war was over, the men had to come back and do their job, get their job back. So now that left the women with no job. So now we were back to can't get a job. Now, I'm older now. I'm about nineteen.

02-00:01:12
Selvidge:

And you're already married at this point?

02-00:01:13
Chappat:

I'm married. Had a baby.

02-00:01:14
Selvidge:

Had a baby. Now, I want to ask this. Did you and your sister, did you stop working when you had the baby? How did that work?

02-00:01:22
Chappat:

Yes. I had to stop because electricity was going through my body.

02-00:01:26
Selvidge:

So once you became pregnant—

02-00:01:29
Chappat:

Right.

02-00:01:30
Selvidge:

—you stopped working.

02-00:01:31
Chappat:

Yes.

02-00:01:31
Selvidge:

And then did you go back to work once you had the baby?

02-00:01:34
Chappat:

No. Well, my dad— I had a little money saved up and he wanted to buy a prune ranch in Napa. So I'm big like this.

02-00:01:47
Selvidge:

Like this? [laughter]

02-00:01:50
Chappat:

We went to Napa. He bought a little ranch up there, a prune ranch. They used to raise prunes up there, not like grapes. I'd get down there and pick all those prunes and everything. And, oh, what a job that is. So then that didn't last. Nobody wanted to pick prunes and we didn't like it, so he sold the ranch. Now we went back to Willard Street with Momma. Then Port Chicago. Do you

remember Port Chicago? It blew up. Well, he goes over there and he gets a restaurant started because there was no place for the workers to eat.

02-00:02:30
Selvidge:

Over at—

02-00:02:31
Chappat:

In Port Chicago.

02-00:02:32
Selvidge:

In Port Chicago.

02-00:02:33
Chappat:

So he opens a restaurant over there.

02-00:02:35
Selvidge:

After the explosion or before?

02-00:02:38
Chappat:

After.

02-00:02:39
Selvidge:

After the explosion.

02-00:02:39
Chappat:

The whole town was blowed up.

02-00:02:42
Selvidge:

Oh, I see. After the town was damaged in the explosion.

02-00:02:44
Chappat:

Yes, the town was damaged and a lot of sailors were killed. Oh, boy. So my dad was feeding the workers and everything.

02-00:02:54
Selvidge:

I see.

02-00:02:55
Chappat:

But he would take a big roast about like this. It was pork on this side and roast beef on this side and lamb chops on this side. Put a lot of mashed potatoes and gravy. Those workers, they didn't know what they were eating, I'll tell you. But it was fun and then, of course, I was getting bigger. All of a sudden I got that morning sickness. Well, I had to give up working. I couldn't be around that smell of food and stuff.

02-00:03:27
Selvidge:

So you were working at the restaurant?

02-00:03:29
Chappat:

I was a waitress, yes. Some waitress. That's about the first time I ever did a woman's job.

02-00:03:36
Selvidge:

Oh, yes?

02-00:03:36
Chappat:

Yes.

02-00:03:38
Selvidge:

How is that different from a man's job, let's say?

02-00:03:41
Chappat:

Well, I had to work hard and no money. I worked terrible. And I'll get to that. So then I had Barbara and I went back to Willard Street. I don't know. My dad gave up the restaurant. The town got better, sailors and everything. I think one night they came there and the sailors were having a poker game on the ship. We just shut down. It was midnight. We were going home. They ordered over a hundred hamburgers. I said, "Oh, no, dad." He said, "Oh, yes. Let's heat it up." We made all those hamburgers and they took them back to the ship for those sailors. But that was the last for me.

But anyway, so I went home. By this time, Arnold's gone. I got the baby and my mother's supporting me and everything. My mother, finally, after six months or a year of this, she said, "You got to get out and get a job. I'm tired of supporting you." So I thought to myself "I got to get a job. There is no job." She said, "I heard American Can is hiring on Twentieth and Third Street. Go over there and see if you can get a job." I went over there. I got a job.

02-00:05:07
Selvidge:

And this is at the very end of the war or after?

02-00:05:10
Chappat:

This is after.

02-00:05:11
Selvidge:

This is after. Okay.

