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Edythe Esser

Rosie the Riveter
World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2011

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Edythe Esser

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[Thomas refers to television journalist Eric Thomas.]

Interview 1: January 24, 2011

Begin Audiofile 1

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and I'm here today with Edythe Esser. We're at her home in Concord, California, and today is Monday, January 24. Edie, would you be willing to tell me your full name and spell that name for me?

1-00:00:22

Esser: Well, my name is Edythe June {Cervanca?} Esser. I spell my name Edythe with a "y." E D Y T H E.

Redman: But you go by Edie.

1-00:00:38

Esser: I go by Edie.

Redman: When did you get that nickname?

1-00:00:42

Esser: My nephew started that, oh, maybe, what—I'm eighty-eight. Probably seventy-five years ago.

Redman: So quite some time ago you picked up that nickname.

1-00:00:51

Esser: I drove a school bus for twenty-seven years. And Edythe was kind of hard for the kids to say, so Edie was easy.

Redman: So that became your nickname.

1-00:01:05

Esser: That became Edie.

Redman: You said you're eighty-eight years old. Is that right?

1-00:01:07

Esser: Eighty-eight.

Redman: When were you born?

1-00:01:12

Esser: I was born in San Pablo, California. In 1922, November 29.

Thomas: That's when I was born.

1-00:01:22

Esser: That's a long time ago.

Redman: So then you were raised in San Pablo, too, is that right?

1-00:01:30

Esser: Yes.

Redman: What was San Pablo like when you were growing up as a child?

1-00:01:35

Esser: Oh, everybody knew everybody. That was before the war, and the house is still there where I was born. Everybody just knew everybody. Now no one knows anybody.

Redman: It felt like a small town.

1-00:01:55

Esser: A small town, very small.

Redman: Did your family experience the Great Depression in any particular way? Do you recall what economic times were like, what your family life was like?

1-00:02:10

Esser: Well, I had two brothers and a sister, and a mom and a dad, of course. When I was three my dad was hurt on Tank Farm Hill, which is in San Pablo, San Pablo and Pinole on the Tank Farm Hill. He was hurt; he was killed. That left Ma, my mom, with three kids, and me, and I'm fifteen years younger than my brother Clem.

Redman: So this was a work-related accident that your father—

1-00:02:51

Esser: Yes. He was working for the Standard Oil. Just Ma raised those kids all by herself with no help from Standard Oil. Of course, this was what eighty years ago.

Redman: So there wasn't any form of workmen's comp or anything like that from Standard Oil at that time.

1-00:03:11

Esser: No, nothing like that. Standard Oil made a few promises, but they never panned out. But that's okay.

Redman: So your mom then had a bit of a challenge in raising a whole family and a whole set of new responsibilities.

1-00:03:33

Esser: For her, she made it really easy. She came from Czechoslovakia. My dad went over to—this is long before my time, of course—he went over there, supposedly to marry her sister, but her sister decided she didn't want to go to the United States of America. So I guess my dad kind of stayed around there or something. But anyway, he got to know my mom, which my mom and her

sister, there wasn't that too many years between them. So my mom said, "Okay, I'll go."

Redman: So what was it—?

1-00:04:13

Esser: So she came. She didn't know any word of English. She didn't know anything about the United—

Redman: She spoke with an accent, a pretty heavy accent throughout your whole life.

1-00:04:22

Esser: Yeah, and she still had it until the day she died. But there isn't another mother in this world like her.

Redman: Tell me about what a typical day was like for her when you were a small child.

1-00:04:40

Esser: Oh, her and I were really, really close. I mean fifteen years is a lot, but my brothers and my sister, they were—they started to work. They worked at the CCC camps; that was digging ditches.

Redman: Yeah, so that's Civilian Conservation Corps.

1-00:04:59

Esser: Yes.

Redman: What did they do for them?

1-00:05:03

Esser: Well, Standard Oil didn't do anything.

Redman: So they needed to find work.

1-00:05:06

Esser: Yes.

Redman: And they found it through the CCC.

1-00:05:11

Esser: And they found it through there.

Redman: Do you recall any of the projects that they worked on, or—?

1-00:05:15

Esser: Digging ditches, that's all I remember.

Redman: So quite literally they were digging ditches. I know that was kind of the criticism of the CCC at the time, that they would have people dig one area and fill in another area, but—

1-00:05:30

Esser: Right.

Redman: But they needed work.

1-00:05:32

Esser: Yes, they needed work, and I don't think they paid probably, what? Five dollars a day or something like that. Money, of course, money is nothing then like it is now.

Redman: Right. But was it a close family then prior to the war?

1-00:05:46

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: So your brothers were at home much of the time, and—?

1-00:05:50

Esser: Oh, yes. The women didn't work. Women didn't drive trucks and dig ditches and work for the PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] like they do now. A place for the woman was at home raising her kids, and that's what Ma did. Ma never worked a day in her life.

Redman: But spent a lot of time preparing food and doing laundry and—

1-00:06:15

Esser: Yes, she did; we had a happy house. We didn't wash clothes on Monday and iron on Tuesday and mop and wax on Wednesday. We had a very comfortable living.

Other Woman: You had a cow.

1-00:06:34

Esser: Oh, yes, we had a cow. Oh, yes, and chickens. [tape stops]

Redman: When we took a break there we were talking about what Richmond and San Pablo actually felt like prior to the shipyards coming in. You said it was more like there was—

1-00:06:53

Esser: Oh, gosh, when I went through grammar school, San Pablo Grammar School, that was to the eighth grade. I graduated from there, and then I went over to Roosevelt Junior High, which was in Richmond. I had to take a bus there because I lived in San Pablo, and the Roosevelt Junior High was in Richmond. Then I went into Richmond High, and then I went to school. I couldn't work, but then when I graduated, during that time I met the kids' father, and we got

married. Then I graduated from high school and the next year there was the shipyards.

Redman: Tell me about back at about elementary school age. You said Richmond had cows and chickens that were just kind of walking around San Pablo?

1-00:07:56

Esser: No, that was when I was born and raised in San Pablo. I wasn't in Richmond at all. But Richmond and San Pablo was just really next door to each other.

Redman: Right, but there were cows and chickens, and your mother had some, and—

1-00:08:10

Esser: Oh, yeah, but she had a fenced-in yard. We had chickens and eggs, and then—of course, now you have chicken every day, but *then* chicken was a big deal, like Sunday dinner was for chicken. We had a cow; I learned how to milk a cow. My brother Clem would give me fifty cents if I went and got Nellie, brought her home, tied her to the fig tree and milked her, and then staked her out again when he got the milk.

Redman: So this is one of your chores.

1-00:08:56

Esser: Not a chore. It was just a—and my brother Clem would give me fifty cents every time I did that. And that was a lot of money then.

Redman: Yeah, that's a good amount of money for someone that age, that's—

1-00:09:13

Esser: My youth was very, very happy. And my mom, like I say, she's just one in a million.

Redman: What would you say made it so happy? Do you think it was your family?

1-00:09:25

Esser: Just Ma. She was just—oh, when I was growing up in high school I had a girlfriend across the street, Helen Costa. Ma would take us to dances, to roller skating in El Cerrito and Oakland. She made me little flare skirts for skating, and, I don't know, Ma and I were really, really close, very, very tight. She lived to be eighty-something, eighty-six.

Redman: Let's talk about high school. Do you remember any particularly favorite subjects from high school?

1-00:10:06

Esser: No.

Redman: Did you like going to school, or did you—?

1-00:10:10

Esser: I went to school because I had to.

Redman: It wasn't your favorite thing?

1-00:10:15

Esser: No. It wasn't my favorite, and I graduated.

Redman: You graduated from high school.

1-00:10:19

Esser: From Richmond High School. It's still there.

Redman: How did you then decide that you wanted to get work at the shipyards?

1-00:10:32

Esser: Oh, I wanted to work. I wanted to make money. When I was in high school I worked weekends for a justice of the peace, Judge Christianson. He was a San Pablo judge, and I don't know what I got. Twenty-five cents an hour or something like that, not very much. But that started me. Then I'd get a check, I guess once a week, I've forgotten that. Then I went to work at the Fifteen Cents Store. All this time I guess the shipyards was being built.

