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Anita Christiansen and Mary Highfill

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2005

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Interview with Anita Christiansen and Mary Highfill

Interviewed by: Nadine Wilmot

Transcriber: Julie Allen

[Interview #1: February 7, 2005]

[Begin disc 1]

Wilmot:

Now we're recording on both.

Highfill:

[whispers] Look at those contraptions!

Christiansen:

Yes!

Wilmot:

Let's see. February 7, 2005. Nadine Wilmot with Mary Highfill and Anita Christiansen.

Good afternoon.

Highfill:

Good afternoon.

Christiansen:

Good afternoon.

Wilmot:

First I wanted to ask you when and where you met. How do you know each other?

Highfill:

Good question.

Christiansen:

Who goes first?

Highfill:

Well, I think our parents knew one another—gosh—when my folks first arrived in Point Richmond, way back when. Probably in about 1925?

Christiansen:

No, it had to be before that.

Highfill:

Well, I was born in 1924. [laughter]

Christiansen:

So it was either 1922 or 192—

Highfill:

Well, my parents didn't come here, I was born in San Francisco, remember.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Then we came to Point Richmond via Crockett. I probably was about nine months old. That goes back to, well, I guess the end of 1924.

Wilmot:

So your parents know each other?

Highfill:

Our parents knew each other, yes.

Christiansen:

They met here.

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

They met here in Point Richmond.

Wilmot:

So were you infants together?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm. Little babies.

Christiansen:

Babies, we were babies. We were babies and we lived on East Richmond Avenue where the shipyards—well, it was the college, the junior college was in that area.

Highfill:

Our first junior college started out on East Richmond.

Christiansen:

On East Richmond and there was a little colony of homes. We were all, mostly, Italians, several from Austria. The Cizmiches were from Austria.

Wilmot:

Ok. Were both of your families Italian?

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Wilmot:

And when you say that your family came through Crocket, Mary—

Highfill:

Via.

Wilmot:

Via Crocket—where were they coming from? Why did they come here?

Highfill:

Well, my parents were from Italy. When they arrived they settled, because my dad's brother worked in Ft. Bragg, my parents settled in Ft. Bragg and my dad went into the logging business. He wasn't a businessman, but was a logger. Then my brother was born, and he was sickly. The doctor recommended that they leave that area, so they went to San Francisco. I was born there. My dad couldn't take it over there in the city, coming from a logging area. So they went to Crocket and he worked for the sugar refinery long enough to know that he didn't like that, it was so hot. So they came to Point Richmond. That started, we met her parents. They were already here at the point.

Wilmot:

What did your parents do for a living?

Highfill:

When they came to the point?

Wilmot:

Mm-hmm.

Highfill:

My dad had several jobs. He worked for the dredging company and—that's the only one that I really can remember, at the time, and then they left there and came up on Casey Drive, here in Point Richmond, and then Dad had various jobs. He worked at Richmond Art Tile, and he worked for the quarry, and then when the war came he went to work as a pipe fitter helper at then-known as Standard Oil.

Wilmot:

Did your mother work?

Highfill:

No. She worked hard, but at home. [laughter]

Christiansen:

Homemaker. We were homemakers in those days.

Highfill:

Then when we did the war years we all worked. My sister in law—my brother was in the service and my sister in law lived with us, and so it took all Mom had to do all the laundry, and cooking for the rest of us that went and did our duty, I guess you might say.

Wilmot:

And what are your parents' names?

Highfill:

What are their names?

Wilmot:

Your parents' names.

Highfill:

My father's name was Vittorio Bianchin, and my mother was Antonietta Bianchin.

Wilmot:

Beautiful. And in your households did you grow up speaking Italian?

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Before English. [laughter]

Wilmot:

Are you still fluent in Italian?

Highfill:

No.

Christiansen:

No, not really. Not anymore. We do okay. We get by but that's about it.

Highfill:

Understand it better than speak it anymore.

Wilmot:

When did that shift happen in your life? Do you remember?

Christiansen:

Excuse me?

Wilmot:

When did that shift happen in your life, when did the shift from having Italian be your primary spoken language? How old were you?

Christiansen:

Because the seniors, like my mom and dad, they passed on and the original natives, so to speak, they either moved or were gone.

Highfill:

Died.

Christiansen:

So we lost that continuity of the language.

Highfill:

Nobody to talk to, so to speak. She and I, but we just don't speak Italian to one another, so we've kind of lost it you might say.

Wilmot:

Was it, you think, was it around high school that you started speaking English primarily?

Christiansen:

Oh no, we spoke English before that.

Highfill:

You know, we learned it in school, first of all. We knew very little Italian when we went to school, but it didn't take us very long to sort of get going.

Christiansen:

Well, we learned Italian first. As babies.

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Because I had an older brother and sister, and they would talk English, and so it was easy.

Highfill:

It made it easier for us.

Christiansen:

It was easy for me to pick it up.

Highfill:

Then my father wanted to learn English. When he came here, was the best American you ever saw. He just fell into this—he just loved it. When he became a citizen it was the best day of his life. He just was so proud to be an American. So we spoke English because he

wanted to speak English. That was our language at home. Then I learned it by, when he read the Italian newspaper I'd sit on his lap and ask him, and learned that way.

Wilmot:

Okay. I wanted to turn now to ask you about your family, Anita. Then I have a couple more questions.

Christiansen:

My father was born from the northern part of Italy, the borderline of France and Switzerland, and my mother was just the opposite, the toe, the toe part of Italy. This is where the girls, they were the only ones that were entitled to go to school. So my mother could not read or write in Italy, in Italian.

Highfill:

Oh, I see.

Christiansen:

But my dad went to school until he was in the eighth grade.

Wilmot:

So are you saying only the young men were encouraged to pursue their education?

Christiansen:

Yes. In Italy, I'm speaking of Italy. So when he came, and his family were all builders. They built hotels, and that type of field, construction. When my father came here in 1907 from Italy, that was the year after the earthquake.

Wilmot:

Yes it was.

Christiansen:

And it was still smoldering in San Francisco. The minute he stepped off the train they handed him a shovel. [laughter]

Highfill:

[laughter] I guess so!

Christiansen:

And that was sort of beneath him. He kind of shoveled whatever for a while, for a couple of days. Then he decided, well, this wasn't part of his life. So he hops on a train and he goes to Calistoga or Napa and worked in the—

Highfill:

The vineyards?

Christiansen:

The vineyards because he loved the grapes and the vineyards.

Highfill:

It was like home.

Christiansen:

That reminded him of Italy. Then he went on to, made his way to Porterville a few years later, because my oldest brother I think, and sister, they were born in like 1912 or 1914, maybe 1916. As he made his way to Porterville, this is where he met my mom, my mother. This is where they got married. She was, like I said, just opposite ends of Italy.

Highfill:

Different cultures almost.

Christiansen:

He would sort of, throw it up at her that she was a peasant.

Highfill:

[laughter]

Wilmot:

Ouch.

Christiansen:

Yes, well. She was very talented and had a lot of energy, and spontaneity. She could really, she was just really—she could outshine him.

Highfill:

She was a sweetie.

01:00:10:00

Christiansen:

As far as personality, where he was more of then—you might even call him today a snob. But he wasn't aware of that. They made their way, they got married, and that was kind of interesting. They managed a hotel in Vallejo. My mother was always the worker.

Highfill:

Of course!

Christiansen:

My father was, can I say, lazy. [laughter] Not as energetic.

Highfill:

He wore the suit.

Christiansen:

Yes he did!

Wilmot:

You remember the suit, Mary?

Highfill:

[laughter] No, but I know what she's saying. I just see pictures of the olden days where always—

Christiansen:

And a tie.

Highfill:

--where the man always wore the suit with the tie and the watch fob where moms always did the actual work. [laughter]

Christiansen:

On their way back to Point Richmond, they settled where Mary and the foreigners and the Cizmiches—we were actually like a little colony of families that lived there and this is where, like I said, the college, the junior college and--was one of the shipyards there too, Mary, or were the shipyards across the channel?

Highfill:

Well I think the shipyards were further this side, in the channel.

Christiansen:

Well there was shipyard number one and shipyard number two and three and four, that they built those Liberty ships.

Wilmot:

They were there even that early?

Christiansen:

Excuse me?

Wilmot:

The shipyards were there even that early?

Christiansen:

Oh yes, this is in 1941, September of '41, I'm sure that Mary will remember, we ran across the mud flats.

Highfill:

Oh, but we had moved by then. Long before we had moved up—

Christiansen:

Yes, but what I'm saying is that we did see that—

Highfill:

First ship launched, was it?

Christiansen:

Yes, but they made us move, naturally, because they were filling in. We didn't know why but we all had to move from that little particular area to where—we moved into town, so to speak.

Wilmot:

Can you tell me a little bit about—what kinds of structures did you live in? What kind of houses?

Christiansen:

There was no plumbing, no indoor plumbing in any of those, the Sez niches were the only ones that had that because they built the house last. There was no indoor plumbing. We had chickens and pigs and cows and horses, and all kinds of livestock. It was just very—well, I don't want to say casual.

Highfill:

It was very rustic. Let's put it this way. I was too young to really remember.

Christiansen:

Well, all of the houses were rustic here at the point.

Highfill:

But my mom and dad really, they had a bare minimum of what you might call a house, but they were what you would now call a squatter. They actually settled on Richfield Oil property. As my mother always said, when Richfield asked them to leave, she said it was the happiest day of her life, because it was really not much there. She had to get her own water from the well, and it was just not very nice. Let's put it that way.

Christiansen:

My mother—

Highfill:

That's when they moved up in 1927, I believe, probably about 1927, up on top of the hill here on Casey Drive.

Wilmot:

So your families moved at the same time to that area?

Christiansen:

No, we moved to another little area on East Richmond, which was hideous.

Highfill:

[laughter]

Christiansen:

It was just so horrible.

Wilmot:

How old were you when that moved happened from the flats?

Christiansen:

Okay, I can remember. I was six, six years old? Seven?

Wilmot:

You were just a little one.

Christiansen:

Yes, we were small children, but we were—I don't know, we were alert and maybe bright enough that we could remember. I can remember so many things. I can remember Mary's mom and Maria—because my mother, for some reason, because I had the older brother and sister, maybe that kind of instigated the washing machine. We had a washing machine and your mom and Maria would come—

Highfill:

To the wash?

Wilmot:

Maria?

Christiansen:

To do the wash.

Highfill:

See, I don't remember that.

Christiansen:

See, they had to boil the water. My father had built a pit, a fireplace, so to speak.

Highfill:

A fireplace, yes.

Wilmot:

And when you say Maria?

Christiansen:

Yes, a friend, Maria Buziol.

Highfill:

Another old friend from Italy.

Christiansen:

She was a foreigner.

Wilmot:

When you say foreigner, where was she from?

Christiansen:

She was from Venice, Italy.

Wilmot:

Italy, okay. Now would you also tell me your parents' names?

Christiansen:

Say that again?

Wilmot:

Will you tell me your parents' names?

Christiansen:

Yes. My father was Eduardo, Edward, and my mother was Terezina.

Wilmot:

Oh, beautiful.

Christiansen:

Isn't that cute?

Wilmot:

It sounds like Theresa.

Christiansen:

Yes, Theresa, Terezina.