02-00:05:12
Chappat:

This is way after.

02-00:05:13
Selvidge:

This is way after. Okay. About a year after the war or something?

02-00:05:14
Chappat:

Yes. So they gave me a job packing cans. And that's a woman's job. Oh, boy, you stand all day long packing those cans in bags. They're empty cans. Paint cans, beer cans, little cans, peanut cans. The men had all the good jobs, easy jobs.

02-00:05:44
Selvidge:

What kinds of jobs did the men have there at American Can?

02-00:05:47

Chappat:

They had like fixing the machine, but they'd stand around and they'd hit a little thing like this. Or forklift driving, inspectors. They had all the good easy jobs. The women worked. Then I think in 1956 or eight, women's lib came in. I'm going for a man's job. I went for the forklift. Now, they made me take tests to do that job. They didn't make the men take tests, but they made me do it. And if you missed one you had to start all back again.

02-00:06:33

Selvidge:

What kind of test was it?

02-00:06:34

Chappat:

Oh, about driving.

02-00:06:37

Selvidge:

And was this at American Can where you were still working?

02-00:06:39

Chappat:

American Can. Well, anyway, I passed the test and then the foreman says, "You can't do this job," I said, "Listen, I'll be woman enough to tell you I can't do the job if you can be man enough to tell me I can do the job. Give me an hour's try." "Okay." And pretty soon here he come. He said, "You're woman enough to do the job. You got it." So I got it. And I worked there for twenty-seven years.

02-00:07:12

Selvidge:

As a forklift driver?

02-00:07:14

Chappat:

No just the last eight or nine years. Then American Can shut down. And they moved over to Oakland. And they force retired me because I had enough time. You had to go by your age and your seniority. I had enough time to get out. So they retired me and I drew my unemployment for two years and then the pension started. In the meantime I started doing woodwork. I tried to get another job but I couldn't get one, because now I'm fifty-seven or fifty-eight years old. So I did this woodwork. I made planters. I made memory boxes, I made coat racks, and I went down to Fisherman's Wharf and sold them like the hippies and had my wares on the side of my truck and stuff. Oh, gee, I had a lot of fun doing that.

02-00:08:15

Selvidge:

Oh, that's great.

02-00:08:16

Chappat:

But then I had to get a job. I needed insurance and stuff. So this lady down in Pacifica says, "Hey, Lee, a bus company's coming in named SanTrams. Go down and put your name in. You'll get a job." I thought, "Oh, they won't hire me as a bus driver." "Yes, go ahead." So I went down there and they hired me. Damn, I got another job. So I become a bus driver. This is transit driving. So SanTrams took me on. I worked there another fifteen years. I worked until I

was sixty-six. And I retired but I did a good job. Got a ring for no accidents. Safety.

02-00:09:03
Selvidge:

Oh, congratulations.

02-00:09:05
Chappat:

Yes. I've worked all my life and I've done a good job. I took pride in what I did. I meant to tell you I was a grease monkey for the Army Western Ocean division.

02-00:09:18
Selvidge:

Oh, right. Yes.

02-00:09:19
Chappat:

When I was driving those men around—

02-00:09:21
Selvidge:

When was that?

02-00:09:25
Chappat:

That was a little after the war.

02-00:09:26
Selvidge:

Before American Can?

02-00:09:28
Chappat:

Yes. Oh, yes. Before American Can I got that job. And I'd drive all these enlisted men around to get shots and things, but I got tired of doing that. So I said, "I'm going to be a grease monkey." I'd drain the oil out of the cars and put new oil back in and grease all the joints and stuff. So I used to do that and all the boys would come around talking to me and taking my mind off my work. Well, this friend of mine, Becky, who's still a friend—she just turned ninety—she drove a car over to Oakland that I forgot to put the oil in. She calls me up, "Lee, I had to put five quarts of oil in that car. You didn't put the oil back." I said, "Oh, my god. I didn't." So that was my first mistake on a car. I never did that again, though. I was distracted with those boys coming around and talking and everything. But I had a good life and I enjoyed working. I wanted a job and, boy, I had them. All men's jobs. I did not want to do a woman's job.

