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Matilda Foster

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
David Washburn and Tiffany Lok
in 2005

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Interview with Matilda Foster

Interviewed by: David Washburn and Tiffany Lok

Transcriber: Nadine Wilmot

[Interview # 1: March 16th, 2005]

[Begin Foster 01 03-16-05.wav]

1-00:00:00

Washburn:

We're here doing an interview for the Rosie the Riveter project on March 16th, 2005. We're with Ms. Matilda Foster. And she's being interviewed by David Washburn and Tiffany Lok.

Lok:

Can you describe, like, how your life was in Lewisville? You're from Lewisville, Missouri.

Foster:

Beg pardon?

Lok:

Can you describe how life was like in Lewisville? You said you were a farmer.

Foster:

Oh, Lewisville, Arkansas?

Lok:

Yes.

Foster:

I was a real country girl. It was fine. As far as I knew, it wasn't too bad. We had our own little farm and everything. After I got married—I was married twice before I left Arkansas at twenty-two, twenty-seven, twenty-six, I guess, yeah. Yeah, I was married five years to my first husband. I married when I was young. And three and a half years to my second one. And we separated. He came to California, and I went to St. Louis, Missouri. Because I had two sisters living in Illinois, East St. Louis, Illinois. And a cousin living in Missouri. So I liked Missouri better and I was lucky to get me a job after I got there.

After I got there, I {cleaned a pressing shop?} first, I guess about a couple of months. Then I went to this factory and I got hired there and I worked there until I left and came here to California. My brother—the factory work was good, my brother told me I could make more money in California, the reason I changed.

Washburn:

Why don't we go back real quick, though. Would you tell us when and where you were born?

Foster:

Lewisville, Arkansas. County Lafayette. It's, I guess, north of Shreveport. About 66 miles from Shreveport, Louisiana.

Washburn:

What year was that?

Foster:

When I left?

Washburn:

When you were born.

Foster:

Oh! July 20, 1916.

[interview interruption]

Washburn:

So what year was that?

Foster:

I'm born? I'm born July 20th, 1916. Eighty-nine years ago. [laughs]

Washburn:

That's wonderful.

Lok:

How long had your family been in Lewisville before that?

Foster:

How long had it been there? Well, I guess from before we was born and raised in that area. My mother came from Mississippi when she was a girl, she said. And she met my father and they married. My father died when I was five years old. My stepfather reared me.

I married at a young age and everything. Was still there on the farm, but life was okay, farm life. We had food and everything. We raised most our food, you know. This was on the farm. Got along fine until Mr. Hoover, that's the President, as they said, the bottom fell out of everything! [laughs] That's why [people stopped working so much today?]!

Washburn:

Tell us about that. Tell us about what your family did there in the Lewisville area.

Foster:

In Lewisville, cotton was the major living, cotton and corn, you know. People raised and grew cotton and corn in the area where I lived. They ginned their cotton and everything, sold bailed cotton. Their products were chicken and cows and hogs, that's what people

grew there, for food, you know, meats. Vegetables, well our main vegetables, like black eyes-peas, string beans, sweet potatoes, corn. We grew all of that.

Lok:

How did you meet your first husband, you said you married young?

Foster:

He was in my community of church people, you know. I met him in church. A young man. After we separated, I met the other man in the community. We met and stayed married three and half years. And I didn't marry anymore after that for fifteen years. I met my third husband, Mr. Foster, out here. We got married in '58, May 31st 1958. We lived together. He died February 27th, 1979.

Washburn:

That's some time ago. I'm sorry to hear that.

Foster:

So with him I was married twice longer than I was with the other two. I divorced the first and second, too.

Washburn:

So how old were you when you met your first husband?

Foster:

Seventeen. And the next one, twenty-three.

Washburn:

That was pretty young to marry, why did you want to get married right at that point?

Foster:

I guess to get away from home like most girls does, you know. [laughs] That's about all I have to say about that. [laughs]

Washburn:

Well, describe that, what do you mean "getting away from home?" Why was--?

Foster:

From under my parents. My stepfather, mean stepfather. That's all I want to say about him. He was okay but he was kind of rough, you know.

Washburn:

And so when you got married, what happened?

Foster:

I moved out with my husband. He's alright until my mother started having some children. He was nice to us until momma started having some children for him. He had never been a father before. And he idolized his children. But he's okay. At least he didn't molest me.

Washburn:

What about your first husband? What was your guys' life like when you moved out of your--

Foster:

Well, we done pretty good. We was farmers too and everything. But he just drank a little too much for me. We did all right until one weekend, I just got tired of that, you know. So that's why I leave him. I left one time, he begged me back. I went back and he still—he didn't get any better about that drinking. And my second husband, he was awful. He was worse than that.

Lok:

How did your brother hear about moving to Richmond? You said he was the one to--?

Foster:

Huh?

Washburn:

Hold on one second. Did you have anything about Lewisville? St. Louis?

Lok:

Oh, yeah. What prompted you to move to St. Louis?

Foster:

Huh?

Lok:

What prompted you to move to St. Louis? Why did you move to St. Louis? I mean, did your entire family move there?

Foster:

Oh. After me and my second husband separated, well, he was California. And so, I didn't want to come here, where he was. I had two sisters living in St. Louis, Missouri, across the river, East St. Louis, we called it. And then I had a cousin, living in Missouri, she and her husband. So I went there. Lots of people in my home left and went to St. Louis, Chicago, different places like that. New Jersey. So that's where I went. I liked Missouri, St. Louis, Missouri. A big city, you know.

Washburn:

Describe why people were doing that. Why were people in the community doing that at that time?

Foster:

Well, it was a way you could make more money, you know. Better wages, that's why so many people left and emigrated to California because of the money, the better conditions and everything. When so many people had left my home and come to Richmond, California for work. And they'd write and tell us back how much better it was, you know. Us, in Arkansas, once the farm work was over, you didn't have anything to do but fish

and hunt or do something like that. Of course you didn't have no job. I did housework, like that, but other than that, where we lived out in the country, it was just you didn't have anything to do, like making a living or whatnot. You worked and you put up your stuff when the fall ended, spring and fall, your dried stuff, your dried potatoes, actually, they buried 'em in, yeah, to keep them all winter and they stay good. And then you dry [your wheat soap with salt?] And then you dry your beans and peas and stuff like that. And your canning lots, you know, vegetables and all of that. So, you had all of that to live off of through the winter. But you didn't have that much money, you see.

As people got older, they were saying kind of wish they had more money they could make. Well, they left. Some had crops, they just left the crops and went on to California. Some of the landlords and things what people work for, tried their best to stop folks, you know, from coming and leaving. I know two mens within my family, they was [strawbossing?] and things, working for a big landowner and they drove the trucks and did business like that. Good jobs there, but still wouldn't pay as much money as they could make out here just even working labor.

1-00:10:09

I came here, you know, I started working shipyard rate, I started at eighty-eight cents an hour. That was much more than I was making in St. Louis. It was paying sixty cent an hour, that work on factory. I worked at cleaning and pressing shop, ten dollars a day—no, ten dollars a week.

Washburn:

That is more money.