Highfill:

And she danced just like it sounds. She did the tarantella. [laughter]

Christiansen:

I wonder if I got that from my mother?

Highfill:

She loved to dance.

Wilmot:

Your mom was a dancer? Your mom loved to dance?

Christiansen:

Yes. She did.

Wilmot:

And your parents' last names, please?

Christiansen:

Barra. [pronounced with American accent] Barra. [pronounced with Italian accent] You see the name in Italy. They're in fashion, you know, the clothing. They are well-known, but we were not related.

Highfill:

Fortunately! [laughter]

Christiansen:

But anyway. It's one of the things—well, many things that I can recall and remember.

Wilmot:

Yes. Well, let's keep on. I wanted to ask you also about siblings. You mentioned, Mary, that you had a brother?

Highfill:

Yes I do.

Wilmot:

And do you want to say his name?

Highfill:

Bruno.

Wilmot:

Bruno. And was he your only sibling?

Highfill:

Yes. He was a year older than I. He led the way in school, for me. [laughter] Once they knew my brother, all I got was, "Oh! Are you Bruno's sister?" Because he was an accordionist, and very, very good.

Wilmot:

Lucky you!

Highfill:

Yes. So everybody knew my brother, from all over the place. So as I went along, all I got was, "Oh, are you Bruno's sister?" So that kind of paved the way for me through school, the teachers knew me just because they knew my brother and there wasn't that big an age difference. Just one grade.

Wilmot:

Okay, and no one younger than you?

Highfill:

No, just he and I. And you said you're one of three siblings?

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

Is that right? What are their names?

Christiansen:

Well, there were actually four of us. Out of the four, there's two that have survived. I had an older sister named Rose, and my brother Louie. Louie is still living. He will be, I think eighty-nine, maybe eighty-nine in April.

Highfill:

I thought about him the other day, I thought, "How old is he?"

Christiansen:

And then I was born--in between, there was an epidemic of the flu. See, I was born in 1924, that might have been, what, 1920? I don't know 1921 or 1922. Anyway, there was a baby, a girl, and she passed away. And then I was born in 1924, and then my youngest brother was born in 1925. William. As I said, out of the four, there's two of us who are survivors.

Wilmot:

And when you say you were born in 1924, were you also born in 1924?

Highfill:

January.

Wilmot:

And you're born in?

Christiansen:

April.

Wilmot:

Okay, so we have an Aquarius and--?

Christiansen:

I'm an Aries. [laughter]

Wilmot:

Aries, okay.

Highfill:

Capricorn, here.

Wilmot:

I have a question for you each to answer about each other, which is, what were you like as children? So I'm not asking you to answer that about yourselves, I'm asking you to answer that about each other. So let's start with—

Highfill:

Shy.

Wilmot:

Wait, are you describing Anita?

Highfill:

Anita.

Wilmot:

Go ahead.

Highfill:

Quiet, reserved. How else—what else? [to Christiansen]

Christiansen:

Intelligent. [laughter]

Highfill:

Oh yes, intelligent, right, of course, I must say that! [laughter] I think that pretty much. I think she's the same as she always was. Kind of shy. Well, you're not that shy now. As children growing up, coming from an Italian family, we were rather shy. You know.

01:00:20:00

Compared to the kids who spoke the language really well. I don't know about Anita but I always felt like I was different. Not different, different, but because I spoke a different language, I think, I always felt like I was different. When kids would come to my house I was a little bit kind of shy, like. The kids would say to me, "Are you Italian?" It made me feel like—for years, I couldn't figure out why—come to find out, it's because I was so fair. I didn't fit the Italian mould as being dark haired and dark eyed. My brother and I are both green and blue eyed, freckled faced, we just did not fit the Italian look. This is what they meant, not, [in ominous tones] "Ohh, are you Italian." [laughter]

Wilmot:

What tipped them off when they came to your home that you were Italian?

Highfill:

Well, my mother, they spoke a different language. Although they did their best to speak English, that was pretty obvious.

Christiansen:

Can I interrupt?

Wilmot:

If you wish to.

Christiansen:

Basically, the population was mostly Italians.

Highfill:

Right.

Christiansen:

So that contributes, you know.

Highfill:

There were a lot of Italians here at that point, many, many Italians.

Christiansen:

A few Austrians.

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Just a few, and the rest were the so-called, for us, the “Americans.”

Highfill:

But we were the wine-makers, I didn't—but my parents made wine, her parents made wine. Half of the neighborhood made wine! So we sort of said to ourselves, we were different sort of, weren't we? [laughter]

Christiansen:

That was very festive, in September.

Highfill:

Come to think of it, it was very happy times.

Christiansen:

Yes, very.

Wilmot:

Well, I was wondering if you would complete this image of Anita. How did she dress when she was little? Do you remember? Is that really going too far back?

Highfill:

No, it wasn't very mod, was it? Nor were mine.

Christiansen:

Can I add something to this? [laughter]

Wilmot:

Yes!

Christiansen:

Because things unfold as you keep talking. My shyness was also basically that I was embarrassed. See, a lot of people don't know this.

Wilmot:

Why?

Christiansen:

Because we were so poor.

Highfill:

We were not rich, that's for sure.

Wilmot:

Okay.

Christiansen:

We might have been rich in some other things, and that even applies today. You can have a million dollars. I get weepy! [begins to cry]

Highfill:

Oh dear! Turn it off! [laughter]

Wilmot:

Do you want me to turn it off?

Highfill:

Just that part where she bellers.

Christiansen:

A lot of that was embarrassment for me [voice breaks] because we were so poor. I wasn't like Shirley, or Gwen at that time.

Highfill:

Oh yes.

Christiansen:

Do you see where I'm coming from?

Highfill:

The well-dressed.

Christiansen:

Well they had cute clothes and we didn't—I didn't.

Highfill:

I didn't either.

Christiansen:

I didn't. I had holes in my shoes.

Highfill:

Hand-me-downs.

Christiansen:

And I wouldn't wear—I had this pride, even as little as I was, I had a tremendous amount of pride and I would not wear—like, Charlotte handed down to me a raincoat one time, I would not—I would rather be soaked to the skin than to wear that raincoat, because it was given to me. It wasn't like today. We just have all of this, today I guess it's what you call false pride. Do you see what I'm saying?

Wilmot:

Yes.

Christiansen:

So that made it—it was difficult. I had a difficult childhood.

Highfill:

It's interesting because I don't recall it as being a difficult childhood. We didn't have much, but—my dad was unemployed for about a year and a half and that kind of made sort of a difference for us, as far as having things. Although Mom had her vegetable garden and we had animals.

Christiansen:

Well we had that.

Highfill:

That sort of thing, and I did wear hand-me-downs, but I just didn't realize--at the time that a lot of the kids whose dads were employed at the time weren't any better off, really, than we were. Everybody went through hard times. But we learned a lot in those days. I look back now and I think, I don't know, it sort of made me what I am today.

Christiansen:

We all went through the Depression, so to speak.

Highfill:

Oh yes.

Christiansen:

It all depends how it affects individuals. It affected me a certain way, maybe someone else could kind of rise above it or slough it off easier. For me, my childhood was not easy, it was difficult. I think even to this day I am still determined, that determination has not been taken away. So there's good things, naturally, good qualities that are mine—they're mine. That doesn't mean that it was—we look, compared to what Steven and Mary's children, all of the opportunities that they have been given, and with probably your life.

Wilmot:

Very much so.

Christiansen:

But I'm not complaining.

Highfill:

I had a happy childhood, you know. We didn't have material things, but we had a happy childhood. Did the best--Mom and Dad did the best they could.

Christiansen:

But see I don't label it—

Highfill:

We were missing a lot but I had a happy childhood.

Wilmot:

I understand that you're not complaining, that you're being descriptive, you're communicating your truth.

Christiansen:

Yes, that's just the way it was. I just tell it the way it was.

Highfill:

We wished we'd had more, because some kids did. I realize now that a lot of the kids weren't a whole lot better off than we were.

Christiansen:

No, I'm not saying that, I'm speaking just as an individual, just me.

Wilmot:

Yes.

Christiansen:

I'm not comparing what I didn't have with what who had, and et cetera.

Wilmot:

I understand, and I'm thanking you. I want to ask you now if you can tell me a little bit about what Marry was like when she was a little person. [to Anita]

Highfill:

Shy. [laughter] We laugh at each other because we were just as green—really very green. [laughter]

Christiansen:

There's always been a special attachment, a special feeling, for each other. I don't recall—we may not agree on a lot of things, but we've never argued or had a fuss about it.

Highfill:

Nope.

Christiansen:

Not ever. And Mary would come over and have lunch. Remember when you'd come and maybe sometimes you brought your sandwich and then you had lunch at the shack, at the old house?

Highfill:

Oh, at the old house.

Christiansen:

Yeah! Around the bend?

Highfill:

That was a fun place. I think back now.

Christiansen:

Maria, what was it fun? Why? [laughter] Mary was outgoing. Where I was very quiet, she was outgoing.

Highfill:

Well—

Christiansen:

You were!

Highfill:

More so than you.

Christiansen:

Oh, absolutely.

Highfill:

But it wasn't until after I grew up and got married.

Christiansen:

Yeah, that we blossomed, so to speak. But she was—

Wilmot:

You both feel like you blossomed after marriage?

Christiansen:

Well, as we got older.

Highfill:

We grew up and realized, hey, there's a lot out there, and we are ourselves. We lost that shyness, that's for sure. [laughs]

Christiansen:

And to top everything—and of course my mom and her mom and dad and my father, they were good friends and her brother. So as I said, we've just known each other, and I think we've appreciated one another. I think that's a good word.

Highfill:

I think many years ago, and the person who said it to me, a lovely, lovely lady, but she used to say to me when she'd see me, "Hello there." I always felt like I was beneath her. "Hello there." I thought--I learned not to like that expression. So at that time I said to myself, "There's nobody out there any better than I am. As far as worth on this world, I'm just as good as anybody." With that I braced myself up and there I am. But she never meant anything by it, but I always felt like every time she said, "Hello there!" like I was down in the ground some place. [laughter] I thought, "Hm, okay."

Wilmot:

Who was this lady?

Highfill:

I'm not going to tell you who it was, because she was a very wonderful person, but it was just an expression she had.

01:00:30:01

"Hello there." I thought, 'Oh, I did not like that.' That was my first lesson as far as value as a human being, that I'm just as good, maybe not as rich, maybe not as good-looking or better than some, not as good as others. As far as value, I'm as good as anybody else. That started my growth as being—marching forward, you might say. [laughing] This is going to be a real fun interview I hope.

Christiansen:

I hope they appreciate it. [laughter]

Highfill:

Feel free to cut any part of it off that you will! [laughter]

Christiansen:

Erase the whole thing! [laughter]

Wilmot:

It's going to be okay.

Highfill:

So then we must get to the war years.

Wilmot:

We will, I have just a couple more questions about your families. The first one is that both of you have mentioned parts of Italy where your family originated from. Did you have a continuing relationship with Italy as you got older? Did you ever go visit the place where your family was from? Mary, you did not?

Highfill:

No, my parents didn't either. They never went back.

Christiansen:

I did.

Wilmot:

Okay.

