

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Dorothy Cordova

Rosie the Riveter
WWII American Home Front Oral History Project

*This interview series was funded in part by a contract with the
National Park Service, and with the support of individual donors.*

Interviews conducted by
Robin Li
in 2012

Copyright © 2013 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Dorothy Cordova, dated January 6, 2012. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/cite.html>

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Dorothy Cordova, "Rosie the Riveter WWII American Home Front Oral History Project" conducted by Robin Li in 2012, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2013.



Dorothy Cordova

Table of Contents—Dorothy Cordova

Interview 1: January 6, 2012

Audio file 1

1

Family background — Father’s murder — Where the family is from in the Philippines — Brother is born in the Philippines — Earliest memories of Seattle — Seattle’s Chinatown — living in the all white neighborhood of Madison Valley — Ethnic makeup of Seattle’s residents — Filipinos called “brown people” — Going to a Catholic missionary school run by the Mary Knoll Order with mostly Japanese — Filipino customs for children — Filipino families in detail — Types of work for Filipino men — Consciously aware of being Filipino — Types of recreation for Filipino children — The Great Depression — Dorothy’s political mother — Japanese aggression in the Pacific — The attack on Pearl Harbor — Japanese internment in the United States during World War II — Air raid sirens in Seattle during the war — Japanese attack of the Philippines after Pearl Harbor — How Japanese internment affected the Chinese in Seattle — The Japanese take American names after internment

Audio file 2

19

Japanese friends from school who were interned — Japanese return from the internment camps — Filipino motivations for joining the World War II effort — Use of the word “Indopino” — Working on the farms during the war — Some Filipino men denied enlistment into the military — Some Filipinos go to work for Boeing during World War II — Dorothy’s godmother starts a business during the war — Seattle grows during World War II — Life in Seattle during World War II — Filipino uncles return from the war and use the G.I. Bill — Filipinos fighting with the U.S. in the Philippines during World War II — United States involvement in the Philippines after World War II — American schools in the Philippines — Filipino assimilation into American culture — Filipino clothes during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s — Dropping of the Atomic bomb in Japan — Revisiting Japanese coming back from the internment camps — The meaning of the end of World War II — Students who had been to war versus student who had not — Dorothy’s mother works for Eddie Bauer during World War II — Opportunities for Filipinos after World War II — Filipino War Brides

Interview 1: January 6, 2012

Audio file 1

Li: This is Robin Li speaking with Dorothy Cordova, January 6, 2012, as part of the Rosie the Riveter Project, 2010-2012. This is Interview 1, Tape 1. Thank you so much for sitting down with me today. I'm really looking forward to hearing about your experiences during the war, but just to start off with, could you tell me your name and your date of birth?

1-00:00:23

Cordova: I'm Dorothy Laigo Cordova.

Li: Please spell your—?

1-00:00:28

Cordova: Laigo is L A I G O, that's my maiden name. And, of course, Cordova's my married name, and that's C O R D O V, like in victory, A.

Li: And when were you born?

1-00:00:41

Cordova: I was born February 6, 1932.

Li: In Seattle?

1-00:00:47

Cordova: Yeah. I was the first one in my family born in the United States. My claim to fame.

Li: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

1-00:00:59

Cordova: Okay. My father, Valeriano Laigo, came to the United States when he was eighteen in 1919. It was interesting; I could tell you more. My mother came in 1928. My father came with two cousins, and I didn't know until many years later that one of the things my father did was he sent one of the cousins he came with to the University of Washington. The reason for this is my father died when I was four, and when my son Timothy wrote a play and we start bringing the play—it was a play on Filipinos old timers called the "Across Oceans of Dreams." We brought the play to Daly City, and my uncle, who was the one who had come to the United States with my dad, came back stage and was in tears and said, "{Tir Timoteo?} wrote the story of your father and me. I just barely knew who he was. I knew he was my uncle, but he had gone back to the Philippines after he got his Masters. So it was interesting. So maybe one of the reasons I became an oral historian was I actually was looking for my father, too. So whenever I would interview people I'd say, "Did you know my father?" So they'd tell me little stories about him.

Li: Do you know why he came?

1-00:02:25

Cordova:

My dad? I think it was after—there was a sort of a cholera epidemic in the Philippines and a lot of people died. My father came to—actually to work. From some of the oral histories I learned he eventually brought up to a hundred people here. Which was easy because Filipinos were American nationals, and they didn't need a passport. So my father, who started out as an older boy at eighteen, eventually became a businessman. He was a contractor, and over the years I found out he had—we did have a little restaurant, and he had a grocery store, and this was all during the twenties and into the thirties.

Li:

Did he have family or friends here that brought him to Seattle?

1-00:03:19

Cordova:

No. He's the one who brought people here. So he came—like I said—he came with the two cousins and one uncle—I forget his name—he went to university. My father was the one who worked, and a third person just took care of himself. But my father then eventually became one of the leaders in our Filipino community here, so when I do the oral history his name would pop up as one of the businessmen who would do things. It was a good search for me because I knew him as my father, but I didn't know what he did when I was a kid. My father was murdered.

Li:

Oh, I'm so sorry.

1-00:04:10

Cordova:

Yeah, there were a lot of drama in my family. He went to work one day, went to his lawyer's office, and this man came and killed one of the lawyers and killed my father. My father was a part owner in a gold mine. It was at a time, 1936—by that time Filipinos couldn't own property. So a lot of this had to be purchased through his lawyers. We never saw any of it. The man who did the killing was the one who had sold the gold mine, and there was litigation.

Li:

So it was motivated by money.

1-00:04:55

Cordova:

Yeah, but he was a little nuts because we've read the history. One woman did a biography on my brother Val, who was a very fine artist, and in doing so she dug up the old records of the court case. The man's wife described him as very erratic. In fact, he was a desperado kind of a character back at the turn of the century. He was older, seventy. I think he was probably getting senile.

Li:

I'm so sorry.

1-00:05:30

Cordova:

Yeah, but then my mom came here as a schoolteacher with the intent of going to school. But she met my father and she married him, and it turned out that they came from the same province and lived within miles of each other. But never knew one another.

Li: What year did they get married?

1-00:05:47

Cordova: My dad came in 1919; my mother 1928.

Li: And they got married—?

1-00:05:55

Cordova: They got married in '28.

Li: What's the name of the area they're from in the Philippines?

1-00:06:01

Cordova: The province in the Philippines? La Union, it looks like union. So my mom came from the Naguilian, and my father came from Bauang.

Li: Do they speak the same dialect?

1-00:06:26

Cordova: Oh, yeah. They're both from the North. They were Ilocano.

Li: Did you have any sibliings?

1-00:06:33

Cordova: Me? I have—my older brother, and this is funny, when I said I was the first one born in the United States, I have an older brother. So he was conceived in the United States, and then my mother went back because my grandmother and her family weren't at the wedding because my mother got married here. So she went back to introduce my dad. My brother—not my brother, he wasn't born yet. So they stayed for several months, but my father returned in '29 November, that's when the Great Depression hit. So he came back and my brother was born in January of 1930. So he was born in the Philippines and at that time we were all nationals, but by '36 my brother became an alien, something that my family overlooked. It wasn't until the Korean War that my brother realized when he went—he left college for a bit and went on a troop ship; he was in the Merchant Marine. They wouldn't let him off the boat because he had no papers. So that really disturbed him—the fact that—he would say to my mom, “Why didn't you just stay in the United States and let me be born here and then you could go back?” But—

Li: But he was born as a citizen—

1-00:07:50

Cordova: He was born in the Philippines—

Li: He was born as a US citizen in the Philippines at that time.

1-00:07:51

Cordova: No, he was an alien. Because my parents couldn't become citizens. The only ones who were able to become citizens at that time were those of us born here

or people who were in the military and after they served so many hitches. Then they were given the opportunity to swear allegiance.

Li: So you have an older brother, and then any younger siblings?

1-00:08:15

Cordova: Then I have seven brothers and sisters.

Li: So nine of you altogether?

1-00:08:19

Cordova: Right. There were five from the first marriage, and then my mom—two years after my father died my mother remarried, and there were four children there.

Li: Can you share with me some of your earliest memories of Seattle?

1-00:08:37

Cordova: Well, my memories of Seattle are really kind of mixed. That's where I grew up and—like I said, we always—this is called the central area—this is where people of color were allowed to live. And it was either Chinatown or what we call First Hill, Cherry Hill. I remember—it's really interesting because our kids say they don't remember, but I made a point to remember. Maybe it's because my dad died so early. So I remember I would try to harken back to whatever it was. But I remember Chinatown really well where my parents had the restaurant because we were there a lot. I recall that there were other Filipino kids there because they would come to the restaurant, and we would then walk around; we'd go down to what were tide flats at that time. The reason I knew they were tide flats is because I would come back with cat-of-nine tails, which is only where it's marshy. See, part of what is Seattle now was filled. When they cut down that area, they sluiced the hills with—on Jackson, so that's why Beacon Hill is so high. And then where the Yesler is, it's like this? That was all sluiced down into the water to make more land.

