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Berkeley, California

Eloise Fong

Rosie the Riveter  
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Robin Li  
in 2011

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Eloise Fong



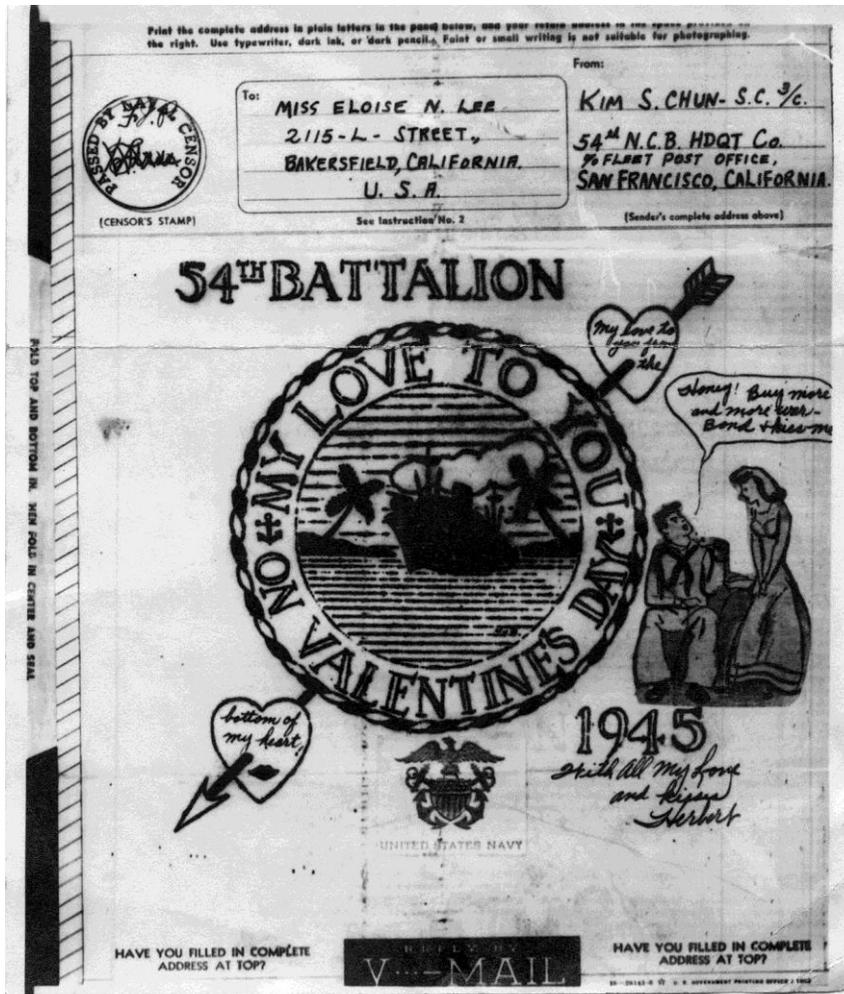
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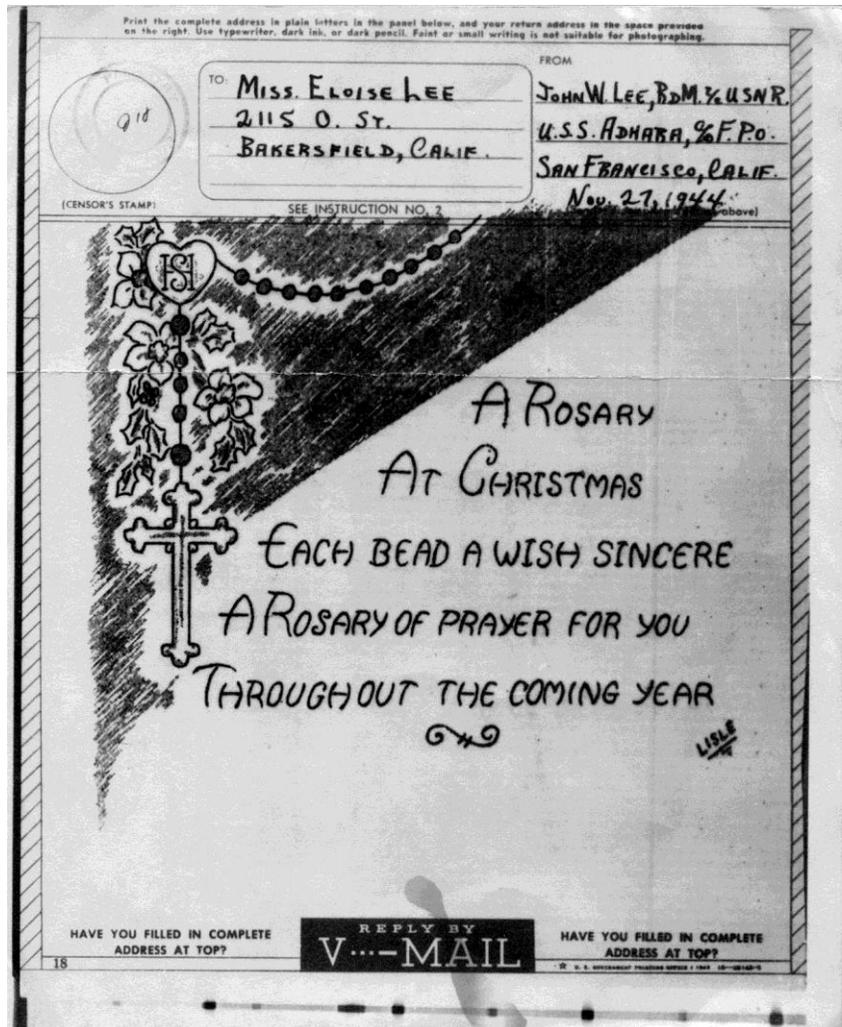
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Interview 1: November 8, 2011

Begin Audiofile 1

Li: This is Robin Li on November 8, 2011 speaking with Eloise Fong in Belmont, California for the Rosie the Riveter National Home Front Project. Thank you so much for participating. I'm really excited to talk to you today.

