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**Denise Fleig**

**Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project**

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

Interviews conducted by  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2008

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### Audiofile 2

Describes the confusion after Pearl Harbor—precautions taken to protect the Bay Area from an attack—work at the telephone company became more intense because all of the men were gone—Black markets developed to circumvent the rationing—even cigarettes became hard to get—saw discrimination against the Japanese, but not the Italians—became a welder for at the Kaiser shipyards—treated well by the men at Kaiser

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Interview #1: 07-09-2008

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01-00:00:06

Rigelhaupt: It's July 9, 2008. I'm in Oakland, California, doing an oral history interview with Denise Fleig. This is tape number one, and, to start, if I could just ask you to say your full name and the year you were born?

01-00:00:22

Fleig: Denise Fleig, 1922.

01-00:00:26

Rigelhaupt: Where were you born?

01-00:00:28

Fleig: Berkeley, California, in a little house on one of those cross streets. [chuckles] Forget the name of the street, now. I was born in the front bedroom.

01-00:00:43

Rigelhaupt: And how long, after you were born, did you and your family live in Berkeley?

01-00:00:51

Fleig: Three or four years because my first recall, when I was about five, was when we lived in East Oakland. So we moved around Oakland a lot, I think.

01-00:01:03

Rigelhaupt: Do you know why your family moved around a lot?

01-00:01:06

Fleig: My dad didn't like sitting still. He had a great imagination, and he always saw something over the hill. And I think, when I was born, he worked for a corporation and had a nine-to-five job. But my consciousness came when I was four or five. We lived in East Oakland. He was, I think, still a brick mason, which was his original trade. And, as a brick mason, and later, as a plasterer, he moved around wherever buildings needed him.

01-00:01:53

Rigelhaupt: And how long after these first memories, when you were about four or five, did your family live in East Oakland?

01-00:02:05

Fleig: Not long. I remember living in Palo Alto. I think I went to kindergarten in Palo Alto, or—yeah. And then we moved to where my grandmother lived, up in Lake County, because she settled there in 1859 when she came across in a covered wagon. So we went up there, and then we would move back to Oakland when—for whatever my father was doing. There were seven of us, and I was the youngest, so they had quite a history before I came along, and my sisters and brothers would refer to things I didn't know anything about. And they would talk about people that worked for us, and they would say,

“Do you remember Mindy?” “Who was Mindy?” “You know, she worked for Mom for a long time.” “No, I don't remember her. Before I was born.”

01-00:03:14

Rigelhaupt:

How would you description the neighborhood and the immediate surroundings around your family's house in East Oakland?

01-00:03:21

Fleig:

Oh, I would say straight-up middle class. I saw pictures, when I was little, of my brothers and sisters, when they were little, playing in the yard and the various places we lived on Coolidge Avenue and we lived on Upper Broadway. The regular middle-class territories in the flatlands of Oakland. And in the last few years, I worked for St. Mary's College and I supervised student teachers in the elementary schools all over Oakland, so I went back to those neighborhoods that I lived in when I was going to school.

We lived all over Oakland: Ninth Avenue, Fifteenth Avenue, and East Eighteenth; Coolidge Avenue, and Sixty-Sixth Avenue and MacArthur. And then, every now and then, we'd wind up in Berkeley for a while, but they were all middle-class houses—had to be big enough for nine of us—and various levels. During the Depression, we lived in a terrible old house down on Tenth Street, and that was a bad neighborhood then. Franklin School, which is still down there, I went to for a little while. And then we'd move up and we'd live by—we lived behind the Grand Lake Theater for a while, and I went to Lake View School. So there was a lot of moving around till I got to high school.

But I didn't go to the ninth grade at all. We were up in the country and my dad didn't think it was important for me to go to school. It was hard to get to school, so I didn't go for a whole year. And when we came down to Oakland and my mother put me in West Lake Junior High to finish the ninth grade, they said, “Where's she been going to school?” my mother said, “Placerville Union High.” And I looked at her, and then—okay. And Oakland wrote that down and nobody ever checked to see, so I just went right on. I have strange ideas about how important it is to go to school everyday.

01-00:06:00

Rigelhaupt:

Well, jumping backwards a little bit, you said your grandparents—was it your grandparents that—

01-00:06:06

Fleig:

Uh-huh.

01-00:06:07

Rigelhaupt:

—first settled in California?

01-00:06:08

Fleig:

Yes. Uh-huh.

01-00:06:09

Rigelhaupt:

Okay. What did they tell you about their coming to California in a covered wagon?

01-00:06:14

Fleig:

My grandmother, it was, who was the only one I knew. She was in her eighties and almost blind when I knew her. And they made the trip when she was about six or seven years old, so she didn't remember a lot, but when we came to the part in school where we were studying the westward movement and I heard about the Oregon Trail, I mentioned that to her, and she said, "Oh, yes. That was how we came." But when I got a map out and tried to help her, she took me from Missouri, where the wagon train gathered, pretty well across and identified Chimney Rock and a couple of rivers where she said, one of them, the Indians helped them get the wagons across because the water was so deep. And that was the only contact with Indians, was when they helped them at a river crossing. That's about all she remembered. But they settled up in Lake County in an area that just now might beginning to be developed. It never, ever became anything. Middletown, yeah. But they were farmers.

01-00:07:38

Rigelhaupt:

What did they farm?

01-00:07:41

Fleig:

Grains, I think. And then they had cattle, of course. Always. But her husband, my father's—yeah, this is my father's side of the family—was killed in a carriage accident in Santa Rosa before he was born. So he didn't know him at all, of course, and he was raised a lot by her relatives and what around. So it was very sketchy what they did, and, since I'm the youngest, I knew the least about anything. But they were early settlers.

01-00:08:41

Rigelhaupt:

Did they ever tell you why they settled in—is it Middletown, in Lake County?

01-00:07:46

Fleig:

No, they settled in a place that is only on old maps. It was called Jericho, Paradise Valley, Hell's Half-Acre; all these Biblical names. East of Middletown. Yeah. Over the hills there, where there's—there was nothing the last time I drove out there to see what was left. They came because they had some relatives who had settled on Cobb Mountain and wrote to them to come. Who they were, I have no idea—or why they came. Could have had to do with the Civil War. And if they really were from Missouri, that was—whether that was going to be a slave state or not. That stuff going on. Now, I don't know if they were from Missouri because all the wagon trains left from Missouri. And we don't know where they were originally from except for the folk songs that my father sang. I got the idea it was the mountains. Maybe West Virginia someplace. I don't know.

01-00:10:12

Rigelhaupt:

Did they talk at all about—or your grandmother and then maybe your father—about what it was like when they first got to California? Their first impressions?

01-00:10:22

Fleig:

Well, my grandmother knew all the Indians in that country very well, and she used to have me go get the materials for the cough syrup she learned to make from the Indians, which was horehound and digger pine—had to be digger pine—needles, and horehound, and yerba santa, which she called herbacenta. And she made a cough syrup out of that with honey every year in the spring. She pointed out that the Indians were never bothered with poison oak; they used it as a medication on injuries and what. And so she knew a lot about Indians, but I was too young to know the questions to ask because they were almost all gone by the time we got there. They were on a reservation outside of town, known as a bunch of bums. I remember my father saying they left the valley out there in Jericho because there was a terrible drought and the Indians all left and moved up into the foothills. And that's when that family moved into town, which I found very interesting. Anyway, it was weather that really determined their lives then. I think it is again, huh?

01-00:12:14

Rigelhaupt:

How would you talk about your impressions, as a child, about how it was different living in Oakland versus up in Lake County and things you saw?

01-00:12:24

Fleig:

Oh, yes. I just thought Middletown was a baby town, and it would grow up to be like Oakland. Cities are just grown-up little towns. And so when they paved the road through Middletown and over the mountain, that was the most exciting thing, and I remember sitting on the fence of the library and watching them pave the road and thinking, "See? This is how you get to be a city. You get your roads paved, and then there'll be sidewalks, and it'll grow."  
[laughter] It never did. It hasn't to this—well, a little bit now, but not much, because I still go up there to the graveyard. [coughs] But that was my concept, that it would grow up to be like Oakland when it got sidewalks and streets, and it was starting to be laid out in squares that you could tell a little bit.

I don't recall anything else except that it was hot out there, and I loved it at my grandmother's because you could take your shoes off in June. First of June, you could go barefooted. And then you could play in the creek all you wanted to, and it was a big, wide, beautiful creek with those wonderful stones, and it was shallow; never more than two feet or so, but just rippling through and very wide. So it was wonderful wading and playing in the summer. And we played one-a-cat baseball by her house, and it was just a lot of fun for a child.

01-00:14:17

Rigelhaupt:

You said, so, this was your father's side of the family?

01-00:14:20

Fleig: Yeah.

01-00:14:21

Rigelhaupt: And your mother's side?

01-00:14:22

Fleig: My mother's family came from Ireland. I don't know when, but they came directly to Petaluma, California, for some unknown reason which she never knew. And I did get my mother's father's death certificate from up there in Petaluma, and it says on his death certificate that he was born in County Cork Ireland, and the date and all. It doesn't say when he came here, but he was truly Irish, and so was her mother. Now, I have no information about her mother, and she had a family of about—oh, five or six of them, I guess. And she was among the youngest, and the daughter that stayed home to take care of the old people. And so she grew up in Petaluma, and when she met my father, she was old. She was an old maid. Twenty-three. And he was twenty-one, I think. He came into town with the brick masons to build the courthouse, and they built the courthouse in Petaluma. And she worked on the newspaper in Petaluma, which was quite remarkable for a woman at that time to have a job, even. And so they're old Californians, as well.

01-00:16:05

Rigelhaupt: Did you mother give you any descriptions or tell you what it was like growing up in Petaluma?

01-00:16:11

Fleig: Yeah. She always said her father was a constable in Petaluma. And the girls all went to the Catholic school—St. Elizabeth's; I do believe it's still there—and the girls delivered—or anyway, their family delivered the milk to the neighborhood because they were the ones with the cows. And they delivered milk everyday, and eggs, I believe, to their neighborhood. It wasn't like a big business, but it was just a neighborly kind of thing. So they were stand-up members of the community from her point of view.

And then when I got interested, trying to look up some of my family, I went up to Petaluma and I found their graves and got as much information as I could from the mortuary, which has all the records. Didn't learn very much except the address of the house where my grandfather died. So I went up to see the house, and it's still just a middle-class area in Petaluma. Kind of ordinary little house on D Street. Kind of in the middle of Petaluma now.

01-00:17:48

Rigelhaupt: So your mom was alive for the '06 earthquake?

01-00:17:54

Fleig: Oh, yes. Yes, and Petaluma really got it. She loved to tell about how the fences moved like six feet from one place to another, and the ground just opened up in big trenches and ditches. But she had no personal experience

with any damage from the earthquake, but she did remember, in the outlying areas, how bad it was. But Petaluma didn't have much of a population then. They had a lot of chickens, which they're famous for. Yeah, I don't think there were enough people there.

She used to talk a lot about the Petaluma River; they were greatly oriented to the river, and when children had croup or any problem like that, breathing, they would take them out in the river in the fog to cure the croup. And now doctors say put them in the shower; get a lot of steam in them. So they used the fog on the river. Don't hear much now about the Petaluma River.