Redman: Let's talk about Pearl Harbor. Do you remember—?

1-00:11:16

Esser: Pearl Harbor?

Redman: The day Pearl Harbor was bombed?

1-00:11:18

Esser: Yes, I remember. I remember, but I just remember that it was a horrible thing. That was, I don't even remember the year.

Redman: December 7, 1941. So do you remember any emotions in particular that you felt associated with that time?

1-00:11:38

Esser: Oh, it was just everybody thought it was awful, just terrible. But I think I remember more the Port Chicago explosion.

Redman: Right.

1-00:11:50

Esser: I can remember that more than Pearl Harbor.

Redman: Great. We'll talk about that in a little bit. I absolutely want to get back to Port Chicago. You said you remember the shipyards being built?

1-00:12:03

Esser: No, I don't remember that.

Redman: So you'd maybe vaguely heard that there were shipyards there, or that people were finding work there. How did you first hear about them?

1-00:12:12

Esser: I graduated from high school in 1940, and then in 1941 they were hiring in the shipyards. So anyway, I was married, but I wanted to work. I love work; I worked until a couple of years ago. I don't remember the yards being built, but they were there because I went to apply for a job.

Redman: How did your husband feel about you working prior to the war, and then did his attitude change at all when you got a job at the shipyard? Was he indifferent, or—?

1-00:12:52

Esser: No, he worked at one yard, and I—I didn't work at a yard; I worked at a prefabrication plant.

Redman: Okay, near by the yards.

1-00:13:02

Esser: Yes.

Redman: Do you remember the process of actually—the day you signed up, and you get an identification badge, you could register for health care, you could buy war bonds, they took your name down, do you remember any of that?

1-00:13:21

Esser: Oh, I remember all of that. Oh, yeah. We had war bond drives. We had contests, whoever could sell the most bonds would—I don't know what we got, maybe, I don't know. I don't remember that. But when I went to apply for a job, I was only nineteen, and so I went and applied for a job. They said okay, so I went to work. I don't know if it was the next day, or the next month, or next week; I don't know that, but it was to working in an office. Well, I'm not an office girl. I want to be outside, get my hands dirty.

So anyway, I did go to work in the man-hours department, which was all on typing with all numbers. Well, I was never good in arithmetic or typing numbers. So, anyway, I worked there for two days, and they put me, of course, put me in the man hours, which is all numbers. Well, after two days he came and he says, "You know Edie," he said, "I don't think you're going to make it." I said, "No, I'm not." So, anyway, he said, "But they're beginning to hire women out in the yards." "Out in the fields," I guess he called it. He said, "Swing shift." He said, "How does that sound?" Well, he knew I wanted to work, and I guess he knew by how I acted or talked or whatever. I wanted to work. So anyway, I got the job out as an expediter.

Redman: I know it was maybe only for two days, but the man-hours department, was that mainly women that were working there at the time?

1-00:15:10

Esser: Yeah, in the office, there were women.

Redman: Was it almost exclusively women doing that job at that time?

1-00:15:14

Esser: Well, yeah. I just remember—well, I was only there a couple of days, so I don't remember too much. But I know that there was women because the shipyard was mostly women anyway. All the men were off to war.

Redman: So pretty quickly you realized, "This isn't exactly what I was hoping for."

1-00:15:34

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: It was mainly some pushing away from not wanting to be with the numbers, but then also you wanted to be outside a little more?

1-00:15:45

Esser: Yeah, it sounded good. Of course, he must have told me what I would do. It was small parts. That department was an expediter in the small parts department, and that was for the water-tight doors and the rungs like the ladders, and oh, going to get steel, quarter-inch steel and stuff, expedite. I'd just go to Yard 1 or Yard 2 and get this stuff.

Redman: Did you join a union right away and stay in that same union?

1-00:16:20

Esser: Oh, yeah. I think I had—I don't remember that, but I think I had to. In the Ship Fitters Union.

Redman: So then tell me a little bit more about the actual learning on the job.

1-00:16:37

Esser: Oh, I was everything. Like they said they were going to send me to the—we had a tool department. It was nothing like it is now. They just had little places sectioned off for the shipwrights, for the riggers, for the ship fitters for all of that. And that when they said they were going to send me for a—it's a joke now—for a left handed monkey wrench, something like that. I went through all of that.

Redman: So you then had to go wherever they told you to go to get whatever piece of equipment they needed.

1-00:17:16

Esser: I had a requisition, and then I'd go and give it to the guy in the parts department and tools, or whatever, and I think he'd give it to me.

Redman: Now, you arrived at the shipyard pretty early on.

1-00:17:27

Esser: Oh, yeah. Right, oh, I was the first one there.

Redman: Really?

1-00:17:31

Esser: First woman.

Redman: So tell me about how that must have been. You were working in this department, initially, right away, that had a lot of women, but then you were offered this job where there were virtually no women.

1-00:17:43

Esser: No women.

Redman: No women at all.

1-00:17:47

Esser: See Yard 1 and Yard 2, there was women. Yard 3 later on, but Yard 1 and 2 was there from the beginning. At the prefab we made the deck houses, and they made them upside down.

Redman: That's right, I've heard of that. Then they would flip them over when they put them at the ship.

1-00:18:08

Esser: We'd put in sections. They'd put them on this big flatbed truck and because they had a lot of room, and they would take the pieces of these deckhouses to this Yard 1, or Yard 2, wherever. I never did go to see where these bulkheads went; I just got the parts and the steel, quarter inch steel—. I'm getting ahead of myself—that was something that they could never have enough of.

Redman: So one thing that I've found when talking to other shipyard workers is that some people didn't really get a feel for the entire project of building a ship until they were ready to actually launch a ship. They would work on one small component of the larger process. But it sounds like you moved around enough to sort of see what different jobs were going on at the shipyard, is that the case? Did you sort of get to know other jobs, and—?

1-00:19:06

Esser: Well, where I worked was mostly for Yard 2, and we had a makeshift desk and we had requisitions, and I worked swing shift. So if day shift couldn't get the part, or get the steel, whatever, they'd say, "Edie, we need this." So when I would go to work at 4:00 o'clock I would look to see what they needed, and sometimes I could get it, and sometimes I couldn't.

Redman: So sometimes they were just out of the part, and you'd have to wait.

1-00:19:37

Esser:

Yeah, they had it. But see, all the parts that I could have was parts that—the steel they had, I guess laminated is what you call it, had bubbles in the quarter inch; it was no good. But there was a can of paint there with a brush, and now the head expediter at Yard 2 was named Buck Hurley. He went on to be a radio weatherman on one of the channels, Lou Hurley. But at the shipyards he was Buck Hurley. A young guy, like you. I would take—I had me a guy, a man, that had a winch, a truck, and it's nothing like what it is now, but it was what they called an A frame, and it had cable. I would get this can of paint and I would write—they had a stack of quarter-inch steel; it was good. But they wouldn't give it to me because all that we could use was scrap, and we couldn't have this good stuff. Which good stuff was good, and I couldn't have that. But I would write "LAM," laminated with, well, when anybody would say, "Hey, where are you going with that?" "It's laminated." "Oh, okay."

Redman:

One of the things that I've seen is that as all of these different parts are coming together into this really complicated ship; they were all labeled, sort of like puzzle pieces, and they might have different labels to go into different areas and then to be welded or riveted together or whatever else. So you would add some of these labels to the laminated sheets indicating that they were laminated.

1-00:21:39

Esser:

See, all I could write laminated, see the water-tight doors; they were already made and checked. I'm just trying to think; I had more than water-tight doors that I would get, but I can't think of too many now. But with the laminated it was just plate, sheets of it or whatever. Because the doors and the, I guess the portholes? I don't know if I remember. I might have gotten portholes, windows? I might have gotten that. And they had—I don't think they're like that now, but things that you had to screw the windows tight.

Redman:

So there were a lot of different parts of your job.

1-00:22:32

Esser:

Oh, a lot of parts, yes, mine that was small parts.

Redman:

So you would work with a lot of different components of the ship, and they all kind of had to be handled differently.

1-00:22:42

Esser:

Right.

Redman:

Did you get used to the different jobs, or would sometimes people bring different—?

1-00:22:45

Esser:

Oh, it's the same. Every ship had the same; they put them together the same.