1-00:00:21

Fong: Well, thank you.

Li: Just to start off, could you give me your full name and date of birth?

1-00:00:25

Fong: Eloise Fong.

Li: Your date of birth?

1-00:00:35

Fong: My birthday—April 19, 1924.

Li: Where were you born?

1-00:00:48

Fong: San Francisco.

Li: Do you know what hospital you were born in?

1-00:00:47

Fong: At home. We have a laundry.

Li: Where in San Francisco were you living?

1-00:00:59

Fong: The Mission District. The street name is San Carlos.

Li: Okay, and your family had a laundry?

1-00:01:07

Fong: Yes.

Li: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents; were they born in San Francisco also?

1-00:01:13

Fong: No, they're all from China.

Li: What town in China, where?

1-00:01:19

Fong: Toy Shan.

Li: How did they come to the US, do you know?

1-00:01:19

Fong: No idea—they just come. [Narrator addendum: Grandpa was a sea merchant and stayed in San Francisco. He opened a laundry. He brought my father over to help run the laundry.]

Li: So did both your parents work at the laundry?

1-00:01:29

Fong: Yes. All of us lived in the laundry, upstairs.

Li: Do you have any memories of those years in San Francisco?

1-00:01:43

Fong: Well, I just start kindergarten, I think. Then we went back to China. My grandfather say, “We go back to China, go to school.” My grandfather built a house, you know, Chinese—those three story houses in Guangzhou. Then we go to school there.

Li: So he wanted you to have a Chinese education?

1-00:02:16

Fong: That’s right, all of us.

Li: How many were there? How many children?

1-00:02:18

Fong: Six of us. I’m the oldest.

Li: Besides your grandfather, did you have other family living in the house in Guangzhou?

1-00:02:33

Fong: No, my mother, grandfather and grandmother, as well as the six of us.

Li: Do both your parents speak English then?

1-00:02:41

Fong: Not too much. My father yes, not my mom.

Li: Do you remember going back to China? What it was like to move there?

1-00:02:54

Fong: Now?

Li: Yeah, do you have memories of—?

1-00:02:56

Fong: I went back—sure looked different. I thought our house was very big.  
[Narrator addendum: I just started kindergarten. I did not remember much when we moved to Guangzhou. We lived in a house versus the laundry.]

Li: Do you remember when you first—when your family first arrived back there when you were—how old were you when you moved back to China? Or moved to China I should say?

1-00:03:13

Fong: I don't know. I think—

Li: Maybe six or—

1-00:03:19

Fong: Six years old. I start kindergarten a little bit. After that—go back to China.

Li: How soon after you were in China did the Japanese invade; do you remember?

1-00:03:33

Fong: Gee—I forgot what year but I came back in 1938. The war started in '37. I think I was fourteen years old when I returned to the US.

Li: Right.

1-00:03:43

Fong: And then the '38 I came back. I think I was fourteen years old when I returned to the US. A friend brought us back. A Mr. Lim, and all his children, and us six.

Li: Was he like your father? Had he lived in the US and then returned to China?

1-00:04:06

Fong: Mr. Lim. Yeah, he lived in San Francisco. He took all his children back there too. Until the war start—he brought us back here.

Li: So your parents stayed in Guangzhou?

1-00:04:25

Fong: My father's already here. I have a stepmother. [Narrator addendum: My mother stayed in China because she did not return after one year of leaving the US.]

Li: Okay.

1-00:04:32

Fong: Live in Bakersfield.

Li: So your father moved to Bakersfield while you were in China?

1-00:04:39

Fong: Yeah.

Li: What brought him to Bakersfield?

1-00:04:39

Fong: I don't know. I really do not know. Hah, I wonder that too. I don't know why.

Li: So what are your earliest memories of America or American culture? Was your family very American when they were in China?

1-00:04:59

Fong: No, just a regular Chinese way. All I do is go to school and no housework. We have housekeeper. No housework, just go to school. For school I went to my grandfather, so I went downstairs to learn. After that he don't teach too much. My grandfather rented the first floor to a teacher. He thought the teacher will teach all of us. After a while my grandfather figured out we were not learning much. My grandfather say, "Well, we'll send me to one of those boarding school in Guangzhou. So Grandfather sent us to overseas Chinese children school.

Li: Was it run by missionaries?

1-00:05:49

Fong: No, just a regular Chinese school—expensive and more for the overseas children.

Li: Oh, interesting. They charged a higher tuition?

1-00:06:00

Fong: Oh, yes. I sure learned.

Li: Yes? What do you remember studying?

1-00:06:10

Fong: I like history.

Li: What did your grandfather do?

1-00:06:20

Fong: Real estate man.

Li: Real estate.

1-00:06:25

Fong: Yes. I go out with him a lot. Summer vacation, six weeks summer vacation with homework. The school hour 8:00 o'clock to 5:00 or 4:30, and then my mom sent me to night school.

Li: Oh, really?

1-00:06:50  
Fong: Learn that—what do you call that?

Li: Abacus.