01-00:19:27

Rigelhaupt:

Did your family come back and settle a little bit more in the Bay Area by the time you were in high school?

01-00:19:34

Fleig:

When I wasn't going to school, we lived at a mine outside Placerville, up in those mountains, and that's why I couldn't get to school. There was no road in there to that mine. So we moved down, then, to Oakland, and I lived with my sister who had—she and her husband had an apartment right near here on Warfield Avenue, off Mandana. And I went to West Lake. And then my dad got settled in somehow, and I went to Oakland High. We lived behind the Grand Lake Theater then, again, at that time—because we had lived in that area before. And this time there was only me and my brothers. I think the girls were all gone, and my oldest brother was gone, so there were just three of us home.

And the principal at Oakland High said that I should never change schools again—he told my mother—because it was very important at my age to stay in the same place with the same group of people around me for a while, for my social development. I guess she told him we were going to move out to East Oakland, and he said, “No matter where you live in Oakland or Berkeley, she should come to Oakland High. So if you move around, she should stay in the same school. Arrange for her to do that.” So I did. I went from the ninth to the twelfth grade at Oakland High, and we lived in Berkeley, on Virginia Street, and we lived in Sixty-Sixth Avenue, and we lived in Ninety-Ninth Avenue [laughter], and all—I don't remember where else. And I went to Oakland High. Whatever bus or streetcar ran around, I went to Oakland High and graduated from Oakland High and with enough credits to go directly to UC Berkeley, which I did.

And it cost \$27.50 for tuition, and if you had from \$5-10 for books and a place to live, you could go to college, so I did. And I could always find somebody to live with, just among my relatives, my sisters and brothers, and sometimes with my parents if they settled in Oakland for any reason. And so I would always manage to get that \$27.50 somehow to go to college. But I never went in successive semesters because I always had to work one to get the money to

go to the next one. So my transcript is kind of messy because it has History 1A, and then it has History 5B because I never got around to 1B. They weren't giving it when I went back.

So when I finally got ready to graduate after—what, eight years? Yeah. I was called in and said I didn't have enough credits to graduate. Oh, God! [laughter] No, not after all that. And they said, "Well, you took Philosophy 1A, but you never took Philosophy 1B. You took Philosophy 6A, and that doesn't count. So you're short three credits." I had more credits than I needed, but I didn't have Philosophy 6B. [coughs] I think the tears probably started running down my face, and I was talking to the secretary—I thought she was just a secretary—[coughs] and I just said, "Oh, God. I don't know if I can stand this another whole year. And you don't know what it takes to get over here and get in these classes, and—Oh, God." And she said, "Oh, well. Let's just waive that one then." And she wrote across it, "Requirement Waived," and signed her name, and I graduated. I had no idea she had that much power. I don't know who she was, but I'm sure grateful.

01-00:24:35

Rigelhaupt:

Well, jumping backwards a little bit, how did the beginning of the Depression affect your family?

01-00:24:43

Fleig:

Well, terribly. We went all the way down. We were living in Palo Alto, I remember, when I went to kindergarten, in a big, beautiful house with tennis courts in the back. We all lived there. All of us were home. And my sisters went to Redwood City High. They had wonderful clothes. My oldest sister was just beautiful, and I remember my mother making dresses for her. And the boys each had a bicycle, and they'd let me ride on the back or on the handlebars now and then, and we had a big, beautiful dog that used to get the paper every morning and bring it in, and a beautiful garden in the back, and it was just a beautiful place and everybody was wonderful. Everybody was happy. Whatever my father did, he was making good money, and I just remember everybody being happy. It was just wonderful. And then we left. Okay, I was born in '22. If I was, say, in kindergarten, five years old, it was '27, huh?

01-00:26:17

Rigelhaupt:

Well, the big crash was in '29.

01-00:26:18

Fleig:

Yeah. So we were doing just fine in '27. See, I don't know how long we were there, but my next recollection is of being at my grandmother's, up in Lake County, and I have no recollection of anybody being there except me—My sisters and I, they weren't—nobody was around. Bob wasn't there. Bill—my brothers—mm-mm. I just remember my mom and I being there.

And I loved school. I went to school. In the first grade, I learned to read. I

remember learning to read. That was so wonderful. And I used to go to Sunday school in the morning. Where my father was and the rest of my family, I don't know. Something happened that I'm not aware of—I wasn't aware of. And then, after that, I think I was at Franklin School, and we lived at that terrible old house down on Tenth Street. And I think that was second grade, so almost in tune with those years.

I never thought of this before about how that—I just know from then on it was the Depression. Yeah. And that's all you heard about because there was no work for anybody. Nobody was building a house, My father was supposed to be a plasterer or a brick mason, and nobody built anything, and so he tried all kinds of schemes and promotions to get money.

And he got into one deal where he was promoting somebody—he had a great personality. I think he could talk anybody into anything. And he had this great idea, and he would talk people into putting up the money to do it, and I think one time he spent the money and it didn't go, and he got into real trouble. I think he was actually in jail in Oakland. And it was a terrible, terrible thing. Oh, they're accusing him of grand theft. And I loved those words: grand theft. Ooh, that's—I wonder what it was? [laughter] And I felt so sorry for him because I loved my father, and I don't think he'd do grand theft. Really! So he wasn't away very long, but it was a terrible, terrible thing he never spoke about ever. But it was hard.

He had other ideas that did get promoted. He wanted to do bottled water from the mineral springs up there in Lake County, and we got that set up. We had a labeling company and we had the whole assembly line for bottling the water, labeling and getting it out, and it didn't go at all. Nobody would buy water. But he had a good idea, didn't he? Mmm-hmm.

He had another one which failed that was to—he was a plasterer, and he figured out a way to get asbestos into the—what do they call it?—the material so that when you plastered your house with his Tectorium product, it would be fireproof, and he could color it and make you—he called it jazz plastering, and you could have red—any color you want. [Narrator Comment: He invented the product and copyrighted the name and he and his investors built a building in San Mateo and produced it.] Silver, gold; we had a silver dining room while he was fooling around with that asbestos. [laughter] Built a plant down in San Mateo, and had backers to do it.

He went into the caracal sheep business; he went into the turkeys for Thanksgiving business; we had a big ranch—yeah, but none of them worked! I'm sorry, but while the promoters were in, we had a lot of money. And then we would live in a great big house, and we'd have beautiful automobiles. He loved cars. [coughs] Everything would be just marvelous, and then it would

all fall apart, and we'd be living who-knows-where, with whom. Sent my sisters to live with relatives. Sent me to live with various people. Terrible.

01-00:31:27

Rigelhaupt:

Did your extended family, either up in Lake County or around Petaluma, have similar experiences during the Depression?

01-00:31:34

Fleig:

I think everybody did. Yeah. Everybody I knew. The only person I ever knew who made it through easily was a man who was gold-mining. We did that, too. And he and his wife were scam artists. He'd been on the police department in San Francisco, and he had an injury, and he was on disability. [coughs] And he was not disabled at all, but he wore a black sling around his neck just in case a strange car drove in. He'd put his arm in his sling. [laughter] And she had tripped at the Fox Oakland on a carpet and sued them, and she had a regular income from that. [laughter] They were the only ones I knew who made it. Anybody who worked for a living was in terrible shape.

[Narrator Comment: Others who got through without being hungry were people on farms. For quite a while, when I was about seven years old, we lived on a ranch a few miles out of Middletown. Just my Mom, Dad, me, and two of my brothers. So we had a vegetable garden, we had at least one cow or more, and my Dad had no compunctions about shooting a deer for meat. We did fine for food, and we had enough income, I think the owners of the property paid my Dad for caring for the cattle on the property, so we had a rattletrap of a car to take us to school. I always remember, when things were tight, we had to have flour and sugar from the store. People, it appeared to me, could do all right as long as they had food. Running water and electricity weren't all that necessary, food and a fireplace were mostly enough. We enjoyed living there. A cowboy worked the cattle with my Dad, and he came in in the evenings and sang ballads. He also played the Jew's Harp for us to play and for us to sing along. We wandered the hills and picked mushrooms. The Frenchman down the creek (or river) a ways told us which were good to eat. He had a pet skunk too, just removed the scent bag. We admired him greatly. He was the caretaker for the property that had been a lovely resort before the Depression.]

01-00:32:36

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the things you saw amongst your classmates? You were still at the end of elementary school age? Junior high, middle school? That children brought with them to school either in their appearance or things they were going through that were perhaps unique to that era, to the Great Depression?

01-00:33:04

Fleig:

I just loved school because school was always there. It was always clean. When they told you to do something, they gave you the materials to do it with. Everybody was so nice, always, and there was no trouble at school. It was a

very peaceful, safe place. Home was not, necessarily.

We had a lot of trouble at home. And we lived, sometimes, in terrible, old houses, and people argued a lot and people—my mother would be mad at my father because we didn't have enough food or the rent wasn't being paid or whatever, and my brothers and sisters were scattered around and whenever you saw them, they had trouble. Somebody was going to have a baby and they weren't prepared for it, and he didn't have a job, and, well, what are you going to do? And all of that going on at home. And everybody would be home for a while, and in that case—I think I always—most of my life, I slept on the couch. I'm still doing it. My son laughs. Yeah, it was terrible.

I didn't feel any of that among the kids at school. We were all probably in the same boat. I didn't like to ever get up in front of the class because usually my clothes were pinned someplace to hold them together. But every school—and I went to a lot of schools because we moved around so much—but it was always wonderful.

Except the one in Belmont. God, that's when we were in that big, beautiful house on the top of the hill, and they put me in school there. I don't know where I'd been. They put me in school there and said, "What grade is she in?" And I remember my mother said, "I think third." And then they put me in the third grade, and then they came around and said, "No, she's in the fourth grade." And I thought, well, how come they don't know what grade I'm in? That ought to be easy to figure out. And they kept moving me around. Well, we finally lost the house and we moved away from Belmont, and the next thing I knew, I think I was in fifth grade someplace. [laughter]

01-00:35:52

Rigelhaupt:

When you were in elementary school, did you have a favorite subject in school?

01-00:35:56

Fleig:

No. I loved everything they did. I was a great speller. I loved everything they had and everything they did. They gave us those beautiful books, and they were just full of wonderful things, and the teacher read to us. Oh! She read *The Secret Garden*. But they were all that way. I never had any problems at school. I just loved it.

And, boy, when I got to McChesney here in Oakland—wow. They had a Maypole and the music to go with it, and they took us down every Thursday to the auditorium and they put a big radio up on the stage, and we listened to the standard hour of music. Oh! Imagine. Right in school. It was just wonderful. I'd never heard that kind of music before. Oh! It was so wonderful.

At Oakland High, they introduced me to English literature, and I—where did they get that stuff? Oh, my God, it was marvelous! And so at the end of the

year when they said you have to turn your book in, I could not give them back that book. I don't know where I'd ever find that stuff again, and so I put it under my mattress and told my mother I lost it. And they had to pay \$3.79, but I got the book. [laughter]

So [coughs] I think when I was in school, I was so aware of school that—I finally made friends in high school, at Oakland High. Yes. But I barely remember the other kids in elementary schools. A couple of them come to mind, but not many. We weren't there long enough. We moved away quickly.

01-00:38:15

Rigelhaupt: So you started high school in about 1936?

01-00:38:20

Fleig: [Coughs] Yeah. Graduated in '39. Yeah.