Li: So where were the marshes? Were they down—?

1-00:10:09

Cordova: Further down. Yeah, they were—I was a little girl, so we couldn't have walked too far. So they were about where the stadiums are right now. I can remember vaguely in my mind—and it didn't occur to me what it was because I was just a little girl—were these huts, these hovels, where they—the shantytowns. During the Depression people just took whatever they could and built housing for themselves. So that's what I remember. I also remember wandering around with the other kids through Chinatown. The other thing I remember, too—and it wasn't until I was in college and started to read about how Seattle had changed that where the front door of our restaurant wasn't cement; it was wood. Then in the back of the restaurant there were flights going down, around three, or two, flights. I remember as a kid I used to—all the kids would play—but I would go and peer in the windows and wonder,

“How come they’re,” it didn’t make sense to me. Then I realized that there was an underground city in Seattle. They had built it up. And it wasn’t until I was in college that one of the professors mentioned that, “You know there’s a hidden city under Seattle.” This is back in the forties, the late forties, and I thought, “Oh my God, that’s what it was.”

Li: Even in Chinatown that was—I knew Pioneer Square I’d heard of some—

1-00:11:44
Cordova:

Pioneer Square, but you figure Chinatown’s right next to Pioneer Square. So it was built up, and that’s the reason. So I have a picture of my mom standing in front of the restaurant with some of my uncles, and you could see the cement—I mean, not the cement—the wooden sidewalks. But also I recall, our church, my neighborhood. First we lived on Broadway before my dad died. Then he moved us to another house right by Garfield High School. But everywhere we lived—and then we finally went to the house where our family was, the house that he bought. But he must have put it in our names, the children’s names, to his lawyers. That was in 1935. But I always recall that there were always a lot of relatives living with us, male relatives. That’s because my dad had a responsibility for them, so most of them were my relatives, cousins or uncles.

But, yeah, what I remember about Seattle, the Chinatown which is a different experience, the Garfield thing which was more built up, so when we moved to Madison Valley. What I recall about it were the woods. There were three houses, and then a woods, and then three houses and a woods. So my brothers and I grew up in woods. I mean we climbed trees. And not only that but it must have been an old homestead area too because there were a lot of plum trees and apple trees, little apple groves. We would spend—during the Depression we were never really hungry in the summertime because all the neighborhood kids would pick berries. I mean berries like blackberries, raspberries—well, we had raspberries in the back yard—but salmonberries. You never see that anymore. Hazelnuts and all kinds of things. I mean, it was really a great place to grow up, in that little valley.

Li: I was going to ask you if you had—I mean did you community feel like a Filipino community, or did it feel more—

1-00:13:58
Cordova:

I didn’t live in a Filipino community. I mean my father—on Broadway we were kind of out of the community. Then we went to the Garfield area, and that’s more black. Then we moved to Madison Valley, and it was all white, and they didn’t accept us. It wasn’t until my father was killed, and our house caught on fire, that the neighbor next door sent her son over to play with us because she felt sorry for us. I remember her saying when we were standing outside watching the firemen chop a hole in the roof and she called us, “Those poor kids—first their dad, and now this.” The next day Tommy Rozelli came

over to play with us. He always wanted to play with us because my brothers and I were five kids. Or four kids, because my mother was pregnant when my dad was killed. My mother was pregnant with the fifth child.

So my brothers and I were like free spirits. If it rained, my mother would let us put on our bathing suits, and we'd go out there in the rain just prancing around. To me my mom felt it was like a shower. She came from another country. My mother was the type—my mother was a painter, and one of her paintings was of kids swimming in the river in her town. So my mother was a water baby—so having water there. So we—afterwards, after the barrier broke down and the kids in the neighborhood—our family then in a white neighborhood—we were the focal family. Everybody wanted to play with us.

Li: Was there a particular kind of ethnicity that the white kids in that area were or was it pretty diverse in terms of—?

1-00:15:49

Cordova:

No, there was—it was interesting because if you know Seattle, we lived on Denny Way, and you go straight up Denny and from around Twenty-Fifth all the way up on Denny on either side was black, African American. It was kind of mixed. But Twenty-Third Avenue and beyond was a lot of African—the old families because that land was homesteaded by a black man. If you know the history of Seattle, he was a businessman who, when the great fire took place, took some of this money and bought the land—a plot of the land on Madison, Twenty-Third all the way up, and he owned that land and gradually sold off land to other people, many of whom were white.

So in our neighborhood—we were on Twenty-Seventh Avenue—we were the brown people. There was one black family who lived a block down, but they were almost white. You could tell they were. They were very, very fair. So there was no problem about them living. But you went up two or three blocks and the real African Americans were there, and it was segregated. The comments that people would make sometimes it just didn't sit right because when we lived by Garfield we played with all the black kids, and then over there we didn't because they didn't come down into our valley.

Li: How old were you when you moved to Madison Valley?

1-00:17:21

Cordova:

I was three. So that was 1935. Yeah, because my dad died just a few months after we moved there.

Li: So your friends, when you were old enough to have playmates in the neighborhood, were in this neighborhood of Madison Valley.

1-00:17:42

Cordova:

They're all white, yeah.

Li: Primarily white.

1-00:17:46

Cordova: So unlike a lot of the other kids, we didn't have—but we were always tied into our community because our church Maryknoll, the one I was telling you about was in what was called the Ghetto. So we went to school up until the war broke out. Until 1942, I never went to school with a white kid. So it was a really interesting kind of a mix. I played in my neighborhood with white kids, but went to school with Japanese kids. So in 1942 I came back to this school—I came to this school building that we're in right now because the Japanese were sent to camps. I'd never been—even though I'd played with the white kids, I'd never gone to school with them. So it was a culture shock for me.

Li: So did you speak Llocano at home?

1-00:18:38

Cordova: I understood it, but someone said to me when I was interviewing her once, she said, "You know when you were a little girl you spoke it." But I guess I lost it because going to a Japanese school there would be no one to talk to.

Li: So why was your school primarily Japanese?

1-00:18:52

Cordova: It was a missionary school, a Catholic missionary school, run by the Maryknoll Order, and they dealt primarily with immigrants. They were basically with the Japanese—many of whom in our school, when I first went there, most of the kids were not Catholic. They didn't convert wholesale until 1940, the year before the war broke out. There were a few Japanese kids who were Catholic. So my first communion picture—there were there were four of us who took first communion. Three of us were Filipino, one Japanese. So that shows you. The world I lived in said one thing and the reality was another thing. So it was a Catholic school that wasn't Catholic until later.

Li: Where was the Maryknoll School?

1-00:19:47

Cordova: Between Seventeenth and Sixteenth on East Jefferson. It's no longer there. It's now Providence Hospital. They bought it out, for the property.

Li: How did you get to school?

1-00:20:04

Cordova: Bus. There were two buses. The Maryknoll fathers had two buses. One bus would pick up all the kids north of Jefferson, and then another bus would get everybody south of Jefferson. So what I remember about the Japanese kids when—because we were the first family picked up. We lived outside of where everybody was. But they would pick us, up and then they would go and pick up my classmates, my schoolmates. Most of them came out of businesses,

grocery stores, hotels, laundries. That's what I remember, picking up all the way down Second Avenue or First Avenue or Third Avenue. They had little hotels there, and they were mostly run by Japanese. This is in the downtown area. The families I found out, in the bus that picked up the kids south of Jefferson, the kids who lived in the hotels or apartments by Jackson Street. Just by chance once I rode on that bus, and that's when I found a whole bunch of kids coming out of those apartments.

Li: So was it primarily Japanese and Filipinos?

1-00:21:27

Cordova:

It was around 90 percent Japanese, 10 percent Filipinos. The reason Filipino kids were there, our parents were immigrants, and in the parish there was a Filipino-Catholic Club. But you figure at that time there weren't that many families. The Japanese at the time were the largest Asian group in the state of Washington. They had more women who had come over at one time, whereas with Filipinos they didn't. Not because they weren't—now, I know there's a lot of misconception. People say, "Well, Filipino women couldn't come." No, that's not true. They didn't come early on because, if the family was going to get money to send somebody, they'd send money—they would invest in a male who would be more likely to get a job. Even in school—but we did have Filipino women coming to school. We have pictures of women at the "U-Dub" [University of Washington], Filipino women, maybe one woman or two women and maybe around thirty men. So it wasn't very—but there had to be a reason, and you figure, we were under Spain for three hundred and fifty years. With the Spaniards, a good girl never went anywhere unless she was chaperoned. So for them to come here they had to be a reason. So my mom coming, she was chaperoned by a brother who left behind a family. But he was the only one who could bring her. All the other interviews that we did, they were either women who had gone through nursing came here, or they were part of a family—where my dad bringing, he brought maybe around five of his female relatives. But there was a reason because there was family here.

Li: You know, some people I've talked to of our generation remember feeling very precious as a child because there were not a lot of Filipino children.