Redman:

So eventually you'd sort of master each task and then get pretty good at it.

1-00:22:55

Esser: Yes.

Redman: Tell me about when you first arrived. You're one of the first women, or the first woman working at a particular yard. How did the men treat you?

1-00:23:05

Esser: Oh, they were—I was nineteen. I love people, and I love working. Yeah, I worked there forty-two—I was the first one hired and the last one fired. I wasn't fired; I was laid off because of the end of the war. I know that I cried when—I was there forty-two months, and when they brought me my pink slip to, that's it, I cried. I cried.

Redman: That was a sad, sad day. So what did you enjoy so much, when you get to this new environment?

1-00:23:37

Esser: Just busy, just working, and I was outside, and I was accomplishing something. I was like day shift couldn't get it, but the lady she'll get it. So then Edie would go and, I just got along with everybody, and—

Redman: So you'd meet the different—now that's another question I've had and in particular, I'm happy to talk to someone in the swing shift about this. I'm curious. For a lot of these jobs you needed someone in the morning shift, and then you had someone at the night shift, and then in the swing shift. I'm curious if you knew any of the people in the morning shift or knew any of the people in the night shift, because you kind of are relying on each other. What that person does in the morning may change your job in the swing shift. So did you get to know any of the people on the other shifts?

1-00:24:28

Esser: I knew them all. My bosses, I know every one of my bosses' names, but as far as the people that I worked with, like the burners and the welders, the girls, oh, we had a ball; we had a good time.

Redman: So, it was just fun being around other people.

1-00:24:43

Esser: It was fun being around, we'd eat lunch together. We had a ten-minute break. We'd sit and have a Coke together, just being friends. We didn't go to each other's house or anything like that.

Redman: So most of your friendship was at the shipyard and lunch and breaks and what not.

1-00:25:07

Esser: Right. I didn't have that many friends, but I knew one girl that she was a welder, Frances {Figgly?}. I stayed with her for a few days one time, and we had a good time.

Redman: Tell me about eating lunch. Then let's talk about lunch breaks. What would you normally bring with you for lunch?

1-00:25:31

Esser: Oh, well, whatever. A sandwich, or half an avocado, a tomato, hard-boiled egg, whatever you could put together.

Redman: I know during that time there was pretty strict rationing, and there were certain things that people couldn't get their hands on. You had enough rations to make your lunch.

1-00:25:55

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: Were you still living at home at this time?

1-00:25:54

Esser: Well, we lived with my mother for a while. Then got our own place. She gave us a house. She didn't give it to us. We paid her a bond a month, a \$1,875 bond. Then, speaking of bonds, we would have bond drives.

Redman: We'll get back to that in a second. I'm curious about finding a house because housing at that time was a pretty challenging commodity to get a hold of.

1-00:26:32

Esser: Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure, no.

Redman: So you were able to find a house pretty easily.

1-00:26:37

Esser: Oh, yes. My mom—now this, you're going back a long time. At that time freeways were being built and all of that. Then they would have to move these houses to build the freeway. Now I could just barely remember this. I must have been what, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, something like that. That's before shipyards. But anyway, Ma would go to these—my dad was gone; he got hurt when I was three; I'm up there a few years—and you would bid on these houses. Now Ma never even dreamed that she would get the house, but her and my dad's dad, grandpa, they went to these auctions and bid on a house, and she'd get it. She wouldn't know what to do.

Redman: She finally got the house.

1-00:27:39

Esser: For an unbelievable, I guess, low price. But anyway, but that is why she wound up with, I don't know, maybe five, six houses.

Redman: My goodness. So they were moving these houses.

1-00:27:51

Esser: Now they're what, \$300,000 minimum. They were, what, maybe \$5,000 a house or something.

Redman: Affordable if you knew how to go to the auction and—

1-00:28:06

Esser: You didn't even have to know. Ma didn't know nothing about—

Redman: So you got lucky.

1-00:28:10

Esser: Yeah. She wound up leaving us kids in good shape.

Redman: I'm going to take a quick break. [Break in tape] All right Edie, where we left off I was going to ask you how you got to work each day.

1-00:28:28

Esser: Okay, well, the kids' father, he was great; he was great.

Redman: What was his first name?

1-00:28:33

Esser: Alvin. We did really good for a while. He had rheumatic fever, and he had a bad heart, but he lived to be seventy. But we didn't have much money. He worked; he was a plumber. He worked, and of course when I was working a little bit here and there we couldn't afford a car, so we got a motorcycle. So we went back and forth to work on a motorcycle.

Redman: Are you serious?

1-00:29:16

Esser: I'm serious. He would take me here with me with my hat, bandana everything, hanging on, and I could go on and—

Redman: Oh, please do. Well, so then tell me about what you wore to work each day.

1-00:29:45

Esser: Oh, we had a—well, there was a dress code. I mean we had to wear sensible boots, hard toes, and they cost a little bit more. You didn't have to have them.

Redman: But you cared about your toes, so you wanted the steel-toe—

1-00:29:58

Esser: Boots, yeah, with boots, and jeans, and, of course, a jacket, and a hat and a bandana. You always had to keep your hair covered because of the sparks from the—

Redman: Welders?

1-00:30:14

Esser: Welders.

Redman: Did you have any of those things beforehand, or were those things that you all then had to buy when you started work.

1-00:30:20

Esser: I guess I bought them. I've forgotten. But I always wore jeans. I still do. I remember one time that I got some new clothes, and I got a flannel shirt because late afternoons were warm, and really at night, night two or three in the morning, that's when it got cold. But anyway, I wore a brown shirt and with flannel—I don't know if you know it—but it's got fuzz all over it.

So I was there long enough that I learned how to tack with welding to hold something in place, or to burn if they had to burn a piece in half. I could do that. So this time they wanted me to tack something, so I went for a flash. I don't know if you know what a flash is, but the arc from the weld of that, oh, man, that burns your eyes.

Redman: So you have to wear a mask.

1-00:31:28

Esser: A goggle, oh, yeah. You could never—if someone's welding you never looked, not unless you had the hood. But, anyway, I was out there tacking, and a spark flew on this fuzzy stuff on my shirt. I might just gone "Whooooosh!" I was just all wondering if anybody saw me. It's just one of those little things that happens.

Redman: So Edie, I know a lot of people that welded had to take training, like an eight-week training course or something like that in Oakland.

1-00:32:12

Esser: Oh, twelve, but I wasn't a welder.

Redman: But you kind of learned welding on the job a little bit, is that right?

1-00:32:19

Esser: Oh, right. Just learned how to tack, yes.

Redman: So someone who maybe was a welder would show you that, or would the other prefabricators show you how to do something like that?

1-00:32:30

Esser: I think just playing around with the torch and the hood, and just once you, how do you say, when you strike an arc, you can't just leave it there. You've got to start and make it, and "brrrrr" and make it and follow, let the rod melt the iron as you're—. Oh, I could just—my weld would only be not even an inch long.

Redman: So maybe a little shorter.

1-00:33:03

Esser: Yeah. Just—

Redman: Now, I don't mean to go back to clothes too often, but women wearing jeans before the war.

1-00:33:12

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: Maybe it was something you'd see in rural areas, but in cities women would wear skirts and dresses.

1-00:33:19

Esser: Oh, when you were not at work you could wear what you wanted, but at work you had to wear, you couldn't wear a skirt. They'd send you home.

Redman: They'd send you home. You had to make sure that you had the right clothing on, but now I've heard from some women about the head scarf as being something that—one woman told me that she would hike her head scarf up a little bit so you could see a little bit of her hair, but then some of her hair caught fire, so she learned to keep it all the way down. Did you do anything like to your—?

1-00:33:54

Esser: No.

Redman: You were just happy to be outside and thinking about that instead of image, okay.

1-00:33:58

Esser: No. Yeah, the hard hats, they had a band, but I—maybe my hair did show a little bit, but I never had anything like that happen.

Redman: From the sounds of it if there's welding and the welding torch and a lot of heavy equipment moving; this could have potentially been a little bit of a dangerous job. Can you tell me about what some of the safety things were? You'd mentioned some of the steel-toed boots and the helmet, but what were some of the other safety mechanisms at Kaiser?