01-00:38:26

Rigelhaupt: Now, you said that you had enough units to essentially start at Cal when you were done with high school.

01-00:38:35

Fleig: Yes.

01-00:38:36

Rigelhaupt: So I'm also assuming that means you had very high grades, as well?

01-00:38:40

Fleig: Means that they were good enough to get to Cal, yeah. I don't know what they were. I never had any trouble. And my brothers told me to be sure and take physics and all the science I could get. They told me the classes I had to take to go to college, so I took those. And I didn't have to take bonehead English, so I passed subject A. Yeah, I had no trouble in high school at all. I just thought it was all wonderful. They were lucky to have me, weren't they? [laughter; coughs] Green as I was. Splattered education.

01-00:39:33

Rigelhaupt: Had any of your older siblings already started at the university or any university?

01-00:39:36

Fleig: No. No. Nope. My sisters had to be married by they were eighteen. They had to get husbands. And that's what my father figured women were for, and so I never got any help at all to go to college.

In fact, they moved away from me at one point. I was working at the telephone company at night, and I was going to school in the day, and so I was hardly ever home. Just long enough to sleep and get out again. And I came home one day, and they were moving. And I said, "What do you mean, you're moving?" And they said, "Oh, we've got this wonderful ranch up in Lake County. You'll just love it! It's beautiful, and it's got a stone house, and it's

got fish ponds, and there are horses, and—” “What? I’m going to school!” “Oh, well, that’s all right. You can go later. But you’ll love it up there.” “Well, where am I going to go?” “Oh, well. Well, you can go to school later. And you don’t have to work, you know. We’ll take care of you.” “No! I’m going to school.” [laughter] Well, finally figured out who can I go live with? Because that was always the problem. Who could I go live with? Lamar and his wife, they lived out in East Oakland. I said, “I’ll call them.” “But they have a one bedroom apartment. They have a little girl. Oh, well, they’ll make room for you.” So they said, “Okay.” They had a wall-bed, so I could sleep there. [laughter] It was okay. Nobody had any problem with it but me. [Coughs] So I went another semester.

[Coughs] And then I think that’s what really made me get married. I needed a place to live, too. And that came very easily. I mean, it was time, and I was too old. I was already nineteen.

01-00:41:57

Rigelhaupt: Well, how did you meet your husband?

01-00:41:59

Fleig: [Coughs] Friend of my brother’s. And we got along beautifully. We got along just fine. So then the war started right around that time. Yeah. And so when the war started, I went full-time at the telephone company because that was your duty. Six days a week. Ugh. Well, I did that for a while, and then I said, “I can’t do this. Six days is—I’ll work at night and go to school, but I can’t do it six days a week. Because I’ve got to go to school.” So the telephone company finally gave in and let me just work weekdays, five days a week, but you get an increment for night, so that made it all right. So I could get married and move to San Francisco. In my junior year, I think.

01-00:43:10

Rigelhaupt: What was the courtship like with your husband? What was dating like at that time?

01-00:43:16

Fleig: Oh, it was fun. That was another—opened a whole world to me because we lived in Oakland and we didn’t have anything to do with San Francisco. My father wouldn’t ride the ferry because he was afraid of water, so we never went to San Francisco.

In high school, I met a little girl who introduced me to San Francisco, and the ballet, and cafes downtown and what. Oh! It was wonderful. And for fifty cents you could go to the ballet, and you could sit in the orchestra if it wasn’t full. You just walked in. And then you could go to Maiden Lane [in San Francisco] and have lunch at some fancy place. Didn’t cost hardly anything. She knew how to do it. She danced with the San Francisco Opera Ballet, and she took voice lessons, and Oakland High let her out of school every day to go to San Francisco for those lessons, and they replaced her requirements for PE

and art in the school. She took the bus everyday to San Francisco for her lessons and what. [laughter] And so she opened my eyes to the world of San Francisco.

Then my brother got a scholarship to go to art school, and so I met his friends from art school, so how I met my husband. And they opened North Beach to my little eyes, and I learned to listen to the Italian bartenders sing, and that whole world. My boyfriend, then, would take me—I would meet him in the city on Sundays, and we would go to the theater. I saw plays at the Curran and the Geary all the time. And take me to dinner, teach me how to drink wine, and that was mostly what we did in our courtship. And we went with other of their friends to art galleries. We went to museums a lot, and of course to anybody who was having a show of their work because they were all in art school. So that was a whole new world that I didn't know existed.

But I'd been reading books and learning about other people besides us because I love to read, of course. And my mother always told me, where ever we lived, she said, "Where ever you are, there's a public library. Mr. Carnegie gave them to everybody, and there's always a public library, and it's always free to anybody. So you always can use a library. Don't ever forget that. Where ever you are, there's a public library." And I never forgot it. And I read my way through them where ever we lived. So those are how those worlds opened, and I'm still going to UC Berkeley. And I'm still working at night; usually at the telephone company. But I worked a lot of places. Once I worked at the telephone company, I could do what they called a PBX, which every firm had, then, to handle their telephone systems. And once you learned PBX, you could work anywhere. And so I could always get a job quick. {First?} and temporary. I hardly ever told them it was temporary. Like I always told the telephone, "Oh, it's my career. I love the telephone company." And then I would quit, and then when I went back again, I'd say, "I'm so sorry I ever quit because you're such wonderful people. Now I want to be a service rep." Okay, they'd take me back. So I always had a good work record.

01-00:47:31

Rigelhaupt:

What year did you get married?

01-00:47:33

Fleig:

'43.

01-00:47:37

Rigelhaupt:

Had your husband already gone into the service? Did he go into the service during World War II?

01-00:47:44

Fleig:

Nobody that I knew wanted to go in. Everybody was trying to find some way to stay out. That was not the general population, I find out, but my brothers did not want to go to war. They didn't see any point in being killed. And neither did my husband and none of their friends. But they didn't want to be

drafted, either. They would rather choose what they wanted to be. So my husband chose the navy, and he made it into the Navy because [laughter]—he told them he belonged to the South End Rowing Club in San Francisco, and I guess they did, but he'd never been on the water. But because of that, he went in as Seaman First Class. So he had three little things around his wrist of his uniform.

My brother decided to go work at a mine so he could get deferred, and he did for quite a while, but he got beat up in a bar in San Francisco by three Marines one night, and that ended his civilian life. He didn't care for that. There were no civilians around. He was one of the last few. And he put a coin in the jukebox, and a Marine got up and changed it for him. Well, that's how fights start in saloons. So he decided he'd join the navy, too, and he went in and he became a corpsman.

My other brother had vision problems and something else—anyway, physical, that he was kept out. And he was a newspaper man, so he got along all right, I think, without being beat up ever.

01-00:49:54

Rigelhaupt:

Your husband was in art school. Was it at the San Francisco Art Institute, or another—?

01-00:49:58

Fleig:

San Francisco School of Fine Arts. Which is—

01-00:50:02

Rigelhaupt:

Part of the California School of Fine Arts?

01-00:50:04

Fleig:

Yeah. It was part of the University of California at that time. On Chestnut Street. It's still there.

01-00:50:13

Rigelhaupt:

And what kind of art was he studying?

01-00:50:16

Fleig:

They were all in fine art. All of them. Mmm-hmm. And their friends hung their paintings at our house, and some of them are now in the new De Young. Their instructors all have their paintings at the De Young. They were the cream of the crop around those years, apparently.

01-00:50:41

Rigelhaupt:

Did your husband talk about any of the instructors that—?

01-00:50:43

Fleig:

Oh, they talked about them all the time. Yeah.

01-00:50:46

Rigelhaupt:

Any names come to mind?

01-00:50:49

Fleig:

Oh, yes. At the De Young, they are well represented. And Diebenkorn from that period. And I forget their names now. They're well represented. Hassel Smith was one of their friends that came often to our house and hung his paintings. The great big, huge things. [laughter] We lived in a wonderful place that art students had passed down from one to the other. The rent was \$14 a month in the middle of North Beach. And so they were into hanging paintings on the ceiling, the walls, where ever you could park them for a while till they had a show or whatever. So we had all their stuff come and go out of our house. Yeah.

01-00:52:08

Rigelhaupt:

And how long had you known your husband before you got married?

01-00:52:14

Fleig:

About two years. Maybe three, anyway. It was quite a long time, actually, because I lived over here. And then when he was active in the navy, he did camouflage for the Twelfth Naval District. The camouflage department for the Twelfth Naval District consisted of two men: a lieutenant and the seaman who was my husband. They were the whole camouflage department. In other words, there was no camouflage around here. It's interesting. Here we are, the prime target for the Japanese, and that's all we had. Those two guys. And my husband applied for officer training school, so he didn't do that. Well, he was there quite a long time, I guess. I was busy.

01-00:53:31

Rigelhaupt:

Did he talk about what some of his day-to-day duties were when he was in that department?

01-00:53:39

Fleig:

He drew a lot of pictures. He wrote me a lot of letters across the Bay. I'd get a letter a day from him because he had nothing else to do. He had two-hour lunches. He and the lieutenant went out to lunch together, and—no, he didn't do anything according to him. They designed camouflage for ships, and they designed camouflage for buildings, but these are all on paper. And they were in the basement of the Federal Building. They had a very nice location. And I was going to school, so I didn't care what he did.

01-00:54:43

Rigelhaupt:

I'm just going to pause right there and change tapes.

Begin Audio File 2 07-09-2008.mp3

02-00:00:06

Rigelhaupt:

Okay. I'm on tape number two with Denise Fleig. I want to switch forward to World War II.

02-00:00:15

Fleig:

Here we are.

02-00:00:16

Rigelhaupt:

And what do you remember hearing about Pearl Harbor as—?

02-00:00:21

Fleig:

Oh! I remember that day very clearly. However we heard it. I worked at the telephone company. I was working nights at the telephone company, and we got off work at the building on Franklin Street and heard it then. Because I got off work at midnight. It must have been the taxi driver because if women worked after 11 o'clock, employer had to send you home in a taxi. So when we get off at midnight, the taxi would be waiting for us, and I think I heard it from him because nobody went to bed. The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor! And President Roosevelt says we're at war! He's declaring war! Oh, my God! Oh, what will that mean? What does that mean? Oh, my God. They'll do the draft. Everybody'll have to go to war. Yeah. Everybody'll have to be drafted, now. Everybody. Oh, I wonder what that'll mean. Oh, yeah, what if you have a job and family and all? Wonder what that'll be? Sure going to change everything. Sure will. Oh, my God. I remember very clearly feeling that way. Everything's going to change. Everything. Well, we'd had a war going on for a while in Europe, so people were being drafted, but not everybody.

02-00:02:29

Rigelhaupt:

But the US hadn't entered the war at that point, but what I was going to—

02-00:02:35

Fleig:

Well, they jabbered about it though. We had Lend-Lease, and we had to help the British, and there was that madman running around Europe, and we'll get into it sometime in spite of what Lindbergh says, and those people. We'll get into it. But we're way out here in California. It's so far from us. Why would you want to get involved in that? But, my God, when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, oh! Sunk all our ships; killed all those thousands of people; oh, just came over out of the blue and bombed the Hell out of everything? God, imagine. Lord, they'll be at the door. No, they won't be at the door. No, they just came to Pearl Harbor. No, they're not here. No, no, no. No, but we're in a war, and what does that mean? Eww. I wonder. Your future just became blah.