1-00:23:23

Cordova:

We were.

Li: Did you feel that?

1-00:23:24

Cordova:

Oh, yeah. We all did. In fact, the term {"ng aking anak?}," which is "my child." Or my aunt calling us "Nini," which is—these are endearing terms. The terminology "Pini, Pinoi, little Pini," that was "little Filipina." So we—a lot of the men—when I said there were a lot of people staying in our house were mostly men, and we were there—if they were older, we were like their

grandchildren, even if we weren't blood relatives. So there was always that feeling that we were special.

Li: So you talk about uncles. It wasn't necessarily just familiar uncles. They were—

1-00:24:08

Cordova: Yeah, but there was this kinship. Filipinos have this ability to be the extended family. We truly have that. I think that some of the people my father brought over weren't his blood relatives because he was a contractor. So when they would get here he'd find them jobs, but they became my uncles. And it's funny because a lot of times we didn't know their names. We knew them by "Uncle So and So." So people I was calling uncle I found out later were my cousins, but they were older than me. Or people I thought were my uncles weren't really my uncles, they were town mates, province mates. With the Filipinos that whole concept of the extended family is very strong. So we built relationships. I mean, say for example, in baptism or confirmation or marriage someone becomes your godfather or godmother and that's a really strong tie, especially back in those days. I don't know if it's that strong now, but we were especially close to our godparents, who many times were not blood relatives. They were just people that our parents felt should be the godparents.

Li: What kind of labor were these men doing that would—?

1-00:25:31

Cordova: A lot. You're talking about the Northwest, of course. Some of my uncles, some of them—well, I know what they did; they worked in the lumber mills, they worked on the truck farms, and like California we had small farms, the truck farms. They worked in kitchens. If they were going to the University, they were house boys. So they would live with a family while they were going to school. There were restaurants; they worked as dish washers and my stepfather used to be a chauffeur before he got married to my mom. But before that he worked in the lumber mills.

But he told me in his oral history that he found out he made more money if he did the cooking for the men and washed their clothes. He didn't have to work in the lumber mills, so that's what he did. And eventually—he was pretty much a free soul; he got a job with this well-to-do family and chauffeured them. He would tell me about his trips across the country, all the way to Florida. They went to the Indianapolis 500 races. It was interesting because many years later, when Dad was in his seventies, this woman calls up, and she was visiting her son who was living here. She was looking for Mike Castelliano, who she met when she was a teenager and he was a chauffeur. My mother was so jealous. I said, "Mom, they're old folks now, what are you going to do?" But my dad—I called my stepfather my dad and my natural father my father. I said, "Dad was just charming." This woman remembered

him after fifty years. But she had to look up Mike Castelliano, and she found him because they were in the book.

Li: You were growing up in such a diverse community and moving, but do you remember when you were first conscious of your own race?

1-00:27:47

Cordova: Oh, all the time.

Li: All the time. So there was never sort of a moment when—?

1-00:27:52

Cordova: Oh, no! Just the fact that the kids wouldn't play with us made me realize that I was a Filipino. I had a very strong mom who was very ethnocentric. Trust me. And my mother was a story teller, and every night she would tell stories of the Philippines. So I was raised every night with stories of her childhood. Where she lived, what she did, and everything was, of course, Philippines. And she would sing us Filipino songs. I was dancing Filipino folk dancing when I was three and wearing these scratchy old Filipina butterfly sleeves before they became soft. I learned how to starch those sleeves. I learned to do Filipino cooking because we ate Filipino food. So there was never any problem that I wasn't Filipino. I never knew that I was anything else but. And I was kind of always aware of it, like I say, when I went to school with the Japanese kids the fact that they—I wasn't Japanese. I mean I was *kurombo* [Japanese word typically used to describe those with black skin].

If I told that to my Japanese friends they'd say, "Oh, no, we never did." Well, how the hell did I pick up that word; it was used. So I was always aware that I wasn't like anybody else. There were very few Filipino women—females. And so we were different. Really we stuck out. We didn't look like everybody. They couldn't figure out what we were. Could we be Indian, or Mexican, or whatever? But we were Filipino. The reason why I knew we were Filipino—even though I lived in a white neighborhood, our spare time is spent with the Filipinos. So my family, which lives close to where Seattle U's [Seattle University] *Campion Towers* is right now, it was like a Filipino village there. We would go there on weekends, and there would be parties. People had the doors open, and people moving out between the homes.

And of course being in school, and always having to defend myself. When I went to school here, I always felt safe in school, but it was the process of going from school to home. Being brown and going to a Catholic school—we lived at the very edge of our parish, and in those days parish schools were defined by where you lived. So the border for *Immaculate*, which is the school, was *Twenty-Seventh* and *Denny*. Now if I lived on the other side I would have been in *St. Joseph Parish* which was where the richer kids lived. If I lived on the other side of *Twenty-Seventh*, I would have been in *St. Teresa's Parish*. But it just happened that we lived on the other end, which was on

the—I was in a poor parish, which was Immaculate where—blue-collar workers. A lot of the kids I went to school with here at Immaculate were children of immigrants. Whether they were Italian, or Irish, French—

Li: But white immigrants.

1-00:31:06

Cordova: White immigrants. Not all of them, but enough of them. Or they were the grandchildren of immigrants. So it was kind of a different situation. But being Filipino—we never denied being—we always knew we were Filipino.

Li: So most of your recreational time, your fun time, was spent with other Filipino kids?

1-00:31:31

Cordova: Yeah, we would spend a lot of times—I wouldn't say every time but we were—how would I say—yeah, we spent a lot of time with Filipino kids. A lot of our social time was spent with them. As a kid growing up after World War II, my mother started to teach folk-dancing to the Filipino community kids. So there were times that she was teaching anywhere from seventy to a hundred kids. That's like a critical mass of being Filipino.

And most of those kids—half of those kids were mestizos [people of mixed Filipino and foreign ancestry]. My mom was a very skilled seamstress, and tailor, and she would sew all the costumes for those kids. So as the oldest daughter I was always taking care of the little kids so my mother could do her Filipino thing. But I danced, and I would go around—for years my brothers and I we danced in public. We did the Filipino folk dancing all over. So we were extremely Filipino, even though we went to school with Japanese kids and white immigrants and lived in a white neighborhood.

Li: Your sense of yourself was—?

1-00:32:52

Cordova: Yeah, we knew what we were, and it was funny because the kids in the neighborhood called us the Filipinos. And my mother had—I told you there was this little orchard across the street from our house and there were green apples, and my mother would pretend that they were green mangoes. She would cut them up and put them with vinegar and salt. Really tasty, and the kids in the neighborhood liked to eat it. They would ask us if my mother would make the Filipino apples. So everything was—and when we had parties—we'd have that the lechon [roasted pig] in our neighborhood, and the kids in the neighborhood always wanted to come to our parties. So we were indoctrinating a lot of people on Filipino ways.

Li: You had mentioned the berry picking, and it sounds like you had apples growing nearby too, but do you remember experiencing the Depression?

1-00:33:49
Cordova:

I remember the Depression really well. Well, you figure—my father died; he was a businessman, and for years people thought that he left us a lot of money. He was only thirty-five when he was killed so he didn't really plan, and he was supporting all these people. So we went from having quite a bit to nothing, within days. What I recall is my mother leaving the house with shopping bags. We had a lot of good things, silverware. She'd walk away with these things and come back with food because she never went on the bread line. She pawned things. She pawned the jewelry that her mother gave her, and she would always tell me the stories about how bad she felt. She pawned them for so little so she could get them back, but she never had the money even to get it back.

Yeah, the Depression was in our neighborhood. The neighborhood that I grew up in, they weren't rich people. It was working class, but I recall in my neighborhood, too, there were a lot of out of work white men, and a lot of alcohol was consumed. The reason we knew that is we could tell when the men were really bad—it's a valley, and the kids would get beat by their dads. So our home became a haven for some of those kids. It was a two-story house, a small house, and we had a ladder that went up—my mother had converted the attic into a bedroom for my brothers. Sometimes the kids would come, go up the ladder, and then the dad would come knock on the door. My mother's downstairs, and my mom must have known—she knew what was happening. And he'd say, "Have you seen my son?" And she said, "No, I haven't." Well she hadn't, but the kid's upstairs hiding.

So I used to think that white men were a bunch of drunkards and beat up their kids. But they weren't all like that because there were a lot of good fathers in that neighborhood. But there were enough around; three of them I remember, who periodically would take out their frustrations on their kids. And I didn't realize until much later that they were out of jobs. We'd go to their house—we were poor, but they had nothing—we'd walk into their home and there'd be a table and some chairs.

We had furniture. With nine kids after a while we'd beat up furniture, but then we still had furniture. But some of those kids—and that was the Depression—one of the games that we used to like to play was "Let's Pretend We're Poor." So I would take bread—I was always the ringleader because I had younger brothers and they went along with everything—I'd take a piece of bread, and I'd have my little dishes, and I divided up equally among all of us, and I'd tell them just to nibble on it. So the Depression lived with us quite a bit.