Christiansen:

We went in 1976. We left the tour, we were on the tour, and we left Venice and we took a train, that was fun. We went to Ascona, Switzerland, and this is where my cousin has—this would have been the son of one of my father's brothers. There were three boys and two girls in the family. One, we just missed her. She was a mother superior and had spent most of her life in Sicily. She was head of a parochial school. Anyway, I met Olivero and his wife and the two girls. This is why my father—see, I kind of miss that, this is important—my father came here to Point Richmond eventually because it reminded him of Ascona. Because, where this is our San Francisco Bay, they had Lake Maggiore in their front yard, or whatever. So this whole area reminded him of Italy.

Wilmot:

I'm just going to take a minute to see if I can show this beautiful day. [panning the video camera across the window]

Highfill:

That is pretty! Look how overcast and gray. Those are your colors!

Christiansen:

I know! Dorothy is the one that has a problem with the gray.

Highfill:

She's more like I am.

Christiansen:

She gets depressed.

Highfill:

It would not do for me to look at this all day.

Christiansen:

So this is what brought him back to Point Richmond.

Wilmot:

Well, I wanted to move on now to talk a little bit about education. Where did you go to school?

Highfill:

Richmond High School.

Wilmot:

Both?

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

And elementary?

Highfill:

Washington School here at the Point.

Wilmot:

And your family, what were the attitudes around education? Because you told me that, I believe, one of you told me that in your family, women—it wasn't as important for women to go—

Christiansen:

That was my mother.

Wilmot:

Yes. I also, I was wondering, as you went forward and pursued your education, did you feel that it was very much supported in your family? Were your parents very happy to see you go out there and do it?

Highfill:

Oh, my dad always said, "Get an education." And it's the same. It might have been a little different than maybe Anita's father, but my dad said everybody went to the sixth grade, my mom did too, then that was it. Then you made a decision. If you could afford it, I guess you went on to school, and if not, then you pursued other interests. My mother learned tailoring. My dad worked on the farm. It wasn't theirs, it belonged to somebody else. That's why he always said, "Get yourself an education." Because, he said, "I wasn't able to." That was one of the reasons that they left Italy, was there were four boys, and they were tenant farmers. Four boys to try to make a living, so the father sent one of the boys, gave him the money to come to America. Then he worked, paid his father off, continued to work, and sent for my father. Then my dad came, and worked and paid off his brother, and then he sent for my mom and then she came, and then they sent for another brother, who came as far as New York and then had to go home because they wouldn't let him through. He had pink eye, can you imagine? And he had to go back. They wanted him to try again but he said he couldn't afford it, you can't keep coming and going. That was the end of the relatives here. I just finished high school.

Wilmot:

And everyone in your family came through New York?

Highfill:

Both of them, yes.

Wilmot:
And you?

Christiansen:
Yes.

Wilmot:
Interesting. So you went all the way through high school.

Highfill:
Yes.

Wilmot:
I wanted to ask you, what was your social life like in high school? Actually, I'm sorry, did you feel that you got a chance to respond to that question about education in your family?

Christiansen:
I did not go through high school. At the age of thirteen they discovered that I had tuberculosis. So I was sent up to Weimar, which is about three hours from here, up in the mountains.

Highfill:
That's what they did in those days.

Christiansen:
And it took forever to get there by car, because the cars were so—you know, simple, and they didn't go very fast.

Highfill:
And we did not own a car.

Christiansen:
I know that you came once, did you come on—?

Highfill:
Came on the train, we came on the train.

Christiansen:
No you didn't, Louie had drove you up.

Highfill:
Well, Louie once and I think I came on the train too.

Christiansen:
Did you?

Highfill:
That was with Mr. whatever his name was, from the store.

Christiansen:

Anyway, at the age of thirteen, never ever being away from my mother and father, to be stuck up there, I tell you.

Highfill:

It was frightening.

Christiansen:

This is why I say—well, nevermind the childhood part, just forget about that. But I go eventually, after being, I guess the word would be, like you're quarantined for about six months and et cetera, I went to school.

Wilmot:

You came back?

Christiansen:

Yes, three years later. I came back in 1940. I was sixteen.

Wilmot:

So six months of quarantine and then two and a half years of schooling still at the sanitorium?

Christiansen:

Yes. But then when I came home I took—what do you call that high school—

Highfill:

GED?

Christiansen:

Yes. I decided, I always had a yen for hair work, to be a beautician, and I enrolled at the beauty academy in Oakland and I had to take a test. I had to go to San Francisco to take an equivalent high school thing before I could continue with my career in beauty.

Wilmot:

When you were about sixteen.

Christiansen:

Yes, I was sixteen. I was seventeen when I graduated from beauty school, and I've been working ever since.

Highfill:

One of the best. And you know, she still does hair, freebies. She does mine. She cut my hair. I was her model, right?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

And she's been cutting my hair ever since. My hair doesn't know anybody else.
[laughter]

Wilmot:

That's wonderful.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Wilmot:

That's a wonderful talent, too.

Christiansen:

You know, it's something I love. I just love it. It's interesting, while I was up at Weimar, that was the sanatorium, I had a dream. I dreamed that I gave a—I did a finger wave. In those days we did finger waves. [laughter] It was so vivid, it was so real! This little gal that was in the next bed, we had to con the nurses into agreeing for me to do this. And lo, and behold I got some wave set. In those days it was like glue. I simply created this whole thing. The first thing I knew I was doing nurses. And I was fifteen. So that's, again--it was a hardship being away.

Wilmot:

It's hard being away from your family.

Highfill:

We were quite sheltered. When we went to school as young children, the first thing, you went to school and you came right back home. You didn't fool around along the way, you got home.

Christiansen:

We didn't hang out.

01:00:40:00

Highfill:

It was very sheltered. I realized when she had to leave how difficult it must have been for her because it was a combination of everything, our being so sheltered, and your mom and dad are not there and you have all these strange nurses and doctors. At the same time, when she left, then the rest of us all had to be tested because they tested the water, I don't know what all they tested.

Christiansen:

Anyone that was associated with me.

Highfill:

We went though what we call, what was it, the clinic?

Christiansen:

Yes, the clinic. Oh sure.

Highfill:

At that time, to my knowledge, you were the only one that went there. At the same time there were a lot of other children who didn't go to Weimar but were sent to what we call summer camps? Do you remember summer camps?

Christiansen:

Yes, they were the "sunshine" camps.

Highfill:

Yes, but were gone all summer.

Wilmot:

Who also had TB?

Highfill:

If not—

Christiansen:

They were borderline, I think.

Highfill:

I think they might have been, perhaps, not as nourished, maybe they felt that being away would have been good for them at the time. What did we know?

Christiansen:

I cried for four months.

Highfill:

I'm sure you did.

Wilmot:

How does one—this is the thing—because TB doesn't exist as much in the US anymore, how does one know when one has TB? How can you tell? As I understand it's a disease where you look just like everybody else.

Christiansen:

Well, yes, today.

Wilmot:

Or do you just cough? I don't really know.

Christiansen:

I didn't look sick, I don't know. I've always been petite. So the weight thing, whether I was tiny had nothing to do, not a thing to do with whether—with a problem. But I was able to rise, again, rise above it.

Wilmot:

Did you have any friends that you brought back with you from that place? From Weimar?

Christiansen:

No, because we were all scattered. All from different areas.

Highfill:

Different areas in California.

Wilmot:

And do you remember that as well? When you went to visit, meeting people who were from all over the place?

Highfill:

Well, I don't remember meeting a lot of people. We just went up to visit Anita.

Christiansen:

For a couple of hours.

Highfill:

For a couple of hours. And then one time, I think they had a program, entertainment up there, so we all enjoyed that.

Christiansen:

Oh yes. Your brother came and played the accordion.

Highfill:

Yes. But at that time, just getting back and forth to there was a major doing. It isn't like today, everybody gets in the car and they whip over to San Francisco or Oakland or Sacramento. It was kind of like an all-day, getting up beyond. It was up on Highway 50, wasn't it? The other side of Sacramento?

Wilmot:

Did you stay in a hotel overnight?

Highfill:

No, it was a one-day affair.

Christiansen:

You left early in the morning.

Highfill:

That's why she's tough as nails. She had to--she roughed it out for a long time. So it tells a little bit about people.

Christiansen:

You just never know.

Wilmot:

I wanted to ask you a little bit about social life when you were sixteen and seventeen and eighteen year-olds. You were doing hair at that time.

Christiansen:

I went to work in September.

Wilmot:

But you two maintained close contact.

Highfill:

We've always lived within a couple of blocks of one another, all this time. Prior to that, of course she was—were you sixteen or seventeen when you went to work?

Christiansen:

Seventeen.

Highfill:

But prior to that, you talk about social activities, there really wasn't a lot. But we had a wonderful little group called the YPL, which is Young Peoples' League. It was supervised by Grace—was she Westman at the time?

Christiansen:

Yes, Westman.

Highfill:

Grace Westman. And we met at the Methodist church, we had out little social functions there, activities. Then dances, then sometimes one of the parents, we had a lot of, at that time it was Standard Oil, we had a lot of Standard Oil parents. They would—how would you say—borrow their club. They had a rod and gun club out there.

Wilmot:

Rod and gun?

Highfill:

Rod and gun club, mm-hmm. So we kids would get to go out there and have our dances, which was really great. And they had a swimming pool there which we got to use. That was our social activity, we did venture, we didn't go over to town. We went to movies, when you could go for—

Christiansen:

Ten cents. Or a nickel.

Highfill:

A pittance. [laughter] When we went to the movies, we had enough money for movies and carfare, candy wasn't in there. So we had things all figured out.

Christiansen:

And sometimes we walked. [laughter]

Highfill:

We would walk there, so we could save that money for candy. But we always made sure we had the money to come home on it because we were tired by then, so we got to ride home on the bus. We could walk to the movies.

Wilmot:

At this point were you dating?

Highfill:

No.

Christiansen:

Goodness!

Highfill:

There was no dating, dating. We just had our little social club, and you might have paired off with someone you liked better. But it was not dating as you might say dating is today, no.

Wilmot:

When did that enter your life?

Highfill:

Out of high school.

Wilmot:

After high school.

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

We were asked to functions during high school, but it just wasn't—how would I say—you declined mostly because you didn't have maybe the right attire to attend some of the—didn't have the formal, that sort of thing.

Christiansen:

Not only that, but my mother wouldn't allow it. They simply didn't allow it.

Wilmot:

Did your parents talk to you about things like boys?

Christiansen:

No.

Highfill:

Like they do today! Good heavens, no! [laughter]

Wilmot:

Did they talk to you about things like sex?

Christiansen:

[laughter]

Highfill:

[laughter] “Watch out for those guys”? No. I think my parents were a little more lenient maybe than your mom and dad. I could have gone probably to some of the functions in high school but I found it a lot easier to say no.

Wilmot:

I have another question, which is, you mentioned that you were at the Methodist church? Were your families church-going families?

Highfill:

Well I’m a Catholic.

Wilmot:

You’re a Catholic now, to this day?

Highfill:

Yes.

Wilmot:

And your parents were as well?

Highfill:

Catholic, but it was okay to—you know, we didn’t go to the church services, but it was held there at the church. It was wonderful, it was a good time, yes.

Wilmot:

I understand. Were you also raised Catholic?

Christiansen:

I was baptized a Catholic, but I did not continue while I was up at Weimar. Oh, I had to go to Catholic—up there—what do you call it?