Foster:

Yes, it certainly—you could be getting ten dollars an hour working in-house. [laughter] The lady who works for me gets 9.50/an hour, 121 hours a month. I think, "My goodness! I never got so much money." [laughs]

Washburn:

Did you move by yourself to St. Louis? Did you live with your sister? What happened?

Foster:

I got a room in the same building where my cousin was living, private room, you know. The lady they were renting from, she was the same lady, she had a big flat, you know? So, I was able to get a room there. And I stayed there until I left to come here. [pause]

I came here. One of my sister's father-in-law, he had one of them Harbrogate houses. There was two apartments, flats, you know? Real nice. Some of them had two and three bedrooms. So I got a room rent from them. I stayed there a long time 'til his wife came out here. Then I got a room with another person right down in the same area and stayed there until the factory [_____] closed and everything and I cleared out to Canal—we call that Canal, in that area.

Washburn:

Canal Housing, out there?

Foster:

Yeah. I stayed out there for a long time. And my sister and them bought a home in the Enterprise area, you know where [town____?] they got over there now. I had a sister and her husband, bought a home that had two outhouses down in the Enterprise. And I stayed with them until I met Mr. Foster, moved to North Richmond.

Washburn:

Can we talk about—I think Tiffany was interested in knowing more about marriage during that time. Could we talk about—was it unique or different that you got divorced at that time? I mean, were a lot of women getting divorced from their husbands at that time?

Foster:

Not too many, not too many. You didn't have--?

Washburn:

So what did people tell you when you said, "Hey, I'm getting divorced."?

Foster:

I didn't tell them nothing! [laughs] I mean, my first husband, we married in January and we separated in January. The week that I left him, we had been married five years, about two or three days past. And so I met this other guy in the same year, in November. And he paid for my divorce, this second husband did. So that was one of the reasons I wanted to marry him, you know. Because we didn't have that much to do in the country noway. And when you single like that, you married if you was single, you know. That's all it was to that. My first husband, he was there still in the same city but I didn't see him that much. And then, my second one, I went back home, three or four years after we had separated I went back home and got my divorce from him. But I didn't marry Mr. Foster until fifteen years after I had quit Clarence.

My first husband, I was Matilda Turner Leslie. My second husband was Matilda Turner Cherry. That's the way, if you search the shipyard records, that's what my name was then, Cherry.

Washburn:

Matilda Turner Cherry.

Foster:

Mm-hmm. That's what my maiden name is, Turner. This man I married, Foster, his wife died in '55 or '61. He was a deacon at my church, Baptist Church, there. We married about two years after his wife died.

Washburn:

So, how was it working for the first time in St. Louis in a factory? Because you had been doing farm work all your life. What was that like?

Foster:

Well, much different. I forgot about, I worked at a hospital for a while in Port Arthur, Texas. And my husband went to [Northwest?] looking for government work. He went to

Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and he worked there a while. And he got hurt and he came home. And they tried to get him to come back and they give him a lifetime job, this place where he worked, but he didn't go back. So, when the war broke out, people started going and coming to California. But he went on, he and another group, to Port Arthur, Texas, and worked in an oil refinery there. He got sick there, I guess, about a month after he was down there working. He worked at a [Kettle?] Oil refinery. This the second husband. And so I was sent a telegram to come at once. I went down and stayed until he got able and discharged, and brought him home. So, while I was there, I got a job working in a Catholic hospital. St. Mary's it was called, close to [Duff Gulf?] there? That was the first place I saw ships was in Port Arthur, Texas.

Washburn:

That's along the sea there.

Foster:

Hah?

Washburn:

That's at the sea, there. It's a port.

Foster:

Right. So I worked there in a hospital as a seamstress in the medical nurses room, there. I made their things that goes on the gurney, you know, [__wrappers and pap wrappers?] and did alteration of doctor's robes and stuff like that. That was a dollar. I think they paid a dollar a day or something like that. But anyway, it was helpful for me to be there and to see after my husband. So I was able to get a nice room and everything. We stayed there and he got doctor released and he got strong enough to come back home. And so we come back home in that same year and he came to California. And that was the way it went.

But when I first started working shipyard, I thought that was the awfullest place I ever worked. [laughs] I had to get used to it. You had to be so careful in crossing and going from one place to another one because cranes and things was always lifting, those shovels and whatnot. And so many people they say got killed with those things hitting 'em.

Washburn:

Well, why don't you tell us—I think Tiffany asked you earlier, about moving out to Richmond. I want to ask you right before that though, did any of your husband's tell you, "I don't want you to work, you should stay home."?"

Foster:

No. Uh-uh.

Washburn:

Why not?

Foster:

It took us both to make ends meet. So, if we didn't have any children, still it was kind of expensive any way. All I ever knowed about, always the cost of living was more than you could make. Even to now, you know. Things look good, but still the money you get is not covering your expenses. Just like when I pay my ordinary bills and things and buy groceries, I'm broke again. I take a look back at life, seven hundred dollars? I'd feel like I been rich back there. [laughter]

Washburn:

Inflation changes things.

Foster:

Seven hundred and some dollars every month? [laughs] Yes, life really has changed. I'm glad the Lord blessed me to be able to work, you know, and not have to have the state take care of me. Because that's what happens to people that didn't work, you know.

Washburn:

So Tiffany asked you about what brought you out to Richmond, so can you tell us a little bit of the story? Who first came here and how did you hear about Richmond before you came?

Foster:

Well, so many people from my home heard about the big government shipyard, the war was going on. And so many people heard about how much they paid. Some was scared to come because they thought blackouts and everything, after the war would break out.

1:00:20:05

But some were anxious to come, and they come and they write people back to tell them how much money they was making and stuff like that. Because it didn't matter about the ship because people were sleeping double and triple and everything. And some were working in the day and your friend was sleeping in the same area, in bed that you slept in at night.

Because, my brother, now he worked graveyard shift and then he worked another job in the daytime. [laughs] He worked two jobs! His wife never worked. He had fifteen kids but he took care of all of those people, doctor bills and everything. And when he died, he left his family living good. Just a good manager I guess. Of course I never was able to have that kind of income and stuff like that. His third wife he married, right now, she living off of what he left her.

Washburn:

So you said people sent letters back. What did those letters say? Did you receive one of those letters? What did it say? Can you remember what it said?

Foster:

Yes. "Make more money, the jobs is paying more." And better living conditions and all of that, it say, you know, which it was. And so even the government jobs, and having

running hot water and lights and stuff like that were much better than you living in the country, you know. But the country life was fine while you were there.

Washburn:

Describe what better living conditions mean? What's that mean for somebody who is living in the South at that time versus living here?

Foster:

Well, better living conditions, you be making more money where you can buy more things, you can buy a car. And buy a nice home and stuff like that. That was the better part. Of course some people never got able to buy no cars and stuff like that. But lots of people—we had our home, our family home. But we never—my father had things before he died. But he died young before I was five years old. He was of the class—momma say, in his lifetime, what they had, he was the class of the wealthier Negro, my father. But he died when I was five years old and I was reared by my step-father. And then after years passed with lesser and--things get bad as I got older, and the different presidents, President Hoover is the one who really had things gone to the [penny?]. And that's what I believe is going to happen before our President Bush get out of office. I really do. I have that feeling. In knowing and watching the Republicans. See, Republicans don't like to pay high wages. But things now, they almost—the unions got 'em paying. And they don't like that, you see. That's why our own government here is trying to change the constitution, to get rid of the unions. Because the union is the one making 'em pay. See, they rich people but they still don't want to pay lots of wages.