1-00:34:36

Esser: We had to wear hard hats because you never knew when like some of the— from the bulkheads, something would fall. I don't know that ever anything did, but you had to be careful.

Redman: So did you hear any stories of any workplace accidents or anything like that?

1-00:34:53

Esser: No.

Redman: We talked a little bit about Richmond and how it was changing, and meeting some of these new people and some of your new friends. Were most of these people from California, or were they from other places?

1-00:35:13

Esser: Oh, they were from all over.

Redman: All over the country.

1-00:35:16

Esser: Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma. I don't know anybody like from Utah or just from I don't know, I really don't. I didn't make—I didn't have any friends, really. I was, like I say, married, which had nothing to do with friends, but I worked. I would go home at 12:00 o'clock and then do what you have to do. If I had to wash clothes or whatever, I'd do it then. Then go to sleep, then when I had to go to work from 4:00 to 12:00. Then I would buy the groceries and do stuff like that then.

Redman: Let's talk about that. I want to get back to where people were from, and I want to also talk about Richmond. You mentioned that there were a lot of people from Arkansas and Oklahoma, and there were a lot of rumors flying around about who these people were or what they were like. A lot of people had interesting first-hand experiences meeting people from other parts of the country. People would call them Arkies and Okies and stuff like that. What were some of your impressions of these new people that were arriving?

1-00:36:46

Esser: You know, I can't honestly say because I never met anybody at the shipyards that I didn't kind of relate to. I mean I really—I loved that job, and I know we were there, we all had our certain things to do, but there was one, a burner. My headquarters was under a roof, but it was all open. Way back in the corner was a burner, and they sat down, but they had a jig, and that jig was maybe as big as this room. But there was four or five jigs, and they were burning just out of this big sheet of metal. There was one girl, black girl, and she was—she just loved me. I don't know, for some reason, I don't know if you know, but sometimes you connect with people, and sometimes—well, with this black girl and I, well, after a few months, we really—she was a sweetheart, just being nice, just being friendly. And she called me Miss Edie. So she tells me that she's going to have a baby, and I said, "Oh, great." And she's young. So then in a few months she asks if it's okay—she was from Odessa, Texas—and she asked me if it was okay if she named that baby Edythe. "No way, go for it." So there's hopefully, there's what, she'd be fifty years old, sixty years old?

Redman: That's fantastic, yeah. So you just made a connection with some people on the job that you—

1-00:38:39

Esser:

Oh, yeah, never see them before and never see them again. But that is what was there. I met a lot of people in my life that I will never forget. The shipyard has a place in my heart that I'm going to take with me.

Redman:

Let's talk about race, because you were probably meeting a lot of African-American workers in Richmond, or meeting a few even.

1-00:39:07

Esser:

Oh, a few.

Redman:

Yeah, and was that at all a new experience or did you just not notice it, or—?

1-00:39:14

Esser:

Didn't notice it, I guess, because San Pablo—they had during my time growing up there, they had parts of San Pablo. There was a vegetable garden which was Italian. There was North Richmond, which was the blacks, or their brand of blacks. Then they had the Orientals; they had a whole bunch of the floral, acres and acres of flowers and florists. They had that part.

Redman:

You've said a lot of interesting things that I want to get back to. Did you know that either in San Pablo or in Richmond—had you heard anything about the Japanese being taken to camps?

1-00:40:04

Esser:

Oh, yeah.

Redman:

What did you think about this at the time? Did you—?

1-00:40:09

Esser:

We were all—well, war. I can remember—golly, you're asking these kind of questions that, yeah, ring a bell. They had blackouts. Everything, blackouts. We lived on Twenty-Third Street and Main in Richmond. You couldn't even smoke. And we had a warden.

Redman:

Right, blackout wardens.

1-00:40:33

Esser:

Blackout wardens.

Redman:

They would come and check and make sure all of the lights were black, is that right? Yeah, or out, yeah.

1-00:40:38

Esser:

Yeah. No cigarettes.

Redman:

Really, you couldn't even smoke?

1-00:40:42

Esser: Oh, no. If somebody was—not the warden—just anyway if you were there and I'm smoking, you'd tell me, "Uh uh, better put that out." One time an airplane flew over, and oh, people just came unglued because they wondered how that—to this day nobody knows how that airplane got through. But, anyway, everything had to be pitch-black dark, and you couldn't talk.

Redman: So there was a fear of an attack that you can, there was a very real fear. Was this in the back of your mind all the time, or was it something that you would only think about occasionally?

1-00:41:24

Esser: I was young. I was working, and I wanted that paycheck. I was busy doing something.

Redman: So when Japanese internment happened, you'd maybe heard about it, but it wasn't something that you dwelt on.

1-00:41:45

Esser: No. At one time when these sections—we thought that the Japanese in that area where they were in San Pablo, everybody thought that maybe they had some kind of a signal that they would—never did turn out that way. But then they put them in—where did they take them to?

Redman: Some of them went to a camp called Manzanar. Some of them went to other camps around—

1-00:42:12

Esser: In Los Angeles in that area.

Redman: Right. We talked a little bit about how the weather changes where the shipyards were. I've been down there at different times of the day. Sometimes it is hot, hot, and sometimes it is cold, cold. So at the swing shift especially, you'd arrive, and it was probably short-sleeve weather; it was pretty warm.

1-00:42:43

Esser: It was warm, and then it got cold.

Redman: Yeah, so how would you prepare for that? You brought extra layers and—?

1-00:42:48

Esser: Yeah, you'd take a sweatshirt or whatever, or leave something there. If it got hot during the night, you'd take your sweatshirt off and leave it there, and then when you got there the next day if it was cold, you'd take it. But I think that corrugated building, it's metal, corrugated. When it's hot, it's hot; I mean that holds the heat. And when it's cold, it's cold.

Redman: You don't seem to remember the work as being uncomfortable, but I'm sure at times it—

1-00:43:29

Esser: I must have been cold sometimes, but I don't remember.

Redman: How did people interact at the shipyards? You can talk about both yourself and some of the people you knew. Also how did you think other people interacted; do you think people got along most of the time?

1-00:43:48

Esser: Oh, yes. Oh, everybody got—oh yeah. The boilermakers then were really laborers, and they swept and kept the place clean.

Redman: That's another thing I wanted to ask about. I've read that there was a British correspondent who came to the Kaiser Shipyards, and one his observations was, "Gee, everything around here is really clean," and that they kept the shipyard in really clean condition.

1-00:44:24

Esser: They did, they really did. They had that dust mop on a stick with a little broom. Oh, yeah, they were all the time—

Redman: So people were constantly cleaning.

1-00:44:36

Esser: Oh, yeah, and they had buckets of sand, and which was garbage, and I guess for cigarettes, I don't—I never smoked, so I don't know that, but they had garbage for people, they took care of it. They helped keep it clean.

Redman: Were there designated areas where people could and couldn't smoke?

1-00:44:54

Esser: No, no, you could smoke any place.

Redman: But you didn't smoke.

1-00:44:57

Esser: I didn't smoke.

Redman: But other people around you maybe—

1-00:45:01

Esser: Oh, yeah. They had that cigarette going all the time.

Redman: Oh, pretty much all the time, okay.

1-00:45:05

Esser: I can remember when Port Chicago blew up?

Redman: Yeah, let me—you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to start a new tape, and I'm going to ask you about Port Chicago.

Begin Audiotape 2:

2-00:00:07

Redman: So during the break we were talking a little bit about your mother and your experience with different ethnicities in Richmond and San Pablo, and that she was thought of as Czech, first and foremost, is that right?

2-00:00:22

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: But she had some interesting ideas about or thoughts or opinions at the time, or just sort of her ideas about other groups at the time.

2-00:00:36

Esser: Oh, gosh. Where do I start?

Redman: Where do you start? I mean go ahead, just describe some of—and what of these do you think were passed down to you, or what of these did you—?

2-00:00:48

Esser: My mother—and I think I'm a lot like her in a lot of ways. Not every way, but in a lot of ways. She was what, eighty-something, when she—she was in a rest home. I had to work; my brothers and sister had to work. Poor Ma, she would have these passing-out ceremonies, she would faint, but she would be okay. But the doctor said they were mini-strokes. They wouldn't leave her—what do you call it—incapacitated. They wouldn't let her—it wouldn't, but anyway, I lost my train of thought.