02-00:10:43
Selvidge:

Yes, I have a question going back a little bit if you don't mind.

02-00:10:46
Chappat:

Yes, go ahead.

02-00:10:47
Selvidge:

Tell me more about what inspired you to actually demand that they give you a chance as a forklift driver at American Can. You mention the women's

liberation movement but can you tell me more about how that made you realize you should do this?

02-00:11:13

Chappat:

Well, I'll just show you the difference between how they treated men from the women. Now, two of us, we was packing peanut cans, and the men were feeding the peanut cans up there on the body makers and everything. They come through on a big line and come down to us and we pack them. Well, we broke the record that day. Two girls packing those peanuts. You had to put eight and then seven. Eight and seven because you staggered them in a big bag. Well, what I found out the next day, the bosses gave all the boys a cigar because they broke the record. What'd they give us? Nothing. Now, they couldn't have broken the record if we'd have screwed up on the other end here. If we didn't pack those cans. So I got a hold of the supervisor the next day and I said, "I hear you gave all the boys a cigar and you didn't give us girls back here that broke the record for you packing those cans. What do you got to say for that?" He says, "I'll tell you what I'll say for it. Just stay right here." I guess he went someplace and he got us both a carton of cigarettes. Not that that's a good thing. But at that time it was good.

02-00:12:44

Selvidge:

It's the gesture that's important.

02-00:12:46

Chappat:

That's right. Come on. Things like that. But my dad wanted a boy so bad he treated my sister June and I like boys. He raised us like boys. I was raising subfloor at twelve years old for him at a house. He had a job where he had to take fireplace bricks down. He took me on the job with him. I had to take the bricks and put them away. Oh, brother. I knew I could do whatever I set my mind. I know I could do it.

02-00:13:27

Selvidge:

So a lot of that determination came from your father, then?

02-00:13:30

Chappat:

That's right. Yes. My sister is the same way. I put a roof on a lady's house for her. She had like a dining room here but it had a wall here. I knocked down the wall for her, made it all one big room. I can put up paneling. I can do anything. Attempt anything. I will do it.

02-00:13:58

Selvidge:

That's great. So tell me, if you can remember a little more, about—I really feel like I see that that determination from your background and your experience and your personality and your family, and how did that sort of meet up with this larger movement of women's rights and women's liberation for you?

02-00:14:23
Chappat:

Well, look what's going on today. Women, they're climbing telephone poles. They're policemen. They're plumbers. I don't care what there is. But if women's lib hadn't come in, you'd be sitting behind a desk or doing sewing for somebody or something. No. I like to see the women do what they're doing. But they're scared to adventure. If you put your mind up to doing something, you can do it. That's what I liked about the women's liberation. But some women wanted to go extreme, like join a man's club. That wasn't for me. Or be able to go into a man's place or something. That's not what it was for me. It was for the job, and better pay.

02-00:15:26
Selvidge:

It was for equal opportunities for you.

02-00:15:28
Chappat:

That's right. If I could do the job, let me have it. If I can't do it, I'll tell you.

02-00:15:38
Selvidge:

Do you remember specifically any sort of women figures who you heard talking about the women's movement or reading books or magazines or things like that?

02-00:15:50
Chappat:

A lot of women didn't like it because now you have to pump your own gas. A lot of women don't like that. You want to keep the woman in the house. Well, it's time to let them out of the house and do what they want.

02-00:16:11
Selvidge:

Go ahead.

02-00:16:11
Chappat:

Am I answering what you—

02-00:16:13
Selvidge:

Yes. I'm also wondering, if you remember, sort of any specific figures that you heard, speeches or any kind of protests that you heard about in the women's movement that were inspiring to you.

02-00:16:32
Chappat:

Well, every time I see women getting some new job or something, that inspires me. Or if I hear a woman, like that little girl going around the world in a boat. That inspires me.

02-00:16:47
Selvidge:

So a lot of what inspired you was sort of everyday women doing things.

02-00:16:50
Chappat:

Well, yes. I give them a lot of credit.