Washburn:

Well, back to the living conditions, did your family have electricity out there at their place?

Foster:

No, we didn't have electricity.

Washburn:

And hot water?

Foster:

No. But they have it now. All out in the country now, my home, they have hot water and indoor toilets and everything.

Washburn:

When you are talking about living conditions, did any of those letters, when they were talking about living conditions mention anything about Jim Crow, and out here there not being segregation?

Foster:

Yeah, yeah! Some people [sure did make much about how in this state?] it wasn't segregation and things. You could go and sit down in the restaurant and eat anywhere you wanted to out here. But you couldn't do that at my home. In a white man's restaurant, no, you couldn't just go in any of them and have food. Some would take you and some

wouldn't. Because even when I went home one year, in 1948, I think it was, I went on a Greyhound bus. And so I stopped and went into a place right there at the bus station, the Greyhound bus station. They didn't serve colored. People. That's what you used to call each other. And then in a place in Kansas, I think, yeah Lawrence, Kansas, I went in there. This was a Greyhound bus. You could take food out. But I if I couldn't sit down and eat a meal there—they even had black folks working—I didn't want it. So I just went for days and days without eating anything.

And some of the white folks told the bus driver about it. I was the only black passenger on for a long time. And he came to me and said, "A lady tells me you haven't been able to get food to eat." I said, "Yeah, that's right." He said, "You should have told me. I didn't know that until I was told that by so many passengers here." He said, "Well, from now on, anywhere we go, if you get turned down, you make sure you let me know." So, Cheyenne Wyoming, we went in the place, ate, and other places, we sit down and ate. But that was in Nevada and Kansas and Wyoming.

When we were coming on the train in 1952 or '55 I think it was, we went to a place in—it was Green River, Wyoming—we got off. The train had stopped for a while for us to get off because they had [switched the diner?], you know? And we went there and they said that they could give us certain things to take out but we couldn't come in and sit down and eat like white folks was. So, I didn't want it then. I said, "No, if I can't go in there and sit down and have a hamburger, I don't want their food."

Washburn:

So you refused to take out.

Foster:

Right. That's the best way.

Washburn:

Why did you refuse to take out?

Foster:

Because I couldn't go and sit down and eat like anybody else. I'd do the same now. That's the onliest way you can break down discrimination, you know. They want your money and need your money to operate. If you don't give it to 'em, they'll finally go broke.

Washburn:

Now, people say actually, about Richmond that Richmond was that way in some ways, too.

Foster:

That's what they say, yeah.

Washburn:

Did you see that as well?

Foster:

No.

Washburn:

I mean there weren't signs up but it was kind of like, you knew.

Foster:

It was one place on MacDonald, now, since you asked me, they said they didn't take colored in there for eating. I forgot what the name of it was but I never went there. I had a place on 6th and MacDonald, they used to have a little restaurant there. I forget what they called it, but they had some of the best roast beef you want to eat. And they was owned by white people. And the lady, I would order roast beef so much and apple pie and ice cream and stuff like that, she got where she knew me. When I come in, she ask me "What's your dish today, roast beef?" [laughter] And same way with Mason [building?] down on MacDonald. I used to go there and have nice ice cream. I liked hot apple pie and ice cream. And all those places, they just run those place away after Richmond Redevelopment what tore Richmond up so bad, you know.

I never vote for Redevelopment anymore. They call it—what they call it now? Limit lines, you know. If they don't want to repair no building going on. Well, that's what they used on us here in Richmond, you know. They gon' redevelop it and change it around and they gon' build this and that. And they just tore it up. In places, right downtown, on Tenth and Macdonald, one of the main center parts of Richmond, from I'd say Eighth Street clear on up on Twenty Third. That was beautiful, beautiful. We had all kinds of store and things, restaurants, and hat shops, milliners, and all that. They don't have nothing down there now. I don't even go down there anymore. It's tore Richmond up. Moving somewhere else. That shopping center could have been right down here on MacDonald.

Washburn:

Yeah, Hilltop. Do you want to tell us about—now, going back to Tiffany's question about coming out to Richmond, describe your trip coming out here. You want to describe that?

Foster:

Oh, when I came to Richmond, I came on a Southern Pacific train. You know, it took us four straight days to come here then. I don't know how it is now on the train. [laughs] I think it's little better, don't you think so? [laughs] Four days. Oh, you were so tired. We stopped and changed, when I left for St. Louis, I changed in Kansas City, Missouri. And I got a change again—I think I changed where at? When I came on to Santa Fe, that was east, west, one. But anyway, I think the next change was Albuquerque, New Mexico.

1-00:30:08

And then we changed somewhere in Arizona. And from that I remember we come on in to—they changed so much, we had to change, they switched cars and things and when we got to somewhere, we had to change and take a bus into Bakersfield for something got wrong with the train, that's when I first came here. We took a bus into Baker—yeah, we used to have a big train station there, Santa Fe, you know about that?

Washburn:

Yeah, down there, the Gerard.

Foster:

Yeah, near Point Richmond. That's the first time I came here. That's where I come into, that station.

Washburn:

Were you traveling alone or with someone else?

Foster:

I traveled alone. I didn't have no companion but I met lots of people, friends and things, people I got acquainted with on my way. Was traveling out here, coming out here from different areas, you know, the South.

Washburn:

What were you guys' conversations on the train? What did you guys say to one another? Were you excited or were you fearful? What were the--?

Foster:

Uh-uh. No, just ordinary people, riding, going to a place we didn't know about but we'd talked—families had written and told you so much about it until you feel like you know part of it, some of it. Because my brother and others was calling and writing, telling us how they were doing, and everything. So I met one lady-friend, we wrote each other a long time after I rode this train. We was companions for a long time, riding, coming West. I think she was coming to Vallejo, California.

Washburn:

Oh, that's neat, so you made a good friend on the train.

Foster:

Yeah. Sometimes you meet nice people traveling. I met some real nice people traveling. We communicated for a long time.

Washburn:

Miss Foster, you know what, I don't know if I believe that you weren't ever fearful, because when I travel somewhere new, I get fearful. You were never fearful that things were going to work out for the best or that things weren't going to work out? What were you thinking?

Foster:

Well I was hoping that it would work out for the best, at least I'd be making more money. That's what I was looking forward to.

And about meeting people, on our way, we could go into diners and eat. But the first time I went back home to Arkansas, we did alright until we got into the Mason Dixon line—that's what they used to call it, the white man, you know? When you cross over [Kansas? City or country?] we could sit anywhere on the train we want to sat. But when we got to

the Mason-Dixon line, they put you in the back seat and drew a black curtain. You had one long seat in the back of the bus or the train. And then they had two more little side seats. And that was it. That was all the black folks had to sit on all the way through the South. It's not that way now. You can sit anywhere you want to. At least you could last time I took a train home, I think in '55. And the other times I took the plane home.