1-00:06:53  
Fong: Abacus, uh huh.

Li: Wow, so did she want you to work? Did she have the idea that you should have a career—your mother?

1-00:07:01  
Fong: No.

Li: No.

1-00:07:03  
Fong: Just go to school. We were young.

Li: So you were saying that you remember the Japanese invasion in China.

1-00:07:16  
Fong: Oh, yes. The air raid, and then I'm so—not afraid. They said to go to the shelter. I went upstairs to the rooftop. I saw the Japanese plane come and drop something—boom.

Li: Oh, wow.

1-00:07:36  
Fong: And China was so poor. Don't have a plane to—anyway, it's real poor.

Li: Yes, yes.

1-00:07:49  
Fong: And then no airplanes to defend ourselves.

Li: Yes, so what did you, were there—?

1-00:07:55  
Fong: When the Japanese finished bombing, just left. I don't know where they were stationed at in China at that time. I don't know where.

Li: I think they were in Taiwan maybe at that point, in the late thirties?

1-00:08:15  
Fong: I know they started the war in Beijing at the—what you call that Lugouqiao?

Li: Yes, the Marco Polo Bridge?

1-00:08:23  
Fong: Is that what they say in America, Marco Polo Bridge?

Li: In America yeah. Marco Polo Bridge.

1-00:08:30

Fong: Marco Polo Bridge. Oh, Marco Polo Bridge. Yeah.

Li: Yes. So you don't remember seeing Japanese soldiers on the streets?

1-00:08:37

Fong: No, no. I just see the plane drop, that's all. After that my mother take us back to the village. Our village quite a [ways] away that time. We took a boat that time. Many hours to go back to our village.

Li: What was the name of your village?

1-00:09:04

Fong: Well, let me—

Li: In Cantonese?

1-00:09:15

Fong: Cantonese? Seigau. That mean forty-nine. [laughs] The village name is {Hok Chunh Hok?}—like a bird, the Hawk. {Chunh?} is a village. Uh huh, {Hok Chunh?}. The town is forty-nine—you go to town and shop. Every seven day you go to town and shop. The town name Seigau. Forty-nine.

Li: That was the big town—

1-00:09:56

Fong: Not big, but they got everything. Chicken, pork—I live in {Hok Chunh?} for a month or something—very bad—no hot water. We hire a girl to bring water in, things like that. Then have my grandfather's house. Then my grandfather have a brother, so the house, half is my grandfather—the other half is his. And they have a new home so they bring their pig over to our house—to his half of the house. We have a pig and a cow. At night time the pig and the cow, they live in our house—the other half of the house.

Li: So your father arranged for you to travel with Mr. Lim from {Hok Chunh?}—

1-00:11:10

Fong: No, my mother. My father's already here.

Li: Right. So did you go from the village? How did you travel?

1-00:11:21

Fong: From the village, go down to Hong Kong by boat and wait for Mr. Lim. Promised to bring us over here. Then we stay in Hong Kong for a couple week. The ship take twenty-one days to come over. President Taft—the last ship leave China.

Li: Were you in a refugee camp when you were in Hong Kong?

1-00:11:53

Fong: No, no. We live in—we rented this flat. Mr. Lim, and his children, and us six and my mother.

Li: So did your mother stay in Hong Kong, then?

1-00:12:10

Fong: After that I don't know. She probably go back to Guangzhou to our house. Then during the war my mom run—walk at different time. You know walk. You know the Japanese bomb Guangzhou.

Li: So she walked?

1-00:12:40

Fong: Yeah. The little jewelry she had sewn into her belt, and her marriage license.

Li: Did she just hide those inside her belt?

1-00:12:55

Fong: Yes, and then when she needed money for food, she take the little gold out and sell a little bit.

Li: Was your family very political, either of your—was your mom or grandfather?

1-00:13:18

Fong: No, just regular, no.

Li: What was your name in Chinese, your Chinese name?

1-00:13:27

Fong: My last name is Li Sao Mei. Do you write Chinese?

Li: A little, but not very well. But I think we have the same Li, the same last name. What does your name mean, do you know, Sao Mei?

1-00:13:46

Fong: Well, I'm the first born. Then my father looking for a boy so they name me—I think my grandfather name me Sao Mei, Sao Mei. Then the Sao—that mean “fix,” that word. There's another meaning in that, but that Mei, that means “pretty.” But do you say that?

Li: The same as meiguo de mei? The same as [“America”]?

1-00:14:26

Fong: Mei, uh huh, yes. But the meaning—how do you say that—Sao Mei, that mean I'm the last girl. Mei, that mean the “tail” also, the same word “tail.” That mean I'm a last tail, “last girl.”

Li: So everyone else after you would all be boys?

1-00:14:51

Fong: Called me a boy. Sao Mei—last, last.

Li: Very thoughtful name.

1-00:14:58

Fong: Very last.

Li: I know a lot of people felt like the US should have intervened to help China when the Japanese invaded. Do you remember feeling that way or thinking—?

1-00:15:16

Fong: I never—that time I was too—just go to school. We never talk about politics, any that stuff. That's all. Nothing.

Li: Can you tell me a little bit about the trip on the Taft. Do you remember being on the boat?

1-00:15:33

Fong: Well, gosh, I got seasick all the way to Hawaii. Seven day to San Francisco from Hawaii. But anyway, seasick. Lay in bed most of time.

Li: Oh, no. And where did the boat land?

1-00:15:52

Fong: San Francisco.

Li: San Francisco.

1-00:16:00

Fong: So my father and my grandmother, my mother's mother, meet us in San Francisco. It was so cold. I think March we come in.