02-00:16:56
Selvidge:

I'm interested also in your experience as a woman working in these jobs and then also being a single mother during this time. You did not remarry during this time, is that right?

02-00:17:08
Chappat:

No, I never married again. If it hadn't been for my mother and dad taking care of Barbara—which they did me a great favor, but it also made them live longer because my mother had something to do. My dad, he just idolized my daughter. He used to take her for a ride in the car and take her bicycle in the car with them, and then she'd ride it home and he'd follow her. But my folks had something to do. Otherwise they'd be sitting here in the house like me doing nothing. But they raised her and I give them all the credit in the world. But it kept them busy and it kept them living longer.

02-00:17:50
Selvidge:

And what was it like for you? Did you know other single parents or did you have kind of that in common with other women that you knew?

02-00:18:02
Chappat:

Oh, yes. After the war and after American Can closed, a lot of divorces occurred because they lost their jobs and there was a lot of depression. Lot of single parents. But you made it. Somebody has to help you if you have a child. In those days we didn't have daycare. Now a girl can take a baby to work. They got somebody to watch them right there on the job. I think that's wonderful. But now they say taking care of a baby now is more expensive than going to college. Oh, I don't know. Have you got somebody worked out on yours?

02-00:18:50
Selvidge:

Yes. Luckily my mother lives nearby.

02-00:18:53
Chappat:

Hallelujah for mothers.

02-00:18:54
Selvidge:

Yes. indeed. Yes.

02-00:18:56
Chappat:

My daughter had a little boy and once in a while when he was older I baby-sat him on the bus. When she would go to work, she'd wait with him on a corner. I said, "I'll be there by five after 8:00. Have him there and I'll pick him up."

02-00:19:08
Selvidge:

And he'd ride the bus with you?

02-00:19:10
Chappat:

Yes. He says, "Grandma, when you going to get a break?" I said, "Pretty soon. We'll go have breakfast." Yes.

- 02-00:19:17
Selvidge: Oh, that sounds nice. So you were also able to help your own daughter in a way similar to how your parents helped you.
- 02-00:19:24
Chappat: Oh, yes. Yes.
- 02-00:19:30
Selvidge: So let's see. One thing that we haven't talked about on the shipyards or in your later jobs. I'm curious if you were a member of a union during the war or afterwards.
- 02-00:19:46
Chappat: I've always worked for a union I wouldn't work for anything else. Just a union. Because if you don't have a union to protect you, they can fire you because you look cross-eyed. I've always been a union person. I believe in the union.
- 02-00:20:08
Selvidge: Can you tell me more about that? Like maybe when you first joined a union or any specific events that stand out? Experiences in the union?
- 02-00:20:20
Chappat: Well, I had to go on strike at the American Can. I think I was out for three months on that one.
- 02-00:20:27
Selvidge: Oh, that's quite long.
- 02-00:20:29
Chappat: Yes. We had to walk the picket lines and do things like that.
- 02-00:20:36
Selvidge: When was that about?
- 02-00:20:40
Chappat: Ooh, boy, you're going way back now. That was probably back in the sixties, back in the early sixties. Before SanTrams I was working for four dollars an hour driving a small bus. And then when SanTrams took us over, it was \$4.18 and then we had to bring a union in. So we brought a union in and our wages went way up. They kept going up. So I think by the time I retired at sixty-six, I was making almost twenty dollars an hour.
- 02-00:21:26
Selvidge: Oh, wow. That's really fast.
- 02-00:21:28
Chappat: Pretty good?
- 02-00:21:28
Selvidge: Yes. Not bad.

02-00:21:32

Chappat:

All right. Got a good pension. Yes. And I worked there fifteen years. Never was late. You'd get five miss-outs, they call them late, five miss-outs, you're fired. So fifteen years I never was late. There was three of us. There was Bill, Babe and me, no miss outs. So I think I had a good work ethic.

02-00:22:02

Selvidge:

It sounds like that.

02-00:22:04

Chappat:

You have to take pride in what you do. You take care of your job, your job is going to take care of you. But these women today, they can do what they want. There's so much opportunity out there. Do it.