The good thing was my stepfather, when he married my mom, he quit his job as the chauffeur and started to work at the old Olympic Hotel, first as a dish washer, and then he became a pantry man. But Dad would bring home the extra food that they didn't use. So at an early age I became used to steak. We were poor kids—now, this wasn't every night. I even developed a liking for

squab. Stuffed squab—it was cold, but Dad would bring it because he'd say to them—they were going to throw it away. So he would bring it home—the butter, he would bring. So even though we were poor and it was such a large family with nine kids and my mom and dad—that's eleven—and then we had an older uncle who stayed with us, who would take care of us when my mom started to work. So it was a family of twelve. We were the biggest family. But we ate.

There were times when I was really little, because you asked me what did men do for work? Well they went to Alaska in the summertime, and they would bring back cans of salmon. The cans that were tin, that were beat up. So I remember some of my best meals, believe it or not, was hot rice, with an egg into it, and canned salmon and tomatoes. I tell my kids that, and they say, "Really?" And I say, "When you're hungry anything tastes good."

Li: Yeah, it sounds pretty good, actually. [laughs]

1-00:38:52

Cordova: Right, and then later on we started eating steak that nobody wanted. It was left—and squab; it was sort of a mixed bag.

Li: Was your family very political?

1-00:39:07

Cordova: Well, they couldn't vote. But my mom, believe it or not, my mother was political. As a little girl I remember her—let's see, it was in 1940—yeah, 1940, and I was eight then. My mother made me stay up, and we'd listen on the radio to the Democratic—when they were choosing the candidates. And we had to write everything down, the numbers. She had me write the numbers down so we could tally it up to see who was going to be the Vice President, and we listened to it. My mother was very much into politics; Dad was too. But it wasn't until the sixties that they became citizens. But for people who—for twenty-two years they would follow politics, even though they didn't have a right to vote.

Li: Did they subscribe to newspapers that you remember?

1-00:40:07

Cordova: Oh, yeah. We always had the newspapers.

Li: Were they Filipino newspapers or the *Seattle Times* or—?

1-00:40:11

Cordova: No, we had the *Seattle Times*.

Li: Did they follow events in the Philippines closely?

1-00:40:18

Cordova:

No. Not really. Not like now. The immigrants now, they're still there. My generation—talk to Vangi—our parents were here. They were going to stay here. A lot of the immigrants that I know now, they just—one foot here and one foot there. In fact, many of them have dual citizenship.

Li:

So prior to 1941 were you aware of the war, the Japanese aggression in the Pacific, or war in Europe?

1-00:40:49

Cordova:

Yes, we were very much aware. In my family, I was aware. You go into the movies—we went to the movies every week—and they had the newsreels. All the newsreels took what television is now, but we went every week. So in between—because in the old days you had the A movie and the B movie, and in between you had all of these little fillers. You could stay in the movies all day if you want. You could go in the middle of the movie. You wouldn't miss it. So of course, a lot of it was on what was happening in Europe. So you knew. There was this impending fear that something was going to happen. Then going to a Japanese school, we knew something was up because the kids would talk about it. They were keeping track of what was happening in the Far East, in Japan. And in China. In those days the Japanese and Chinese here didn't really get along.

Li:

Right. So you were aware when the Japanese invaded China—

1-00:41:48

Cordova:

Yeah, because it was on the newsreel. You would see the Rape of Manchuria and all these different things. It's on the newsreel, and you were aware of these—not unless you were not—I was one of these kids who were always tuned in. I don't know if my brothers were aware, but I know I was. But I remember the beginning of the war, very, very clearly. But I also remember in 1941 the last graduation of Maryknoll eighth grade graduation. It was one of the dignitaries from Japan on his way to Washington, DC, was the speaker.

Li:

What did he talk about, do you remember?

1-00:42:41

Cordova:

I don't remember. I don't think I went to the graduation, but I knew that he was there, so he was asked to speak. As a kid I was really—I felt—I was really tuned in to Japanese culture. I mean—the kendo. I remember at Maryknoll some of the older gentlemen, who probably came from a higher class, used to put on their masks and fight with their sticks. I didn't realize until later that some of them may have come once upon a time from a samurai class, but the others were workers. So I know Mr. Juhara, but he owned a jewelry store. But there were some other men who would do that. We would watch. So you always knew that something may be happening because of the newsreels, but you weren't quite sure. But we knew that there was a war in Europe.

My mother's younger sister—we got a telegram in November, the end of November, and my mother started to weep. Her sister had died. So being Filipino and Catholic, my mother then started a nine day novena [Catholic prayer for the dead]. On the ninth day, which happened to be on a Sunday, all the relatives gathered at our house, and I went to Mass, and I came back. Well, I was outside playing with my cousins. I was nine. And I came in, and the food was on the table, but the adults were listening to the radios. It was the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On that day. All of the sudden the talk shifted. All the men, "Those damn Japs," things like that, and then—

Li: So in one day—

1-00:44:46

Cordova:

Yeah, in one day. Me—now I'm going to school with Japanese. I started thinking, "No, no, no, no." I was always defending because I went to school with the Japanese—even though they called me kurombo. That was just a name. But they were my friends. So the war broke out, and I remember my feeling—my cousin and I—my cousin stayed overnight. My aunt let her stay overnight that night. Everybody went home. It was very somber. Of course, we were waiting for the other shoe to drop, and sure enough it did the next day. They started to bomb the Philippines. In fact, they bombed my mother's hometown because they have an airfield there. I remember my cousin and I walking up Denny to go to the drugstore on the top on Twenty-Third, and all the time we were watching the sky to see if—we were kids. We didn't know what was going to happen.

So everything changed. We went to school the next day, and everything had changed. The nuns were quiet. The kids were quiet, because for them their life was going to be turned upside down. Now going on the school bus—it says Maryknoll, and where we would go get picked up and nothing ever happened, people used to take the buses before. As we would go by the bus stops people would be shaking their fists at us. I'd be there watching. I'd be watching—I'm Filipino—people shaking their fists at us.

Li: At Japanese children.

1-00:46:30

Cordova:

At the Japanese school bus with Japanese kids in it, and some Filipino kids in there, too. But they didn't know. Then we were issued—Filipinos were given buttons that said, "I'm a Filipino."

Li: Who made them? Where did they come from?

1-00:46:45

Cordova:

I don't know. But I thought it was just Seattle, then I found out later it was all over. Okay, now I'm going to a Japanese school. So my mother gives me this button and tells my brothers and me to wear it. So I go to school, and the sister tells me to take it off. So they didn't care about the Filipino kids there. But the

Maryknollers, their prime purpose for existing here were for the Japanese, and it was very apparent. So I took it off because—I obeyed my mom, but I kept it in my pocket, and I go home and I'd have to put it on again. So I was in two worlds. But I learned—some of my friends and I, we would talk about things, kind of sort of. But they were really closed about—because they really didn't know what was going to happen.

We tried to finish up school, but by around April, I think it was, the bill was signed that they had to go away to the camps. So I remember my last day at school the kids were all being sent off and all the buses—now my brothers and I came to school on a bus, but I remember us, we weren't on the bus. So we had to walk home. I remember saying to my friends, they would say, "Write to me, write to me." Where am I going to write to them? So the next day then, we were told we had to go to the Catholic school which was here, which is around six blocks. So that's show World War II affected me, at least in school. My friends went away to camps, and I had entered a new world. Where now I was going to school with white kids. Well, that was just part of the changes of World War II because with it came a whole new set of things. We were issued little stamps to get sugar, and butter, and shoes. You had to—because everything was going to the war effort.

So for us, for the kids in the neighborhood, it was good that we lived in the woody part of Seattle then—we had the big woods, the little woods and the middle woods all over the place. We had different kinds of food that we could get. But the winter time it was pretty hard because we couldn't get sweets. But the good thing is, during the war, my mother by then was giving birth and the babies didn't need shoes. But my brothers did because they're boys, and we would walk to school. We lived at the edge of the parish, so we were the furthest away. So every day we'd walk a mile and a half. Up to school, back home, and then their playing. So the boys needed shoes, and at least they got the shoes that my baby sister weren't going to—they're wearing booties.

Then the other thing that I recall, I don't know if Angie told you, but we used to have air raid wardens. Did she talk about that?

Li: A little bit, but I've love to hear what it was like in Seattle at that time.

1-00:50:10
Cordova:

Well, in Seattle we had to—all the windows had to have heavy curtains, and at night we turn on the lights; you could have them as long as you had the heavy curtains. No lights switched on. You would have these men, the air raid wardens, they'd had these hats on. They're kind of like hard hats? And they would patrol, and if lights would come, they'd come knock on your door and tell you to make sure that the windows were fully covered.

Li: Do you remember they were scared, did you—?

1-00:50:44

Cordova: They thought that they were going to bomb us.