Li: So this is maybe March of '38, maybe?

1-00:16:14

Fong: Thirty-eight—March. The war started '36 or '37, I can't remember.

Li: I think '37 the Japanese—

1-00:16:24

Fong: Uh huh. Manchuria first, and then they go all over. All over, the Japanese.

Li: I think the air raids were '37. 1931 was the Lugouqiao Incident, the Marco Polo Bridge, and then '37 they bombed Nanking and Guangzhou. [music interruption] So you arrived in San Francisco, and your father and maternal grandmother—

1-00:16:55

Fong: My mother's mother on what you call Ah Pau, and they come meet us at the ship. Then we were very lucky at the ship. We were on the special third class, special third class room of eight people, and the six of us with a couple with a child. Then we don't eat the third class food. Just a Chinese man—I wish I know him. He brought—he work on the first class; he bring us all first class food to eat, like bread and all that stuff. We were lucky.

Li: How old were your younger siblings when they came on the ship? Do you remember how old the youngest one was of your group?

1-00:18:05

Fong: I was fourteen.

Li: You were fourteen?

1-00:18:06

Fong: All down sixes, six year.

Li: Oh, okay.

1-00:18:08

Fong: My mother have us one each year. So six year.

Li: When you arrived in San Francisco, did you stay in San Francisco for a time?

1-00:18:27

Fong: No, I don't think so. My father drive us back to Bakersfield.

Li: Had you ever been to Bakersfield before?

1-00:18:37

Fong: No.

Li: Not when you were a child, no?

1-00:18:38

Fong: No, San Francisco to China, and China to Bakersfield.

Li: What was Bakersfield like in 1938?

1-00:18:49

Fong: It's nice town. I don't know how nice, but came over not too long. My father's not that wealthy. Six of us come back. And then he worked at the market, a service market in Bakersfield. Then I did not speak English. I worked at the farm, twenty-five cents a day, and they buy us a Coke in the afternoon lunch. We were very happy then.

Li: Were your employers Chinese?

1-00:19:38

Fong: Yes, Chinese. In fact kind of little bit related to my mother. Then he have a truck from Bakersfield to San Francisco—then come up to San Francisco buy produce, Chinese produce. Then they bring back produce to sell to the Chinese people in Bakersfield.

Li: Bring it back from Bakersfield.

1-00:20:10

Fong: Bring them back to Bakersfield to sell. Whatever is left we can take it home for us.

Li: Oh, how nice.

1-00:20:22

Fong: Um-hmm.

Li: It must have been because it was still the Depression at that time. It was hard to get any job at that time.

1-00:20:27

Fong: I don't know about that.

Li: But you didn't remember that?

1-00:20:28

Fong: Oh no. After that, they work at the farm, and they pick bitter melon, string beans, you know that. Then they have—how do you say that in English, you tou?

Li: Oh, taro root.

1-00:20:51

Fong: And onion—my hands smelled for whole week—the onion.

Li: So were you going to school then also at this time?

1-00:21:02

Fong: Yes.

Li: Yes.

1-00:21:03

Fong: A special class. You know that time, war time, lot of Chinese in Bakersfield.

Li: Oh really?

1-00:21:13

Fong: And then we have a class of about—good twenty people.

Li: And it was just for Chinese? Oh, okay. Was it a public school or—?

1-00:21:23

Fong: Public school. Hawthorne, Hawthorne School. Not too far from our house.

Li: So were there other students who only spoke Chinese?

1-00:21:32

Fong: Yeah, we all speak Chinese. We learn English. The teacher's name is Irene {Dennis?}.

Li: Did she speak Chinese?

1-00:21:49

Fong: No.

Li: Okay, she was American.

1-00:21:53

Fong: Yes, teacher. We stayed there at Hawthorne quite a bit until our English better, and then I went to junior high. Junior high two year, and then I went to— after that I went to high school, sophomore year. Then I go to Lockheed.

Li: What high school did you go to?

1-00:22:19

Fong: Bakersfield High School.

Li: Bakersfield High School.

1-00:22:22

Fong: Very nice place. You know Bakersfield got lot of oil—the school was very wealthy. Nice.

Li: Were there many Chinese at the high school?

1-00:22:35

Fong: Well, us. Some quit, go to work because no family here. Some of them just go to work.

Li: Did you have time to go out with your friends, or—?

1-00:22:53

Fong: No. I never go—in high school or any—I never go see the dance like that—and then the football or ball game. No, no.

Li: So would you go to school, and then go work in the fields after school?

1-00:23:10

Fong: Yes, and then winter time the person I worked with, he had orange farm. The orange from the seedling from China, very sweet. Then he got a big field of orange and then during winter time—especially Chinese time—the New Year time, and then we pick orange. They pick, I wrap them. Some big one, little one, some wrap with paper, some plain. Six cents a box, and I work at night time after school. Very cold in Bakersfield, very cold. At the warehouse, no heat now.

Li: So was it hard work? Do you remember it being hard work, or—?

1-00:24:20

Fong: Well, that time I was young. Not that hard work, but you wrap oranges then stand on the—warehouse is cold. Sometime the hand couldn't move; it's cold.

Li: So do you remember, were there Japanese also in this area working in the farm work and agriculture?

1-00:24:45

Fong: No, not where I work.

Li: No Japanese?

1-00:24:46

Fong: No, no, no, no, just my sister and I. You know whoever can wrap orange go to work.

Li: Yeah, yeah.

1-00:24:57

Fong: Not just me go to the farm, my sister and brother too.