Washburn:

I'm trying to think, was that something that in people's letters, they wrote back? And was that something that you, yourself, were looking forward to? That the whole institution of segregation wasn't going to be in California? Was that something that you were conscious about?

Foster:

No, I wasn't worried too much about the segregation. The thing I was looking forward most to was making more money right then and a better place to live in.

Because it was funny when you come to California, you could hear black folks calling white people by their name. Because the young girls were "Missy" girls, back in the South, you had to "Miss" them, you know. It was an insult to the parents if you called them by their name. The thing that shows you how different states and things are. What you callin' everybody whatever you want to. Just like "Jane," you call her "Jane." And "Alice" or whatnot. But back in the South, after a girl or boy got to be up in their teens, in college or in high school, they parents want you to "Miss" 'em, you know. They would "Miss" 'em for you to "Miss" 'em.

Washburn:

So what would you have to call 'em? "Miss Jane" and "Miss Alice?"

Foster:

Mm-hmm. Right. And the older folks, we would "Miss" them, and the old black folks, they called us "uncle" and "auntie," you know.

Washburn:

But in California--?

Foster:

It's not that way. Some of these Spanish people called me "auntie" in the hospital the other week. I had a heart attack on—let's see, it's close to the end of February—must have been--

Washburn:

Wow, not too long ago. Yeah, you're doing good! That was a few weeks ago! Gee whiz!

Foster:

[laughing heartily, bends over laughing] Yeah, they called me "auntie" and whatnot, those Spanish people, they called me "auntie." I never said nothing, it never bothered me what you called me as long as you help me. And they said, "What do white folks call

you, nurses?" And I said, "Oh, those white nurses call me Miss Foster and the black nurses call me Miss Foster." [laughing]

Yeah, black people have a way of calling white people peckerwoods, you know. And it's one nickname like that, racism and whatnot, I think is wrong, you know. Because just like people get so mad for to be called "nigger." But when we get mad at each other, that's what we call each other. So we just have to think about those things, you know? That's where all this stuff comes from, people call themselves getting mad and calling a person a name or something to make them feel bad.

Washburn:

Yeah, it's pretty silly. Tiffany had a question for you, Miss Foster.

Lok:

Can you describe how you got your job at the shipyards?

Foster:

In the shipyards?

Washburn:

Yeah, describe about finding out about working there and getting your job at the shipyard.

Foster:

My brother, when I got here on—I think it was on the 4th of February, 1944—but anyway, the next day, my brother went to find me a place to live because he had two children and his wife and they had just two bedrooms. I stayed there with them that night and the next day, he took me across town to Harbrogate and saw the Reverend, he was a Reverend, one of my sister's father-in-law. He had one of these houses and they had an extra room. And they rented it to me. Then the next day or so, he took me to the union hall to join the union. And then from there to the hiring hall. We had to go two or three different places, then, to be hired. And so, I went to work the next week after I was here. I worked ever since February, 1944.

I started out working in the [short?] yard, they called it "the yard." Working and picking up and cleaning the streets and things like that. And then the next couple of months, they told me it would pay more scaling. And I took a test to get that job. They paying a \$1.45 an hour. From the bottom we had to climb--and you know how high the ships are—we had to climb the ship ladder from the bottom to the top, then we get to the top, and had to go back down to the bottom, all the way down to the bottom of the ship. That got a little too rough for me. I did a couple of months, then I took sick went to the hospital. The doctor recommended [I be took out of double bottom?] That was in the scaling department. And that paid \$1.05 per hour. Then after I got well, went back, they put me on [the offset?] dock. And that was paying a \$1.00 per hour. And so, I worked there until shipyard was laid off. They began layoffs in '45. I got laid off in May.

Washburn:

Hold on one second. This microphone is creeping down on us here.

[adjustments]

1-00:40:01

Foster:

So I worked there and got [well-liked?] and everything. We had some real good leaders. We had a leader, a white lady from Oklahoma. She real nice, we just like a wonderful big family. It was three blacks, there was a Mexican girl, and two or three white ladies. We got [_____?]; we sit down and ate lunch together and talk and told jokes and things like that.

Washburn:

Describe that again. Who was in your crew?

Foster:

Our “Leaderwoman,”—they called them leaderwoman—she was from Oklahoma. She was white. And we had a Mexican girl, lived here in Richmond. There was three blacks, all three of us was from Arkansas, but wasn’t the same town. And the other ladies was white, different places, but they all was from the South I think. But we had fun together, we sat down and ate together at lunch time and all of that. No discrimination, nothing like that. You could tell jokes on each other, and on each race, and nobody thought nothing about it.

Washburn:

I think it’s pretty amazing that you guys were all from different backgrounds and you were all women doing this work together.

Foster:

Right.

Washburn:

What were the stories you guys shared with each other at the time? Do you remember anything in particular that you guys were saying to each other?

Foster:

Well, all of us was from different states and places and we were making more money than we had ever made in our lives. At least I know I was and they said they were, too. And that was interesting. And told life stories and all that kind of stuff. And the Mexican girl and another white girl and a black girl, they were young. And two of them had married some sailors. And they liked that, talk about that.

Washburn:

Talk about their new husbands.

Foster:

[laughs] Yeah!

Lok:

Can you describe more, like, the working conditions? You said that you didn't like it and -?

Foster:

Hah?

Washburn:

Yeah, describe why you didn't like what you were doing, the scaling, describe why it was so hard?

Foster:

It just hurt my hand, right hand swole up and arm up to here. The grip, you had to hold it straight and everything, because going up and down, if you didn't hold it straight, your knife would jump out and maybe somebody would get hurt. You had to be real careful. [Mine acted alright?], but it would be better for my health, the doctor said, too strenuous. Because we had to travel so much, climbing and carrying those gears on our backs. Those long big hose, you know? You wrapped around there and you put 'em across your shoulder like this. And you had to do that twice a day, morning and night, when you got on at eight in the morning and four in the evening. And people be rushing so, you know, getting in and out. Get that time clocks, because if you miss one minute, you'd lose a whole hour.

Lok:

You said you were, like, in a union. Did you ever complain to the union about these conditions?

Foster:

The union.

Washburn:

Describe your involvement in the union. You had said before you had to go to the union hall first.

Foster:

Right.

Washburn:

Now, describe the different unions, because there were separate unions, right.

Foster:

It was the first one I had ever been in. Because I wasn't in no union in St. Louis when I worked at that factory. This was the first union I was ever a member of. And we paid dues to the labor department, paid two dollars a month for dues. They had several—we was invited to several affairs. They was sponsored by the union. A large crowd of people went. And they'd take our pictures and our clothes and all that. They did that in the shipyard you know. My pictures, I sent them home to Momma and I lost sight of them. Because ladies had to wear coveralls you know and brogan shoes, the men, you know,

because of the steel and stuff was too dangerous. And they had a steel hat like you see there, that picture I showed you.

Washburn:

Can you push up your glasses? Thank you. Miss Maes—Miss Foster, there were different unions, right? Wasn't there a black auxiliary union?

Foster:

The one I was in was just a union, black and white members. They may have helped did one later. Outside there were so many different organizing different things now, like the black caucus and all that stuff you see in the government. Well, that wasn't here then.