Highfill:

Catechism?

Christiansen:

Catechism. I couldn't think of the word. You were sort of forced to go. But this is where Christian Science found me, and I took to it like a duck takes to water. That was in 1939, because I came home in 1940. We had two practitioners who would come from Colfax and visit, and we had Sunday school. I'm still a Christian Scientist, I have continued. This, to me, is what actually saved my life. I give Christian Science all the credit, for whatever I am today. I thoroughly believe in it and I've gotten a lot out of it.

Wilmot:

Is there an aspect of it that you found particularly redemptive, or useful in going forward?

Christiansen:

The whole thing.

Wilmot:

Part of the teachings?

Christiansen:

It's just unfolding and learning more about God, is what it's all about. And love, the true meaning of loving people, and it's just basic, it's just very, very basic. So today I am active in the Christian Science church, and hopefully to continue for a little while.

[laughter]

Wilmot:

I'm sorry to bounce around a little.

Christiansen:

It's alright.

Wilmot:

Is it okay?

Christiansen:

Sure.

Wilmot:

I just remembered that I asked you this question about if your parents were telling you about romance or anything of that nature, and you both said, "No," and then I thought, well, where did you learn about things like that?

Highfill:

[laughter] Your friends.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Your older friends, your mutual friends.

Christiansen:

For me, it was the nurses while I was up at Weimar. They explained the relationships and so forth, which for me, it was totally embarrassing. [laughter]

01:00:50:00

There was, I'm not going to mention her name because you would know who it was. She had a child out of wedlock, she got pregnant, and well, I'm sure she knew it, but for my mother, she was an example of what you don't do. She was just ostracized, just unmercifully. It wasn't today, this, "Well, they were living together," this excuse. Well, we didn't—I did not have a choice. You do not do, you do not commit adultery. To me, there were laws in our household. I'm not saying that we were kept Puritans, but you just didn't do those things.

Highfill:

We knew a lot more, just you heard things. You kept your mouth shut. You heard your elders talk to one another, and you kind of got the drift of what was going on in the world, but it was kind of a hush-hush, and we did have an education, a class or two at junior high school, which was, the boys went one day and you went the next day and they just sort of—the birds and bees type stuff. And unless you were stupid, you kind of got the message there too. It was certainly not like today, good heavens no.

Christiansen:

We didn't have the books and things. You didn't do it.

Highfill:

You just didn't talk about it.

Christiansen:

I'm not saying it was right. Probably it was more wrong than right. It's just like with my granddaughters, how we have sat and talked openly and discussed it, just about life in general. We just didn't do that. That was kind of a little dark side.

Highfill:

But I did discover over the years when I was a child, and you'd listen to the elders talk, they were—a lot of them were not what you thought they were. There was a lot going on in those days that was being done today, only it was kept quiet.

Wilmot:

It wasn't so different?

Highfill:

No, absolutely not. It was just swept under the table, people kept their mouths shut. But you always heard these rumors.

Wilmot:

What happened to the girl you're describing who had the baby out of wedlock? If it's too—

Christiansen:

Well I'm sure that she has passed on, because she's a lot older. Good heavens. She was at least eight, nine years, maybe older than ourselves. You wouldn't know who she was. She married several times, and she did not have a mother. She just had a dad. One of the neighbors adopted the baby.

Wilmot:

Wow.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

I guess it was common in those days.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Yes, I think everything today, it's so different, but today everything has to be legal.

Christiansen:

But that was an example of what not to do.

Wilmot:

I understand.

Christiansen:

So they just didn't go through a lot of lectures and the simplicity of talking and explaining stuff.

Highfill:

You just don't do it.

Christiansen:

That was, it was a law. I know it was in my house. It was a law. That's the way it was.

Highfill:

That brings us up then to the war years.

Wilmot:

Okay, I'm ready.

Highfill:

Shall we go back to the USO, where someone piqued his interest? Your boss's interest?

Wilmot:

Yes. How old were you when you got involved with that organization?

Highfill:
Eighteen.

Wilmot:
You were eighteen years old.

Highfill:
Yes, it was just when the war started, and they set up the USO and we'd take a cab or—I don't even remember how we got there.

Christiansen:
This bus! We took the bus and then we walked to Tenth.

Highfill:
Amazing, during those years that we were able to walk all those blocks and didn't get killed along the way.

Christiansen:
Why not? We were kids!

Highfill:
It was very nice. We met a lot of young men from different parts of the country, mostly I think from Minnesota—

Christiansen:
Minnesota.

Highfill:
Missouri, and Wisconsin, that settled at our old grammar school. They stayed there until they were shipped out overseas. We met a lot of nice—

Christiansen:
And then a new troop would come in.

Highfill:
A lot of nice kids that we met, and then some of our girls, I think we had two, that married boys from Minnesota.

Christiansen:
Mm-hmm, June, one.

Highfill:
Yes.

Christiansen:
And Louise.

Highfill:
Louella.

Christiansen:

Yes, but there was a Louise too, remember?

Wilmot:

When you say “our girls” do you mean your friends or do you mean your daughters?

Highfill:

Pardon?

Wilmot:

When you say “our girls” do you mean your friends or your daughters?

Highfill:

Our girlfriends, our school friends.

Wilmot:

Your chums.

Highfill:

Yes, married some of the boys from back there. Very nice young men. I know one group, I think, in particular, I don’t think that very many of them ever came back. I think those wound up in Iwo Jima.

It was very nice. On Friday nights or Saturdays that we would go down and just dance, juke box, and—

Wilmot:

What kind of music?

Highfill:

Oh, Jitterbug! [laughter]

Christiansen:

We jitterbugged.

Highfill:

It was jitterbug times, and Glenn Miller, we just had some wonderful, wonderful dance music. They had an open—how would you call it—

Christiansen:

Canteen.

Highfill:

The canteen, refreshments, coffee and soft drinks. No beer, no, nothing like that. It was fun.

Christiansen:

But then again, our city of Richmond was totally different too, it was very safe. It isn't the environment or the element that we have today, so you could walk. We were fearless. Maybe it was our youth.

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Because when you're young you are fearless, but we had no problems.

Highfill

Then, too, it was war times. I don't think anybody was really that interested in doing anybody any harm. It just seemed like everybody got busy into doing something for your country.

Christiansen:

The war effort.

Highfill:

To me, the only thing that changed was from daylight to dark, other than that, there were just as many people out at night as there were in daytime. It was like, restaurants open all night, theatres open all night, all these activities. The only thing that changed was the light and dark. Everybody had a job to do, and in the beginning, right out of high school, I went to work at Penney's, what they called the cash room.

Wilmot:

The cash room?

Highfill:

The cash room, that's where the money went.

Wilmot:

Cashoom or cash room?

Highfill:

Cash, cash room.

Christiansen:

The money room.

Highfill:

And we had these funny little things that went up wires and brought the money up, you know, it was funky.

Christiansen:

Oh yes.

Highfill:

But things were in short supply. I do remember, when the sheets came in, and the work clothes came in, people would call and ask, “When are they coming?” We never even knew, but there were times when they’d think they knew, they’d open the doors to the basement and it was all you could do to keep the people out of there. It didn’t make any difference whether they fit or not, they just grabbed whatever. If it suited them, fine, and if not, they just sold it to a friend. Raincoats, overalls, coveralls, sheets, everything! Just grabbed—didn’t have time to even put some of the things on the shelves. That lasted for a while. Then I went on, I wanted to do something different.

Wilmot:

This was in 1942?

Highfill:

Yes. I graduated in ’42.

Wilmot:

That’s when you were eighteen.

Highfill:

After a certain length of time, I thought I would like to go to work in the shipyards. My brother at that time was working in the shipyards as a welder in San Francisco for Bethlehem Steel and he said, “You’re not going to go to work in the shipyard, you’re not going to join the military.” So I decided to go to Standard Oil at the time, which is now Chevron. So I took my little self down there, and they said, “Yes, we will take you.” So I—I don’t even know if we took a physical at the time.

Christiansen:

I’m sure you did.

Highfill:

I was alive, I guess that’s all that mattered! [laughter] So after maybe a month of training, I went out and worked shift work for two years.

Wilmot:

Wow.

Highfill:

That’s rotating shifts, three shifts, six days a week. I went from day time to swing shift to midnight shift. I thought, first night I had to start, it was the midnight shift which started at 11:00 at night. So I went down, my dad walked me to the top of the hill and I wanted the rest of the way myself.

01:01:00:00

After I got there, and we walked around, he said, “Come on, I’ll show you what you need to do and where you need to go.” I thought, “Oh my God, what did I get myself into?” We walked and we walked and we walked. Well, I thought, “Boy, this is kind of scary.” So anyway, that went on for the week, and then my next shift was daytime. When I got

there in the daytime and realized where I had been, it was the funniest thing ever. It was a very short area, except we just went through—what would you call it?

Christiansen:

Crevices, or pathways.

Highfill:

We went up the stairs that way and we went through some underpasses or overpasses.

Wilmot:

In the shipyard?

Highfill:

No, at Standard Oil. So I wound up being a, what they called a stillman and fireman. I fired up the stills and we heated up the asphalt and we brought the crew down from the hills, heated it up, then after a certain time they pulled it out into the warehouse and put it in barrels to be shipped out. The little area that I had to go through, it was just, maybe a quarter, not even a quarter of a block. I thought, "Oh dear me!" It was dark. And when I saw it in the daytime I just couldn't keep from laughing, because all you did was just went this way and that way and then this way. That night I just thought, "Oh lord, am I ever going to get through this?" But anyway, I lasted two years.

Wilmot:

Were you part of a union?

Highfill:

Pardon?

Wilmot:

Were you part of a union?

Highfill:

At that time we didn't have unions. It was beginning, the rumors.

Christiansen:

It was right after that.

Highfill:

As I neared the end they were talking about unions, just before the guys came home from the war. It was quite an experience. Something we wouldn't do had the war not come along.

Wilmot:

Let's pause for a minute. I'm going to change our tapes.

[begin disc 2]

[some pre-interview talk about gardening not transcribed]

02:00:00:47

Wilmot:

I just wanted to return to your work at Standard Oil.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

Were there other women who were also working there?

Highfill:

Oh yes, lots of them, lots of them. The only fellows who were there were the older guys. The young ones went to war. The older fellows, those who were too old to go, and then there were others who had family, I guess they didn't have to go.

Christiansen:

Or they couldn't pass the examination.

Highfill:

I enjoyed my work out there, it was wonderful.

Wilmot:

Afterwards, and you probably, as a result from working at Penney's and Standard Oil, you probably had more money than you'd ever had before. What did you spend your money on? I mean discretionary, like extra money. What did you spend your money on? Did you shop a lot?

Highfill:

As I think about it, we didn't have time to do much of anything. Really, I worked six days a week. And as you rotated shifts, you just—there just wasn't much time. Although we did go to the movies when we could. And I think Anita and I went to San Francisco once in a while and did a little shopping.

Christiansen:

And actually—

Highfill:

But there weren't any big expenditures, on my part anyhow.

Christiansen:

And actually salaries were small.

Wilmot:

Were you saving your money?

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Well, what little there was to save.

Wilmot:

And did you live with your families at the time?

Highfill:

Yes, I made more money there because I worked shift work, and they were paid better than your day workers. I tried to save it. [laughter] It wasn't a huge sum, even at that. But you know, it was nice.