Li: Did you feel that? Did you believe that?

1-00:50:46

Cordova: Oh, well, shoots, if you had air raid wardens—and you figure, in the Northwest they weren't too—in Alaska. So they were coming pretty close. And we didn't know because no one expected Pearl Harbor—no one expected all these other things. It never even occurred to us that they'd have to come clear across.

Li: When they interned the Japanese, did it affect the way you felt about America or about being American or—?

1-00:51:22

Cordova: Oh, when you're nine and ten, what do you feel? I felt it was unfair.

Li: Did you feel scared that—in terms of what the government—?

1-00:51:32

Cordova: I didn't think it was right; see, they were sending away my friends. I didn't know their parents, but then my friends, the children, were going. I'll tell you what was bad was listening to comments by my relatives who I really loved—always having to defend—I remember as a little girl the times that I would leave the room yelling, “That's not fair. That's not fair. They're just kids.” I wasn't talking about the parents, but then my uncles weren't talking about them; they were angry because their towns on the Philippines were being bombed, and the relatives were now—

Li: Right. Because the Japanese aggression in the Philippines was horrible—

1-00:52:21

Cordova: Yeah, it was bad.

Li: I mean they bombed three or four towns in the Philippines the day after Pearl Harbor?

1-00:52:27

Cordova: My mother's hometown was leveled. My first cousin who came here afterwards, the daughter of the man who brought my mom to the Philippines, she talked about how they had to gather up—because our family there had money, but everything was lost. They gathered up—they even buried some of the jewelry and things. She said, “Your mother and dad would send us things.” My mom would send things to them because my dad had money. All that was lost because it was leveled. What she told me later on was, our house was a good house back there; the Japanese officers lived in our house in the family home, which make it difficult for the family. It wasn't that they invited them in; they moved into the better homes.

But my cousin talks about fleeing into the mountains because they lived in the foothills, and they went into the—close to Baguio, which is way up high, and then they'd come back periodically when things—so for them life was going up, going down, but knowing that there were Japanese living in their house. But for a while there they lived there, and {Flori?} would talk about the Japanese officer who lived there and liked her because he had a daughter her age, and she would play the piano for him. So with Flori she had this feeling that they weren't all bad, that there is a man who is doing something.

All I know is that I had my friends who were gone. There were two Japanese families here—a Japanese-Filipino—they were sent away. It was the fifth grade where we came here to Maryknoll. So I was here for two months before school was over. That was April, May, June. Then in September, in the sixth grade, George {Cassy?} comes back because his father was able to prove—his mother was able to prove that her children were half Japanese. So this happened up and down where we did some oral histories, or some workshops, in our conferences on the Filipino-Japanese kids, some of whom didn't know they were Japanese until that happened because their mothers had been ostracized by the Japanese families when they married Filipinos. When they were sent away to camp like, “What is this? I'm Japanese? I didn't know I was Japanese.” But they were, so the government pretty much found out that they were. But many of those families were able to come back by virtue of being Filipino.

Li: Do you remember the effect on the Chinese community in Seattle, the removal of the Japanese? Did you see it affect the Chinese community here? Did it get larger? Did they expand Seattle's Chinatown?

1-00:55:39

Cordova:

I really don't know. I don't know. I do know I don't see how they would have expanded because there was no immigration. I would imagine that they had many of the same feelings, probably even stronger feelings than the Filipinos or just as strong, against the Japanese. I do know this, that everybody during the wartime was involved in war drives, buying savings bonds—doing all those things. My mom—like I said, we did folk dancing. I'd go—there was this place right by the old Olympic Hotel which is now—I think—I forget what it is. But that street north of the hotel was blocked off. There was a big stage there, and people would perform for money, and my brothers and I would dance.

Li: This is to raise money for the American war effort.

1-00:56:31

Cordova:

For the war effort. Like I said, I always knew I was Filipino because I was always out there dancing. [laughs] What else was I? It was—sort of a—with the Japanese kids gone I was more curious about where they were going. But we would becoming—okay, we were inundated going to the movies every

week—inundated with the anti—with these war movies. So it wasn't until after the war that I realized how things had changed for my Japanese friends. When I knew them in Seattle they all had Japanese names. When they came back, they had American names. So Chieko then became somebody else. But among themselves they would keep the Japanese names. But for many of them, they had an American name, like Mary Lou or something. Not unless they were Catholic and they had a Christian name. Like Bernadette was always Bernadette. But it was—the interesting thing is—as curious as I was—I was always a curious person; I never asked them what happened, and they never volunteered. After the war, we picked up that old relationship. We were teenagers by then, and we socialized together. But never asked them, and they never told us. But among themselves they would have little jokes or comments that weren't really meant for us, and they were talking about their life there.

Audio file 2

Li: This is Robin Li speaking with Dorothy Cordova, January 6, 2012 in Seattle, Washington. This is Interview One, Tape Two.

So we were talking about the return of your Japanese friends from the camps.

2-00:00:13

Cordova: Right.

Li: And you said that you didn't ask about—

2-00:00:18

Cordova: No, it would have been impolite, and they never volunteered. Really nothing was said, not too much. You figure they came back in 1946, and I didn't really know what had happened in the camps until the late sixties. That was sixteen years. By that time the children, their children, the children of the older ones, probably started to ask questions. Like, "What happened?" Or "Say something about it." Or "Do something." That's when I really found out—I mean there was a whole—gradually—every once in a while they would tell us something as the years went on, but not a whole lot. In the very beginning there—because we were teenagers then, and it was a very hurtful thing because when they came back, it was bad. People were really mean. There were crosses were being burned.

When they came back they had to find lodging. Many of them when they left didn't realize until many years later that they just had weeks, less than a month, to put away their belongings into storage if they could and to determine what they were going to bring to camp. Everybody I think had a suitcase.

Li: So when they came back, they were—?

2-00:01:55

Cordova:

They had to find places because there were homes that they had to go into. The good thing is there were churches, Methodist Churches, Baptist Churches where they were before. In our church, Maryknoll, which is Catholic, the old Filipino Catholic Club became the home for the Matsudaira family, which was the largest. There was what, sixteen kids? So they had to have a place to live. Eventually, when I was initially on—if you go off Twelfth Avenue and a little south of Jackson you see some of these Japanese places. I don't know if they're historic sites yet, but some of the families were housed there. They had to stay somewhere, but for many of them it was really hard.

So people just don't want to talk. Just like—say for example, what I was telling you, the people suffered in the Holocaust, the survivors. It wasn't something that they would talk about; it was something so tragic that they just didn't want to. Here—they were Americans, for crying out loud! Being told that they were enemies—the thing that used to disturb me, I remember, was—I was in school with Italian kids and German kids, and they weren't sent away!

Li:

Were people—did they experience racism against Italians or Germans? Do you remember people call them names and—?

2-00:03:33

Cordova:

No! Well I guess they would, “dagos” and things like that, but they weren't sent away to camps. It was just the Japanese. Though I found out later from a friend of mine, Tets [Tetsuden] Kashima, who is a professor at “U-Dub,” he wrote a book on the internment, and he said to me that there *were* some small camps for Italians and Germans on the other side of the country. So this was a West Coast thing because—

Li:

Yeah, I wanted to back up because you had mentioned on the phone that some of your uncles had joined the military when the war broke out.

2-00:04:07

Cordova:

Oh, yeah.

Li:

Do you remember what their motivations were for joining? Did they talk about—?

2-00:04:15

Cordova:

Yeah, they were going to fight the Japs.

Li:

That was very clear cut.

2-00:04:20

Cordova:

That was *very* clear cut because by this time where they lived as boys was gone. It was funny because a number of the Filipino—here's the interesting thing: a lot of the Filipinos who worked on the farms worked for Japanese. So

they had a different relationship with Japanese. On Bainbridge Island many of the men who worked there, they took over the farms.

Li: Was it strawberry farms?

2-00:04:54

Cordova: Yeah, and when the war ended they turned the farms back to the Japanese.

Li: They returned them.

2-00:05:00

Cordova: See, they were working two jobs after a while because they were close to Bremerton. They worked in defense plants building boats, and then they were running the strawberry farms because there was nobody to pick—the Native American women from the First Nations were coming down from Canada. So there were a lot of marriages during that time that happened.

Li: Between Filipinos and Native American women—?

2-00:05:29

Cordova: —Native American women, or First Nation women. So there's a term that's being used, it's called "Indopino," and it started on that island—

Li: Bainbridge?

Cordova: —by the children back in the seventies, the late sixties and seventies, where they identified—how they identified Indopino." more Indian than Filipino. But they didn't deny their Filipinoness.

Li: Were the defense industries important to the Filipino men in terms of moving out of agricultural work at this time? Did you know a lot of men who worked in the wartime industries?