Li: Yeah.

1-00:25:01

Fong: They all worked there.

Li: Was it mostly Chinese who were working?

1-00:25:09

Fong: At their farm?

Li: Or just any of the farm work, was it mostly Chinese working?

1-00:25:14

Fong: Well, this farm I work for all Chinese are sister and brother. That's all.

Li: Can you tell me about when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Do you remember that day?

1-00:25:33

Fong: What that day—'41 I marry already. I got married when I was twenty-one.

Li: How did you meet your husband?

1-00:25:44

Fong: A friend introduced [us]; my husband from Los Angeles. I don't know when I got married. Excuse me, '46. Forty-one was Pearl Harbor, right? Then I work at Lockheed at that time. I forgot what year now.

Li: Yes, so you must have been seventeen, maybe? You were seventeen in '41, I think?

1-00:26:21

Fong: No, not twenty-one.

Li: Yes, you would have been seventeen.

1-00:26:26

Fong: I remember you had to bring your citizen paper to show—

Li: Oh, really, when you got hired at Lockheed?

1-00:26:37

Fong: Yes.

Li: How did you hear about the work at the plant?

1-00:26:40

Fong: My friend introduce me, my friend. I used to work at the restaurant that time. I work at the restaurant.

Li: Whose restaurant was it?

1-00:26:51

Fong: This man's brother, the one I work at the farm?

Li: Yes?

1-00:26:58

Fong: Mr. Ng, N-G, and then I work his brother got the restaurant named Chopstick in Bakersfield. I work there after school.

Li: So you stopped working in the fields and you started working at the restaurant?

1-00:27:17

Fong: Yes, I learned more English that time.

Li: Oh, yes.

1-00:27:22

Fong: After that my girlfriend say, "Let's go work at Lockheed; you get more money." I work at Lockheed.

Li: So did you have to get interviewed for the job at Lockheed?

1-00:27:38

Fong: Must bring passport to prove you are a US citizen and right age.

Li: Was it mostly women that were working at the plant?

1-00:27:46

Fong: Men and women.

Li: Men and woman, okay. Did you have a choice of different jobs that were available, or did they just give you a job?

1-00:27:57

Fong: No, they said give me the job on the wings section.

Li: Do you know what your job title was?

1-00:28:03

Fong: Just another worker. But after I learned all that riveting, and backing, and hanging the skin, and trim. Then me and one of the girls, Carmen Martina or something, she and I had no steady job. Whoever's absent [we would fill in for], but most of the time she and I trimmed.

Li: What would you use to trim, like?

1-00:28:37

Fong: Big scissors.

Li: Big scissors.

1-00:28:41

Fong: Yes.

Li: What was the material you were cutting?

1-00:28:43

Fong: The wing.

Li: But what was the material? Was it sheet metal?

1-00:28:48

Fong: Yes, I had the wing.

Li: How did they train you?

1-00:28:55

Fong: Well, at beginning, yes, they trained [me]. I learn fast. Me and my friend Carmen, we learn fast. So I have no steady job in that department.

Li: So no regular shift?

1-00:29:12

Fong: I just work on that department only. But the other side I see machine, like the picture you show me—

Li: Of the women—

1-00:29:27

Fong: A different part of the machine, but I work on the wing.

Li: Did you see the B-17 complete? Did you know what you were working on?

1-00:29:40

Fong: No, I know it's just B-17 wing. But they have a lot of section to transfer over to put it together.

Li: Did you see different parts of the plane being assembled?

1-00:29:55

Fong: No. I no, no, no. I just finish what I'm doing, and they take them away. They transfer somewhere to put it together. Then I used to put my name under the B-17—they have panel for guns, for bullets and camera. Then I used to write my name in the back, Eloise Lee. I give them my address, and then I got letter from lot of people from Iceland—

Li: From soldiers?

1-00:30:37

Fong: Yes.

Li: Was this common? Did other girls do this as well?

1-00:30:43

Fong: Just me and Carmen on the wing that's all.

Li: You both would put your names and addresses inside? So you would get how many letters do you think?

1-00:30:53

Fong: Quite a few. It's too bad I didn't save them, threw them away. That time they had those letter in paper. Did you ever see one?

Li: I don't think so.

1-00:31:21  
Fong: Like this. [holds up some old envelopes]

Li: What are these? Could you describe them?

Fong: When you write to the soldiers, they answer you. How you say that? Answer.

Li: They reply?

1-00:31:29  
Fong: They reply. Uh huh, but they don't have mail. The government do it this way. [holds up the letters]

Li: Oh, well so you got valentines!

1-00:31:40  
Fong: Valentines.

Li: Those ones you saved. So those are from soldiers you never met.

1-00:31:47  
Fong: No, never met.

Li: They just saw your name and address inside the plane—

1-00:31:50  
Fong: Yes, I got lot of them. I only have couple left. I find [them] and luckily I keep that.

Li: That's amazing. Was it thrilling to get replies to this?

1-00:32:01  
Fong: Yes, uh huh.

Li: How did you feel about the work you were doing?

1-00:32:05  
Fong: I feel fine. I need the money.

Li: So did you know that they were bombers that you are building?

1-00:32:14  
Fong: Oh yes, for the war. Yes, they bombed Pearl Harbor already—when I worked at the restaurant at that time for Pearl Harbor. And lot of times blackout you not supposed to turn on the light, a certain way. I don't understand that.

Li: Yeah, yeah. So you were still working at the restaurant when Pearl Harbor was bombed and they would have blackouts in Bakersfield.