Just, you'd go and pay your dues, anything they had, you'd always invite the union members—barbecue, like on 4th of July and stuff like that you know, Labor Day, they'd invite us to. I got a chance to see Paul Robeson and Dr. DuBois. Labor had a big affair in Oakland over at the auditorium. Everything was free, as long as we had our pass, union pass.

Washburn:

What year was that that you saw Robeson and DuBois?

Foster:

It must have been back, I guess, in '45. I was still working.

Washburn:

And what did they have to say to everybody?

Foster:

You're talking about Robeson?

Washburn:

Yeah, what'd they—he sang I'm sure but what else? What did Du Bois have to say about everything?

Foster:

It's been so long, now, I wasn't too informed about him. But I remember him having a white lady to the conference. And Dr. Dubois was the major speaker. And another white man was there—he was the chairman. And they talked about how things went on, and discrimination some places here in America. That was some of the main subjects and whatnot.

And then after that Dr. Dubois—I began to read about him, they had put him on the Communist list. And Robeson, too, didn't they? And they said, because he married a white woman. That's all I ever knew, to hear them say. Because that's why they said [Brown?] was put on the Communist list, and had to give up the NAACP as President in 1949. [coughs]

Washburn:

Well, we want to talk about that later on. But that was a union event out there at Oakland Auditorium where all of the—was it a mixed crowd? Was it all the union members were out there?

Foster:

Yeah, it was a mixed crowd, white and black and Spanish and whatnot. [coughs] Different speakers and whatnot from different organizations spoke. Dignitaries, you know. That's where I found out how strong the union was and how much power they had. And we didn't have no union in Arkansas where I lived. Because we's in the country. And when people first started talking about joining unions and going—we had a [proven ground hope?] just sixteen miles from my ground. President Clinton was born there. And they didn't want people to join unions when they first started organizing unions, in that area. This was in Arkansas.

Washburn:

Why was that?

Foster:

I guess they wanted men more working. Forty hours and stuff like that, eight hours a day work, that's what they really fought, you know. See, you work from sun to sun as a farmer. As long as the sun shines, that's when you work. [laughs] You go to work chopping cotton and corn and picking—well I don't know about picking cotton, but chopping cotton, they paid you by the hour, so much an hour. You went to work at seven and six o'clock in the morning. From seven in the morning, worked until six in the evening. You have one hour off for lunch. That was from twelve to one. And you go back there, chopping cotton, you work on to the end.

Then one man we worked for, me and my first husband, he say he don't want my husband doing [_____?], he want him feeding and taking care of horses so he come in when the sun was up. So the union cut all that out, you know, and that's what some of 'em don't like.

1-00:50:07

Mr. Bush would just love to get rid of some of the unions, because Republicans don't like unions. [laughs] I worked for—I seen twenty-one years, and I know they don't like unions. No, no. Make 'em pay more for labor.

Washburn:

Tiffany has another questions for you, Miss Foster.

Lok:

I'm just wondering, like, how you were treated? How were you treated compared to other workers? You said there wasn't discrimination within your crew but like--

Washburn:

[interrupts] How were the women treated compared to the men out at the shipyards?

Foster:

That's what I liked, us women started protesting certain jobs womens couldn't get. At first, they said they were men's jobs, you know. But womens began to protest and some get to be hired into these jobs where they said women weren't supposed to work.

Washburn:

Which jobs are those?

Foster:

Well, such jobs as [shipwrites], helpers, painters, and welders and another job that you never saw womens on much. I forgot the name of it now. But anywhere in the line, you know, some kind of scaling or welding or done like that, they say it was too hard. But before the shipyard closed, womens were doing the things that the men used to do.

Lok:

How did they protest?

Foster:

Hah?

Lok:

You said they protested, like what kind of activities did they do?

Foster:

They began to have meetings with reverends and men that believe in women working, if she qualifies for a job, to get it. Would tell us what to do and protest and everything. Some women just like to be policemans and firefighters and things like that. I wouldn't want to be, myself. But I say, if a woman wants to be it, if she qualify, let her be it. So things are much better in that field. Because it used to be womens were just working at the desk if she qualified to be secretary or something like that. That's what she got.

Lok:

But you did end up being a scaler, right, which is something that the men didn't want you—or didn't think you were qualified to do, so how did that feel?

Foster:

[nods head] We had scaling. There was lots of women doing scaling work when I left my group. We had a leaderman. Everybody had leadermans and they had so many groups [they called?], they didn't overload a women with a whole lots of people. They had labor number one and labor number two, stay with number two and whatnot. Our leaderman while I was scaling was a lady who lived in San Francisco. Willie Mae, she was a black woman.

Washburn:

Miss Foster, you were earning more money than you ever earned in your life, working out at the shipyards. Same with your brothers. What did you do with the money that you were earning? You were living in war housing, you weren't paying a lot, you weren't buying a home. What were you doing with the money that you had?

Foster:

I was putting it up. I had several bottles of stuff like that and put it up. After the shipyard closed, I was out of work for quite a while and I lived off that. Farm work took over again in California. People were picking beans and things. You'd go pick beans, tomatoes, there'd be so many people. You always had [____?], honey. Down round San Jose, all in that area now were tomato crops and bean crops. We did that for several months, making living. You got a dollar a lug for them—no, \$.60 a lug.

But anyway I worked and made ten dollars every day. And my ride back and forth for the day was a dollar. And I would go and work hard enough to make it and have nine dollars for myself. So, then, after that I went into private domestic work, and I worked there until I retired.

Washburn:

So, did you send money home to your mom?

Foster:

Well, all my sisters and brothers were back at home cut three, and I helped my mother take care of them. My baby brother, he went in the Army and the other two sisters got married. So that's the way it went. I wasn't compelled to do it but I did it because I didn't have any children myself. I helped out. Did that answer your question? You asked me about the--.

Washburn:

[to Lok] Did that answer your question?

Lok:

Yes.

Washburn:

Have you ever had your ears pierced?

Foster:

Uh-uh.

Washburn:

I heard some stories about women out at the shipyards that were piercing their ears and were making bracelets for themselves and making rings and they were all sharing--.

Foster:

Yeah, you know I bought two rings, real nice, made out of steel, it was either steel or chrome or what. But they real nice. I lost 'em. It would have been valuable today. But people made those as a hobby and sold them. And they made bracelets, some of them was copper, some of them was brass colored. And they made rings and bracelets. Then, some of them began to make necklaces, you know. Yeah, lots of folks did that.

Washburn:

Of the women who you worked with, did you befriend any of them? Were you good friends with some of them? Would you do things after the job with any of these women? Tell me about the people you worked with.

Foster:

The two black women and I, we got to be real good friends. And we visited each other and everything, clear until they moved from Richmond. One went back to her home in Arkansas, [Ella Rita?]. And the other people, they moved to Arizona, last time I heard from them. We communicated every Christmas and birthdays. And the white ladies, whenever I ran into them—I ran into one several times after the shipyard closed and she, I think, she really glad to see me. And I glad to see her, too. And the Mexican girl, she used to visit because after I moved and my sister and them in [Hensley?] area we called it, on Enterprise, down cross the track, there were no more black people in that area having had a home. There are still there but its owned by black. And she would visit me at my sister's house and invited me to visit her. I went to her mother's house and met the rest of her people and everything. And then after she got married and everything, she married a white guy and committed suicide. I don't know what happened. Her sister told me she was living in Los Gatos and she had two or three children and she went out in the car and turned that gas or whatever on. And her husband came in and saw them all dead in the car.