Wendy: When she was in Richmond and she was dealing with the different Chinese and the Italians—

Redman: The different ethnicities in Richmond, and what she sort of thought about them. But you said there was an area in Richmond that you would go get meat, is that correct? It was the best place, can you tell me a little bit about that?

2-00:01:50

Esser: That was with the Chinese, there was a butcher. She loved Chinese butchers.

Redman: Do you know why in particular, what—?

2-00:01:58

Esser: Just because they had good meat. That was her idea.

Redman: This was before rationing, or was this during the war that would she continue going to the Chinese butcher all the way through?

2-00:02:09

Esser: Right. I still—whenever I go somewhere to buy meat and there's butchers, I'll always go to a Chinaman, Chinese guy. I just know that they're—that's because of Ma.

Redman:

There was an Italian section of town prior to the war, but let me ask then how that changed during the war because there were so many people coming in, just waves and waves of people coming in to get jobs. Did some of these different groups or areas sort of break down, or did it still kind of stay segregated?

2-00:02:55

Esser: It's different now. When the war started, when they started shipyards, everybody came in from all over the place. Then when the shipyards closed down, then, and there's still a lot of people in Richmond, and there's still a lot who never left, who came and stayed, but Richmond is not the same. The whole town is—they put things down Main Street, and it's just nothing like it used to be. Stores are all boarded up.

Redman:

You had mentioned that being on the swing shift in particular, it's important that once you're done with work you need to be able to go get groceries, or go get cleaners, or maybe even go to a movie, and things were open all the time, is that right?

2-00:03:45

Esser: Twenty-four hours a day.

Redman:

So the city must have just been humming.

2-00:03:51

Esser: Oh, it was humming, oh yes.

Redman:

Tell me a little about what that felt like, or what did it look like?

2-00:03:57

Esser: Well, you know when you're young, you don't—I wish now that I could relive what I would have taken in more, or remembered more. But the dollar stores—what, like Macy's—all those stores were wide open. Now, I don't even think of going to Macy's at 2:00 o'clock in the morning. I'll go at 10:00 in the morning, whatever. But then that was the way of life, and you don't even think about it.

Redman:

It strikes me that maybe that would change someone's concept of time a little bit, that you could go at any time you wanted to go to the grocery store.

2-00:04:43

Esser: Sure. You had to take time to sleep. Of course, you can fit in anywhere. It didn't take me long, swing shift. Swing shift was the good shift because you worked from 4:00 to 12:00. Okay, you come home at 12:00, you go to bed,

and then if you go to bed you get seven or eight hours sleep, you're ready to go all morning. You can do whatever you have to do from 7:00 until 4:00 or 3:30 when you get ready to go to work.

Redman: You saw the swing shift as a desirable shift to have?

2-00:05:23

Esser: Oh, yes. I loved it.

Redman: So you never wanted to move to either of the other shifts?

2-00:05:29

Esser: Day shift or graveyard. No.

Redman: Was the pay the same on all of the shifts?

2-00:05:34

Esser: Oh, no. You got more for, day shift got like what? Say a dollar. Swing shift got a dollar and a half, and graveyard got a dollar seventy-five.

Redman: So there was some incentive.

2-00:05:44

Esser: A little more, but I wasn't that—I was after money, but I just wanted to work.

Redman: Let's talk about the money aspect of it because for so many women this was a key to independence in some sense. They had a little money in their pocket.

2-00:06:09

Esser: We didn't have that much. We didn't make, even until today, as old as I am, and I'm on Social Security, but I don't get anything compared to what some men get because they got so much more money.

Redman: So the men got a higher salary.

2-00:06:29

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: That was pretty well known around the ship—

2-00:06:35

Esser: Oh, yes. That's the way it was.

Redman: So there was no grumbling about that?

2-00:06:41

Esser: No, no.

Redman: Do you remember any of your friends using the child care services at Kaiser? Did any of your friends have small children?

2-00:06:50
Esser: I don't think so, no.

Redman: How about the healthcare system, because a lot of people signed up for Kaiser's health care plan.

2-00:06:59
Esser: Oh, I did that right away.

Redman: You did, okay. Can you tell me, I know you were young and probably really healthy, but did you have any experience going to the doctor or anything?

2-00:07:06
Esser: Yeah, I did. I had to have the kids' father sign for me because he was older than me, three or four years, because I was a minor, I think. So he had to sign. But anyway, I was moving some kind of a big box, a battery box or something, and I gave myself a hernia. I don't know how come I noticed it, but it was like a walnut that come out of my side. So I went to the doctor, Kaiser Permanente in Oakland. That was the only hospital they had. They had one in Richmond, but somehow or other I had to go to Oakland. So they repaired it.

Redman: But you were covered under your—

2-00:07:59
Esser: I was covered, yes, I was covered.

Redman: So was that a little bit of a new experience, having this health care plan and being able to take advantage of it?

2-00:08:10
Esser: Oh, I think they called it the Permanente. A hundred years ago it was Permanente, now it's Kaiser Permanente. So I don't know when that changed. That changed while I was still in shipyards, I know.

Redman: Going back to the subject of people from Arkansas or Oklahoma and then how Richmond was changing. I know there was kind of a rough-and-tumble reputation for cities like El Cerrito and Albany and Richmond, and some of the bars and the night life there got a little bit raucous and crazy.

2-00:08:49
Esser: Yeah, they were.

Redman: Did you see any of that from a distance or kind of hear about it at all?

2-00:08:56
Esser: I never drank. The kids' father never drank. We never went out. We never did, no. I never—

Redman: And was that because of financial constraints?

2-00:09:08
Esser: No, it's just because we didn't drink.

Redman: You weren't interested in going out and doing that.

2-00:09:14
Esser: We were just saving money, I guess. I don't know what we were saving it for, but—

Redman: What would you do on your off hours? What would you guys do together for—?

2-00:09:22
Esser: He liked model airplanes, and—I don't know, what did I do? Nothing, he didn't dance, he didn't do anything. I didn't do anything.

Redman: How about movies?

2-00:09:34
Esser: No movies, no.

Redman: When your shift would end, you'd maybe take care of some errands.

2-00:09:43
Esser: He'd go home. He'd pick me up.

Redman: Go home and unwind.

2-00:09:44
Esser: He worked at Yard 3, and then there was Yard 1 and then Prefab. Then there was Yard 2, and there was Cutting Boulevard here. Well, he would get on the motorcycle, and he'd come down, and he'd pick me up at the cafeteria that they had, on Cutting. I'd be waiting for him there because I'm closer. He got off at midnight, too, I guess. But by the time he got on the motorcycle and came to pick me up I was waiting for him because it only took me—I could walk because he's coming from way down here, and I was here. I'd throw my leg over that thing, and away we go.

Redman: Wasn't it a little scary riding on that motorcycle, or—?

2-00:10:29
Esser: I don't—

Redman: Well, you had your hard hat on still, I suppose, so that could have made it a little safer.

2-00:10:38
Esser: At that time, I think I could fight a buzz saw. Right now I can't even get up out of my chair, to think of what I did.

Redman: Tell me about your husband's job a little more. He was a plumber, did you say, is that right?

2-00:10:50

Esser: Well, he was an electrician. At the shipyard he was the electrician, and his work was—but that's been, I've been single for fifty-four years. It's been a long time. Only married once, just married him.

Redman: I know one of the big events that they would have periodically was ship's launching.

2-00:11:16

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: People would either stay, or they'd come to watch a ship actually get launched.

2-00:11:21

Esser: Yeah, they always had like Ronald Reagan's wife, or had some big what do you call—?

Redman: Celebrities.

2-00:11:32

Esser: Had a big, yeah, celebrity, and for many times you would see it on TV, but we never did go watch a launching. We couldn't go; they wouldn't let us go because we were workers. But there would always be like Henry Kaiser. He was there just about every time. They'd throw a bottle, and the bottle wouldn't break, and they have to—

Redman: Do it again?

2-00:11:56

Esser: Do it again, you'd see that on the movie. But I never saw a launching. That was really something, that great big old thing. Then they have the *Red Oak* [*Victory*], you've heard about the *Red Oak*?

Redman: Yes, it's still there.