1-00:32:52  
Fong: Oh, yes, yes.

Li: So did you—?

1-00:33:01

Fong: Food stamps that time—save electricity or all that.

Li: Did you feel patriotic, like did you feel proud to be an American during this time when you were working at the factory? Was it just a job?

1-00:33:13

Fong: Well, I just go to work, just a job. They pay pretty good. Once in a while they gave me and Carmen the pink slip, five cent raise. I get the highest paid, \$1.30 or \$1.35 an hour.

Li: Yes, and did men and women get paid the same at the factory?

1-00:33:43

Fong: No, whoever—well, me I can do at this department all that stuff. I trim, I hang the skin and rivet and then the backing.

Li: You did all of that.

1-00:33:58

Fong: Me and my friend.

Li: So what was it like when you would go to work at the factory? Could you tell me what an average day at the factory was like?

1-00:34:07

Fong: It's fine, nothing, just go to work.

Li: Did you wear a uniform or—?

1-00:34:11

Fong: Yes, I want to show you my picture. That's my uniform. I'm lucky I found that.

Li: Oh, these are amazing.

1-00:34:21

Fong: This is my friend introduced me to go to Lockheed.

Li: This is Carmen?

1-00:34:27

Fong: No, this is my friend Lonnie.

Li: I've got to put this in order so I can see you in your uniform. Your friend Lonnie?

- 1-00:34:39  
Fong: Not here, I don't have any picture of her.
- Li: So was this given to you by the factory?
- 1-00:34:44  
Fong: No, we took the picture ourself.
- Li: No, the uniform. Did they give you the—?
- 1-00:34:49  
Fong: I don't know, I couldn't remember. Must be because my friend had one, and then I lived in Bakersfield, I have two doggy. One is—the black one is Blackie. The white one is Lucky, and she give birth to quite a few puppy. They grow up—the puppy in the Army.
- Li: Oh, really?
- 1-00:35:14  
Fong: The puppy in the Army. I didn't know that because I hardly stay home. I go to the school. After school I go to work. Late night, about after ten I come home and sleep. Next day same thing because my sister told me that.
- Li: So they took the dogs, they used them as Army dogs, the puppies?
- 1-00:35:39  
Fong: Two of them—the Army—I didn't know that until my sister told me.
- Li: What were they using the dogs for, do you know?
- 1-00:35:49  
Fong: I don't know. Two dogs went to the Army in the service, the doggies.
- Li: Did you have any family in the service? Did any of your brothers or—?
- 1-00:36:01  
Fong: My brother in the Army, I wear his uniform when he come home.
- Li: What did he do in the Army?
- 1-00:36:18  
Fong: I don't know, but he stationed in Philippines.
- Li: Okay.
- 1-00:36:27  
Fong: In Philippines.
- Li: At this point was your mother still in China then?

- 1-00:36:30  
Fong: Yes. They not allowed to come back. They only give you the visa only one year. After the year—you know you cannot.
- Li: Could you write to her or—?
- 1-00:36:43  
Fong: Oh yes, we write.
- Li: In Bakersfield was there much fundraising to send money to China?
- 1-00:36:54  
Fong: Yes. I remember dress up in the Chinese dress and go to Taft, the town named Taft, to sing to raise money.
- Li: To send to China?
- 1-00:37:08  
Fong: Bakersfield.
- Li: But when you said to raise money for the Chinese in China?
- 1-00:37:15  
Fong: Yes.
- Li: What would you sing?
- 1-00:37:17  
Fong: I don't know. I don't know. I hate singing. When I go to China and you go to the music class, you could just stand out. The teacher play the piano, you sing by yourself. I hate that subject, but you have to do it.
- Li: So you sing Chinese songs?
- 1-00:37:45  
Fong: Uh huh.
- Li: Who organized that, taking you to Taft?
- 1-00:37:51  
Fong: Must be some group in Bakersfield.
- Li: Oh.
- 1-00:37:56  
Fong: Got to be a group.
- Li: Yes. Did you sell war bonds or do any of that, or buy war bonds?

1-00:37:59

Fong: I buy war bonds. In fact, Hitler's birthday, April 20—and then my father got my date wrong on my birth. So my birth certificate really is 19<sup>th</sup>—I've been using the 20<sup>th</sup> during the war time—I buy war bonds. Then I found out my real birthday is the 19<sup>th</sup> because I looking for my birth certificate—I went to Sacramento look at the book. I flip. Nineteen. I was there—I supported the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Li: Yes, so people bought war bonds on Hitler's birthday?

1-00:38:50

Fong: Oh yes, I buy lot of war bonds. \$25 war bonds, especially on the 20<sup>th</sup>, Hitler's birthday that day because I thought it was my birthdate. Years later I found out my birthday was April 19.

Li: Did you socialize much with the other workers at the plant? Did you make friends?

1-00:39:11

Fong: No time. Yeah, we have friends. You know recess, the break time. I take a little canteen on the side at the plant you can buy sandwiches, things to drink like that.

Li: Yes.

1-00:39:26

Fong: But I used to around six o'clock—I think it's dinner time, and then I ride the bicycle home, have dinner and go back.

Li: What were the other workers like at the plant? Were they mostly young girls like you?

1-00:39:49

Fong: Some older lady.

Li: Yes.

1-00:39:49

Fong: Some older ladies—some young ones I guess, but you don't make friends so—

Li: Were there many Chinese girls at the thing?

1-00:40:04

Fong: No Chinese girls, except me and Lonnie. Then I see some Chinese men on the machinery section. Not too many Chinese men neither.