02-00:04:03

Rigelhaupt:

Now, was there a sense that the US might potentially get into a war before Pearl Harbor, or was that a complete surprise?

02-00:04:12

Fleig:

No, to me and my people I was around, that was a complete surprise. We knew they were fooling around in the Pacific, but there wasn't any issue of our being any threat to the Japanese or their being any threat to us. That was so far away. I don't think it was even in the news, anything about the Pacific. We always had a big fleet at Pearl Harbor. That was a real gem. We were so proud of our Pacific Fleet and all those wonderful ships and all, but that's all. Never knew what they were there for. It was far away. Far away. Yeah.

Whereas because we're in California, although it was at our door, no one was

aware of that because we're in California and all of what goes on in the country is in the east. Washington's in the east; New York is in the east; and everything that takes place in the United States takes place there. We're part of it, but really out on the edge. Really out on the edge. No jet airplanes. Not much communication between us and the east. And they were close to a war. Those people were close, so that's the war we heard about. And in California, we still talk about the Far East. It's directly west of us, Japan is, but we still call it the Far East, which is pretty ridiculous, but that's how we always thought of it, just like the people in Washington do. It's east of us because it's across the United States and then over there.

02-00:06:36

Rigelhaupt:

Was there any sense, living in the Bay Area, that there was the potential for this region to come under attack in the sense that the next logical stop from Pearl Harbor was California?

02-00:06:47

Fleig:

Yes. After the initial shock that they only did Pearl Harbor, and it was terrible, they've shot their wad, so it's over, but we have to go get them now. We have to retaliate. Now, what we were going to do to retaliate? Japan's a long ways away. But, see, we didn't know about all those islands in between that they occupied, or even that they were there. Come on. Only people in the navy. So it was a little while before somebody said, "Oh! They have submarines. They could invade us from—" Well, they couldn't invade us, but they could certainly attack us. Oh. Oh, yeah. Okay. We've got to beware.

So then we had blackout along the coast. Yeah. And we had the net that hung under the Golden Gate Bridge to keep submarines out, and the Nike sites on the hills over Marin that are still there. And we were going to fortify the Golden Gate—I mean Fort Point. And Nike sites are above Fort Point. And so all those precautions got taken, then, to protect us. Yeah. But it was a while, from my point of view, before that sunk in. And then we had to start working six days at the telephone company. We got overtime, but still six days. Everybody had to work harder than they ever did before then. Because they took all the men right away.

02-00:08:53

Rigelhaupt:

How do you remember learning about the war effort? Was it through newspapers, news reels, radio?

02-00:09:01

Fleig:

Oh, newspaper. Daily newspaper, it was. The daily newspapers came out with a morning edition, a late morning edition, an early afternoon, a late afternoon, and an evening edition. Newsstands were the big thing: the headlines on the newsstands of each edition of the paper. And you could buy newspapers, of course, on every corner. Your home delivery newspaper might be kind of old material when you got it home because the newspapers were picking up wire services all the time about the war. Hourly, practically, reports of what was

going on in the war.

Then, of course, there was the newsreel because you went to the movies and saw the newsreels which were fascinating because that's the only picture you ever had. And then I don't know when Life magazine started out with those beautiful pictures and picture stories of the war. It was up front all the time. And among your own people, it was who was being drafted and who went in and where they put them and where they're going, and then it got to be how do you work your way through this system?

02-00:10:32

Rigelhaupt:

Could you describe how the Bay Area changed and maybe if you want to talk a little bit about differences you saw in Oakland and San Francisco, having lived in both, and since so many people moved to the region for jobs, and the population exploded? And you could talk about what it was like seeing all these people move into the Bay Area.

02-00:11:02

Fleig:

Well, your housing got really scarce. We were so lucky to have that place in San Francisco in North Beach. Everybody was scrounging for housing, and we had that place. And nobody else would want it, that was for sure, but we were glad to have it.

I don't know how soon it was, but very early on it was hard to get tires for the cars. If you had a car, you were lucky, because you couldn't get gas. Ordinary people couldn't get—you were allowed so many gallons of gas a month, I guess, or what. You had a ticket, and a T ticket was a truck. T ticket, I think you could buy all the gas you wanted, or you needed. But that was only for trucks. But if you knew somebody with a truck, you could get gasoline, probably, from them.

Black markets flourished everywhere about everything. I was never participated in a black market. I never had enough money to buy anything on a black market, but if you had money you could get anything you needed. You had a coupon to get shoes, and you had a coupon to get meat, and you had a coupon to get sugar, and those just day-to-day ordinary things were just really big and new in our lives.

Cigarettes were very short because Lucky Strike Green had gone to war. That Lucky Strike package was green, and they changed it to white because they needed that metal that was in the color to make green. And then if you could find cigarettes—because they all went to the military—then a lot of odd brands showed up, and I remember my sister Joanne decided to take up smoking at that time, and we had to smoke Regents because of her. [laughter]

Those little personal things I remember very clearly. The general picture, I don't think I was all that much aware except that I remember sitting on the

train and thinking, I wonder what the train would look like if all of the men were in civilian clothes because every man in the train is in uniform. And I can read every uniform. I know every branch of the service. I know all the insignias on the shoulder and on the collars and what they all mean. I know what their rank is. Some of them, like the Marines, would have Guadalcanal One on their patch if they'd been there; Tarawa, or whatever. Sailors from different countries were to be seen on the trains, too. The British soldiers were fun to see. Australian, yeah, in those hats. But they were all in uniform. Every man was. So what would the train look like if they were in civilian clothes. You wouldn't be able to tell what they did. You wouldn't be able to tell anything about them. I wonder how they'd dress? What would they look like? Hmm.

It was a military world. Everything revolved around the military. A friend of mine came back from Guadalcanal; we went to dinner, and the whole restaurant got up and drank to him as soon as they saw that patch. He was a Marine, and he'd been at Guadalcanal. The whole restaurant got up and cheered and toasted him. He was so embarrassed he could have died. But that was the feeling around.

Now, the people that came didn't touch us because like in Richmond, they all lived in the housing complexes in Richmond. There was probably all of Richmond open for them to live in. Nobody lived there anyway. And when they got the shipyards going, then they built housing for them at the same time so they were all over there in one place. In Marin County, they built Marin City temporary housing for them, and everybody that was of a different color in Marin County lived in Marin City. So they didn't touch anybody else and they all worked down there in the shipyards in Sausalito. So we didn't see them at all, and they never crossed paths with us because they didn't go to the grocery stores we went to or anything.

Other ethnics that were here before, like I say, the only ones I was ever aware of were the Japs, and that was because my father said, if they're in your class at school, they're going to get the A's, and you'll have to beat them because the Japs always do. But that was when we lived in the peninsula, and the Japanese had the cut-flower industry on the peninsula. And next to our house, the whole hill was covered with sweet-peas. And the Japanese people worked in the flowers all day, and my mother would give me ten cents to go out to the Japs and buy some flowers. And I would go with my ten cents out into the middle of the field and find one of those people and give them ten cents and I would get a huge bouquet of flowers. Never talked to them that I recall. Whether they were in school, I don't know. I didn't pay any attention.

My folks talked about wops, the dumb Swedes—well, anybody of a different ethnic group. Polaks and—there weren't any around here that I ever saw—and a lot of wops. Jews—kikes—were around. My little friend, Joan Devine I knew at school, and I come home and told everybody how I liked her so

much, and my brother said, “What’s her name?” And I said, Joan Devine. And they said, “Joan Devine? You got a little kike friend, huh? Hey, ma, she’s got a kike friend. Joan Devine.” I said, “What are you talking about?” They said, “She’s a Jew, for God’s sake. Don’t you know that?” I said, “Well, okay. Okay. I won’t talk about her anymore.” But I didn’t know what their problem was. And I was probably eleven or twelve then.

I could never see any differences among these people. None of us did when we were grown. None of us ever felt anything against anybody of any other color or race. We went to school with these people, for goodness, all our lives. And they were just other kids in school like everybody else, so how could you distinguish between a wop and a Swede anyway? Wops come all colors, and so do Swedes, so what—none of us ever thought that made any sense. And I think that if you grew up in California, that was probably your feeling, even in that age. Your own experience told you that was foolishness.

Now black people weren’t around, so there was no problem. They weren’t in school with us. They all lived in West Oakland and they all went to the schools in West Oakland. They went to their neighborhood schools. I don’t remember ever having black people at school, ever. Anywhere. Not even at UC Berkeley. They just didn’t figure. They weren’t present. They were quite right about that.

02-00:20:29

Rigelhaupt:

Now, it sounds as though there was some anti-Japanese sentiment in the Bay Area of California long before Pearl Harbor.

02-00:20:34

Fleig:

Yes. Yes, there was. Yeah. It was like it was ingrained. In my father? Where would he get that idea? Well, there was one Chinaman left in Lake County. He worked in the kitchen at the little hotel in town, and he was called the Chinaman. I never heard anybody ever refer to him by name. He was an old man. He was left over from when they worked in the mines up there. And there were thousands of Chinese in Lake County in the quicksilver mines in the 1800s.

02-00:21:21

Rigelhaupt:

Then jumping forward to the months just after Pearl Harbor, what do you remember about the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans?

02-00:21:30

Fleig:

About the internment? Very little. I wasn’t aware, really, of that that I can say. I lived in San Francisco, probably, then. I didn’t know any Japanese people. Never had, in my life, known any Japanese people. The people who live here now who lived in Oakland at that time and were interned, I’m just amazed at what they tell me. They grew up here! They were born here! I learned a lot from the people who live here that I’ve asked questions of. But I was not aware that they were being taken away. I didn’t know anybody. Didn’t know

anybody who knew them. Must have been in the papers, but it's just news in the paper. It's what they do, and the president said they had to go, so they had to, whoever they were. Absolutely nothing. And I don't think that I've just forgotten. I don't remember ever being aware of them at all.

02-00:22:54

Rigelhaupt:

Now, but living in North Beach, did you ever notice a similar rise in anti-Italian sentiment in the sense the US was now at war against Italy?

02-00:23:04

Fleig:

No. Oh, it was Mussolini. It wasn't the Italians. No, it was Mussolini we were at war with. Yeah. All the Italian people are wonderful. Well, look at them all around us. They're marvelous. Yeah. No, I don't remember at all. But I had a friend who I was teaching with at St. Mary's whose father was a German doctor, and they lived in Oakland, and he had a practice. She went to Oakland High at the same time I did. And her father had to be moved out of this area because he was an alien, and they went to live in Michigan or someplace away from the coast. They had to be inland. I'd never heard of that before. That was news to me in the last few years. So maybe among the Italians, but we were living in the middle of North Beach and surrounded by Italians, who all spoke their own language all the time, and our grocery store was someplace so foreign to me I had to ask Gina all the time what these things were and how to use them. So I wasn't aware of anything ever in San Francisco against Italians. No. And I don't think there were that many Japanese in San Francisco then, either. Chinese, yeah.

02-00:24:55

Rigelhaupt:

Well, I was going to ask about the Japanese—?

02-00:24:57

Fleig:

They were out there where they are now, if there were any.