2-00:06:09

Cordova: Well, believe it or not, a lot of men who worked in farms—that *was* a war industry because they had to provide food to the troops. During the wartime my brothers, and I, and hundreds of other kids, we went to the farms and picked beans and whatever was in season. My uncles had farms. In fact I was going to farms even before the war because my uncle and aunt were tenant farmers for this person out in the valley. Then after the war my Uncle Clark and one of his friends took over a big bean—when the Japanese—I don't know if they were told by the government to do it, but then it was a job and they had to do it. They would have pickers from all over.

Li: Was this Carnation Valley? What was the valley that they were—?

2-00:07:13

Cordova: It was the valley which is now Kent, and Auburn, and—

Li: Near Renton?

2-00:07:21

Cordova: Renton, or south of Renton. So that's where a lot of the truck farms were, and then the strawberries on Bainbridge Island. Then on the other side of the mountain there were the farms there. Filipinos were farming all during the war time.

Li: Until they took over the Japanese farms—

2-00:07:43

Cordova: Well, with the Filipinos on the other side, those were their own farms.

Li: That they had before the war.

2-00:07:48

Cordova: They had before the war. I would think that there were. There were Japanese farmers there. But a lot of the Filipinos there already—they had married the Indian women, see, because Yakima is Indian Territory. Many of the men had married so they could secure the land, but I guess there may have been some; I don't know. There have been some writings—I think they did—where other people took over the farms. So during the war a number of the men did do double things. They were triple because the salmon canneries were now war industry.

Li: So many of men were gone—

2-00:08:33

Cordova: Right, some of the men who wanted to enlist were told they couldn't.

Li: Because they were needed in the salmon—

2-00:08:40

Cordova: Yeah, they were needed to provide food. Especially if they were skilled at running a farm or they were skilled laborers. Skill; how skilled could you be? Well, I guess there *is* skill doing {sliming?} and doing all those things—the quickness of generating food. So it was a war industry, and yet during the time, and I think the Chinese—I did a panel once at the Smithsonian with some other Chinese, and we were talking about for the Filipinos, and they said Chinese too, the war really turned the economics of Filipinos around because for many of the men they were able to work two jobs if they were on the farms. But they also worked in building boats, or planes, or doing things like that. One of my first cousins—and I don't know how she got the job because I thought you had to be an American—but she worked at Boeing. I don't know if she was Rosie the Riveter, but she was there. Maybe she was sweeping up, I'm not sure, but she was there.

Li: So they were able to save money and to move up—

2-00:10:00

Cordova:

Yeah, yeah, they did. Another woman that I know, my godmother, she—because Seattle was—everybody moved here; people were converting garages into apartments. In this school, I remember in the sixth grade, all of a sudden Sister told us that we had to share our seat with kids who were coming in. Because their parents were coming in to work at either building boats or building airplanes. At that time Boeing was turning out a plane a day.

Just the influx—everybody—people were doubling up on housing. So my godmother had a house—this was before the freeway—she had a little store that she took over from Japanese. It was down where the freeway is right now; I guess that would be right off Jefferson, somewhere around there. I just remember it vaguely in my head. But that place was full of workers because Boeing was having twenty-four hours a day work, three shifts. Otherwise how can you turn out a plane a day, if you didn't have that? So she kept her store open twenty-four hours a day and she made a lot of money. So much so that she was able to buy property on Eastlake. Not only that, when the Japanese left Bellevue, which was at one time rural, except for the small towns—

Li:

Blueberry farms—

2-00:11:48

Cordova:

She bought a farm right on where there is prime property now, I mean then. So she bought that land, and they farmed it. Here she had this store that was running twenty-four hours a day and farming over there, somebody farming it. Eventually when Bellevue started to grow, they bought some of her land for a school, and then they had to have an access road. So she sold that, and then they needed a park, but she still kept enough of it for her husband to farm. Her family neighborhood developed there, but they were there. So I would imagine—this is my godmother—she was just really savvy with money, and quite a few of the people made money. A lot of it were the women. They figured it out.

Li:

Did Seattle feel really vibrant then? There were so many people coming. There was so much money actually flowing into the city.

2-00:13:02

Cordova:

Well, it was growing. Seattle was like a little town. It was a city that wasn't a city. If you look at Seattle, we have neighborhoods, really strong neighborhoods. So there's Ballard and University district. Gradually a lot of these places—they were little towns, Georgetown—those were all the Rainier district. They were little towns at one time, but they retained their own personality so even though they became part of Seattle—. So you had all these different people living in these areas, but—yeah, there was a lot of stuff going on. Still though, at night time they would roll up their sidewalks and everybody—there was nothing at night.

Li:

Really?

2-00:13:51

Cordova:

Yeah, it was sort of a dead town. There were night clubs. There were speakeasies I would imagine because on Jackson you have the African-American bands. But those were places like clubs. So clubs were able to stay open.

But during the war there was a lot of activity. I remember, when I think about it, the Buddhist Temple was taken over by I think the Coast Guard, and they housed men there. Yeah, because some of my schoolmates from here when they were in high school—because the Buddhist Temple is less than a mile away, they would go down there and made friends with some of those young guys because those guys were what, seventeen, sixteen or seventeen? They were young. They go to the movies together. Life changed. Girls became a little faster because of some opportunities.

Li:

Did your uncles who served in the military take advantage of the GI Bill when they came back?

2-00:15:04

Cordova:

Many of them did. I don't know, but they did take advantage—yeah, buying homes. Some of them going to school, but many of them—. Yeah, at least buying their homes. They were able to do that.

Here's the interesting thing now, just as an aside. People get confused when we teach our classes. They get confused; they talk about the war veterans. When I talk about the war veterans, I'm talking about my uncles and their—the seven thousand men who were in the First and Second Filipino infantry. They're talking about the guys who were in the Philippines. But then we had another group that came over, which was after World War II. They were the men who were in the Philippine scouts and were given the opportunity before the Philippines becomes independent in '46. We were interviewing those people.

Li:

So the Filipinos were fighting with the US in the Philippines but as Filipinos.

2-00:15:58

Cordova:

As Filipinos, but part of the US Army. So when the war broke out, they were still being paid by Americans. So there was an opportunity before they were asked, "Do you want to stay with the US Army or be part of the new Philippine Republic?" A lot of them, many of whom were in the Bataan Corregidor survivors, opted to become Americans, and by virtue of that were able to come and eventually bring their families over. So for World War II, we had three. We had those who were living in the United States when the war broke out; that's the First and Second Philippine Infantry. And the others who were in other parts of the service. Then you had those who chose to become Americans before July 4, 1946. And then subsequently, the ones who they're fighting for to get some benefits. So it's all—I keep trying to tell people there are many divisions.

Li: Well, I think there's a real complexity. What I wonder about—if the complexity of being patriotic, given the colonial relationship between the US and the Philippines—

2-00:17:12

Cordova: You want to know something funny? Before the Philippines—I'll never forget this discussion because I was in high school. The Philippines was going to become independent July 4, 1946. So one of my girlfriends in school came and said to me, "My father thinks that the Philippines should become the forty-ninth state of the United States." And others were saying, "No, we fought for independence against the Spaniards, and we didn't get it. The US bought us." So there was this mix. Some people thought we should stay with the US, others didn't.

But the country was destroyed, and the US didn't build it up. They built up Japan. I had pictures that Fred's uncle, who was a newspaper man—he was in the First and Second Filipino Infantry, and after the war—because he had received a degree in journalism from U-Dub. So after the war, he marries his wife, they come here for a bit, then he goes back to the Philippines, becomes an editor in one of the Manila newspapers. And when he returns to the United States, he brings back all these pictures. So for years I have these pictures, and it was of the Philippines—1948-49 with Magsaysay when he was President. This is many years later, and the Philippines was [lip sound], parts of Manila. Nobody had built it up. MacArthur went into Japan, and they built Japan up, and left the Philippines on its own. When they gave it—you know they had the Jeepneys [popular form of public transportation in the Philippines originally made with US Jeeps left over from World War II]? Like one guy said after the war, "Well, they gave you Jeepneys." Here I'm an American. They said, "Yeah, it was left over from World War II, they weren't going to bring the Jeeps back." So they gave that as part of what they were paying the Filipinos. They gave them old used stuff. What the Filipinos did then is they rebuilt it and used it as transportation. Then they used the same design to build new Jeeps. What do you want? It was really crazy.

Li: So would you remember there being sort of discussion about resenting the American occupation of Japan in terms of all the money that flowed into Japan?

2-00:19:26

Cordova: That never came up until much later with younger people. Then also more recent immigrants at that time back in the eighties who were more politically savvy. Like my mom and my dad: anything the US does is okay with them. They never would have questioned the US. Like my dad said, "What do you expect?" I don't know. I expected a lot more. So my father thought I was too radical or too—it was like—because as I grew older I was questioning the United States.

Li: Both of your parents must have attended American schools then in the Philippines, is that right? So were your parents educated by Americans?