Li: So what's the plant like, the interior of the plants, do you remember?

1-00:40:35

Fong: Like this.

Li: It looked like that? So it's the one big room?

1-00:40:36

Fong: Yes, that's why I'd like to have a picture like that.

Li: Yes, so you said it was an ice rink that they had converted?

1-00:40:42

Fong: Before [it was] an ice skating rink in Bakersfield that they converted to Lockheed [airplane manufacturing plant]—certain part—I guess the wing and some motor I guess.

Li: Did you see the Rosie the Riveter posters? Would you see those images around trying to recruit women to the war effort? Did you see any of that at this time?

1-00:41:13

Fong: Yes. That day I went with Leslie—we went to the [Rosie the Riveter event].

Li: But back in the thirties and forties do you remember seeing them?

1-00:41:21

Fong: No, no, no, no.

Li: What did the end of the war mean for you? Do you remember how it ended?

1-00:41:34

Fong: Well, I was happy. I think before the war ended Lockheed closed. That's why I moved to San Francisco.

Li: So you moved to San Francisco before the end of the war?

1-00:41:50

Fong: Yes, when my two brothers did. I got hay fever so bad in Bakersfield my father say I can move to San Francisco with my two brothers. I live in Grand Avenue. Then that day the war [was] over I see all people on the street. I only remember that.

Li: What year was it that you moved to San Francisco, do you remember?

1-00:42:26

Fong: Gee I can't—I got marry what year, '46? About '46—I lived in San Francisco not that long.

Li: Were you working there?

- 1-00:42:39  
Fong: Yes, at the Chinatown—the shop.
- Li: But you were there for the end of the war.
- 1-00:42:53  
Fong: Yes.
- Li: Do you know why they closed the Lockheed plant in Bakersfield?
- 1-00:42:56  
Fong: I guess it's the war. They know you don't need all the plane anymore. Must be, otherwise they wouldn't close.
- Li: Did you like working at the plant? Besides the money, the actual working?
- 1-00:43:16  
Fong: Oh yes. Work is work. Just like I work at the restaurant—hard work in the restaurant. Lockheed's nothing.
- Li: Really?
- 1-00:43:25  
Fong: You carry those heavy dishes. Before they don't have cart, bring those dirty dishes everything by hand.
- Li: Oh, yes.
- 1-00:43:37  
Fong: It's hard work at the restaurant, no kidding.
- Li: So the factory work you found to be easier?
- 1-00:43:42  
Fong: Oh, yes.
- Li: Yes.
- 1-00:43:46  
Fong: Four to twelve swing shift. At daytime I go to school. Get out at 3:15, high school. Sophomore year, get out at 3:15 and then I would go home, have little thing to eat, and then go 4:00 o'clock Lockheed.
- Li: What time would your shift end?
- 1-00:44:11  
Fong: Twelve.
- Li: Twelve, and then what time would you get up for school the next day?

1-00:44:19

Fong: About seven or six something. I can't remember. My father drive us to school. Quite a way to walk to high school.

Li: So a lot of people see this time as a really, a time of transformation for Chinese in the US. There was a lot of opportunity for work. Do you remember it that way? Do you think things were better for Chinese in the US after the war?

1-00:44:48

Fong: I don't think so. I just—I don't think of those things. I just think of myself—get some money to help my parents out.

Li: Yes. So when you were in San Francisco would you send money back to Bakersfield?

Fong: No, I got to pay rent, \$25 a month. I have to pay rent. I've got to have food. My brothers go to work, two brothers. After that one of the brother got drafted, my brother George. He got drafted, he overseas in Philippines. I remember he [was in the] Philippines. The other brother, the Army don't want him. He [had] flat feet, so he [was] saved. He go to radio trade school. That time TV just started and radio.

Li: So were you closest to these two brothers of your siblings?

1-00:46:04

Fong: We all close, all—we still do. My half-sister, one is half-sister. Two half-brother. Nine of us. My stepmother have three, my mom have six. Big family!

Li: So did your mom ever come back to the US?

1-00:46:31

Fong: Yes.

Li: When did she come back?

1-00:46:37

Fong: Well, I don't know what to say, but that time we got money, work. My sister Helen, we got little money [and] work. That time I marry already. I work at the store. Then we got money, and then my brother's friend, he's live in Canada. He's a truck driver from Canada, to US, to Los Angeles. Then he introduced a man to bring my mother over. I don't know what to say that.

Li: Yes, so after the war?

1-00:47:28

Fong: Yes, many year after the war.

Li: But you were able to see her again?

1-00:47:36

Fong: Yes. We write to each other. My sister bring—know this friend to bring my mother over. My mother crossed from Vancouver and during the Seattle Fair that time. Easy to walk across, so she walk across here.

Li: I've heard of other stories like that. Yes, in 1967 I think it was [Interviewer note: Seattle World's Fair was in 1962.] So how did you meet your husband? You said—

1-00:48:09

Fong: A friend introduce.

Li: You were living in San Francisco at the time?

1-00:48:12

Fong: Yeah, in San Francisco.

Li: Did you settle in San Francisco then after you were married?

1-00:48:22

Fong: No, I met him in Bakersfield, and then I moved to San Francisco with my brother that time. We got marry on '46.

Li: But did he come live in San Francisco? You said he was from LA?

1-00:48:43

Fong: No, I moved to Los Angeles, and he have a market in Los Angeles.

Li: So he sold produce and—?

1-00:48:54

Fong: No, a meat and whole market. Meat, produce and grocery. Then live across the street from the store. He got the store in East Los Angeles.