Christiansen:

Things were looking up.

Wilmot:

Did you feel after you were done with that type of work at Standard Oil, did you continue working after that?

Highfill:

No, I got married and then raised my two children, and never worked until years later.

Wilmot:

Okay, and where did you meet your husband?

Highfill:

Standard Oil.

Wilmot:

Standard Oil? He worked there as well?

Highfill:

Yes, he was a day worker.

Wilmot:

I'm just adjusting the camera for a minute, because it's a little bit off.

Highfill:

How did you meet Bernard?

Christiansen:

Something at school.

Highfill:

Was it at school?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

But I mean here.

Christiansen:

Oh, he worked for Chasseurs. You know, on Standard?

Highfill:

Ah! Okay. Yes, okay.

Christiansen:

And he would ask me out.

Highfill:

[giggles] Yes, I thought to ask you that many times, where just exactly did you?

Christiansen:

Yes, but I remember him at school. Then when he worked for Mrs. Chasseur and her daughter. Mr. Chasseur didn't work in the store.

Highfill:

Isn't that funny, because Bruno worked at the Washington Market for Benny Farina.

Christiansen:

Oh, for Benny Farina. Well, see, Ben worked for Chasseurs.

Highfill:

Do you know she's still living?

Christiansen:

Is she? Amelia? I love her.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm. She's probably about ninety-eight or ninety-nine. She's in a rest home.

Christiansen:

Oh is she?

Highfill:

Yes. It took a long time to find her, but I did manage to get her niece somehow.

Wilmot:

Thank you for bearing with me for a minute while I fixed that. Okay, so you were just asking each other how you met your husbands. How did you meet your husband?

Christiansen:

Well, I knew Bernard in school, in junior high school. I knew him then, but he was a year behind me. I was smarter than him.

Highfill:

[laughter] Really!

Christiansen:

Anyway, and when I went to work at the little beauty shop on Standard Avenue, he worked for a little grocery store, kind of kitty—at an angle across the street, called Chasseurs. He drove, I don't know how that little truck got around, but it was a little beat-up truck. He would deliver groceries. Oh, he also worked for Valergis.

Highfill:

Oh, okay. [laughing]

Christiansen:

You know, down on Barrett or someplace. Anyway, and he would ask me for a date. As I said I was shy, and I was also doing his mom's hair, but I don't know, I just was "duhum" and I would, you know—

Highfill:

Put it off. [laughter]

Christiansen:

Put it off, not encourage him. Then he went into the service. We had no dates when he went in, before he went into the service. That was interesting. But we communicated, we wrote letters, lots of letters and things. When he came home, he came home in December, Christmas day of 1945. We were married in June of 1946.

Highfill:

But we all knew each other from grammar and junior high school.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

But it was sort of a renewed interest.

Christiansen:

It scared Grandma Christiansen to death.

Wilmot:

Why?

Christiansen:

Because she thought I was—it was my quietness—just because I was working, I was a beautician, they had sort of put me up on a little pedestal, which was—I had never created that. She felt that I was better—you know that? In those days they would do that. You were kind of—

Highfill:

Well, let's put it this way, he wasn't good enough for you? Is that what they thought?

Christiansen:

No, it was in reverse.

Highfill:

In reverse? Oh! [laughter]

Christiansen:

Well, that I was above them.

Wilmot:

In terms of class?

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

Now, neither of your husbands were Italian, is that right?

Christiansen:

No, Bernard was Swedish and Norwegian and Danish.

Wilmot:

And what about your husband?

Highfill:

Well, you might say he's German and Scotch-English.

Wilmot:

Okay. Now I want to ask you a little more about—now, you were doing hair. Did your business expand a great deal as the migration occurred? Were you doing peoples' hair who were from other places?

Christiansen:

Oh, yes.

Wilmot:

Could you work with all textures of hair?

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm. Well, they were mostly all Caucasians, and so many of them lived in cars. That's another thing we overlook during the war, because housing—there wasn't any housing. It was just being started. But whole families would sleep in a car. If they came from Oklahoma or Arkansas or Louisiana—until these little shacks—and then they would catch on fire, remember? They were burning—every time you turned around one was on fire.

Highfill:

Well, anything that resembled a room was taken, until the housing got going.

Christiansen:

All of Cutting.

Highfill:

But we sort of were here actually when the housing went up—it seemed like overnight, we just grew from 20,000 people to over 100,000.

Christiansen:

Or 120,000.

Highfill:

When I worked at Penney's, we'd look out the window, and you'd look out the window and you'd see an army of people and they were coming from the train station, being taken down there to the hiring hall, all with suitcases. It was unbelievable what took place in such a very short time. It's really kind of hard to think back and say, "Gosh, did all of that happen in such a short time?" Just people from everywhere. But everybody got along. Everybody had a job to do and there wasn't all this to do that we have today. There was another interest there besides—if there was anything else I didn't know about it. My time with Standard Oil, at the time, was very nice. I enjoyed my stay there.

Christiansen:

And we were young, also. I think youth had a lot to do with it also. We were—it was easy for us to adjust to a situation.

Wilmot:

Did you socialize with the newcomers, in your social life?

02:00:10:00

Highfill:

I didn't have time.

Wilmot:

You were working.

Christiansen:

Oh no, we were just working.

Highfill:

Unless they happened to come to work where I happened to be, but Standard Oil at the time pretty much—we had the same employees except those that left to go into the service and the new ones were the ladies that I remember with me. Most of the guys were the old timers with Chevron and the newcomers seemed to be the women, because all the men went to war. The ladies that I met were from out of the—actually, from out of the state, and they took the place of men and they did a good job. Actually my trainer was a woman, believe it or not, a lady in her fifties. But we were treated very well there at

Standard Oil, no complaints at all, we got treated very well. Got paid well, got treated well.

Wilmot:

And for you also, were you also socializing with people who were migrants or working with the people who had come?

Christiansen:

No. The only social contact I had was while they were in the shop getting their hair done. And I certainly did all kinds. I mean, they would come off of shift work, you know, the morning, at eight o'clock and come in and get their hair done. I met just tons of ladies that were working for the war.

Highfill:

The other thing too was the Galileo Club.

Christiansen:

Oh yes.

Highfill:

There was the Galileo Club, stayed active all during the war years.

Wilmot:

What did that mean? Could you tell me a little bit about the Galileo Club?

Highfill:

It was an Italian American club.

Christiansen:

And it's still there.

Highfill:

It's still there.

Christiansen:

On Twenty-third.

Highfill:

Dinners and dancing, and then as the war went on, there were times where they'd bring Italian soldiers. These were the prisoners of war.

Christiansen:

Prisoners, they would entertain the prisoners.

Highfill:

That's when things were looking a little better and Italy finally gave up. [laughter] So they brought the soldiers over to the club. We saw some of them around here. They'd

take them out here and they'd work them out towards the tunnel, and they'd march them around the fields, took them back to wherever they came from.

Christiansen:

They were stationed in Oakland.

Highfill:

Was it that?

Christiansen:

Yes, the army.

Highfill:

But they got treated very well, too. They were treated well.

Wilmot:

What was the aim of bringing them to the Galileo Club?

Christiansen:

Just to entertain them.

Highfill:

Just to show them what we were like, actually. I would say, good will. If I think back, good will.

Christiansen:

Also, like my father, we took them to Oakland. I'm going to say it was the Oakland air base. He was looking for nephews or cousins or a relative, but didn't come across anyone. I'm not sure that others met relatives in that regard.

Highfill:

It was pretty much—

Christiansen:

And you know, they were young too.

Highfill:

Yeah right! [laughter] They were no more responsible than the rest of us as far as that's concerned. I think they got treated very well here. We showed them what we were like. We were hoping that maybe our boys would be treated likewise. I'm sure they were when they finally were—you know, in Italy. I don't think it took Italy very long to give up, did it?

Christiansen:

No.

Highfill:

I think they welcomed the Americans.

Wilmot:

And for your family members, were your family members in the war? Were your fathers, your brothers?

Christiansen:

My brothers, two brothers. I have two brothers.

Wilmot:

They were in the service?

Christiansen:

Yes. They were—William was a paratrooper and my older brother was in the army. He was a welder, or whatever.

Wilmot:

What did you hear from him about that experience?

Christiansen:

Well, they didn't write too often. You know, it wasn't like—now, Bernard would write to me, and would tell me—because, well, he went to the Pacific and he was like in New Guinea, all through New Guinea and the Philippines, and ended up in Korea and home. I think there was another little island, not Guam, he would—Clarence was in Guam, that was rough. He was a marine. That was Bernard's brother. Grandma had four boys and four boys were in the service.

Highfill:

That was a lot.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

My brother was in the navy. He was a radio {radial?} gunner on a plane. He did that for three years. He served his time in the South Pacific as well. He was in the Marianas.

Wilmot:

Were you hearing from him during that period?

Highfill:

Pardon?

Wilmot:

Were you hearing from him during that period?

Highfill:

Oh yes, he wrote all the time. A lot of the time—it took quite a while before he was sent, actually what I call “overseas.” He spent a lot of time in the States. I attribute all of that to—he was an accordionist, growing up, so it didn't take much for him to learn the code.

He was really quick at code. So that's what he did. It wasn't until, oh, maybe a year before the war ended that he was sent—I think it made the way, actually, before the atomic bomb, he went to the Marianas.

Wilmot:

Sorry, I didn't hear the last sentence, he made the way?

Highfill:

I think he sort of was part of paving the way, just before they threw the bomb, the atom bomb, up in Japan. That's when he went to the Marianas.

Wilmot:

I have a question—do you remember in 1941, do you remember when Pearl Harbor happened?

Highfill:

Sure!

Christiansen:

Oh yes.

Wilmot:

Can you tell me your memory of that?

Christiansen:

We were at a wedding.

Wilmot:

Together?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Good friends of mine were getting married that day, and the dressing, the girls were dressing at my house, my parents' house. It was like, about, what's the difference in time? Seven, eight?

Christiansen:

Wasn't it about two o'clock?

Highfill:

I thought it was earlier than that.

Christiansen:

I mean when we went to church.

Highfill:

When we heard that they bombed Pearl Harbor. Well, in the mean time, it was like, ugh, like this, we were waiting for the flowers to arrive. Of course, the flowers were sent by Miamoto's Nursery and of course they were Japanese. I remember this day, he just came and delivered the flowers and walked away. He just looked like he'd lost his last friend, he felt so bad. The rest of us felt bad because the rest of us knew him, everybody knew the family. They were a wonderful family.

Christiansen:

Outstanding family.

Highfill:

Yes. That was very hurtful, I think, to them. I remember it just like it was yesterday. As a matter of fact I still correspond with the couple.

Christiansen:

The bride and groom.

Highfill:

Yes. They celebrated their sixty-fourth?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Their sixty-fourth wedding anniversary.

Christiansen:

Forty-one.

Highfill:

Just like it was yesterday. That killed everything as far as spirit, you know. Then also, when we went to school, a real good—well, it wasn't really a friend of mine, but a good friend, and loved by everybody—she didn't show up for school that Monday.

Wilmot:

Was she Japanese?

Highfill:

She was Japanese, uh-huh. There was this shame they took on them. They were no more responsible, nobody held them responsible. It's just times, that's the way it was.