02-00:22:23

Selvidge:

I wonder if you can tell me a little about when you were raising your daughter. What kinds of things that you tried to do to show her and to teach her about taking opportunities and things like that.

02-00:22:39

Chappat:

A child seems to take after their parents. Now, she's got a good job. She worked for Nestle for thirty-one years. She started out as a little file clerk and then she become a sales representative and then she become a boss. She had girls working under her. She did that for thirty-one years. To this day, when they have a retirement party or something, they always invite her to come. Now she got a job at a winery in Napa. She's been there seven years. And she's working up there now. The lady that owns the place just dearly loves her. She works in the tasting room, and she takes care of the property and takes care of the houses. If something goes wrong up there she has to hire somebody to make the repairs.

02-00:23:42

Selvidge:

Did you see as she was growing up that she had more opportunities as a woman than you did?

02-00:23:50

Chappat:

Yes. She did. But she couldn't get them because, you have to remember, women's lib didn't come in until later.

02-00:24:07

Selvidge:

Right. So she experienced some of that when she was younger.

02-00:24:11

Chappat:

Oh, yes. When she got her job at Nestle, she come in there a little file clerk. Then women's lib come in. They didn't think she could become a sales person, but she did and then she become a boss. So she done the same thing.

02-00:24:31

Selvidge:

Yes. It sounds like she also took a lot of initiative.

02-00:24:36

Chappat:

Oh, yes. She's very precise. Everything has to be just right. If that glass is sitting there, that's where she wants it, that's where it's going to be.

02-00:24:54

Selvidge:

Another thing I'd like to go back a little bit to is the places that you lived. Did you stay long on Willard Street?

02-00:25:05

Chappat:

We stayed there until they wanted to sell it. Another thing. We could have bought that house for \$5,000. There was a flat on the bottom which was rented. Then we had the top flat, then another flat on top of that. All hardwood floors. It was a beautiful place and I don't understand why my dad didn't buy it. Then he moved. Here we go moving again. We moved over to 21st Street. Then from 21st Street they moved to 18th Street. From 18th Street they moved to Daly City, to Hanover Street.

02-00:25:48

Selvidge:

And your family was renting each of these places?

02-00:25:54

Chappat:

I don't know why he wouldn't buy a place. Finally he bought a little house down in Santa Cruz, and then my mother's sister's husband died, so they moved to Ojai to live with her, and they sold the little house in Santa Cruz. Then my dad died and my mother moved back. Anyway, Barbara came back with me. She went down to Ojai with them. She's back with me now. So when my dad died my mother come to live with me.

02-00:26:31

Selvidge:

And where did you live?

02-00:26:32

Chappat:

In Pacifica. I had a little apartment there. I took care of her. Then Barbara, she met Gene Fenucci and got married, so it was just my mother and me now. All that moving. Oh.

02-00:26:50

Selvidge:

That's a lot of moving.

02-00:26:52

Chappat:

I don't know why they moved all the time. I just don't understand it.

02-00:26:56

Selvidge:

Yes. So how did you feel when you were finally able to buy your own place? You bought the place in Pacifica? Is that right?

02-00:27:03

Chappat:

No.

02-00:27:03

Selvidge:

Oh, you rented a place in Pacifica?

02-00:27:04
Chappat: I was renting.

02-00:27:04
Selvidge: Okay. But how did you feel when you were finally able to settle in one place and you could stay there?

02-00:27:10
Chappat: This is my house here.

02-00:27:10
Selvidge: This is your house.

02-00:27:10
Chappat: I bought. My daughter, her husband and my grandson lived up here over on Firethorn. I thought, "Well, it's getting pretty close to retirement age," and they were building these little places here. I said, "Well, I'll buy one of those townhouses and that's where I'll stay and be closer to Barbara." Well, I took Kevin on a vacation with me and he got in a car accident with four boys. He was thirteen years old. Car accident killed him.

02-00:27:45
Selvidge: Oh, I'm so sorry.

02-00:27:50
Chappat: Chris is a vegetable and the other two boys, they lived. So then, of course, after that a divorce occurred. Barbara lives in Napa. He lives in Petaluma and I'm sitting here. So it didn't work. It tore the family apart because he was the only child in our family. We're all girls. My sisters had girls and Barbara was the only one that gave us a boy, our only child.