2-00:20:10

Cordova: Yeah, my mom told me stories about that. Their family gave land for the school built in their town. So my mother thought she had a sense of ownership. But she'd go to school, and she thought she could still speak her dialect. As soon as they crossed the door, English only. If you spoke the dialect, you were punished. You were punished either physically or embarrassed. You were humiliated by being put in the corner, and everybody knew. Once you left you could speak your—but it was all English. So when I was a child my mother—the nursery rhymes I learned were all American. “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” and all these, my mother knew them all. She was a schoolteacher. So she just passed on to her kids what she was teaching her students, all the American things. I mean, the nursery rhymes, the fairy tale stories and things like that.

Li: So in terms of identity of your parents—

2-00:21:05

Cordova: They were Filipino.

Li: Right, but they were fluent in American culture prior to coming to—

2-00:21:15

Cordova: No. They were fluent in Filipino culture but they could speak English, and read English and write English.

Li: But they were familiar with American customs, American—

2-00:21:22

Cordova: They learned it in the movies. When they came here they had to learn, because they were in the Philippines. So the thing that was American for them was their educational system. My mother became Americanized here. I just looked up one of—my mom's been dead for around seventeen years now. See, we archive things, and so Fred archives a lot of this stuff, and he pulled out my folder when I was fifty, and there was a card in there from my mom. It's funny because she called me “Kiddo.” Now that's not Filipino, but she was twenty-four when she came here, and she died when she was ninety-one. So she became Americanized here. But still she was strongly Filipino.

Li: Right, so the American education system in the Philippines—

2-00:22:12

Cordova: Was English.

Li: So that was the language skills they got.

2-00:22:16

Cordova:

That was the language skills because they were really good in grammar and spelling, things like that. But knowing things—my mother-in-law would say that the father of her country was George Washington. [laughs] Fred would say, “No Mom. The father of your country was Bobby Aguinaldo or Bonifacio [Andres Bonifacio].” “No, no, no, it’s George Washington.” That’s what she learned in school. They were being taught out of American textbooks. But they were really Filipino.

So, I would say in many ways that Filipinos were schizophrenic, more so than any other Asian. Because they thought they were American coming here, the early immigrants, because they weren’t aliens. If you look at the ships’ landings, I mean the passenger list, they’re not listed under the alien. They’re listed under US. But they’re not US. They weren’t citizens. They were nationals. But they couldn’t put them there, so they put them here. But they really weren’t. So for many of them they were kind of confused I think.

When I was in college I remember my sociology professor saying the Asian immigrant group that assimilated the quickest were Filipinos, and they did in many ways. Much of it was because they could speak English. There was American things there. They learned how to—American foods that were brought in, and American movies were being shown. But yeah, so our young Filipino men who came here they really—the way they dressed, I mean they looked like a train of forties, they looked like gangsters. They were really sharp dressers.

And it was no problem for them to date women of other races. Well, we’re a mixed race people anyway. We look like everybody. We are everybody. [laughs] So for them to come here, the women were here, the ratio was what—when you look at the demographics back in the early days, it was 6 percent female and 94 percent male. And many of them coming were young, and we’re a family oriented society. So who are you going to marry? So they consorted with women and married women of other races. Whether they were Native American, from all over, and we’re finding out that it wasn’t just the Northwest. I just thought it was the Northwest that was Native, but it was a lot of people; they were just everywhere.

Li:

Do you remember zoot-suiters? Were there any like young men in zoot suits?

2-00:25:09

Cordova:

Oh, yeah.

Li:

Do you remember that?

2-00:25:11

Cordova:

Oh, my God, my uncles. I remember my uncles would have—because they were little. See in the old days when we do the oral histories a lot of them bought clothes from tailors. So there was a big business with tailors. They

would measure the guys, and if they would go—a lot of them worked on the railroads, this is the other thing, too, they worked on; they fixed the railroad ties. They didn't build the railroads like the Chinese did, but they were the maintenance crew. So in Montana—this one Montana oral history—he would measure the men and then when they come back into town the suits would be ready for them. So even the shirts and everything. But then the tailors—so money was more apparent during the twenties. But during the thirties, that's Depression time, so people—but they always liked to dress. So they're buying suits off the rack. Well, there weren't stores that called, "Little Guys," and—

Li: Right, or Big and Tall. There wasn't—yeah.

2-00:26:12

Cordova: Yeah! So we're maintaining—and in fact a lot of the Filipinos talking with zoot suits had to start with Filipinos because they always in the twenties, and the thirties, they were always dressing up. Okay, now, check this out: if they no longer are getting tailor made clothes, and they're buying off the rack, well—you're small—when I buy clothes I have to go to the petite shop. But if I like something then I have to alter something because the waist line is up.

So here would be my uncles, and they would have the waist band up under their armpits. And their pockets would be like this. And my mom—and then their shoes, but they always wore Florsheim shoes, Stetson hats, and MacIntosh Suits. And if the bottom was there, they'd drape the bottoms. So they were zooty.

Li: This was in the thirties, right?

2-00:27:15

Cordova: The thirties and the forties.

Li: And the forties.

2-00:27:18

Cordova: And the forties. The late thirties, the forties. My mom would always make comments like, "Look at those men, jiggling their money in their pocket and they're all pennies." That's what they had, but she said, "They look like a million dollars—they had nothing." [laughs] I'm thinking, "Well, I didn't understand what she was talking about." But—

Li: Because in a way the zoot suits were—it was also sort of a political identity and there were altercations between American white military men and zoot suitors. Filipino—

2-00:27:43

Cordova: And the Mexicans.

Li: And the Mexicans. Did that happen in Seattle?

2-00:27:47

Cordova:

No. No, that didn't. But the men wearing—they were “zooted” up. But after a while, then, they found out that they could get things altered so the zoots—it tapered down. But I think as the men went into the military probably the tension stopped. Now they were wearing military clothes. No, the zoot suitors were—but the younger people, my husband—well, his older brother—they picked it up.

Li:

I wanted to go back and ask you about Hiroshima, and about the bombings.

2-00:28:35

Cordova:

Oh, yeah.

Li:

And where were you when you heard about it, and—?

2-00:28:43

Cordova:

It was '45. There was—I heard about it. Well, we always got the papers, and there was a picture.

Li:

Of the mushroom cloud?

2-00:28:58

Cordova:

Uh huh. I didn't really understand what it was. Then going to the movies, of course, the newsreels which were more explicit. All I knew is a lot of people were dying, and it was different. But by then war had dragged on so long. I'll tell you the other thing; maybe I should say this, that during the wartime, by this time, I would read the papers every day. This is really unusual I think for a young girl.

Li:

You were thirteen in 1945.

2-00:29:33

Cordova:

No, I was eleven, twelve, and then thirteen. But I was really tuned in what was happening. So I would read—I read the newspapers from the time I was six. I don't know why, but I remember every day I would read the front pages. And I don't think I was the only one; I think everybody did because that's where our news was, or the radio, or the newsreels. What was happening on Iwo Jima and all these different places, the people dying. We would get letters every once in a while from our uncles, and there would be great big things. They can't tell you where they are. You know those little V-mail things. So there'd be—I guess they would have people go through the mails to make sure that they weren't giving away information. We didn't know—we knew that by '44 that they had landed in the Philippines. But still there was still a lot of writing going on.

But when that happened it was—to me it was destructive. So there's more than one bomb that was dropped. But I remember very distinctly realizing that that would have been one of the only ways to stop the war, maybe? But then by this time they're focusing not on the soldiers, but on the civilians.

I recall the day when the war ended in August, and I remember—because we lived in a valley, and all of a sudden I started hearing a boy—because they used to have newsboys—“The war is ended. The war is ended.” You know, it was reverberating. He was walking up and down. People were rushing to get the newspapers. That day two of my brothers—I was thirteen then, and I had just graduated from grade school in June—my two younger brothers below me had gone camping by Issaquah, I guess North Bend, and they had to come home because they heard. They came back. But I remember the sense of jubilation with people that the damn thing was over.

But there was a lot left over from it. The feelings, the rebuilding, and what’s going to happen. I knew then by the time I was a freshman—because I was going into my freshman year—later that year my friend Bernadette comes back to school from the camps. The good thing is none of the girls in school said anything to her as far as I knew. She was accepted.

But there was one I remember, and I wondered about it, and it turned out that her brother had been killed by Japanese, a young nun, and she’s the only one who had some kind of animosity. But the rest of the nuns were really very kind to the Japanese kids who came back. So in many ways the war ended, but feelings didn’t end, and for many of them then it was—. So we are now at the stage as teenagers where a critical mass of Japanese are coming back, little by little. Buddhist Temple was turned back to the Japanese. We had a Filipino Catholic Youth Club, it was called the FCY, and we would play basketball games at the Buddhist Temple during the—I think from ’47, ’48, ’49. So they had a lively—the thing was, not everybody returned home, returned back here. I think two of Bernadette’s sisters—one went to New York, got married there. Another one stayed with her, and then they eventually—they’re back here now. But a number of others stayed in the Midwest. Because it was probably hard for them to come back.

Li: What did the end of the war mean for you, your friends returning, your uncles coming home?