2-00:12:10

Esser: It's still there.

Redman: So let me ask about Henry Kaiser. Did people have sort of an impression of Henry Kaiser, or did they—because I know he was pretty present.

2-00:12:19

Esser: Money, money. I think.

Redman: Just had a lot of money and—

Esser: That's what, yeah, shipyard. I don't think he comes even close to that [Bill] Gates or Oprah Winfrey; I don't think he comes close to them.

Redman: But he had a lot of money for—

2-00:12:37

Esser: He had a lot of money at that time.

Redman: One second. [Tape pauses] All right, so when we left off you were going to tell me about a little something that one of your friends at the shipyard gave you or made for you, a little lunchbox, is that right?

2-00:12:52

Esser: Oh, okay. Well, he was a shipwright.

Redman: Could you hold [the lunchbox] up for me like this? Great. He was a shipwright.

2-00:13:00

Esser: Yeah, he was a shipwright.

Redman: Great. So that's a little lunchbox.

2-00:13:10

Esser: That's a little—so this is when I first started at the shipyard. I asked him, I said, the shipwrights they made the drawers and stuff for the bulkheads. Some things they did there at the prefabrication plant, but then on the outfitting dock is when they moved all this, turned them upside down, and then they put the towels and all that stuff, they did that in the yard. They didn't do that at the—

Redman: At the Prefab.

2-00:13:48

Esser: Prefab, yeah. So anyway, I think, we talked—it was really nice, and anyway I'm friendly, and he's friendly and stuff, so we get to talking. One day I said, "Can you make me a lunchbox?" "Yeah." Well, you know how your dad—like I don't know, maybe you're not old enough, but like a lunchbox like this, black. So a week goes by, two weeks, three weeks, and then two months. "How's my lunch box?" "Oh," he said, "I'm working on it. It just takes time." I'm, "Oh, yeah." So finally, he's smoking a pipe—he's an elderly man—smoking a pipe, humped over. I see steam, and so he told me one day, he said, "Yeah, your lunchbox," he said, "I think it's done. You could come pick it up if you want to."

Redman: So you went running over there, no doubt.

2-00:14:47

Esser: I go, "Just this?"

Redman: It's a little toy lunchbox.

2-00:14:53

Esser: It's got a thermos, it's got a cork in it, and in here—

Redman: Oh, okay.

2-00:14:58

Esser: I threw it out because it got old, but he had a little piece of brown bread wrapped up with wax paper, and a little piece of orange peel wrapped up, and a piece of cookie wrapped up in wax paper.

Redman: So it's just like a real lunchbox, but, so he's pulling your chain a little bit.

2-00:15:17

Esser: Right, yeah.

Redman: But you seemed to have gotten a kick out of it.

2-00:15:20

Esser: Oh, I had a kick, though. Oh, of course, I was disappointed, but I don't know if I was really or not. Then another time the boilermakers, they were laborers, and they were, well, black and white.

Redman: Okay, because at a certain point—

2-00:15:40

Esser: They were all young, and so for lunch we'd all meet in the shack, the boilermakers' shack. I don't know where all that water went; it was warm. At lunch time we'd eat before 12:00; we'd eat at midnight. So then we'd all go—there's five of us that went into this where the boiler room was. It was warm. They had boxes. We sat on the boxes. I had a Coke.

Redman: I'm going to pause you right there. Hold on one second. [Tape pauses]

2-00:16:16

Esser: So we'd sit on Coke boxes, and a half hour would go fast. Then we'd always get a Coke. Well, somebody looked at the bottom of the bottle, and I don't think it's that; they don't do it anymore. I don't know where they make their bottles, but on the bottle is where—

Redman: Where it had been produced, or—?

2-00:16:39

Esser: Yeah, where they make that bottle, where it was made. My son, he got all those bottles, those Coke bottles. [Points across room to bottle collection]

Redman: Yeah, I saw that you have quite a collection!

2-00:16:52
Esser: Underneath there's a different—so Wendy took one down, so there it went on the table.

Redman: Great, and now you have one, yeah.

2-00:16:56
Esser: Yeah, here. It's got San Francisco written on the bottom.

Redman: So you'd have a Coke every day for lunch.

2-00:17:05
Esser: Yeah, for lunch.

Redman: This would be at midnight, yes.

2-00:17:08
Esser: So then somebody said, "You know what? The one who has,"—there was only five of us, four of us, whatever. The next one who had the furthest away town or place, whatever, has to buy the Coke tomorrow. So we'd get our Coke, and sure enough we'd all look at the bottom. They'd have to buy, and Cokes were what ten cents apiece then? I don't know. But anyway, so that's another thing that was—at night, and we'd all go because if we didn't go, I guess we'd think the other one didn't want to—

Redman: Participate, or yeah, yeah. That's a great story. So the boilermakers union was something I was interested in because my understanding is at the start of the war it was a segregated union, so that there were African Americans or blacks in one union, and whites in another union, but then they eventually joined. So by the time you sort of met the boilermakers it was desegregated, it was mixed?

2-00:18:26
Esser: I guess, I don't remember that.

Redman: But you remember then both black and white boilermakers?

2-00:18:33
Esser: Oh, yes. There was whites and blacks, yeah. But when did we have to go union, that's what I don't remember.

Redman: Maybe when you signed up?

2-00:18:48
Esser: Maybe. Because I was in the ship fitters' union, so I don't know if there was laborers' union, ship fitters, painters, whatever. I don't know that.

Redman: Did you have a shop steward? Do you remember interacting with a shop steward at all?

2-00:19:01
Esser: I don't remember that.

Redman: Do you remember any other union activities? It's okay if you don't, but do you—?

2-00:19:11
Esser: I sure don't, I sure don't.

Redman: The union was an active presence.

2-00:19:17
Esser: Well, we had to go to a meeting once a month.

Redman: Do you remember what those meetings were like at all?

2-00:19:21
Esser: I don't remember. If I did go, I have been to union meetings since then. But you just go there and sit and listen and they talk about something. It didn't interest me.

Redman: So it wasn't terribly pertinent in your life.

2-00:19:39
Esser: Interesting, or anything.

Redman: So especially for, I'd imagine, for a nineteen year-old girl at the time, you just kind of don't care.

2-00:19:47
Esser: Right, sure

Redman: From the sounds of it I think I can sort of guess the answer to this question, and we've talked about it a little, how the men and women interacted at the shipyards—

2-00:20:01
Esser: Oh, there was—

Redman: I was curious if there was some sexism.

2-00:20:03
Esser: A lot of hanky panky.

Redman: That was going to be my follow-up question.

2-00:20:10
Esser: You don't need to go there.

Redman: I was just kind of curious. You only have to tell me what your comfortable with, but people would meet up, and they'd start relationships or—

2-00:20:20

Esser: Oh, yeah. I don't think it's any different then as it is today. They had those, what do you call, double bottom.

Redman: Okay, tell me what that is.

2-00:20:25

Esser: It's a ship, and then they put, the ship is like this.

Redman: Sure, it comes down to a point.

2-00:20:40

Esser: Then they have—

Redman: Oh, sure, holds?

2-00:20:43

Esser: Holds?

Redman: Different holds, yeah.

2-00:20:44

Esser: But they call it double bottoms. They have pieces of steel, and then there's holes, and I think there's water in there isn't it?

Redman: Sure, yeah, ballast.

2-00:20:57

Esser: Yeah, well that kind of—but anyway—

Redman: So would people—men and women would sneak off to go there?

2-00:21:05

Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: Oh, really? And there could be some privacy and—

2-00:21:10

Esser: Oh, yeah, they'd disappear. "Where so and so?" "I don't know." But everybody knew where they went.

Redman: So that was sort of a known—

2-00:21:19

Esser: It's the same today.

Redman: Yeah, it's the same today, right. That's an interesting story, okay. Let's talk about Port Chicago.

2-00:21:37

Esser: Oh, yes.

Redman: Because you had some pretty vivid recollections of Port Chicago.

2-00:21:41

Esser: Oh, yes

Redman: The day it happened there was a massive explosion.

2-00:21:48

Esser: *Massive.*

Redman: Can you tell me, did you hear that or feel that or—?