Christiansen:

It's just like my mother, she was—the word is not deported, but she was not a citizen, and she had to leave this area, the Bay Area. She went up to Pengrove.

Wilmot:

For what reason?

Christiansen:

Because she was not a citizen. She could have been Japanese, of course, the Japanese, they went, where to Utah.

Highfill:

Well, yes, to concentration camps.

Christiansen:

To a concentration camp. But the fact that she had to leave home, and went up there to Pengrove.

Wilmot:

How long was she gone?

Christiansen:

A little under a year I think. Because both of the boys were in the service by then, and this gave—I'm not going to say a lee-way, but that she was able to come home through that.

Wilmot:

Did she become a citizen in her lifetime?

Christiansen:

No, because she didn't know how to read and write. And she had physical problems, and it was difficult for her to have gone to school. My father was, he was a citizen.

Wilmot:

Do you recall—and you both mentioned that the Japanese were interred.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm.

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

Do you remember that happening? Do you remember the disappearance? Was there a disappearance?

Highfill:

Well yes.

Christiansen:

Sure.

Highfill:

I don't know at what point, but I know that she didn't come to school the following day, and we didn't see her again. I guess she went to a concentration camp.

02:00:20:01

And when she resettled, it wasn't here. She resettled, I understand, in the Chicago area and became a nurse.

Christiansen:

But many of them came back to the Bay Area, a lot of the Japanese.

Highfill:

Yes, but without their property.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Which was sad. A lot of them had to sell out real quick.

Christiansen:

The Miamotos didn't, they hung on.

Highfill:

They managed to hang on.

Christiansen:

And the Adachis. For some reason, you know, some of them worked it out. I don't know how.

Highfill:

You know, that's a good one to try and figure out, because there were some people, I knew of one that was in the Valley, and the only reason he managed to hang in there was that the neighbor said, "I'll work the farm for you, don't worry about it." He said, "I'll take it over, work it for you, and when you come back, it'll be there." Which is true, he worked the farm for him. But some people lost everything. I don't know if it's because they sold out, you know, wanted out real quick.

Christiansen:

I think the Miamotos just—

Highfill:

They hung in there.

Christiansen:

They closed everything up, just locked everything up. Then came back after the war.

Highfill:

But I think it was for them kind of a sense of shame, you know, they're quite sensitive people I think. I think they took it on as a real shame, which they should not have, because none of us certainly blamed any of them, that's for sure. My parents stayed, both of my parents were citizens so we didn't have to move, although lots of my friends did

move. I felt it was kind of silly, because you have friends who are in the service, and you had to move, which was ridiculous. And some of them moved to San Francisco.

Christiansen:

Some of them moved up here to Alvarado Park.

Highfill:

Isn't that ridiculous? They didn't want anybody near here.

Christiansen:

Within a certain radius.

Highfill:

I don't know, something to do, to give signals to the enemy through the Golden Gate, I don't know, but it was sort of—we used to laugh about it, thought it was kind of silly.

Wilmot:

Do you remember, were there blackouts?

Christiansen:

Oh yes!

Highfill:

Yes, mm-hmm. Oh yes. And if you didn't have your shades down, or the right shades, and saw a little bit of light, they called on you.

Christiansen:

We had the, they called the air raid wardens. Remember?

Wilmot:

Is that who they were, the air raid wardens?

Christiansen:

They would canvas your neighborhood.

Highfill:

To be sure your lights were out, doused. And yet it's so funny, the city was twenty-four hours a day, lights, movies, cameras, theatre open, the restaurants open! I don't know, they weren't blacked out, although they did have the tops of the lights covered.

Christiansen:

They did something.

Highfill:

But we used to, we used to think, "This is kind of strange," but they had their way of doing things I guess.

Wilmot:

Do you remember also, well, you mentioned that your brother was in the service in some connection with the atomic bomb, do you remember when that was dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Highfill:

Oh, it was just in the paper here recently but at my age, I can't remember things. Both of them I think in '45, and he wasn't involved with the bomb going, but let's put it this way, paved the way to get there. You know, a lot of work being done prior to getting to that, and the bombing of the Marianas, or whatever you have. It was all part of it.

Christiansen:

That was in—

Highfill:

Forty-five.

Christiansen:

Forty-five, I'm going to say June.

Highfill:

One was early, one was later, I never can get the things straight.

Christiansen:

Because Roosevelt died.

Highfill:

April.

Christiansen:

In April of '45 and the bomb was dropped after that by Truman. It was President Truman that gave the permission, or whatever you want to call it.

Highfill:

All I remember is that both of them, in '45, was VE Day and VJ Day, Victory in Japan in Victory in Europe. I guess the European came first. That was in the spring, and I think the VJ Day came later. That's what happens when you get old, you can't remember all these things.

Wilmot:

Were there ever any images shown on the news of what happened in Nagasaki and Hiroshima?

Highfill:

Oh yes.

Christiansen:

Oh yes. Well, we didn't have television, but we heard it. We heard it on the radio.

Highfill:

And pictures, newspaper.

Christiansen:

And in pictures, newspaper, uh-huh. At least I didn't have television.

Highfill:

I didn't—no, I didn't think so.

Christiansen:

That kind of came afterwards.

Wilmot:

Was it a sense that it was a great disaster there?

Highfill:

Oh yes. Oh yes. It was almost beyond comprehension.

Christiansen:

Well, I don't know, some of us felt it was a need, you know? This is just going on with Iraq, with all of this destructiveness.

Highfill:

I don't know that there was anything good about it, except the only thing I understand is that they were warned that this would happen, and those who stayed were hurt and those that didn't—a lot of disagreement—I knew a lot of service boys that they didn't agree with having done that.

Christiansen:

But we weren't warned either, were we, with Pearl Harbor?

Highfill:

No, no, that isn't what I meant to say. They were warned that the bomb was coming, so at least they were told it was coming. So there's always a difference of opinion.

Wilmot:

I have a question. You mentioned Iraq and I wanted to ask you, how is that wartime that you lived through, how is it different from this wartime that we're in now?

Highfill:

There's no comparison, it's like nothing happened.

Christiansen:

Well, it's because we're not involved-involved personally, you know what I mean?

Highfill:

Well, there's no war work.

Christiansen:

Like I said, we're not involved in it.

Highfill:

I know what's going on, but I mean, there's no activity, we're not doing anything different, except our government spending money. [laughter]

Christiansen:

There's no denial of anything.

Highfill:

Everything's still here, you're not short of any food stuffs.

Christiansen:

Gasoline, you know, like during the war, there was a shortage.

Highfill:

Shortage of gas, shortage of everything.

Wilmot:

Is that what you mean by denial? There's no rationing?

Christiansen:

Yes. Food, meat, meat was very scarce. Butter, bacon, all these things.

Highfill:

They called it a war, I don't know what else you want to call it. There's another word for it, I suppose. I can't think of it right now. What's the other one they're using sometimes?

Wilmot:

Occupation, sometimes. They also say liberating the Iraqis, they say occupation, they say different verbs like that. She's looking for a different word other than war, to describe.

Highfill:

I know what it is but I can't say it.

Christiansen:

Occupation?

Highfill:

Well, we're occupying it, yes, but whatever they called it, why we went in there, it's a war and yet not a war.

Christiansen:

Terrorism.

Highfill:

They're getting killed.

Christiansen:

It's the terrorism.

Highfill:

That's how come we know there's a war is that when you read the paper and you listen to the news and these boys are getting killed you know it's a war.

Christiansen:

Well, they call it a war, they call it a war now.

Highfill:

It's a whole lot different, there's just no comparison. Taking that away, that the boys are getting hurt and getting killed, and the disasters, and hurt really bad—

Christiansen:

Well, every war they do.

Highfill:

Ours was just an all-out effort. Everybody was doing something as far as the war was concerned. Everything went directly to the war. I can't say that we gave up anything other than food, but it wasn't that—there was always something to eat, if you know what I'm saying. The luxury items, cigarettes—when they came, they still had cigarettes, but people would buy them and then they'd black-market them. There's always something to make money out of something. Those that were able to get a box of cigarettes, those that had connections, and then instead of charging you a regular fee, they'd charge you a fortune for the cigarettes. A lot of people made money. [laughter]

Wilmot:

Were either of you smokers at that time?

Highfill:

Just barely.

Christiansen:

She was.

Highfill:

I wasn't into buying—

Wilmot:

You'd borrow them from people?

Highfill:

I wasn't borrowing, I just was a very light smoker. People had access to them and then they made money by doubling, tripling the price of a carton of cigarettes. I even knew people that—they did that with their paychecks. They sold raffle tickets for their paychecks, so by the time they got through, the guy that won got the paycheck, and the

one that got rid of his paycheck made three times as much. [laughter] There were a lot of business opportunities.

Wilmot:

That's amazing.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm. There were just a lot of interesting things that went on. Like I said, there was the realizing that even though, like I said, that today we are at war and it's terrible, it isn't an all-out effort like everybody was involved at the time.

02:00:30:01

All the boys were gone. We had the older folks and the moms at home, and a lot of good-byes. A lot of good-byes and a lot of no returns.

Christiansen:

Well, and it exists today, primarily.

Highfill:

That's true, on a lighter scale, but not good. As my dad served in the military in World War I in Italy, he saw nothing good about it, he would not want to do it again. My brother served in World War II in the navy, and he would not want to do it again. War is not good. Hopefully someday there will be a way of solving problems without going through all of this. But through it all, we made it through, we survived it all.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

And even though it was wartime, there were good times as well. As my friend would like to say, Elizabeth, there was a lot of romance at the time.

Wilmot:

Now what are you speaking of?

Highfill:

Romance! Well, saying good-byes to your loved one, going a distance to meet your loved one. A lot of romantic times, like maybe he might not come back again. You know?

Wilmot:

Oh, that would make it really serious.

Highfill:

A lot of sweet good-byes. I can't tell you how many times my sister in law and my family would say good-bye to my brother. It seemed like every Friday night he'd show up at home and then every Sunday night my husband and I and my sister in law, we'd drive him back to Alameda. And my sister in law would cry, oh, maybe never to see him again. Lo and behold, he'd be back on Friday again. It got to be a joke. Finally we said, "Well,

we're not going to say good-bye any more because you'll be back!" And sure enough, one Friday he didn't show up and that was when he was sent overseas. That's when we knew. There were a lot of good-byes.

Wilmot:

Now, I wanted to ask you, around your work in the USO, why did you decide to do that, to volunteer there?

Highfill:

Well, they asked. The news was out that all the young ladies that would like—

Christiansen:

They were looking for hostesses.

Highfill:

Hostesses. The boys were lonely and it gave them something to do, a place to go, right?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

So we volunteered, went down, and did that.

Christiansen:

A place to hang out, so to speak.

Highfill:

I also, this was something one was not supposed to do, but I had an older lady friend whose husband knew exactly what was going on all the time, and she'd call me and she'd come with me, "I'll pick you up," and we'd go to the Santa Fe depot, and sure enough, a troop train would come in. All the shades were down. But after they'd settle in there, they'd peak out, and we'd have our big baskets and we'd have gum and we had cigarettes and we had candy. We weren't supposed to, but we did. We'd mail letters for them. They'd give us letters to be mailed, because they weren't supposed to do these things. Nobody was supposed to know who was going where. The enemy was watching, I guess. But we'd take their letters and we'd mail them for them.