02-00:24:59

Rigelhaupt:

—in the Western Addition, which now—well, not so much now, but up until, say, about 2000, since World War II, was a predominantly African American neighborhood, but until the internment and the evacuation of Japanese and Japanese Americans, that had been a Japanese neighborhood.

02-00:25:17

Fleig:

Yeah. That's where they were. Yeah. They were out there. Yeah. Uh-huh. And we never had a car in San Francisco, so we ran around our own neighborhood. Now, when you live in North Beach, you don't have much occasion to go anyplace else. To the zoo and to the beach. Otherwise, there wasn't anyplace in San Francisco I ever wanted to go. We did go to the Golden Gate Park a lot. We went to the beach a lot. We went to the museums. But we didn't go into the neighborhoods. We all lived in North Beach. We'd go to Chinatown all the time to eat, but that's all. And you walked to most places. Took the street car down to Market Street {to get the?} car to go to the terminal to get on the train to go to Oakland.

02-00:26:30  
Rigelhaupt: Well, let's shift gears to your work at Kaiser.

02-00:26:32  
Fleig: Which?

02-00:26:34  
Rigelhaupt: To your work at Kaiser?

02-00:26:36  
Fleig: What year?

02-00:26:37  
Rigelhaupt: Your work at Kaiser?

02-00:26:38  
Fleig: Yeah.

02-00:26:39  
Rigelhaupt: Welding? And your work at Yard Two?

02-00:26:42  
Fleig: Yeah. Right.

02-00:26:43  
Rigelhaupt: So if you could describe how you got interested in becoming a welder and the beginnings of your work there?

02-00:26:51  
Fleig: Yeah. Well, I was at Cal, and I was—my husband was in the navy, then. And he was downtown at the Federal Building every day. And we lived in that little place in North Beach. So we just had barely income enough to live on, of course, which was always the case. And these people were working in the shipyard, and they were making money like crazy. But that wasn't my goal. I wanted to be a labor mediator. And so I was enrolled in Clark Kerr's classes in collective bargaining and economics.

And my brother was advising me and my brother got on the War Manpowers Board, and they dealt with all the manpower for the war in the Bay Area. So they were manning all the stuff going on at Kaiser shipyards. And he said, "You know what you ought to do? You ought to get some firsthand experience in real work, and I would suggest you get a job in the shipyards. They're hiring thousands of people. They pay like crazy. It would be good experience for you to work with working people because you really never have. And so I suggest you go out there and see what you can get a job doing." And so I said, "Oh, okay." He says, "You'll make enough money to get back in school probably full-time, then. You won't have to work and go to school. And you can be full-time at it." So I said, "Okay. That sounds like a good idea. It'll further my career."

So I went and applied at Richmond, and I expected to get some kind of a decent job. I didn't know what they did at the shipyards, but everything obviously. And so they said, "Do you want to be a welder?" And I said, "What's that?" And they said, "Well, we'll teach you to do it, and it pays \$50 a week and time-and-a-half for overtime if you work six days." So that's about \$70 a week. Ah, God! I thought, Lord's sake. Okay. "You'll teach?" "Yeah, we teach you and take care of you and all." "Okay. Fine. Whatever you say." So that's how I became a welder. And they sent me to school to be a welder.

[chuckling] Those guys were wonderful. They had never dealt with women before. This was all brand new to everybody. And there were all kinds of us together there. There weren't many people at UC [laughter] going to welding school. For one thing, it was in Richmond, and I lived in San Francisco. So if I was going to work for the shipyards and be in San Francisco, I should have been at the Sausalito yards, whoever they were. But they weren't Kaiser, and my brother was a big support of Kaiser. He thought they were just wonderful. So okay. "Take Richmond because it's so huge and there are just millions of jobs over there. There won't be any trouble getting a job." "Okay." So I did.

Okay, well, welding was okay because I think that was nine-to-five hours. And it was three weeks in welding school. And I really enjoyed that. It's just like sewing. You're putting two pieces of metal together, and you've got to put them together in some way they'll stick together. And the thing that sticks them together has to be stronger than either one of them. My God, isn't that fun? And welding makes a beautiful pattern. It's just even and pretty if you do it right. But you can have bubbles in a weld, and if there's bubbles in the weld and you can't see them, it'll break. So it's no joke. Okay, I get the picture.

And those guys were real nice, and they were also very persnickety and they would test your welds for bubbles and uneven—you had to do it right. They were very good. You had to do it right. Okay. So once they said you could graduate, you could weld anything then, which kind of scared me because I thought, I wonder what people are depending on my welds? Where? I hope I'm good enough at this and I know what I'm doing.

And then there was the gear. Oh, Jesus. The gear. A leather suit; coveralls of leather with a jacket. A leather jacket. Heavy leather. Gloves with the big gauntlet like that to catch anything coming this way so it would never get on your hands. Then you had to wear gloves under the gauntlet gloves. And they're heavy, heavy leather. We had my glove on the mantle for years because my glove was like this; solid slag. Just my right hand glove. The other one was kind of straight. And then boots. You had to have boots to your knees because of slag, again. And heavy boots. And then you had to wear a hat or your hair all tied up tight. You couldn't have one hair exposed. And then to put the hood on top of that. And then there was all your hose because there's

just yards and miles of hose you have to carry around. And then your gear, the welding rods and whatnot.

So by the time you got dressed in the morning—first at home to lace up the damn boots and get over there—I had to take the ferry from San Francisco and I had to be at work in the yard at 7:00. So I had to take the ferry at 6:00. At least 6:00. You have to get over there and then walk from the ferry landing to the bay where your ship was. And then you had your locker there with all your gear in it and then you had to get dressed in all of that stuff after you got there, and you got paid from the time, I think, the ferry landed—no, you got paid from the time you hit your ship. Yeah. That was your starting time. You had to be there by 7:00. So I guess it was the 6 o'clock ferry out of San Francisco.

And then to get the ferry by 6:00, I had to be up at 4:30 because it took at least a half an hour to get dressed with those boots to lace and all those clothes to put on. Had to wear—it's cold down there—flannel shirts and undershirts and other jackets and what. So it took a long time to get dressed. And then I had to get down to the ferry building and the streetcar didn't start running until 5:30, and I had to be down there at 6:00. And so anyway the streetcars didn't run in time for me to get down to the ferry, so I had to get a taxi every morning down to the ferry building.

Well, to the people who were getting their ferry to go to the shipyards, arriving in a taxi was not quite the usual strata. [laughter] And so they used to laugh when I'd get out of the taxi. "Here she comes! Here's Taxi." "Hey, Taxi here yet this morning?" So that was my name. "Taxi's here. Yeah, we can go." And every morning we went through this whole routine.

And then to get dressed and get to work, well, I was assigned to double-bottoms. And the double-bottoms on a liberty ship—or as they called them, the liberty boats—are squares about two feet, as I recall. And they have to be welded together because they hold all the ballast. Whether it's water or whatever it is. And it flows between them, but they open and close these categories in certain units. So anyway, my job was to work with flangers.

The flangers put the metal in place and held it, and I welded, which is the worst place you can possibly be in a ship. You're below the waterline. It's dark. The only light is from your weld when you hit your rod against the metal. The flangers—there's two of them. One on this side of you, one on that side of you, holding these big metal plates together. They're heavy, apparently. And these guys all used snuff, so they smelled mostly of snuff and other stuff. But they're on top of you all the time. They're right up against you holding the {stuff?}. Be sure you get your welding rod in the right place. They have to guide you because you can't see a damn thing. [chuckling] And it's just so tight and cramped and stinking. The weld makes smoke, too, so it's hot. And it's just the worst conditions you can imagine to work under. And

these guys don't like it, either. We all went out of there as soon as possible.

And I never got to know my flangers. I think I might have different ones every day. They had to wear protective gear, as well. And there wasn't anything to do but your job. You just did as many of those as you possible could in time for lunch. And then, oh, good God, you'd get to have lunch. You'd get out of there for, I don't know, forty-five minutes or something, and then back you'd go again.

The only other welding I did which I really liked was when they had me do the little fences up on the top of the rear—aft. There's a fence and a railing, and I welded those posts to the deck. And it was outside. The wind was blowing. I was all by myself. Just do those posts and when you get through, report in. And that was a real pleasure to do those little posts. And I just hope those were good welds because if any guy ever fell over by leaning against my fence, that would be terrible. [laughter]

So that was the work situation, which was just awful. And I think I probably only did it for a few months. I couldn't do it six days. I always fell off the sixth day. I never made all that money. I made my \$50. But the sixth day, I just collapsed. And I was so tired every night, I had to go to bed at 8:30 to get up at 4:30. And once I actually ran into the door of the bathroom {full front?} [laughter].

It was the people that I met there that were really just wonderful and opened my eyes, I'll tell you, to people I'd never been around before. We got off to a good start because I came in a taxi and they'd always laugh about that. "Why do you have to come in a taxi?" And, "How much money do you have? You don't need to work in a shipyard because you're goddamn rich. Where do you live?" "She comes from Russian Hill." Oh, Jesus. Well, I did. And so that was a big joke. That was a big joke. Why does she have to work in the shipyard?

And there weren't very many women in the group. It was mostly men on that ferry in the mornings. So the few women there were tended to gather together. Everybody on that ferry was from someplace east that I'd never contacted before. The ones that I got most well acquainted with were from Arkansas. And all I knew about Arkansas was what I'd read in books about the hillbillies of Arkansas. Well, these were people from Little Rock. And the girl I knew best had worked in a mop factory in Little Rock. And we commented to her, one time—she didn't have real heavy boots, and she had sores around her tops of her ankles; her feet—and I said, "You know, Connie, you should go to the infirmary and have something done about those sores on your feet. Or get some big boots. You shouldn't have those."

02-00:41:55

Rigelhaupt:

One sec. Your mic—

02-00:41:59

Fleig: [sounds of microphone adjustment] Oh, my microphone fell off. How long has it been off?

02-00:42:03

Rigelhaupt: Just one second. It's no problem.

02-00:42:06

Fleig: How did it—oh, it's just a little clip, huh? And it goes up here somewhere? Well, I'll never get it. My fingers won't do it. They don't have any strength anymore.

02-00:42:21

Rigelhaupt: So just before your mic fell off, you were talking about Connie and the sores and potentially going to the infirmary.

02-00:42:26

Fleig: Yes. And her ankles. And I told her she should go to the infirmary and have those taken care of, and she said, "Oh, it's all right Taxi, 'cause—" she said, "when I worked in the mop factory, you know, the floors, they're just falling through all the time. Those boards is rotten. And so the floor would go through and I'd have cuts on my ankles all the time, so it don't matter. Maybe some of them are old from there. You know, that's how it was." I said, "The floor fell in on you when you're working?" "Oh, Taxi, you don't know. Them places is terrible. It's a terrible place to work. You don't know."

Well, that was Connie, I called her. And so one day, she said, "You know, Taxi, my name ain't Connie." I said, "It isn't? How'd I call you Connie?" She said, "My name's Tiny." I said, "Oh, Tiny." "Yeah." I said, "Oh, Connie, and you let me call you by the wrong name all this time." She said, "Oh, it's all right." I said, "No, it's isn't. Your name's Tiny, your name's Tiny. It isn't Connie." So I said, "Well, Tiny's a nickname. So what—" "No," she says, "Tiny's my name." I said, "But that's—didn't your mom named you something else and then that's a nickname for some other name?" "Oh, yeah. Well, my name's really Palestine." "Oh, really? Palestine's your name?" "Yeah, and it's just Tiny for short." "Oh, okay. Uh-huh. Well, you've got a lot of brothers and sisters. What were there names?" "Mary-Beth and Liza-Sue and—" All of them she named off, just ordinary names, and she's named Palestine. I said, "Well, that's kind of unusual. Do you know where your mother got it?" "No, I don't know where she picked it up. That's my name." "Okay. Okay."