2-00:21:53

Esser: I felt it. Well, this happened in Concord, which is about what three miles from here. Now I'm in Richmond, and I'm working, and I'm at the desk. I'm getting and talking to, I know all my leadermen, all my, {Neil?} Hooker, Ed Snyder, Bob Halderman, Ralph Zeiss, Terry {Rilover?}, Henry Fong. I knew all of them.

Redman: So these men were all—

2-00:22:24

Esser: All my leadermen. My bosses, big, big bosses down to Henry Fong. Henry Fong used to bring me some coconut candy from Chinatown. He lived in Chinatown, San Francisco. But I was at my desk and, all of a sudden, I'm sitting on a stool at one of the—just a stool, there's two. I'm talking to Ralph Zeiss, one of the bosses, and he says, "What in the hell was that?" I said, "Yeah, what is that?" Then, nothing, no earthquake or whatever, and then it wasn't five minutes when they said that Port Chicago blew up.

Redman: So you found out right away that something terrible had happened.

2-00:23:19

Esser: Terrible, terrible. So that is how we found out. Then it just leveled that.

Redman: Because I know some people found out that Port Chicago—there was a huge disaster there, and then it was only later that many people found out that it was predominantly African-American sailors that were there. Did you find out about that pretty quickly, or is that something you—?

2-00:23:43

Esser: Oh, right away. Right away, yes. Then just in last night's paper there's a big piece on the dead. Oh, gosh, six hundred blacks got—and they, what do they call, mutiny?

Redman: Yeah, they were put on trial for mutiny.

2-00:24:01
Esser: They quit. Yeah, they quit.

Redman: Because they refused to go back to do the same job, yes.

2-00:24:05
Esser: They put them in jail, and some of them are still in jail.

Redman: So did you hear about that at the time, or is that something that you'd learned about later?

2-00:24:12
Esser: Oh, that was a week later, or whatever.

Redman: A week later you were hearing about some of the details of this?

2-00:24:20
Esser: Oh, yeah, it was terrible.

Redman: Okay, so was that primarily word of mouth that people were talking about Port Chicago, or through the newspaper, did you read any of that or—?

2-00:24:26
Esser: The newspapers and word of mouth. Newspapers, they can make you or break you, they can. But it was bad. It was bad because they're still writing about it, and that was in what?

Redman: Forty-four.

2-00:24:41
Esser: Forty-four? Yeah. It's been a long time ago.

Redman: Yes. I wanted to ask about when Franklin Roosevelt died, near the end of the war, how did you feel about Harry Truman as the war came to an end? I know a lot of people were really attached to Franklin Roosevelt. He had probably been the President for almost your entire life by the time he passed away, is that right?

2-00:25:06
Esser: Yes.

Redman: Not quite your entire life, but near like from '29 to '30 when you would have been just a few years old, all the way until '44, '45 when he passed away, so pretty much your entire conscious life Franklin Roosevelt had been President, is that right?

2-00:25:31
Esser: Well, I tell the kids I'm smart, but I'm street smart. I'm not government smart. Now all my life my mom was a Democrat, and she came over from Czechoslovakia. She didn't know beans about anything, couldn't even talk,

but she was here long enough to where politics, the Constitution—she learned all of that by herself, not going to school or anything. But because she married my dad, it made her an automatic Democrat, or citizen.

Redman: A citizen, an American citizen.

2-00:26:13

Esser: So I was a born Democrat, so today if I like the guy, what he's doing, I'll vote for him. But if I don't, I won't. But as far as with Roosevelt I remember my mother when he died. The day he died, we were in a market in Richmond, and the butcher—we were at the counter—and the butcher said that President Roosevelt had just died. My mother she just, oh, she just fell apart. She started crying. She was really a devout Democrat.

Redman: And you maybe felt—

2-00:26:53

Esser: But that's what our—yeah.

Redman: So you were more concerned for your mother than anything else.

2-00:27:01

Esser: Yeah, it didn't mean—to me I was with Ma. So I must have been—when, how old was I? It was—

Redman: Forty-four, forty-five.

2-00:27:07

Esser: Forty-four? Forty-four from eighty-eight?

Redman: You were pretty young, early twenties.

Thomas: Twenty-two.

2-00:27:14

Esser: Okay, yeah.

Redman: Twenty-two, yeah. So then let's talk about the end of the war. First, let me ask, is it true that you met Tony Curtis during the war? Is that correct?

2-00:27:30

Esser: Where did that come from?

Other Woman: I don't know, but you thought you did.

2-00:27:33

Esser: Yes!

Redman: Yes, you thought you met Tony Curtis?

2-00:27:36
Esser: No, when—see, after the shipyards.

Redman: Oh, that was after the shipyards.

2-00:27:40
Esser: After the shipyards.

Redman: We'll get to that then. Let's talk about—

2-00:27:44
Esser: I've had a beautiful life.

Redman: You really have. Let me ask about what maybe you remember as kind of a sad time, at the end of the war, getting your pink slip from Kaiser.

2-00:28:01
Esser: Oh.

Redman: That was a hard thing for you, is that right?

2-00:28:02
Esser: That was hard. I knew it was coming. Everybody was getting pink slips.

Redman: Yeah, so your friends around you were getting—

2-00:28:11
Esser: Oh, yeah, everybody that's working got, but I never got mine until I got mine. I think it was Ed Schneider brought it, and he said, I don't know, "I hate to do this," whatever. So then I guess I fell apart. I remember, I remember crying because I did not want that pink slip. It wasn't—I'm married, there was nothing going on in there, I just loved doing what I was doing. I had an important job. I was getting these parts for the ship, and sometimes day shift couldn't get it, but leave it to Edie, she'll get it. I got it, those kind of things.

Redman: So you felt like you were good at your job.

2-00:28:59
Esser: I did.

Redman: You knew your job, and you liked the people there.

2-00:29:02
Esser: Oh, I did.

Redman: So it was a sad day when—

2-00:29:03
Esser: Oh, I did. I was eager, I worked. I wasn't sitting smoking cigarettes; I never smoked. But anyway, I was throwing such a fit I guess—he said, "the only

thing I can do is to give you what's left of the day shift." He said that they're next, they're going. Because I guess they cut graveyard, then they cut swing shift, and then they were going to cut day shift, and I have that. I worked—I think it was only two weeks that I worked. I worked then, but then—oh, it's sad now. We go look, and it's nothing but an empty building. How many beautiful hours I spent there. And I did a little bit of everything. I could tack. I don't know what I could do today with the hood and the stinger. Maybe, but I probably couldn't do it.

Redman: Tell me what happened after the war. You found another job, is that correct?

2-00:30:17

Esser: Yeah.

Redman: How did your life change, then?

2-00:30:26

Esser: I just went right into—I think then, I've worked all my life. I've worked until I was eighty-four years old. I worked in a soap factory. I worked eight hours a day, right, five days a week.

Redman: So then did you start driving a school bus right after, or that was later?

2-00:30:44

Esser: The school bus was when we moved, there was—

Wendy: Treasure Island was in there somewhere.

2-00:30:51

Esser: Treasure Island. I think that's when I worked at Treasure Island.

Redman: So maybe '46 you started working on Treasure Island?

2-00:30:56

Esser: I don't know exactly what years—

Redman: At the end of the war—

2-00:31:01

Esser: Yeah, at the end of the war.

Redman: What happened? What did you do at Treasure Island?

2-00:31:06

Esser: I guess something I saw advertised or something, that they had ship service, they called it, during the war, and I worked in the restaurant part. I made milkshakes, and the sandwiches would come in already made, but I would make the milkshakes and Foster Frosties, I think. Of course, the kids from overseas would come, and that was their first milk, real milk, and they would

just all come there. They'd be lined up before we—I don't know what time we opened up, 8 o'clock?

Redman: But they'd be lined up when you opened.

2-00:31:46

Esser: Nine o'clock, yeah, waiting for that milk. So then we had a machine that we, you know, so the kids they would inhale this, you know. And they would be in line outside.

Redman: Yes, soldiers.

2-00:32:04

Esser: So, and I shouldn't have done it, but nobody saw me, so they would slurp—

Redman: So you'd give them a little more on the top, okay. So these are the soldiers coming back from overseas, sailors coming back, right. So you switched into a pretty different career path.

2-00:32:24

Esser: Oh, yeah!