02-00:28:27
Selvidge: Yes. Oh, that's so sad. Do you mind if I go back again to another question?

02-00:28:36
Chappat: No, go ahead. Take me back.

02-00:28:37
Selvidge: Something I wanted to—take you back.

02-00:28:39
Chappat: Take me back.

02-00:28:40
Selvidge: I wanted to know a little more about Port Chicago.

02-00:28:44
Chappat: Port Chicago. Well, Port Chicago was a nice little town, and two ships pulled in there to be loaded with a lot of explosives and bomns. From what I remember, they wanted the black soldiers to load the explosives, and something made the ship blow up. Well, not only did the ships blow up,. it

just blew up the town and everything else. It killed a lot of sailors. So then my dad opened that restaurant and it was feeding the workers that had to come in there to build the town up.

02-00:29:28

Selvidge:

Yes. So part of the reason I ask is that one of the people I work with is doing some research about Port Chicago and he's really interested in people's memories of the town after the explosion. So I'm wondering if you can tell me some about what it was like there afterwards with all of this damage and destruction and I guess a lot of people sort of affected by the explosion.

02-00:29:57

Chappat:

They were affected. It was like a ghost town. You hardly ever seen any people. And we rented an old house over there that we stayed in because we couldn't travel back and forth to San Francisco. So we rented this old house and we stayed in there. But I don't know what happened to the people. I never hardly saw anybody. It was mostly all workers. Carpenters and mostly all men.

02-00:30:25

Selvidge:

People who are rebuilding.

02-00:30:26

Chappat:

Yes, rebuilding. As far as seeing people living there, I never did see anybody.

02-00:30:35

Selvidge:

And all the people who would have been working in the shipyard, the Navy guys and those people, weren't around anymore?

02-00:30:43

Chappat:

Just the Navy sailors came in there wanting food and stuff. But no real people that lived there ever came in that I know of. Just workers.

02-00:31:02

Selvidge:

Yes.

02-00:31:07

Chappat:

Everything seemed to be in shambles.

02-00:31:08

Selvidge:

Were there a lot of African American Navy guys around still after the explosion?

02-00:31:15

Chappat:

No. I didn't see any—

02-00:31:17

Selvidge:

You didn't see any?

02-00:31:18

Chappat:

—black people. No.

02-00:31:21
Selvidge: Do you remember hearing about the mutiny trial?

02-00:31:25
Chappat: Yes. I remember that.

02-00:31:28
Selvidge: Do you remember your reaction to it or what people said about it?

02-00:31:31
Chappat: No, but I thought it was a bad situation.

02-00:31:40
Selvidge: Yes.

02-00:31:40
Chappat: Yes.

02-00:31:40
Selvidge: Can you tell me how long you guys had the restaurant in Port Chicago after the explosion?

02-00:31:46
Chappat: We were there maybe six to eight months.

02-00:31:51
Selvidge: And was the town or the area considerably built back up by the time you left?

02-00:31:57
Chappat: Well, some of it was built but not all of it. No. You could see buildings that were blown up. Yes. Yes. We had our little nose in most everything that happened around there.

02-00:32:16
Selvidge: Yes. Yes. Did people in the town talk much about the explosion?

02-00:32:21
Chappat: No.

02-00:32:23
Selvidge: It seems like it was a lot of people who came in to do work that you were talking to.

02-00:32:26
Chappat: Yes. A lot of people came from all over to help build that place up.

02-00:32:31
Selvidge: And was it people who had been close by in other areas?

02-00:32:35
Chappat: No. I think they came from out of town or San Francisco. Yes.

02-00:32:41
Selvidge: Yes. Kind of like you did?

02-00:32:44
Chappat: Yes. Just like what we did.

02-00:32:46
Selvidge: So there was sort of a sense that there was a new opportunity because of all this building?

02-00:32:49
Chappat: Yes. They needed help over there because the whole town almost went to pieces.

02-00:32:54
Selvidge: Yes.