I'd never heard that accent before. It was just more fun to listen to her talk, and then she'd say things like—I said, "How'd you get out here, Connie?" "Oh, I come with friends. We all together." I said, "Well, where do you live?" "Oh, we got an apartment. We got it all together. And I don't know where it is. I just go home every night. I don't know the name of the street." I'd say, "Oh, well, I just wondered. And you all live there together?" I said, "How

many of you?" "Oh, there's a lot of us. But it's all right, Taxi. We got it figured out. See, some of us work days; some of us work night shift; and some work graveyard. So we just put our palettes down, and that's our space."

And I said, "You put your palettes down?" "Yeah." I said, "What's a palette?" "You don't know what a palette is?" [laughter] "No, I don't know what a palette is." "Oh, Taxi, you're so funny! The palette's—well, it's a bed!" "Oh," I said. "Well, you know, you just put down a blanket and blanket on top and a blanket on top, and pretty soon you got a palette, and then you just roll that up and then somebody else puts their palette down, and that's how we all live together, Taxi." And I said, "Oh, my God." She said, "Well, it works fine 'cause we all come out together. We all know each other."

And I said, "Well, when you go back, where—you said you send money to your mother every week." "Oh yeah, 'cause my mother's taking care of my girls. I got two girls, Taxi. And my mother takes care of them, and so I send her money every week for the girls and her. But I'd like to save some of this money. You know, Taxi, I'm making a lot of money and I don't need it. And I send some to my mother but I'd like to save it. Taxi, you can tell me, how do you get money in a bank?" And I said, "You just walk in and tell them you want to start an account." "Can anybody just walk in any bank?" I said, "Sure you can. Yeah." "Well, I never been in one, Taxi, so who would I—"

And this man was sitting across the aisle, then, I remember. Charlie. And he said, "Jesus, I'll take you and show you how to get into a bank." And she said, "Will you really?" And we had talked to him before. And he said, "Sure. Jesus. You just go in and go up to a teller and tell them you want to open an account, Connie. There's nothing to it." "Oh," she said. "I'd like to do it, but then I've got to be able to get it out." He said, "There's no problem. I'll show you." So she said, "Okay."

She said, "You know, I'm going to do this just as long as I can. And if I could save enough money, when I get home, I could buy a little house, you know? And if we had a little house and we had a cow and some chickens, we'd be set. We'd be set for life. If I can just get that much saved." And I thought, "Oh, my God." And, you see, it almost makes me cry to hear her now. Because I'm sure she did it, somehow or another. I'm sure, where ever she is, she made it. She was just a wonderful little lady.

And we were sitting out in the sun behind the bow of the ship. There was dirt, and you could sit there, and the bay was right there. And seagulls were sitting there, and we were throwing them food, and they were eating. And she said, one day, "You know, Taxi? I just think that them's the prettiest birds." I said, "They are pretty birds." She said, "People don't like them, though." I said, "Yeah, I know. 'Cause they eat anything." But I said, "They're beautiful birds." "Whatcha call them, Taxi? What do you call them? What's their

name?" I said, "Those are seagulls." "Oh, them's seagulls?" "Yeah." "Well, I think they're pretty." [laughter] I said, "They are pretty. No matter what people say, they're pretty." And I thought, "Bless your dear heart, you know. You would just love to learn everything."

And one day when we were on the ferry, she was looking out the window, and she said, "Taxi, can you tell me what makes that water go up and down like that? Is them waves?" "Yes, those are waves." "You tell me what make them do that? How come it do that?" And I don't know what I tried to answer her. Or maybe I said I don't know, it just does. But I thought, you know, it's just education. That dear lady, if she had an education, just imagine what she could probably do. She's got the drive. She's honest as the day is long. She's an extremely moral person. She's got everything. She just never went to school, or very far in school. And she worked in a mop factory where the floor fell in and her legs got cut to ribbons and there was nothing you could do about it. Jesus. That is just terrible, terrible.

And there were others in that group that were like her. Hardworking. Really nice people. And that's where I met my first blacks from the south, too. Because they blended right in on that ferry boat with everybody. And you couldn't tell the difference except some of them, I learned, had a real southern drawl. They were from Alabama or Georgia. And her accent was very different, the ones from Arkansas. And Charlie; I think Charlie was from the east. He didn't have what I call a southern accent. He might have been from Tennessee or a little farther north. He and Tiny finally got to dating, actually. He showed her how to do the bank and all, and then he sort of took her under his wing and showed her some other things. And then I think they dated.

But it was just a wonderful experience for me to actually meet those people and live with them day-by-day. She worked as a welder in the same yard, and I finally did get her to go into the infirmary and get her ankles fixed. They made her get boots and to take care of herself. I don't think she'd ever been to anyplace like the Kaiser infirmary. I got a piece of steel in my eye one day, and found out what a great infirmary they had there. And it became the Kaiser hospitals, of course. Their medical clinic, first one, was in Richmond out at the yards. But she got taken care of, then.

And the way they lived—I asked her how they ate and what, because she said, one time, "I was so embarrassed this morning before work." She said, "I got up to go to work and found out there's no milk. Somebody left and didn't replace the milk." She said, "Well, I had to have something to eat before I come to work, so," she said, "I'm in my long-johns and I got to go down to the store," so she said, "I said, oh, I don't care. I put my coat on, pulled my long-johns up above my knees, went down," and she says, "then the long-johns fell down and I'm walking down the street. Oh," she said, "I was so embarrassed I could hardly stand it!" She says, "I got that milk and I ran

home. Just terrible. I hope they never do that to me again. And I'll never go out in my long-johns again. Ever." [laughter] Just a wonderful experience. Yeah.

02-00:54:55

Rigelhaupt: I'm going to pause right there to change tapes.

Begin Audio File 3 07-09-2008.mp3

03-00:00:01

Fleig: And those of us who rode the ferry were another group.

03-00:00:05

Rigelhaupt: Okay. So I'm on tape number three with Denise Fleig. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the social world in which Tiny came into in the sense—you said she was from Arkansas. And certainly one of the terms from that era, certainly from the 1930s and going into World War II, was Okie.

03-00:00:26

Fleig: Yeah. Okies.

03-00:00:28

Rigelhaupt: Arkie.

03-00:00:29

Fleig: Yeah.

03-00:00:30

Rigelhaupt: And those were not necessarily terms of endearment.

03-00:00:32

Fleig: Oh, no they weren't. No.

03-00:00:34

Rigelhaupt: And so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how those terms were used; if you think if affected people who came from—

03-00:00:43

Fleig: Oh, yes.

03-00:00:43

Rigelhaupt: —the Midwest, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and how it affect their chances to get different jobs, where they could live—

03-00:00:51

Fleig: Oh, yeah. There was terrible prejudice against them. If they got the name Arkie or they talked like that—if they didn't talk with a California accent, there's something wrong with them. And it wasn't good. We never heard New England accents. Those were foreign to us. But Midwestern, the Okies, yeah. That was familiar from the thirties. There weren't many of them left in San Francisco. They went to the valleys around, but not in the city. But my

husband's family were from Oakdale in the Central Valley, and the Okies settled down there, and then a lot of them came up to work in the shipyards, of course, in Richmond and all around. There was a lot of defense industry around that I wasn't aware of; it was under every tree, I think. Once you worked in a defense industry, you had to stay in defense. You couldn't do non-defense work.

So the Okies were scattered all through the community by then, and you could tell them by their accent. They don't lose it overnight. And there's real discrimination against them; yes. They're dumb, for one thing. They're farmers, for one thing, so they're not urban dwellers, like us, who are several stages above rural people. They're ignorant. They're unschooled. None of them ever went to college, that's for sure. And if they were from Arkansas like Tiny, see, I thought they were all hillbillies. And hillbillies are rude, uneducated, boorish, no manners. You just didn't know what to expect of them. And we had lived, when my father was gold mining, up in the mountains of California where people pretty well fit the picture of a hillbilly in that they didn't go to school past seventh grade usually. That was my neighbors in Spanish Flat [a gold-mining town in '49].

Their humor was built around scatological stuff, usually, or other what I call dirty stories. Just people you really didn't want to be around. They probably chewed tobacco and thought it was fun to get drunk Saturday night and be in fights was their idea of entertainment. They didn't read books. They weren't interested in anything except what their neighbors were doing or their cows were doing or their animals. They hunted. They weren't any people you'd want to be around, certainly. And that's what I ran into in the foothills—or up in the mountains of California. And so when people talked about Arkies and Okies, I associated them with those people, and I didn't want to be around them either.

Tiny was the first one I ever knew. And I worked with her everyday and rode the ferry with her morning and night, and got to know her well and realized she's a fine person, and that was a real awakening for me. And so then I looked at them all in a different light. I tried to dismiss the accent and look at them as people and individuals, and found out some of them had been to school and some of them are really nice people, just like Tiny. She's the one that opened my eyes, though. But among the general population, I think people felt like I did about them and didn't want to have anything to do with them. I didn't know anybody who was an employer, but I didn't know any of them where I worked.

Oh, yeah. I worked for the Wessex Electric Heater Company. They were the biggest electric heating in the area. And they were the most liberal, outgoing employers I ever worked for, and they had Okies working for them. The secretary was an Okie. And some of the people in the office. Because I ran the

PBX there; got to know the office people. So they got hired as they got assimilated, but I think it was very hard for them when they first came. And like Tiny said, going down to the store with her long-johns falling down, that was a terrible thing to do. And she knew it was a terrible thing to do in San Francisco. I don't think it would have been bad in Little Rock—so bad. She was very sensitive and aware of the fact that she didn't belong there. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

03-00:07:04

Rigelhaupt: Now, you mentioned that you got steel in your eye.

03-00:07:08

Fleig: Uh-huh.

03-00:07:09

Rigelhaupt: And I'm wondering, did you see other workers who got injured while they were working in the shipyards?

03-00:07:13

Fleig: Oh, yes. Oh. Well, did I see them? I saw them in the infirmary. I only worked with two flangers. That ship, [laughter] I don't know what was going on. But no. You couldn't wear any jewelry. Anybody in the yard, you couldn't wear anything. You couldn't have anything on. My wedding rings had to go. Nothing that could possibly hurt you on your body. You had to be clean and stuffed with clothing and with safety gear. I had safety glasses that I wore under my hood, and it was when I had the safety glasses off and was doing something with my hood up, and the rod hit metal accidentally. And it was just a spot, but I did get a little piece of steel in my eye. I didn't feel it at first, and then you know how it feels when you have something in your eye; you keep rubbing it and keep rubbing it and keep rubbing it, and it doesn't get better. And so by afternoon it was really bad. It really hurt, so I—I got to go and have it—see what happened to my eye. And so I went up there and they had fits because I should have reported it immediately. The steel starts rusting immediately when it hits the salt in your eye—the cornea—and when it starts rusting, it spreads very, very fast. And so it has to be removed immediately. So it had been in there a few hours, so they had fits, and had to scrape the cornea. And they deadened it to do that so it didn't hurt at the time, but oh, God, for two or three days it was just awful. Couldn't touch the patch, and what. And so they took good care of me. But it was a huge infirmary and it was full of people.