Washburn:

That's an awfully sad story.

Foster:

But she was a beautiful Mexican girl married to white guy. I don't know what happened.

Washburn:

How long did you maintain—how long were you friends with these two women in your shipyard. The one who went to Arkansas and Arizona, how long after the war were you friends?

Foster:

After the shipyard closed, they moved back but we communicated a couple of years, writing each other. Mary went back there and one time she wanted to come back out but she said she didn't have enough money. And her boyfriend sent her money once but she used it up and she didn't come. And she wasn't going to bother him anymore so she asked me if I could send her, but I couldn't trust her. Because she had a good boyfriend but she just didn't want to marry or something. And so the other lady and her husband moved back to, I think it was Tucson, Arizona. But we communicated, I guess, for a long time. We sent each other Christmas presents and all that.

Washburn:

We need to take a break, okay Miss Foster? We have to change this tape.

1-00:59:38

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

2-00:00:01

Foster:

--a woman leader. But the first job I had, we had a man leaderman.

Washburn:

Okay, this is tape two with Miss Foster. And I think we are interested in finding out a little bit about, if you don't mind, your social life at the time. You were out here and you were not married, right?

Foster:

Right. I was single. I guess what you call it, I was a divorcée, you know. I had been married twice. But for fifteen years, I was single. Yeah, I had boyfriends, if that's what you--. [laughs heartily and bends over with laughter]

Washburn:

Yeah, let's talk about that. [laughs] Yeah, we want to talk about the boyfriends. It's so much fun!

Foster:

[laughing]

Washburn:

Why don't you tell us a little bit about, as a single woman, what it was like to be, you know, to be living in Richmond and going on dates and can you push up your glasses for a second?

Foster:

Maybe I should wash them, too.

Washburn:

No, they look okay. Why don't you tell us about being a single woman and going on—you know, what you did for meeting men.

Foster:

Well, the first boyfriend I had after I came to Richmond--I didn't have no special boyfriend in St. Louis because I wasn't there that long. But I had people take me out and stuff like that. I'm a church lady. And so I always met people mostly with going to church and everything. So, I had a boyfriend who was an ex-school teacher from Texas, he was real nice to me. We went together for a long time until after he left and went back to Texas. He had two daughters. One was a musician and played in a show or something in Southern California. I used to have one of her records and whatnot.

But I didn't marry for fifteen years. I never changed boyfriends that often. I wasn't one of those that changed boyfriends often or had lots of boyfriends. He would take me to nice shows and stuff like that in Oakland, 'Frisco, you know, church meetings. He was the one to take my membership to the NAACP when they first organized in Richmond.

Washburn:

What was his name?

Foster:

Professor [Hoyk?]. I think his initials were W.M. His wife was dead. Taught school in Texas.

Lok:

Was that unique to you, for you to date someone who had children?

Foster:

Hah?

Lok:

Was it awkward for you to date someone had two children already?

Foster:

Yeah, he had two daughters.

Washburn:

Did you watch after them?

Foster:

No, no, they was grown! [laughs]

Washburn:

He was older than you then, no?

Foster:

Yeah, uh-huh. They said he had a daughter older than me, that's what some people say. And he didn't tell me himself. He told me about his daughters because one got married and they sent me a wedding invitation and everything.

Washburn:

Why didn't you guys get married if you don't mind my asking?

Foster:

I had been married twice and I wasn't ready to marry again. [laughs]

Washburn:

Why not?

Foster:

Because I wanted to enjoy life single, be my own boss for a while. [laughs] That's what happens you know when you leave home young, you been under your parents the time you was there, and you get married to your husband who's your boss, it kind of feels good to be your boss and you got a job where you work and taking life, and take care of yourself. I rent me out a room, I always just had a room, I rent. Buy my own food and

whatnot, and cook it. If I didn't ever want to cook, I'd go out to a restaurant. And I enjoyed that life for fifteen years, I'm telling you.

Washburn:

Why'd you enjoy it so much?

Foster:

Just being my own boss, for one. And being able to work and take care of myself and buy some things that I liked to have. I rented from my one sister for three or four years. When I started renting from her, she had three children, two boys and one girl—and then their family increased and so I found me another place. I rented from some people, a man and his wife, a bedroom I had. Then I stayed with them until another sister and her husband bought a home. And they had a vacant bedroom and they invited me to come and live with them. I did that until about twelve years and then I got me a little private apartment right next door. I stayed there until I married Mr. Foster, that's where I was living.

Washburn:

Why was it more important to you to be your own boss than to raise a family and have kids? Why was it more important to you to live that life?

Foster:

It just meant so much to be free again, honey! [laughs and claps hands] That's all I'll tell you! When you be married, she have to go under her husband's rules. He rules you and tell you where to go and all that kind of stuff. Well, when you get to be single and get around and go places and learn things, learn how to get around towns and things, you just get to where you feel more freer. You just enjoy it, go where you want to go.

My first husband, he decided he didn't want me to go to church, and he knew I go to church, I was a member of the church where we met and everything. He decided he didn't want me to go. That was a big confusion there, you see. Because after I got free and single—I married when I was seventeen—after I got free and single again at twenty-four, I just kind of felt like a bird out of a cage. And the more I traveled around, the more independent you get, you know. [pause] Don't you think that was good? [smiling]

Washburn:

I think that's wonderful.

Foster:

[laughs] Yeah.

Washburn:

But what was it like, I mean, were there other women doing what you were doing? Or did people say to you, "Hey Matilda, you need to get married. What are you doing being single all these years?" So what was going on for you at that time? Were there other women doing the same thing or did you feel kind of like--?

Foster:

I met other womens that was single. I met other womens who was married. We became friends and I was friends with married women just like I was with single. Because some womens back then was—she never did marry. She and I was friends for years and she never did marry. She had a nice apartment, dressed nice, and everything.

Washburn:

What I'm trying to say is, was there the pressure, just like there's a pressure to go out there and get a good job and make a good living, was there the pressure, like "Hey Matilda, you got to get married. What are you doing?"

Foster:

Oh, no, those that knew me didn't want me to ever get married anymore after they didn't work out so good, my first two marriages, those people that knew me from home. And then friends and things I met was surprised to know that I had been married twice and had two living, two divorced husbands. So, no pressure, no, uh-uh, on me.

So, when me and Mr. Foster got married we just met about two years and the next year we went on to Reno and got married. Yeah, it was Reno. His niece and nephew-in-law took us down there early one Saturday morning. The 31st of May, 1958.

Washburn:

So you had no children, right?

Foster:

No.

Washburn:

Why didn't you ever want to have children?

Foster:

I liked children and wanted two.

Washburn:

So what happened?

Foster:

I just don't know. I didn't have any. That's all I know. [laughs] That's all I know. Yeah, I wanted a girl and a boy. My brother used to tell on me, I named them before I even had them. [laughs and falls back with laughter]

Washburn:

What were their names?