Li: Did you work in the store also?

1-00:49:13

Fong: No, that time I have Steve. I got marry in November the 10th, and then Steve born on August 28. Take care of kid—I never worked at the store in fact, never.

Li: Then how many other children did you have after Steve?

1-00:49:41

Fong: Leslie.

Li: What year was she born?

1-00:49:39

L.Fong: Forty-nine.

Li: So did you stay home and raise the children then? You didn't work in the store.

1-00:49:51

Fong: Well, after that my husband have a store in San Francisco. The famous street Haight and Ashbury.

Li: Oh, really?

1-00:50:01

Fong: In fact my sister work at the store—two sister, they live right on the corner Haight and Ashbury—around the store—very famous now. I see that on the picture all the time.

Li: So he had a store there?

1-00:50:20

Fong: On Haight Street. How you spell that?

Li: H A I G H T. So did you move up to San Francisco then?

1-00:50:28

Fong: No, I lived in Oakland.

Li: You lived in Oakland, okay.

1-00:50:35

Fong: We built a house in Oakland.

Li: Did you work again then after you were married?

1-00:50:47

Fong: Until the kid Leslie—well I lived in Oakland when the kid was small then, Steve and Leslie. After that my husband moved to— let's see how it go—I lived in Oakland that time when the kids small. Then after that then Bill decide to sell the store on Haight Street and move to San Mateo. So we built a store in San Mateo next to Hillsdale Shopping Center. Bill said, "Work for six months." I ended up working until the store closed in 1974. So I worked for fourteen years.

Li: Was working in the plant something that you remember fondly, or did you have any feelings about it?

1-00:51:43

Fong: Oh, I very happy. I'm a happy person. I like people.

Li: Now when you look back, do you feel like you were a part of something important, a part of history?

1-00:51:58

Fong: Well now. I never thought of them until Rosie the Riveter. [I] just like the work.

Li: When did you first hear about the Rosie the Riveter project or see the poster?

1-00:52:15

Fong: My girlfriend's girlfriend told her, and then she told her sister. Bette and I are very good friends, she lived in San Mateo. She—I don't know—she give us the number so Leslie call in. Then we got a flyer in the mail to see the museum.

Li: Is there anything else that you would want to share with me about your time working on the B-17?

1-00:52:43

Fong: Well, I just work there. I [was] never late. I enjoy them. I got money, paycheck. That's it. I know lot of the friends. When you work you busy, you don't go chit chat. You know noisy too. You rivet that stuff.

Li: Yes.

1-00:53:03

Fong: They give you some kind of ear plug too.

Li: Well thank you so much. It was so nice to talk with you.

1-00:53:21

Fong: Me too. Thank you very much.

Li: So just now when we were talking you were describing when you moved from Oakland to San Mateo you looked to buy a home in San Mateo, and you said it was difficult to buy a home?

1-00:53:36

Fong: Yes. My husband that time he wanted to buy—well at that time—no not far from the store. After that we move over look for a house. Very prejudiced, very. Lots of place don't want Chinese to live.

Li: This was like the fifties, you said?

1-00:54:04

Fong: Yeah, then we look for houses. I'm so tired looking sales sign. I don't like the house, the one we look. We have a nice home in Oakland.

Li: So would the real estate agent say, "You can't buy this house," or—?

1-00:54:28

Fong: No, they let us buy, but you want to go in right away to look at it. They said, "No, wait until the coast is clear, then you go in."

Li: So the neighbors wouldn't see you?

1-00:54:40

Fong: I don't know. In fact, the first house in Oakland we bought a piece of land, and then a contractor built a house. My husband got nothing to work that time; he go help out. Then after we move in—we live on Mandana, close to Piedmont—then the back yard, the street is higher. We have a retaining wall. Neighbor throw his garbage over to my yard many time. I don't know what to say that time. Finally, somebody told me, "Throw them back." So I did. In fact my next door neighbor in Oakland, he put up a petition for us not to built there. Toward the end we are good friends.

She's an alcoholic. She come to my house, borrow whiskey. That time we have lot of whiskey, presents, things. We go to the banquet that time. We used to bring that home, and then I give her whiskey, whiskey, whiskey. Until her husband's very sad. That time I don't know alcoholic. I don't hear anything like that. So she just like to drink. Come over and borrow. Her husband must be—won't let her buy, I guess. Her husband is a big shot at Del Monte Can Company. They used to bring me white asparagus, things like that from the plant. Then he very unhappy man, very unhappy.

After that, well, I moved to San Mateo. Buy a piece of land to build a market here. After that we move over to San Mateo, live in apartment for couple year. After that we decide to buy a house instead of apartment—no luck. So we end up buy a piece of land.

Li: So you had a buy a piece of land and build because you couldn't find a house you like that people let you buy.

1-00:57:25

Fong: Yes. That time my husband had the market in San Mateo. He wanted to buy a house across the railroad track. Our building is next to Hillsdale; across the street is a train. Then we want to buy a little house across the train track. They won't sell it to Chinese. So like the worker all from San Francisco area most of them.

Li: So this time you said you started working again, you started working at the market?

1-00:58:02

Fong: Yes, after the market grand opening. Then Bill say, "Go help out for six months." So I'm still ever since, until I'm fifty years old. The market closed. Too much competition, you know. That time, just us and a few other big market. But now, wow!

1-00:58:29

L. Fong: It was an independent store compared like Safeway, Lucky's.

Li: Wow, okay. Well, thank you.

1-00:58:35

Fong: Oh, you're welcome to hear my story.

[End of Interview]