02-00:32:56
Chappat: Yes. Can you imagine all that powder in that big ship? Boy.

02-00:33:00
Selvidge: Yes. So there was destruction not just near the shipyard but even far into the town?

02-00:33:08
Chappat: Yes.

02-00:33:10
Selvidge: A lot of buildings were destroyed and stuff?

02-00:33:12
Chappat: Yes.

02-00:33:13
Selvidge: Wow.

02-00:33:17
Chappat: Got some more questions?

02-00:33:23
Selvidge: Let's see. Well, we've talked about a lot. We've talked about a lot of things. I think that's most of the questions I have. Do you have any other aspects of your life or of your experiences that you would like to talk about?

02-00:33:48
Chappat: Well, no. I loved whatever I did, and I did a good job. I respected my job and it was always good to me. And my daughter, she followed in my footsteps and she's a good little worker.

02-00:34:07
Selvidge: Yes. It sounds like you've really worked hard in your life and felt rewarded for it, too.

- 02-00:34:15
Chappat: Well, I got tired of moving. I'll tell you that. I liked driving the bus and I met a lot of people, my passengers. In fact, some of my passengers still send me birthday cards.
- 02-00:34:27
Selvidge: Oh, that's great.
- 02-00:34:28
Chappat: Made a lot of friends on the bus.
- 02-00:34:33
Selvidge: Oh, I can think of one thing we didn't really get back to. I'm curious what your sister did after her job during the war. Because you mentioned she had a job where she was one of the very few women who did that.
- 02-00:34:48
Chappat: Well, she also worked for the Army Western Ocean division driving. We kind of followed each other. So that's what she did. And then after that, I think she worked at a gas station there in Mill Valley.
- 02-00:35:07
Selvidge: Pumping gas?
- 02-00:35:10
Chappat: She ran it.
- 02-00:35:11
Selvidge: Oh, she was like a manager of the station?
- 02-00:35:13
Chappat: Yes. She was a manager of the gas station. And then she took a train ride with a friend, and she met her future husband on the train. Johnny. And he was in the Navy. And she fell in love with Johnny, and I guess he fell in love with her. They got married and then she was a stay at home mom. She had two little girls. So that was pretty much her life.
- 02-00:35:44
Selvidge: Okay. So she didn't really have a similar work experience to you?
- 02-00:35:50
Chappat: No. She drove a school bus. She tried to work for SanTram but the kids cussed her out so bad that she couldn't take it. They called her bad names and stuff. She didn't like that. Didn't bother me. And then she drove a school bus. See, the school bus she had control of the kids. You don't behave, you don't ride the bus. Where SanTrams, you can't do that. So she was more or less a stay at home mom. Took care of her husband and her kids. She didn't follow me. I tried to get her to follow me. I got her a job at the American Can and she only lasted a couple of months. She quit that. Said she got sick smelling that smell on the cans. Well, she quit and then she got a job with SanTrams and

that didn't last too long because the kids called her bad names and things.
That was her way.

02-00:37:00

Selvidge: Yes. All right. Well, I think we can stop here. Unless you have any parting words.

02-00:37:10

Chappat: No, that's about all. My daughter will probably see this and she'll say, "How come you didn't tell them this? How come you didn't tell them that?"

02-00:37:17

Selvidge: Well, you can't do everything.

02-00:37:19

Chappat: I go over to Richmond to the home front reunion and have a good time every year. I'm going back the second week of October.

02-00:37:31

Selvidge: Oh, great.

02-00:37:32

Chappat: You going to be there?

02-00:37:35

Selvidge: Probably not because my baby will be about four day old then or something.

02-00:37:39

Chappat: Oh, I see. Okay.

02-00:37:40

Selvidge: So probably not.

02-00:37:42

Chappat: Well, that's good.

02-00:37:44

Selvidge: Yes. Maybe next year.

02-00:37:46

Chappat: Yes. Bring the baby. If I'm around next year. I don't know.

02-00:37:51

Selvidge: Well, I hope so.

02-00:37:54

Chappat: Well, nice talking to you.

02-00:37:58

Selvidge: Nice talking to you.

[End of Interview]