Redman: It seems like many of the skills that you learned you didn't use again, is that correct?

2-00:32:28

Esser: Well, I had to learn—I never did that, ever, nothing, I never even had any, but they gave us a dress to wear, or an outfit. So I guess that is where Tony Curtis comes in. This really good-looking sailor would come in. I'm married, so pure. But anyway, and he had a curl, and I mean he was good looking; oh, he was so good looking. But he came in for his Frostie. So he would come in, and he knew I was married, but he would get on the cattle car, and we'd go—he'd get me talking. Am I talking too much?

Redman: No, this is great.

2-00:33:18

Esser: He would get on the cattle car and go to the island, to Yerba Buena Island, where we would get on a train, and we'd go over the bridge to MacArthur Boulevard. And then I'd get on a street car and come—oh, it took me three or four transfers to get home. But this guy with the curly hair, he had a Buick that was stored in a complex some place, so he asked me—he knew I was married—so he asked me if I would be interested in driving it just to keep the battery up. "I—no, no, want none of that." But anyway, again, a month later I see Tony Curtis, and I say, "That's that guy." So—

Redman: So he had gotten out of the service and made it big.

2-00:34:19

Esser: Yeah, well, he's gone now, he died.

Wendy:

Are you sure it was him?

2-00:34:20

Esser: I'm sure, but I didn't want to know if it was or if it wasn't. Let me go thinking it was him. Don't tell me it wasn't him!

Redman:

Well, I think that's great. So I just have a few more questions. I'd love to take a look at your ID badge from Kaiser. I'd love for you to show me that, and tell me about that. Just hold it up right there. Could you hold it right next to your face maybe, right here? Yeah, that's a spitting image; it's you. So tell me about that.

2-00:34:55

Esser: I don't even know when I got it, but I do know that's me.

Redman:

Tell me about do you remember having that made, or anything about it.

2-00:35:12

Esser: Well, I know when I got it then, they were very, very careful during the war. They were really careful, so we had to take our badge off when we went home, and then the next day when we came to work; 5220, that's my number. We would tell the girl behind the counter there, "5220," so then they'd give me it and said I could work. Then at night I'd have to take it off. And give it to her until the next day. How I got to bring it home God only knows.

Redman:

On your last day.

2-00:35:48

Esser: Yeah, the last day.

Redman:

You were somehow able to hang on to it.

Wendy:

And it's metal.

2-00:35:54

Esser: And it's metal. That shows I'm one of the first to start working at the shipyards. I do know that when I read in the paper the girl who passed away would say that she was one of the, you know, and I can honestly say that—and I don't know, I wish there was a way I could check it. I would for my own head to know that I was, and I would bet my life on it, that I was the first one to go to work, swing shift, not—

Redman:

But you were the first woman on the swing shift at Kaiser.

2-00:36:37

Esser: At the prefabrication plant.

Redman: Let's talk about that image of Rosie the Riveter that you have on your T-shirt and the idea of women working at that time and the head scarf and the motto of "We can do it." Looking back on that, how does that all make you feel?

2-00:36:56

Esser: Oh, it makes me feel good. I mean you know that's me! But, I'd like to know where it came from. Who—did somebody pose for it?

Redman: Yes.

2-00:37:13

Esser: But that's what we used to look like. We had to wear a shirt, have our arms covered. We had to have our head covered, and we had to wear a hard hat.

Redman: So that image, as soon as you started learning about that image and seeing that poster, you identified with that.

2-00:37:31

Esser: Oh, I identified good, oh yeah.

Redman: I thought that was you, actually. [Laughter]

2-00:37:35

Esser: Oh, yeah. One of her kids is off the school, and he got me that metal thing on the wall.

Redman: That metal sign with the same image, yeah.

2-00:37:47

Esser: Then I went some place and I got a light switch. So I got Rosie all over the house. I love that girl.

Redman: We've talked about a lot today. We started off the interview talking about being born and raised in San Pablo, growing up in the Great Depression. We talked about your brothers and your mom, and then getting a job in Richmond and working in prefabrication and all of the many things you did at work. I'd like to ask if there's anything else that you'd like to add or, looking back on that time in your life, if there's anything else you'd like to tell me about.

2-00:38:32

Esser: Okay, let me see here, the lunchbox.

Redman: I can pause this and take a minute or two if you'd like, or you could, either way. Here I'll just, let me pause the tape. [Pause tape] All right, so when we took a break there, one of the things that you sort of recalled was that people would make rings or bracelets on the job.

2-00:39:10

Esser: On the job.

Redman: And maybe give them—was it mainly men maybe making rings or bracelets for young women who were there?

2-00:39:16

Esser: I think it was probably men, yes.

Redman: How would they make a ring or a bracelet for someone?

2-00:39:24

Esser: Well, they'd go to the small parts and like where you could get your nuts and bolts, and then you would get a nut that would fit one of your fingers, whichever finger you wanted. Then you'd go to the grinder, and you'd hold on to this nut with the pliers, and sparks would be just a flying. But then it would grind down, ground down because you know a nut is heavy. Then you would make it round, of course.

Redman: So you'd turn it from a hexagon into a ring, yeah. Oh, you'd put a design on it?

2-00:40:01

Esser: Oh, you could put like a design on the ring if you wanted to, or whatever. You couldn't—you know, the ring was small, but you couldn't write on it or anything, but you could kind of make a little indentation or something design on it.

Redman: Some sort of decoration, sure.

2-00:40:22

Esser: Then, of course, the bracelet was just one way; you'd take it and you'd twist it.

Redman: So you'd take two rods and twist them together, and then bend them down into a sort of a circle.

2-00:40:36

Esser: Some wrists are bigger than others. I guess maybe he got it red hot maybe. He'd put it somewhere, but—I remember, and putting it in water.

Redman: So did you get some of these as gifts from—?

2-00:40:51

Esser: No, there wasn't that many made, but every once in a while you'd see somebody at the grinder, and you'd see sparks and know they were doing something they're not supposed to be—

Redman: Right, yeah, but it was kind of funny, a way to—

2-00:41:10

Esser: Oh, sure, it was something that—and I had a bracelet for years, and I had my ring for years, and I can't find them. I looked for them, but I can't find them.

Redman: That's kind of a fun story.

2-00:41:21
Esser: Yeah, it's a fun thing.

Redman: Tell me just a little bit about then—Richmond changed a lot between the start of the war and the end of the war?

2-00:41:32
Esser: Oh, yeah.

Redman: So then you were still living out in San Pablo, is that right? Or did you live closer to—?

2-00:41:42
Esser: Oh, we moved to Salinas. Oh, I've done a lot. I moved to Salinas and worked in the lettuce sheds, and I've done a lot of work.

Redman: You've done a lot of different jobs after that.

2-00:41:50
Esser: I've done a lot of beautiful stuff. If I had my life to do over again, I'd do exactly the same.

Redman: Exactly the same.

2-00:41:58
Esser: I had six beautiful kids.

Redman: Great.

2-00:42:00
Esser: I only got three left, but I did raise them.

Redman: Yeah, so you have a family and this incredible story to—

2-00:42:11
Esser: Oh, yeah. Like I say, I can talk, when I'm talking here I'm out of my box.

Redman: Does doing this interview, does this help you recall or remember some of the things that happened?

2-00:42:32
Esser: No, not really. I do recall more with my mom. My mother and I, we've been through a lot together, and the kids have been—my mom was around until she was eighty-some, huh? So she was—

Redman: So you think a lot of this stuff is passed down through generations and—

2-00:42:48

Esser:

I think so, yes, and I'm so glad that I don't know what Wendy, I think you have heard all of this that I've said before, haven't you? So I've told the kids of my life, I've been single for fifty, what, fifty-two years? I never married again, and I didn't want to. But I had to work, and if my life, if it wasn't like it was, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. Is this on now?

Redman:

Yeah, this is just finishing up, we'll wrap up with that. That was absolutely perfect. Thank you so much for being here with me

2-00:43:33

Esser:

Oh, wow, thank you. Golly, you just—Wendy and I say, “Oh, that girl, I don't know.” I've got three girls, one's in Idaho, and one's in Los Angeles, but with her, everyday that girl's here.

Redman:

That's great, fantastic.

[End of Interview]