Foster:

Helen and Curtis! [laughing]

Washburn:

Helen and Curtis?

Foster:

Yeah. [laughing] He gave a big birthday party for my seventieth birthday and he told me that he had all the children and I didn't have any but I always had wanted a girl and a boy, and I named them Helen and Curtis. [laughing]

Washburn:

Those are nice names.

Foster:

I thought those was beautiful names when I was young, you know. I was just a girl, a kid, when I used to say that. Because I was married when I was seventeen.

I went to night school out here and graduated from high school. Because I went to seventh grade in Arkansas grade school. And so after I moved here and they was going to have a night school, and after I got my job doing domestic work, I went only at night for seven years. Got my high school diploma. Graduated in 1959.

2-00:10:00

Washburn:

Can we talk a bit about--did you have any questions about religious life or anything? [to Lok]

Lok:

How did you get involved in the church?

Washburn:

Tell us about your religious life in Richmond?

Lok:

What kind of activities did you guys do?

Foster:

Religious.

Washburn:

Tell us about your church life. What was the first church that you--?

Foster:

Oh, St. John. When I came to California, my schoolmate, one of my sister-in-law's brothers, he had found a church on Cutting. James Brown, he's dead now, he died last year. But anyway, he was living in L.A. But he founded St. John, the biggest church we have there in Richmond, on 52nd, South 52nd. That was the church I first joined. I stayed there four years. And my brother, he was working in Macedonia. He's younger than me but he was active, real active in church. He had got to be a deacon and asked me to come out and join him. I went out and joined him in Macedonia. Because more people from my

home, that's North Richmond, which is a big church there, on Philbert, you know? Right here on Macedonia, I've got thirty-four years. The reason I leave there, my brother he had changed denominations. And he founded the church and pastored for thirty-five years before he passed. And I joined there in '86. And I'm still there. And that church is right here on 35th and Cuttings. Bethel Temple Pentecostal Church.

Washburn:

So you changed and became a Pentecostal.

Foster:

Yeah. But I was reared as a Baptist.

Washburn:

You were raised as a Baptist. And St. John's is Baptist.

Foster:

And Macedonia is Baptist.

Washburn:

And Macedonia is Baptist.

Foster:

Uh-huh. Reverend G.E. Griffin, now, he was the pastor I was under at Macedonia. And when I left St. John, Reverend Johnson, the late Reverend Johnson had had these St. John's apartments down on First and MacDonald. He was pastor there until he died.

Washburn:

Did you start going to church the first year you came to Richmond?

Foster:

Yeah, I was reared up in church, you know.

Washburn:

That was important for you.

Foster:

Right.

Washburn:

Tell me why was it important when you first came to Richmond to find a new place to worship?

Foster:

Because I wanted to be in church and worship. I wanted to be in church and worship. I was raised up in church and so I worked in church for years with children. I had children all over the state of California to different meetings. That's what one off those plaques are over there, one of the family groups there. They gave it this year. Right there.

Washburn:

This one here? This one right here?

Foster:

This one right there. [indicating]

Washburn:

[reads] "Matilda Missionary Appreciation for your—." Oh, that's nice. [pause] People are interested to know--we're actually trying to find out--and I think I know the answer but I want to hear it from you—during this time, did you find more comfort and more friendship by spending time at work and in the union or by going to church.

Foster:

I found friendship in different places because at the union and civic meetings and things like that, I had friends, colored and white, some of 'em dead and everything. You know I had one white lady friend, she sent me money after her husband died, every month. Automatically, after she retired, she said that she had extra money and her kids didn't need it, her son and daughter was grown and had grown children, and she said she had two black friends she was going to send the money to and the other lady was Lizzie Lincoln. She never sent under twenty dollars. Sometimes she'd send forty, like at Christmas time. But she's dead, too, now. She died a couple of years ago. And she was our friend. I met her in the Democrat Club. And we were friends for years. And others, you know.

Washburn:

But you also said you met men out at church, what was more important to you in your life at that time, being part of the church or being part of the union or having a job?

Foster:

Church, I never put nothing ahead of church.

Washburn:

Okay, why is that?

Foster:

Because I feel like it's my obligation as a Christian to support the church and respect the church. I would say things, maybe I would make a joke or something like that in a civic meeting, I wouldn't say that in a church meeting. Because when you go to church, you supposed to be there to worship in the name of the Lord, you know. That's what you go for. Because you are a baptized believer in Christ, Jesus. And that's why I would go to church and baptize believers because I believe in Resurrection, you know. We serve God by serving each other.

Washburn:

Now, what's that mean?

Foster:

Because we haven't seen God. And he said that, you say you love God and hate your brother, [you walk daily, you lying to truth?]. That's what John says. You have to love everybody to get the glory, if you want to go. I believe in that. After death. That's what the Bible say. I read that every day.

And as for a civic meeting, maybe I would joke or say something or other or maybe make some kind of motion or something that I thought would be feasible for the organization, yet maybe I wouldn't say that in church, you see. Because I don't have that much—unless it's my department that I'm working in or something like that, or president of. When I'm going into my church, the reason is to sit and listen to the gospel, you know. Because he said, "How can you hear without a preacher?" [claps hands once]

Washburn:

[to Lok] Do you have a question to ask about church?

Lok:

Yeah, was it pretty much just an African American community church or was it more diverse?

Foster:

Well, some of our churches have lots of white members. And some just have only African Americans. And you take—we had our annual banquet of the NAACP this Saturday night at the auditorium. Now, we have always had a pretty nice mixed crowd, you know. With your ministers here [_____?] so I didn't see that many of our leaders, white leaders that we usually have introduce. Most of the time, we always recognize our leaders regardless of the color. Black Muslim people, you know, they's different. And some of them was charge, our main speaker was a Black Muslim, Mohammed from Oakland. He was a preacher, good speaker and everything. But I don't believe in discrimination.

Washburn:

So do you want to talk about the NAACP, when did you first join and why did you join it?

Foster:

Because it was a civil rights organization. My boyfriend, Professor [Hoyk?] took me in 1948. That's when it was founded here in Richmond. Down here at Harborgate, you know?

[phone rings; interview interruption]

Washburn:

What year and why did—tell that story again that you just told me.

Foster:

About the church?

Washburn:

No, no, about NAACP, we just got interrupted.

Foster:

Oh, yeah. They had membership meetings every third Sunday, I think, at Harbrogate. That's where it was founded, at Harbrogate recreation center. And we met and had membership meetings. So that was in 1944. July in '44. And I've been a member ever since. And in 1950, Mr. Fowler—Mr. Brown was president all the time from '44 to '49. That's when they had the Queen Contest. And I was asked to run for a queen. I kind of brushed it off slightly because I didn't think I'd get that much support you know. I didn't know that many people out here in California. But I went on and worked with people that I did know and the family members and friends, I won the contest. And so they had a big affair, one of the biggest affairs I had been in in California because they had limousines and all of that from Hudson Funeral Home, you know? And they had this long float. It was long and led to the parade from [Nickels] Park down here on 33rd I think or 34th.