2-00:34:42

Cordova:

It meant the end of the war. You figure—I mean there were a lot of movies that weren’t about war, but there were enough movies about war. They were pretty explicit. Not only that, the newsreels were very explicit. Because we followed the war from ’41 to ’45. That’s four—what—’42, ’43, ’44—four years, watching the war unfold on the newsreels and in the newspapers.

Li: So thinking about it every day—

2-00:35:18

Cordova:

Every day, yeah. I mean it touched your life. It isn’t something that you could put aside—the fact that you couldn’t get gas, and towards the end of the war what we were wearing were huaraches from Mexico because there weren’t

shoes. We always knew, we'd kid around, "Oh, someone's got a new pair of shoes," because you could smell it. The leather wasn't fully tanned or whatever it was. There was still that smell about it. So we all wore huaraches—saving up for a good pair of shoes because you could get one pair of shoes a year. So the rest of the time we had to wear other than, or maybe start wearing sneakers which were canvas. But rubber was also—So the whole war we were always working for the war effort, saving. We would have—I don't know if Angie told you about these little books we had? You would buy ten cents and you put it in there, and when you saved up enough you turned it in for a war bond. Seventeen eighty-five or something like that. So everybody did their bit. Kids could just give up their candy or whatever it is, or a movie, and fill up their books. I mean for us the war was there.

The kids would play war. You be the enemy. Every once in a while they'd play cowboys and Indians, but a lot of time they would play—and in our neighborhood with a lot of woods, for the boys in the neighborhood, it was a lot of that going on.

Li: I know you've talked to a lot of people from this generation who served in the war and lived in that time. From your point of view, what do you think is the significance of the World War II period for Filipino Americans?

2-00:37:21
Cordova:

Well, for many of them, like I say, it was sort of like a defining point of, I don't know, coming together for a common cause. A lot of our men were leaving. Our communities were—everybody was doing a war effort. In fact, Fred was telling me that some of the lodges, the big fraternal lodges would actually—there was one that raised enough money to buy a Boeing plane. I thought, "My God, that's extraordinary." This is in California. So that must have been a lot of money that they had to—I don't know, maybe they didn't buy a whole plane, but they bought enough of it.

But for us as children going to pick beans we knew that we were doing something. And we were doing it because there weren't men to do these things. Women were doing men's work, and children were doing other people's work. We were earning money, and some of the people left behind were earning money. When the war ended, by that time, '45, by the time I went to SU in '49, around one third of the students that I went to school with, the men, were GIs. They were getting their college degrees. And so different from us. We were into good times, and they were serious. They were the serious students. A little more somber than we were.

So for us during the war—I told you my mother was a very skilled seamstress. Eddie Bauer used to do sleeping bags, and my mother went to work for Eddie Bauer sewing sleeping bags. By that time my little sisters were born. So Eddie Bauer gave her a—I had her get a power sewing machine, so my mother continued working for Eddie Bauer at home to turn out these things.

Li: During the war?

2-00:39:44

Cordova: During the war. Now people work at home, right? Well, here is my mother during the wartime working at home because they needed her to do what she was doing.

Li: So it was a time of economic opportunity for—

2-00:39:59

Cordova: Yeah, it was. All of a sudden my mother was able to earn money. Before that my mom was—I told you my mother was an artist, and before the war I remember her—right before the war she used to draw flowers, and she actually worked for a company called Barlin and Silver, and she used to do the designs that women would embroider. Then she was sewing costumes for this company. I guess the people would wear uniforms in the theaters? But during the war she started work for Eddie Bauer.

Li: Was Eddie Bauer making sleeping bags for the military?

2-00:40:44

Cordova: Yeah. Well, I think before that they were making bags for whoever was camping, but then it basically went into the military. So that's what Mom did during the war.

Li: So she was a Rosie, a work-at-home Rosie.

2-00:40:59

Cordova: Yeah, I never thought of my mom doing that, but then when you think about it—because I thought, “Okay, that's Eddie Bauer,” but—

Li: It was a war effort.

2-00:41:07

Cordova: Yeah, so a lot of what people were doing, we were working to win the war.

Li: So when the war ended, were there lingering effects of these economic opportunities that you saw? Did women who used to only work at home continue to pursue jobs outside their home, or did men who used to only work agriculture could pursue work with Boeing or with the shipyards?

2-00:41:37

Cordova: Well, it's interesting because a lot of men then, especially here in the Northwest, if they were in the service they had become—see, they had become American citizens. So there were opportunities now, as an American citizen now. They could work for the Post Office.

Li: Oh, because by serving in the military they became eligible for—

2-00:41:53

Cordova:

That's right. It opened up doors. I guess the same thing with Chinese.

Li:

So it was both an economic and a political opportunity.

2-00:42:01

Cordova:

That's right. So a number of the men who were in the military—I noticed there was quite a bit of them who went to work for the Post Office. A lot went to work for Boeing. Some of them went back to the farms because they felt comfortable there, and some of them did the farms and Alaska. That was part of their routine. Many of them brought back war brides, and it changed our communities all over the country because all of a sudden now you had these young women coming in. Now, they weren't only just married to Filipinos, but most of them were. But I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, maybe a lot of them weren't just married to Filipinos. But the ones I knew—because then our Filipino community grew.

Li:

Were they Filipino war brides, Japanese war brides?

2-00:42:56

Cordova:

They were Filipino war brides. Because when they landed, they landed in the Philippines. Now here were relatively young men who came out of the society here in the United States where there were only very few Filipino women, and they land in the Philippines. They see all these—okay, now here is the other thing, too: if all these men were coming from the Philippines to the United States, like I tell everybody there's a double edged sword here. You have a disparity of men, there, because a lot of them then ended up fighting; they're getting killed. You have men who came where there were very few women. Boom. They met each other. Lots of war brides. So the community started to grow. So the men were out of the service by around '45, '46. Some of them stayed in the service, but maybe they stayed on a little longer. But then, those who had war brides, started to process their coming over here. So gradually—and the good thing was the older women here received them. They embraced them. We were just happy to see another Filipino, especially Filipino women seeing another Filipino female, my God. "This is my little sister now. I'm going to take care of her."

I remember one women now who's around eighty-five, she likes to tell the story that I was the first one to meet her because she was supposed to meet her husband at our house, and he was at work. I knew she was coming, and I saw her, and she was so young. She was around eighteen. I think it was fourteen. But she looked like she as thirteen. She was so little, and she was so scared. She was really frightened. But she likes to tell the story about the first Filipino she met in the United States was me. And for me, that was the first war bride I ever met, and we've been friends all these years.

But, yeah, it changed communities all over the world because what happened then was now we have more Filipino women. It was a different group because

this was now women in their—many of them were teenagers, or early twenties, and the women who were here had come in the twenties. So they were as old as their mothers. So it was like a rejuvenation of, an infusion of—it was a changing of our community.

Li: Well, and you mentioned that before the war the Japanese Americans were the largest Asian population in Seattle.

2-00:45:41

Cordova: And it continued until around 1970.

Li: And then?

2-00:45:45

Cordova: And then the immigration laws changed in '65. That's when all of a sudden the Filipinos became second only to Mexico in total immigration every year, and the Koreans were second.

Li: So now in Seattle, the largest Asian minority—?

2-00:46:00

Cordova: In Seattle, I think the largest minority are Chinese. But in the state of Washington the largest are Filipino. But the East Indians are coming up pretty quick. But like I say, I think the last census someone was telling me there were 80,000 who said they were Filipino-Filipino. But another 30,000 plus, who said they're *Filipino-and*. So that's 110,000. Plus those who probably just went over their head, decided that they'll just declare their—like a lot of Native Americans, after a while they just declared their Indian blood because they needed the count to get money from the government.

Li: I wanted to ask you too about international district. That area with Chinatown—I guess it was Chinatown before the war—

2-00:46:58

Cordova: I still call it Chinatown.

Li: Did that change much during the war years, that area?

2-00:47:06

Cordova: As a kid I really wasn't aware. One thing that I did know is that we would go there to eat and to get certain foods. There were a few Filipino businesses there, so my dad would go there to get his hair cut. There was a Filipino grocery, and there was some Filipino restaurant there. But usually, if we would have a party it'd be at the Chop Suey House. That's what we called it. We didn't call it a Chinese restaurant. We called it the Chop Suey House, and that's were all the—

Li: All events and celebrations—

2-00:47:33

Cordova: Right, but there were some night clubs there, and the musicians were all Filipinos.

Li: Is there anything else about this period that I haven't asked about that—?

2-00:47:51

Cordova: I don't know—aside from—I'm not sure.

Li: It's been really wonderful talking with you. Thank you so much.

2-00:48:02

Cordova: No, during the war there was just a lot—working. I never even thought of picking beans as part of the war effort, but I guess it was. No, not really. I'm sure after this I'll think of a million things I probably could have said.

Li: Well, thank you so much for talking with me today.

2-00:48:22

Cordova: Oh, you're welcome.

[End of Interview]