I'm sure that they did everything they could to keep people safe, but it's a terribly dangerous place to work. When the ship—they put the sides up and they get the bottoms in, and then they start filling the ship. Well, they do it from the bottom up, so the last thing is anything up on the deck or the top, and before they lay that deck up there, there's just—to get from one side of the ship to the other, you have to walk all the way around the ship, or you walk across planks that they have slung across the middle. And they're two two-by-

fours. So it's twenty-four inches wide. And it bounces when you walk. And down below is just nothing: machinery and stuff. And I had to go from one side of the ship to another with my flangers. I'm supposed to walk across there with all this gear on me and all those hoses hanging on my arms, and I have vertigo. I've had all my life. [laughter] And I'd get about half way across, and that thing would start bouncing from the guys in front of me, and I thought sure as Hell I'm going to crash at the bottom any day. So I think I did it once and then I said never again. If you want me on the other side, I'm walking around. You'll have to wait for me. So they did. They had to wait for me. I had the right to do that, so. But you can imagine. The noise is absolutely deafening. And it was my impression that if you lose your hearing because of noise like that, I seemed to lose all awareness. I couldn't see. I couldn't feel anything. It was just awful. Just awful. And so I was scared all the time, I think. I think I was scared every minute something would hit me from someplace because these huge—those wheelies that are the cranes—they carried the cranes. We called them wheelies. They're running up and down tracks right beside you all the time, and people are running back and forth, and there are all sorts of wheeled vehicles coming and going with no rhyme or reason. So to pick your way through this: ah! It's fine in the morning when they're all going one way, but during the day, oh no. You don't want to be running around. So it's a terrible place. Yes, I'm sure people were hurt constantly.

03-00:12:09

Rigelhaupt: Were you in a union while you worked for Kaiser?

03-00:12:11

Fleig: Oh, yes. Boilermakers.

03-00:12:14

Rigelhaupt: And what was the union like?

03-00:12:16

Fleig: I have no idea. [laughter] I paid my dues and never heard anything from them.

03-00:12:22

Rigelhaupt: It's interesting you mention the Boilermakers because right around this time was an effort to desegregate the Boilermakers in the Bay Area.

03-00:12:31

Fleig: Oh, really?

03-00:12:34

Rigelhaupt: The African American workers were in a separate auxiliary, so they had to pay dues into the auxiliary but were not allowed to vote. So they had no rights as union members, but they still had to pay the dues.

03-00:12:45

Fleig: Oh, right. Yeah.

03-00:12:47

Rigelhaupt: And so there was an effort to end the auxiliary system and des—and it went all the way to the California Supreme Court—

03-00:12:56

Fleig: Yes, it would.

03-00:12:57

Rigelhaupt: —in '45. And so I'm curious if you heard anything about—

03-00:13:01

Fleig: Oh. Not till then. No. My brother would have been very aware. Yeah. He's a union man and always was.

03-00:13:08

Rigelhaupt: So it wasn't in the press or anything leading up to—

03-00:13:10

Fleig: I'm sure not. Mm-mm. Only the guys directly involved would have known about it. Yeah.

03-00:13:19

Rigelhaupt: And the name Joseph James never came up? He was the lead plaintiff and the case is named after him: James v. Marinship.

03-00:13:29

Fleig: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah. Oh, those devils, huh? Put them in an auxiliary—oh.

03-00:13:38

Rigelhaupt: So I was just curious if it was well known at the time.

03-00:13:42

Fleig: May have been among that group. Well, women were just ignored. We didn't exist, really. Those flangers that worked with me just—I'm sure they wish I was on another planet. I was just a big nuisance. I wouldn't walk across the thing to go from one place to another, and probably other things I complained about, and what. "Oh, shut up." But we shouldn't have been there. We had no business there. [chuckling]

03-00:14:23

Rigelhaupt: I want to switch gears to your experiences at Cal. Now, you'd mentioned that there were not—well, actually how many other women were in classes with you?

03-00:14:33

Fleig: Not very many. Pretty soon, it was all V-12s. V-12s were in the navy and they were being sent to school. They were all in uniform, but they weren't regular navy. They were students of some kind. Whether they were in officer training, or what, but they were called V-12s. And they took all my classes because I was taking economics and collective bargaining and things that there weren't

many women in any of my classes. But V-12s were in all the math classes that I had to take, and they were terrible competition because they had to get certain grades. And I remember having to move down to the front row to ask questions because those guys got everything the first time it was demonstrated, and I had to see it and hear all the details. You couldn't skip any steps with me. And so I had to learn to sit in the front row and ask questions with them. My collective bargaining classes were, I think, maybe one or two other women. I didn't pay any attention to the fact. That's what I wanted to do. I'm from a union family. Especially after the shipyards and that experience, I thought—and I worked for the telephone company. I couldn't believe the personnel, the way they treated people. Jesus. You'd think they'd have better sense. We're all good people. We're not trying to do the company in, so why can't they just bend a little? I worked long distance for the telephone company at night. Now, during the war, it was all servicemen all night long calling home. They'd land in San Francisco, and they'd want to call home first thing. And those guys would come to the telephone with bundles of nickels and dimes to use the stupid public telephone. And it would cost them dollars and dollars to call Pennsylvania or someplace, and it just seemed such a shame to charge them so much money. Oh, God. And if you listened for just a second and you heard what they were saying, oh, God. And the stupid telephone company, you'd think they'd give them a discount or something.

And then the operators around me got to be coming from other places. These were the Okies and what that got jobs as telephone operators. And they would sit there at night, and you're in front of this board, and by picking up one plug and put it in, you can talk to anyplace in the world. But especially in the United States. There was nothing to it. You just got the New York operator or whatever, and they'd give you the town and the number, and you could talk to anybody you wanted to. And those girls, then, at night, would sit there and they'd look around when it was real quiet, and you'd see somebody sneak and put a plug in, and you'd see them talking very carefully. They're calling home on the telephone company's time. And they got fired for doing that. And I thought these are perfectly moral, decent people, and they know that—so easy I can call my mother in Georgia or someplace, and it won't cost the telephone company anything. The lines are just sitting there. So why can't they? Why don't they give them one call a week, or two calls a month or something free? And then they could do that. And they'd obey that. Why do they treat people so dumb? So I decided to organize all the women in the telephone company, and then when I went to work for the emporium, I decided that all those women who work in retailing need organizing, and there's nobody doing that. Women just weren't doing it. And it's just like teachers; they have husbands who work, and so they say they don't need the job, and it doesn't matter what they're paid. Well, come on. I don't care whether you have a husband or not or whether your father pays for your room and board or what. You're working for them, and they owe you for eight hours work. That goes without saying. And if you do that, and you need a free telephone call home to your mother once a week, couldn't you have that? Wouldn't that make sense? “No, no, no.

You can't. They'd take advantage of it." Oh, well, okay. Fire them, then. Bad people. Bad people. Anyway, that's where I learned my thinking, was working.

03-00:20:02

Rigelhaupt: Which union were you organizing with when you—?

03-00:20:06

Fleig: I never organized a union. I never got my foot off the ground. [laughter] I got a fellowship—I think I told you that—I got a fellowship to Princeton from UC, in labor economics, and I wanted to be a mediator. And so I told those guys that. They called me in and told me I got the fellowship. I almost fell off the chair. I applied for a lot of things; I never got them. And I thought, my God. Maybe I can do this. Wouldn't that be exciting? And then they talked to me and asked me what I wanted to do. I said I wanted to be a labor mediator, and they said there are no women labor mediators. I said, "Well, I'll be the first one. That's all right. Look at the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and those women. They did it. The League of Women Voters even got the vote. So somebody has to start." And they said, "Well, there just aren't any jobs, and if you do it, it will be an academic exercise because there won't be any career for you. Whereas if you let a young man take this position, he can have a career. And really it won't do you any good at all. You could be maybe a union organizer or something like that, but you'll never be a labor mediator." So I said, "Okay. Forget it." That was the climate. And when I went back to UC when I was forty and said I'd like to get an MBA, they said, "What have you been doing?" And I said, "Teaching school." "And you want a master's in economics, now?" I said, "Yes. That's where I got my BS here." "Oh. How old are you?" "Forty-one." "We don't take anybody over forty into the program." So women have had these little obstacles. So I became a teacher. My friends did, too, who started out in business because they never could get promoted past the first level of management. Things have changed.

03-00:22:57

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember who any of the faculty members were who called you in to ask you to give up that fellowship?

03-00:23:02

Fleig: Himself. I said his name just a minute ago. He was the dean. He was the chancellor during all the strikes.

03-00:23:10

Rigelhaupt: Clark Kerr.

03-00:23:11

Fleig: Yeah, Clark Kerr.

03-00:23:12

Rigelhaupt: He asked you personally to give up the fellowship?

03-00:23:15

Fleig:

He and the other professors. There were three of them, as I recall. There were only three of them in the department. I think I took almost all my classes from Clark Kerr. Yeah, he gave me all these great ideas. And I always admired him so. Just really a great man, I thought. I still do.

03-00:23:42

Rigelhaupt:

You liked taking classes with him?

03-00:23:44

Fleig:

Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. He just underlined all my personal experiences with the history of the whole movement, and studying economics was also an eye-opener into these corporations I worked for where I learned how corporations work and how the money system works and all, and I really enjoyed it. Especially when you're working every day for these people. Marketing. It was great. I loved it. But I was never able to do anything with it.

03-00:24:29

Rigelhaupt:

And then what year did you graduate from college?

03-00:24:32

Fleig:

I got out in '47. I started in '39 or '40. That fall, I guess.

03-00:24:42

Rigelhaupt:

And what did you do immediately after college?

03-00:24:46

Fleig:

I was probably working someplace. Ah. I decided to go into retailing and see what I could do. Maybe organizing somebody. But first you have to get into the business and be accepted and know everybody and all. Okay. So I went to the emporium and I applied for a job in training or office work of some kind. How did I find—? I was trying to figure out how I found out there was this job opening that I wanted. But anyway, I found out there was a job as editor of their house publication that came out monthly, and I decided I wanted that job. So I went in and applied for it, and they said no. You don't have any experience. And so I thought what they don't know. I can do anything. So I went over the person's head who interviewed me to see the manager and talked her into the job. Then I had to work with those people every day because it was the same department. [laughter] But we all became good friends. In fact, they were friends until they died just recently, those people. Yeah. It was a great bunch to work with. What'd I do after I was there? I don't know, because it wasn't until after I was divorced that I decided I had to be a teacher because I'd have to earn a steady living and I had a child. So I went back to school then and got a teaching credential.

03-00:26:53

Rigelhaupt:

Do you remember the general strike in Oakland that started at Emporium in 1946?

03-00:27:02  
Fleig: No. A strike at the emporium?

03-00:27:05  
Rigelhaupt: The retail workers were on strike, and someone essentially tried to make a delivery through the picket line, and it started a general strike in Oakland.

03-00:27:18  
Fleig: Really?

03-00:27:19  
Rigelhaupt: Yeah. The city was shut down for a couple days.