Wilmot:

Were you, with your baskets of cigarettes and gum and candy, did you give that, or did you sell that?

Highfill:

Oh we didn't sell anything, no.

Christiansen:

Oh no.

Highfill:

It was given to them. I don't know where she had access to this, but always had these huge baskets with goodies.

Christiansen:

It could have been—was she connected with Red Cross? Or one of these?

Highfill:

I couldn't tell you where she got them, but it always was plentiful, and she'd call and away we'd go. I felt kind of guilty—in a way I felt kind of guilty, and yet I was happy to mail the letters. [laughter] Hoping that the enemy didn't get a hold of them!

Christiansen:

But we didn't even think about that, I wouldn't think about that.

Highfill:

But we did them a favor by doing that. They were young kids just like us, away from home, probably for the first time. It's scary.

Wilmot:

It is scary. And I can imagine it would also be fun to connect with people who were from different parts of the country and learn where they were from.

Highfill:

Yes. There wasn't much time to fool around or to spend a lot of time there. It was done very quickly, because the boys didn't come to stay. Everything was just done really quickly. We didn't stay very long but we stayed long enough to offer them goodies.

Christiansen:

It was the shipyard workers that you—you got acquainted with them, a family. You learned, I know I did, with being a beautician, because I had a closer connection with some of the women that would come in, and their husbands were working or whatever. Every family had a different situation, whether they graduated from the cars to this—what did they call them? They were like a barracks. War time housing. It was wartime housing. And they were, they were just a cheapie barrack. I had nurses that were working for Kaiser.

Highfill:

Richmond.

Christiansen:

Hospital down here on Cutting. Oh gosh, and I had a lot of nice ladies, wonderful ladies.

Highfill:

And through it all, eventually, after the war, a lot of people stayed. We met a lot of wonderful people that stayed from different states.

Wilmot:

So you didn't get the sense that a lot of them left and returned back to where they'd come from?

Christiansen:

Some of them went and then they came back.

Highfill:

Some of them did, I think you're right. I think some of them decided this was a nice place and came back. But a lot of them just stayed.

Christiansen:

And they moaned and groaned and griched about it while they were here. [laughter]

Highfill:

I don't remember that.

Christiansen:

Oh I do. See, like I said—I had a—

Wilmot:

You mean they moaned and groaned—

Christiansen:

About the town, the situation, the conditions.

Highfill:

It certainly wasn't home.

Christiansen:

You would have thought they had come from a palace, where some of those states are pretty meager. Sure enough they would go back and it wouldn't be but a few months and they would come back. It wasn't too bad after all. There was a lot of—what's a good—a little disturbance. Like for instance, I don't know whether I even should say this, but a Tuesday, a Tuesday or a Thursday, it was one day out of the week—you didn't go downtown.

Highfill:

I didn't know that.

Christiansen:

Oh yes, that was not rare. It was push whitey around.

Highfill:

Oh, I didn't know that.

Wilmot:

Was it a pay day or something?

Christiansen:

It was just, get back—

Highfill:

Interesting.

Christiansen:

I don't know the right word for that. It's not getting even, it's just being plain vicious, just plain mean and vicious.

Highfill:

Hmm, I don't remember.

Wilmot:

Were these African American or Latino American people?

Christiansen:

It was mostly the African, the blacks. Our little Mrs. Smith was given a shove.

Highfill:

Oh, I don't remember.

Christiansen:

And {Cressas?}, remember Cressas?

Highfill:

I don't remember any—

Christiansen:

She just went flying from—and the aisles were wide. I was a moose compared to here.

Wilmot:

You were bigger than her.

Christiansen:

Yes, she was a little bitty lady and she broke her hip and arm.

Highfill:

Well, that's all news to me!

Christiansen:

Oh yes?

Highfill:

I was totally unaware.

Christiansen:

Push whitey, it was either a Tuesday or a Thursday.

Highfill:

Well certainly it opened up, we were exposed to a lot of people, a lot of new people.

Wilmot:

That is, again, another part of it. How did the influx, how did that influx of African American migrants from the South, how did that play itself out here in Richmond?

Highfill:

Well, I know that—

Christiansen:

It's taken years. It didn't get better.

Highfill:

It's interesting, the ones that I'd been exposed to, and then years later I went back to work at Penney's, it was still early, and I did very well to get along with everyone. I think it was easier in those days than it is today, don't you think so?

Christiansen:

Yes. But our kids were victims, you see, our children. They were victims.

Wilmot:

What do you mean?

Christiansen:

Well, for instance, Steven, his first day at Roosevelt Junior High School on Ninth. I think it was 85 percent black and we raised Steven to be loving.

02:00:40:03

Because that's my religion also, and to always express love and he was forced—they tried to force him to tie their shoe strings.

Wilmot:

Bullying.

Christiansen:

Bully, right. And he said, "I'm not going to do that." And Steve was small, Steve was not a big boy. Well, he could have gotten his teeth kicked, but he didn't bow down to that. That was one of my favorite expressions: don't you bow down to anything that is so erroneous. And he didn't. I said, "You have any problems, we go to the counselor."

Highfill:

I'm sure that there were a lot of adjustments that had to be made. We were grown ups, so for us—

Christiansen:

But I'm talking about the children. Our children

Highfill:

The children had to rough it a little.

Christiansen:

You bet they did.

Highfill:

I don't think probably the problem is thoroughly resolved even now. I think it just—

Wilmot:

You both said it was probably worse now than it was then.

Highfill:

I think so.

Christiansen:

It kind of leveled off. Well, of course, they closed the junior high school. See, they started closing different areas. So that eliminated a lot of that destructiveness. We have a long ways to go. Now I think it's more the adults. It isn't the pupil, themselves is what I'm saying, the younger—

Wilmot:

It's not the children, it's the grown people.

Christiansen:

Yes. It's taken a different—

Highfill:

There's too much unemployment, too much nothing to do, whatever.

Wilmot:

Okay. I had another question for you, I have to remember what it was. [pause] I was wondering, in that piece we discussed briefly the African Americans, but were there also Chinese or Asians or Mexican Americans who were here during the war that you remember being part of the social mix?

Christiansen:

Not as many Mexicans. We always had a little area of Mexicans, like on First Street.

Highfill:

Well, there were more Mexican children, Spanish Mexican children than there were blacks. We had very few—we had none at our school here.

Christiansen:

Now this is before the war.

Highfill:

I don't remember any in junior high school.

Christiansen:

You mean blacks?

Highfill:

Yes.

Christiansen:

Oh, I do.

Highfill:

I do remember, it's interesting, high school, in high school—and very very few.

Christiansen:

But they were all well-behaved.

Highfill:

Yes. Do you remember Earl Turner, the boxer?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

Everybody loved to dance with him, he was a good dancer. They had this—I guess they called it the same as the student union, where they danced at lunch time. Everyone loved to dance with him, he was a wonderful dancer.

Wilmot:

You did speak briefly about the Japanese American students that you knew. Were there Mexican people in your high school?

Christiansen:

Yes. And junior high, yes.

Highfill:

Yes. Mostly, just as so many of us Italians live in the Point, there were some that lived on this side of Richmond, which is the lower, we call it the lower end of town now. But at one time that was part of the new part of town. Eventually a lot of the Mexican kids that I knew lived on that end of town, just as a lot of us Italians lived here, at that end of the town and also at the Point. Not a great number, but enough.

Christiansen:

You're talking about the Mexicans?

Highfill:

The Mexican children.

Christiansen:

Well there were a few here in Contra Costa.

Highfill:

Yes, uh-huh.

Christiansen:

The Grenadas and the Avilas and Zorminos.

Highfill:

Yes, my best friend Amelia. I had no problem mixing, I don't know. It was easy for me, I got along with everybody, it made no difference.

Christiansen:

Well, we didn't have that to cope with, that element of you are black and I'm white, this thing. Then it was just after the war when—

Highfill:

We just had kids. [laughs]

Christiansen:

When it started.

Wilmot:

I also wanted to ask you a little bit more because my boss was very interested in learning more about the USO. I was wondering, did either of you form connections there, friendships with soldiers or letter writing relationships or anything like that with people there?

Highfill:

No.

Christiansen:

I did for a while. I wrote to a soldier. But I don't know, I didn't keep it up, it just kind of disintegrated.

Highfill:

We just went there and danced and it was entertaining for everybody, and we were asked to do that so we did. Any correspondence I had with military were friends of my brother's. He'd bring the kids home and we'd get acquainted, and kids from high school that I felt that I should. I always kept up a correspondence with them.

Wilmot:

Did the soldiers that you danced with, did they ever give you small gifts like cigarettes or chocolate or anything?

Highfill:

No, no.

Christiansen:

No.

Wilmot:

Okay.

Highfill:

They had less than we did! [laughter]

Christiansen:

We were really prim and proper.

Highfill:

But they came to dance. They just wanted somebody to talk to I guess, just as though they were home.

Christiansen:

Or cards, we played cards.

Highfill:

Just to hang out and talk, and just enjoy the evening. We all did that, uh-huh.

Christiansen:

We were not swingers. [laughter]

Wilmot:

Okay! Except when you were dancing, then you'd swing around.

Highfill:

Yes, or jitterbugging, that was great, that was really fun.

Wilmot:

Were you good? Were you good dancers?

Highfill:

Let's say fair, fair to good. [laughter]

Christiansen:

Yes, of course Bernard and I, we took dancing for years.

Highfill:

Eventually, yes. But at that time no.

Christiansen:

Ballroom dancing.

Highfill:

We all enjoyed dancing, ballroom dancing is what we did, jitterbug. We didn't lean up against each other as they do today.

Christiansen:

Yes.

Highfill:

I watched some people dance today and all they do is they lean up against each other. We actually covered the floor.

Christiansen:

Yes, we traveled.

Highfill:

We moved.

Wilmot:

When you say jitterbug, is that where people throw people up in the air and come down?

Highfill:

Yes. Well, I wasn't that wild, but the legs went flying, let's put it that way. It was great times. It was kind of bad times because of the war and the loss of life, but at the same time it was good.

Christiansen:

You did a triple lindy, and you moved.

Highfill:

What was that? I don't remember.

Wilmot:

I don't know what that is, a triple lindy.

Highfill:

I don't either. Triple lindy, I never heard of that. It was just ballroom dancing, jitterbugging.

Christiansen:

Just a fast jitterbug. Only you put a different beat to it.

Highfill:

For quite a while, just a number of guys that would come, and never knew who to expect there. They always changed and some came back. Like I said, one of them married my niece, my husband's niece, I should say. That wound up in a marriage, and I'm sure there were others that did. I think she met Elmer right there at the USO.

Christiansen:

Oh, uh-huh.

Highfill:

Both of them are gone now. It was good times.

Wilmot:

I wanted to ask you also, were you two pregnant together? Did you ever have babies at the same time?

Christiansen:

No.

Wilmot:

You were on slightly different schedules.

Christiansen:

Mm-hmm.

Highfill:

I had one, one of mine was in '46, the other one was in '49.

Christiansen:

Two years later.

Highfill:

Yes, '46 and '49, they're two and a half years apart.

Christiansen:

Oh are they?

Highfill:

Yes. When's Steven, '50?

Christiansen:

Steve was '51, 1951. See, I was married in '46. Mary was—

Highfill:

Forty-five.

Christiansen:

Yes and you were expecting Kristin in '46, I remember because I went to the shower, the baby shower. Five years later we had Steven.

Highfill:

But you see, I'm a great granny five times and you are not! [laughter]

Christiansen:

So. [laughter]

Highfill:

You're slow!

Christiansen:

I'll just have to eat more potatoes. [laughter]

Wilmot:

So did you feel like you knew what to expect when it came to raising a family and being pregnant? Did you know what to expect or did you just learn as you went?

Highfill:

Let's put it this way, we sort of learned as we went, although my mother—I was only two blocks, three blocks away from my mom. So you know, I had some support there. It was just learn as you go.

Christiansen:

And luckily for me, I had a wonderful—

Highfill:

Mother in law.

Christiansen:

Yes, Grandma was—she was a jewel, but an obstetrician, and he really was very concerned, because I was narrow and all of this stuff. It just—it worked out well. We just had Steven.

02:00:50:04

Highfill:

Learn as you go.

Christiansen:

And what a jewel. Well, so is Dex, the girl.

Highfill:

Learn as you go.

Christiansen:

And when we moved up here, Steven was a year old. He was just thirteen months when we moved in.

Highfill:

Let's put it this way: Anita was born here at the Point, I was not, I was born in San Francisco, but arrived here, I was less than a year old. We've never moved, all we've done is sort of shuffled around in the same town. My husband and I rented about three blocks north of my parents. Then when we decided to build we moved three blocks south of my parents, we live on the same block. We're not adventurers, that's for sure.

Christiansen:

We're just—I don't know, it's our time that we grew up and raised a family and we didn't have a lot of frills. Like Steven and Dex, they can hop on a plane or hop on a bus—it's just a different—

Highfill:

Well, our opportunities were not there like you do today, the young people can go anywhere, everything is acceptable, you can go solo, you can go with, without. In our time we were limited, the war years and our growing up time, and then after that, four years of that—it was time more or less to kind of settle down. So our little traveling was as our children grew up and we ventured off. Today, the kids are able to do just about anything.

Christiansen:

Which is wonderful.

Highfill:

They love to travel everywhere. I agree. Their opportunities are great.

Christiansen:

I totally approve.

Highfill:

Their education is great now. Ours was, in a sense, for many, some went on to college, then for those of us, the rest of us, just went in to work somewhere and then just never returned or were interested in going back to school, other than some of the soldiers when they came home, were able to finish.

Christiansen:

Because they had a G.I. thing.

Highfill:

Yes, they got to go to school under the G.I. [bill].

Wilmot:

That transformed our world.

Christiansen:

That was wonderful.

Highfill:

Yes. So that was good.

Christiansen:

You know what was interesting, Bernard was, when he first went into the service, you just wonder what would have happened—he was bright enough and passed this entry exam for West Point, and he passed very high. The next thing you know, he's in Hawaii.

Highfill:

[laughter]

Christiansen:

From Hawaii he was in New Guinea. Just like that. Never got there. We just wondered, you know? What a wonderful education he would have had.

Highfill:

True, a lot of interruptions. Like I said, it changed the course for a lot of people. Some managed to finish and it gave them a great opportunity. Others found other things to do.

Wilmot:

No, when did you stop doing hair? When did you stop being a beautician?

Highfill:

What?! She's still doing—

Wilmot:

You never stopped?

Highfill:

What! She's still doing hair.

Christiansen:

I've never stopped.

Highfill:

For free, she does everything for free now.

Christiansen:

Okay, we were living in our little apartment.

Highfill:

Oh, I threw a {?}

Wilmot:

It's okay, you're okay.

Christiansen:

At 30 Nickel, and the first little lady that—she was so unhappy with where she was going—was Mrs. Lawrence. Remember Kathryn Lawrence?

Highfill:

Oh, yes.

Christiansen:

So she knocks on the door one day and here she is, just bewildered. Some of my ladies would hold Steven, and he was three months old, and hair all over him if I was cutting hair. I still futz around with hair.

Highfill:

Like I said, freebies.

Wilmot:

Was there a time when your husband said, “Okay, now I’m working and you don’t have to work.”?

Christiansen:

No, because he didn’t dare. [laughter]

Wilmot:

Okay.

Highfill:

She did her thing. I keep wanting to put my glasses on. I find it hard to see.

Wilmot:

You can put them on if you like.

Christiansen:

Well, he was not neglected. He was not neglected in any fashion, nor was Steven, so I think that meant a lot.

Wilmot:

I want to ask you lastly, were there any dishes that your moms prepared that you also make?

Christiansen:

Oh yes. The chicken cacciatore.

Highfill:

Polenta, and chicken stew.

Christiansen:

Well, we called it cacciatore, you called it stew.

Highfill:

However. [laughter]

Wilmot:

You say potato, I say potato. [pronounces differently]

Highfill:

Yes. [laughter] Much of the same thing, you can add or take away, but the whole idea is the same.

Christiansen:

Oh, and the spaghetti sauce, the way my mother—

Highfill:

I think you call it polenta in—what is that?

Christiansen:
{Bosse??}

Highfill:
Something pollo.

Christiansen:
Really?

Highfill:
It's one of my favorites, chicken stew, or chicken cacciatore.

Christiansen:
Okay, well, we call it the same thing.

Highfill:
We have risotto spaghetti.

Wilmot:
And what do you feel like you learned about being a woman from your mom?

Christiansen:
Control your temper.

Highfill:
[laughter] That goes a long way, it does.

Christiansen:
My mother was temperamental.

Highfill:
You know, when I think back, as much as my mom did, she was a hard worker.

Christiansen:
Oh yes.

Highfill:
She worked hard. That just seems like, that's the thing to do. It's part of being a mom, a wife and mother, these are things that you did. Today, the gals will not do that.

Christiansen:
They were pioneers.

Highfill:
The girls today won't do the kind of things that we did. I mean, a lot of times we even went to work and came home and continued working at home.

Christiansen:
Yes, we were just—my mother was a pioneer.

Highfill:

My own daughters, none of them, daughter or daughter in law, they don't have a garden like do or did. I found that as part of the thing I did—of course I love doing it, and my mom was quite a good gardener. A lot of things, it's just a lot of work, it's just a lot of work. And you keep doing, you just keep adding. Today the gals holler.

Christiansen:

They grich.

Highfill:

Yes, they won't do it.

Christiansen:

I think that's what made us strong.

Highfill:

I think so.

Christiansen:

And they were determined. I like to think it's not willfulness. [laughter] You know. Meggie that's the oldest, she can be willful. But willfulness can also be determination. So it's a balance. I just label it I'm determined. I can do—

Highfill:

But we accept a lot of things as, this is what moms are supposed to be. This is mom's work. Therefore I think we do a lot more, have done a lot more, than the younger people do today.

Christiansen:

Oh well of course.

Highfill:

They just—girls won't do that.

Christiansen:

Because we didn't have all the little push buttons that we have today. The automatic washer. I didn't have that until I came here, until I moved up here.

Highfill:

And we did it, she probably did—I never have driven. I've never had a driver's license.

Christiansen:

That was your choice.

Highfill:

Therefore my work was, I walked to the bus stop, I walked to the grocery store, walked everywhere.

Wilmot:

Why did you choose not to get a driver's license?

Highfill:

I don't know. I got terribly nervous. By the time—I learned how to drive, I learned on the hills here, going to Point Melote, believe it or not, and every time I got close to the [laughter]—

Christiansen:

Time to take her test—

Highfill:

Time to take my test, I was a wreck. I should have kept it up, and finally decided no, I didn't want to do it, and as much, you know.

Christiansen:

But we get along, we get along without it.

Wilmot:

And you drive?

Christiansen:

Yes.

Wilmot:

So do you drive your friend around?

Christiansen:

Well, if we go down to the store, or if we're going—

Highfill:

She will if—my husband is still living, so he's been the driver all these times and has never minded.

Christiansen:

We've gone to the Galileo—

Highfill:

We shared sometimes, different things, but I've just never got around to getting my license. Then it got too late to do it, and they don't want another lady driver on the road. [laughter]

Christiansen:

Yay, amen.

Highfill:

I've always thought, I watch my husband driver, and I could—especially that one car we had before the last one, I could drive that car anyway.

Christiansen:

Yes, I bet.

Highfill:

I could. If I had to, I would have. This one, I don't pay any attention to it, because I know I'm not going to drive the thing. But always living here, it's handy to walk down to the bus. But today I will not take the but, I won't take a bus.

Wilmot:

I drove past your house on the way here.

Highfill:

Pardon?

Wilmot:

I drove past your house on the way here, and I knew because I called and asked for your address so I could put it on that letter, so I knew it was your house.

Highfill:

Mm-hmm.

Wilmot:

Well, I'm wondering if either of you have anything more you want to say regarding your home, Richmond, or anything else that you want to talk about.

Highfill:

Well, we're waiting for a renewal of the town, let's put it that way.

Wilmot:

Yes.

Highfill:

We're waiting for some good things to happen to Richmond, it certainly needs it. It was such a sweet little town all these years and we suffered the consequences of the war. I mean, after the war was over, a lot of people left.

02:01:00:00

Good and bad left, good and bad stayed. Then, you know, the biggest event was—the worst thing that happened to us was when they moved our, really, shopping area, to what we call Hilltop Mall, put it away. It really killed the town.

Christiansen:

They closed up Wards.

Highfill:

It sort of left our town sort of wanting and needing, and I don't know if I'm going to be here, but I expect that eventually there will be a renewal.

Christiansen:

What we need is to clean out the council. It starts somewhere.

Wilmot:

The council?

Christiansen:

The city council, for me.

Highfill:

Oh she's going that direction, yes.

Christiansen:

Well, how else are you going to improve a city? You have to start with the higher-ups.

Highfill:

I know, but you also have to get people interested in coming to town, and a lot of them don't want to, but I expect that it's going to happen one day.

Christiansen:

I know, because if the council—they have to clean up.

Highfill:

Not while I'm still here, but I think the value of the property—it's ideal.

Wilmot:

It's already coming up. A lot of Richmond has been coming up for the past years.

Highfill:

Yes, it's an ideal area, close to everything, and there will be a renewal, whether it's going to come tomorrow or next year, I don't know.

Wilmot:

What about the shipyards? I mean, not the shipyards, the oil refineries?

Highfill:

It's still here, doing well. No complaints about Chevron.

Wilmot:

People say that in some ways, the pollution of the refineries impacts the housing values, the land values.

Highfill:

Do not believe that.

Wilmot:

Okay.

Highfill:

Do not believe that.

Christiansen:

They spend tons and tons of money.

Highfill:

We have million dollar homes being built.

Christiansen:

Keeping the environment clean and free from odors and things. They always have. They have been a good, good neighbor. But then you're going to find people that are going to complain about it.

Highfill:

Oh, they've improved 100 percent. There might be more to go—they've done well. I don't know why everyone keeps harping on Chevron when they're building million dollar homes all around here. It can't be all that bad.

Wilmot:

Okay. Let's close for today. Is there anything else you want to say?

Highfill:

No, thank you.

Christiansen:

Other than you have been delightful, you truly have been delightful.

Wilmot:

Thank both of you.

[End of Interview]