03-00:27:20  
Fleig: I was living in San Francisco. [phone rings] Huh. Can we let that go? It'll ring four times. Then it'll go to tape, of course. Or maybe they'll hang up.

03-00:27:37  
Rigelhaupt: We could just pause it for a second.

03-00:27:40  
Fleig: Sure.

03-00:27:43  
Rigelhaupt: So you weren't aware of the Oakland general strike?

03-00:27:46  
Fleig: No. That's right. See, I was living in San Francisco—or maybe Sausalito by that time. When did we move to Sausalito? Isn't that amazing? No, I never. You're the first I've ever heard about it. It was in Oakland, not the San Francisco store?

03-00:28:04  
Rigelhaupt: Yeah. It was in downtown Oakland.

03-00:28:06  
Fleig: Okay. See, I hadn't been in Oakland since '43. I was completely into San Francisco or—no, we didn't move to Sausalito till about '49.

03-00:28:24  
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember the explosion at Port Chicago?

03-00:28:27  
Fleig: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Everybody knows that one. Killed all those black guys for no reason except safety precautions. And because they were black, they let them die. That was the {whole?}. That's what I heard, {always?}.

03-00:28:46  
Rigelhaupt: Did you feel it, or hear—?

03-00:28:27

Fleig: No. Hmm-mm. No. Just that it was a terrible disaster among undeserving people.

03-00:28:57

Rigelhaupt: I'm just going to pause for one second. Okay, so—

03-00:29:03

Fleig: That's amazing. The retail workers finally struck, huh? Yeah, they're all unionized, now. Well, everybody in Oakland is. [chuckling]

03-00:29:21

Rigelhaupt: I'm wondering if you could reflect a little bit backwards on World War II in respect to the fact there wasn't television, and if you could talk about what it was like hearing about the war, learning about the war, without television. Thinking about the Vietnam War, the current war, where images are being brought into your home on a daily basis. And that didn't happen during World War II without television. And what was it like hearing about the horrors of war—and there are truly horrors of war—but without television?

03-00:30:04

Fleig: Well, it had to be your own imagery. You got it in print, and people must have done pretty good job of writing it from reporters who—well who wrote it? There weren't any reporters on Guadalcanal. [chuckling] I guess there were navy reports. Or the Marines gave out press releases or something is how we knew. But, boy, I knew what happened when you put one of those flamethrowers into a cave where the Japanese soldiers were. It just cooked them all. You knew when the Marines landed, like at Guadalcanal, where most of them were killed in one swoop. As they ran ashore, they were just plowed down. They were just machine-gunned. You wondered how any of them ever made it in. How would it possibly be that they would run up on that shore, and everybody around them is being killed, and one of them got loose—how would he ever make it? They still had ammunition. They're still shooting at him. That's all we knew. They had flamethrowers when they got up there to defend themselves, and they took the island, finally. I don't know how many thousands are killed. Like everybody in the first wave, or something. And then these stories about how the Japanese would never give up; they didn't believe in surrendering. It was impossible for their religion for them to surrender. So they would all wait to be killed to the last man. You had to get everyone of them or they'd turn into snipers or something. Just unbelievable. But it had to be your own imagery. The idea of a battleship and how big it is—none of that came until the movies. Then we learned from movies that were made. Were they made during the war or right after the war? Now, they showed the guys landing on Tarawa and how they were all mowed down. The movies did it. But before the movies, a newsreel picture would show the battleship firing the guns, but you didn't ever see what they hit. I never saw a carrier, I don't think, until the movies. Smaller ships like the one—my husband was on a submarine chaser in the Pacific, and they were

back around Moorea and Tahiti and that area when the war had gone on. So they were having kind of a holiday. But their ship—I forget how many men he said were on it. I was amazed it was that big. He said it was a tender, and I thought they were like the small coast guard boats that we see here, but no. It was big. It was an evil looking thing. It had the guns on it and everything. They were manned with depth charges because they were a sub chaser. But it was a large ship and it had a lot of officers. I don't know what the guy who was a commander—what his rank was, but it was pretty high. First Lieutenant's pretty—well, in the navy, they're just lieutenants, but they pretty well ran the ship. He was an ensign, so he was very happy to be an officer. But I never saw what a submarine tender looked like. No, it was all our own imagery, and since we didn't know about pictures, we didn't miss them. Newspapers had just these accounts of these terrible massacres that went on constantly, and guys that came back didn't talk about it at all. I didn't know many. My husband never talked about—all he talked about was dropping depth charges to kill fish and drinking beer. And he came back about forty pounds heavier than when he went, so I believed it.

03-00:35:37

Rigelhaupt:

How do you remember and what do you remember about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

03-00:35:43

Fleig:

Oh, yeah. I think I still have those newspapers. I came out of class one day and at Sather Gate there were newsstands all the way around. Telegraph Avenue went up to Sather Gate, then. And so just as you came out of Sather Gate, there were newsstands and all kinds of stores. And there was the headline on the newsstand. It said "Atomic Bomb Dropped." What in the Hell are they talking about? Atomic bomb? This is some comic strip talk. Never heard of such a thing. My God. Bought the newspaper. Everybody's standing around saying, "My God. Did you read that?" Yeah. We didn't carry radios around, so you depended on the newspaper. You'd hear it later on the radio. But the newspaper was how you got it. That newspaper I saved, and it's in my archives someplace downstairs. And FDR's death, I think. Yeah. But the atomic bomb was just—oh, my God. There you are again. What does this mean? The war'll be over. Yeah. The war'll be over, but what's an atomic bomb? God. It absolutely laid Nagasaki low, and Hiroshima. Nagasaki we'd heard of, but nobody'd ever heard of Hiroshima. Jesus. A whole city wiped out? [gasp] And then we got to reading about it, the Enola Gay that delivered the bomb, and there's a lady here whose name is Enola. Everybody that meets her says, "Oh, that—" And she says, "Don't tell me about it." [laughter] "I don't want to hear about the airplane."

03-00:38:11

Rigelhaupt:

And then how do you remember getting the news that the war had ended, and what was the reaction?

03-00:38:22

Fleig:

That one's not very clear to me. Oh, I know why. Because we had the European war over. That was V Day or—something V Day.

03-00:38:36

Rigelhaupt:

VE Day.

03-00:38:37

Fleig:

VE Day. That was a big deal. The war's over. And then we had VJ Day when Japan surrendered. So I just remember all the stuff about VE Day being big, and the newspapers were full of that with all the pictures of the people in New York and everything. And all these guys are coming home now. And that was big, big, big. VJ Day is like—we knew that was coming. Maybe the big thing was the atomic bomb because it was kind of an aftermath here. People gathered down on Market Street and made big noises and stuff. I never went to anything like that. No. I didn't feel that one hardly at all except I knew my husband would be coming home sooner or later, but you never knew how soon that was going to be, especially in the navy. It could be a long time. And I think it was quite a while before he finally got back. Yeah.

03-00:39:57

Rigelhaupt:

And how do you remember hearing about the Holocaust?

03-00:40:09

Fleig:

It's like it's always been with me, so I'm trying to think where I would have heard about it first; where I would have been. When they started opening those camps, huh, and found those people. I knew the Jews were persecuted in Europe. I was very aware of that. They got out here to the university. We heard about them, people who had run away from the Nazis. Not that many here, but I guess they're mostly scientists that came out here that I would have been aware of, and only because of the university. I worked on the atomic bomb. I worked at Lawrence Lab as a receptionist. I think that's when I got out of the shipyards and I got a campus job because I had so much money I could afford a campus job that paid fifty cents an hour. And I was a receptionist at the lab. And I got an atomic bomb pin, and I got a certificate from the Secretary of the Treasury for working on the atomic bomb. But at the time, I never heard of an atomic bomb. We had no idea what they were doing in those laboratories. All I knew was their dogs were barking upstairs. And those guys were really nice, Lawrence and all his friends that came in and out of the lab all day. They're just really nice people, and they helped me with my math, and that's all I knew. The guard at the door had a gun, which really astonished me. And they were serious. Nobody went in that building. The Coke man walked down the hall one time to fill the machine before I gave him a pass, and the guard pulled a gun and said, "Come back here." And the guys said, "Well, Jesus. I was just going to fill the Coke machine. I do it every week." The guard said, "I said come back here." He's serious. What are they doing in here? Oh, well.

03-00:42:47

Rigelhaupt:

Was this lab on campus?

03-00:42:48

Fleig:

Yes. Called Donner Lab. You know where it is? Well, it's way up in the hill, but it's surrounded by buildings now. It used to be—you know where the cyclotron is? It's not far from it. The little one. The first one. It's not far from it on the hill. It's not a very big building, and it's certainly not imposing. I think they built it just for them. I think they threw it up in a hurry. It's just a box. And there wasn't much around it, then; parking lot. And I gave the guys the keys for their cars. If they had a certain color badge, I could let them in, like Lawrence. [laughter] Nobody stopped him. And three or four others. I used to know their names as well. They were all famous. They weren't then; they were just those guys from the cyclotron. But about four or five of them had badges where nobody could ask them. They came in about any time they wanted. But everybody else had to be let in. But anyway, that was the defense industry, so I could get away with working for them. Oh, we were on the atomic bomb. Well, as far as the Holocaust, I don't know when I first heard about that. Probably when they were talking about the development of the atomic bomb and those scientists. But when they opened those camps, I don't know, and found all those people and started saying how many of them they actually killed. I don't know. It's like I've always known that. It was after the war. Yeah.

03-00:45:05

Rigelhaupt:

Well, those are largely my questions, and the way I like to end is to ask two more questions. One, is there anything I should have asked and I didn't, and two if there's anything you would like to add?

03-00:45:23

Fleig:

Well, I've never talked so much about my history and my life, or ever reviewed it that much. No, I think as far as like a Californian's view, I think you've probably covered just about all aspects. As a teacher, I saw the changes in populations because I worked in different places. And down in the valley, my husband's mother who financed all those Okie farmers, helped them be successful because the banks wouldn't lend them money because they were Okies, and she financed them. And I taught down in the valley, one year, to itinerant farm worker's children and how they were discriminated against in the community, but not in the school. The school system treated them wonderfully; got their teeth fixed; got them glasses; took care of their health; all through the school system, but nobody else. And the teachers that took care of kids, and the stupid men that taught sixth grade and had orange groves and just took the whole season off when they were harvesting their fruit because that's where they made all their money. And they were terrible teachers, and they punished kids. They'd beat kids. They put dunce caps on them. They were just awful. Terrible people. It was the primary women down in the primary grades that were nice to children. [chuckling] I taught sixth grade and I was with those awful men who couldn't believe I wouldn't hit a kid. But

those are the only areas. And it's kind of interesting, looking back to what I've said. I hope they were all learning experiences and that I benefited from all of that. They all helped me, I think, understand other people better or be more forgiving and so forth that I'd like to be. That's all.

03-00:48:30

Rigelhaupt: Okay. I think that's a nice place to end.

03-00:48:32

Fleig: Yeah.

03-00:48:34

Rigelhaupt: Thank you.

03-00:00:36

Fleig: Well, thank you. It was easy. It was kind of fun. [laughter]

03-00:48:39

Rigelhaupt: It was fun. So I'm going to turn it off now.

03-00:48:42

Fleig: Okay. Oh, it's been on all—

[End of Interview]