2-00:20:05

Then out on [Tuvin?] in North Richmond, that big place then was Masonic Hall, and that's where we had our banquet that night. [coughs] Queen of the Carnival and everything. That was really nice, I enjoyed it very much.

And then from then on—that was in '49, '48 or '49, I think it was '49—in the next year, Mr. Fowler, he was elected. He's dead, too, now, he and his wife. But they was re-elected and [_____?] here in Richmond. [Blossom?] Fowler was her name. And he was elected. And Mr. Lucky, [Abdee] Lucky asked me and a cousin of mine, we had been working and raising money for the branch, asked us, "You're running for the Bowl, right?" And I didn't know what he meant by "running for the Bowl" you know. We accepted. We were elected. And I just got off the Bowl the year before last. [laughs]

[interview interruption]

Washburn:

Tell us about the NAACP in Richmond. Why was it formed and what was its purpose in Richmond?

Foster:

Well, it formed because they said we needed one in Richmond on account of so much discrimination was going on in houses and places. They said, some places, they didn't want people to work. You'd take that plant out there, you know where [Chess?] lives in North Richmond? You ever been to North Richmond? You know that [rain?] plant, it's closed now. Well, used to be Negroes couldn't even be hired there, for a long time. They said that that was in the contract when they founded that place. I think they made instruments, basin bowls and stuff like that. They wasn't supposed to hire Negroes. So for a long time, when one Negro was hired there, and then before it closed, they had lots of Negroes. And then another plant there, they had lots of people where they used to didn't hire black folks. It closed down, too. They used to make equipment, bathroom equipment. They used to make mattresses and all that. Back there at the railroad.

Washburn:

As a participant and a member of the NAACP, what did you do?

Foster:

We worked to raise money and stuff like that and had meetings and went to our state and county meetings. All the time, we went to state meetings. Miss Tarea Hall Pittman, she was our field secretary until she got old, and you know, everything. And, watch-you-call, you know, he was our national director, and also the first one I knew was a white guy, he was mix you know, he was our national president. [Walter White] And with so many founders—a white lady was a co-founder, Miss Mary [White Ovington]. She a co-founder in NAACP national, and Dr. Du Bois, and others. They have them on records. They have them on records and everything.

Washburn:

But those first couple of years when you were in Richmond, I guess, we could talk a little bit about the—what were some of the big issues that came up in Richmond? Maybe you want to comment on the Wilbur--

Foster:

--Gary house.

Washburn:

For someone who doesn't know who Wilbur Gary is—[sneezes]

Foster:

Did you want some Kleenex?

Washburn:

I'm okay. Who is Wilbur Gary and what was his story?

Foster:

Well, he was just a workman here in Richmond, a man, and he said really to buy his home—he could live in a government housing or something. When he saw his first son graduate from high school, well, he wanted a place of his own where he have company and whatnot, for his children. And so he bought this home in Rollingwood. And he was the onliest black person that had bought out there. And those people just carried on so bad, the NAACP had to have people out there day and night to help watch them because white folks were talking about threatening their lives and everything. So the NAACP got into it and worked and they kept on confronting. And that place now practically fully integrated if you tell me. I haven't even been out there since that time was going on. It was all in the paper and everything.

Washburn:

What year was this?

Foster:

It must have—it was in the fifties. And I was working. I start working [for the Fraziers?] in 1949, I guess. It was up in the fifties when it happened. And some black folks said he

wrong, some of the same black folks said then that this man was wrong for moving into a white neighborhood. And they didn't want him to. Some of the same people moved into black white neighborhoods and was protested just like he was. Just can't give up something we want to do. That's takes a wrongful person to have a neighborhood that they want certain folks that they want to buy and live in. So this man, he had the money to buy that home and he wanted to stay there and so he stayed there I guess, I think—well, he's dead now, I think, I read that a good while back. But they stayed there. They didn't leave. They tried to run them away. They told him if they want to live in that neighborhood, [go paint your face white?]. All that, it was in the paper, you know.

Washburn:

So, did you go out and sit at his home, too?

Foster:

Yeah, I went out several times? The NAACP assigned members. A man and woman or maybe two women, most time it would be a man and a women. They didn't let women go alone, then. Because women were not as brave as they are now. There were no policewomen or nothing like that, then. But we went out there and sat several times with them. NAACP had mass meetings and raised money to help them. They had people come out there and they had watches from outside and inside. Costed lots of money, you know. But they stayed, the best part. The bad part would have been to let them run them away like certain members were saying they ought to do. "Come out from there. You should stay--they should have gone somewhere else."

But see, if you don't break down discrimination, it would still be discrimination every where else. We wouldn't even have the school, integration, all of that, if the NAACP and Dr. King hadn't started working. If Mrs. Parks hadn't got off that bus, like they told her, to give up our seat and give it to a white man, we'd still be doing that. But somebody had to break the ice, you know.

I was put off the bus in Port Arthur, Texas, we black folks, just to give the white people our seats. Now, I know that. That was in '42, I guess. I was coming from seeing my husband at the hospital. A little boy was my companion, where I lived, he went out there with me and back, he showed me the way. And the bus got overcrowded. People were standing up and everything. And the busdriver stopped and said, "Ya'll niggas get off and catch another bus, I'll give you a transfer." That was in Port Arthur, Texas.

Washburn:

Well, I can expect that in the Jim Crow South, but we were out in California in the fifties and that was going on.

Foster:

Yeah, that's right.

Washburn:

And what was the NAACP saying about that at that time? What was your guys--?

Foster:

We were the ones working to help those people stay out there! And to protect them, send police to watch they homes and things. The NAACP put out a full force to help them. And other organizations, black and white was criticizing us and the people for moving out there!

Washburn:

Why were they criticizing you?

Foster:

Said they shouldn't move out there!

Washburn:

But why would they say something like that?

Foster:

Because the white folks didn't want him out there. That's why. But some of those same people, now, since other areas have been integrated, they changed their mind and saw things was different and went over and cooperated. What we saw was blacks just as discriminatory as the white man, you know.

Washburn:

So the NAACP, did you guys have resistance within the black community to things you were doing?

Foster:

Sure, they were! When they first protested the government housing, you know. The black folks come, even the preachers, some of them were worse than anybody, about telling the folks, for us to "Stay out of it. White folks don't want us to live in their community. You get your place in your own community."

2-00:29:59

That's why there so much discrimination today, certain black ministers, you know. It's like Mohammed, they all discrimination, and some of our young folks is falling for that stuff, you know.

Washburn:

Tell us about their efforts to improve housing conditions in Richmond. What were they doing?

Foster:

They protested and went to their government, even to the national government and protested. You take Atchison Village down there going to Point Richmond? They used to didn't want black in that whole area. The NAACP stood up to 'em. So, now, I haven't been there for a long time, but they tell me it's almost owned by black people. And even right across the track there. And they had slaver, you know, all in that Iron Triangle area, I think that's what that district is. They didn't want black folk to move in there! My

brother got two houses in that area where they used to didn't want Negroes. He had one rented house and one he lived in.

So Housing, they began to tear homes down and moving people in different areas and they wanted to put 'em in discriminated areas, some stood up and wouldn't go. They come to the NAACP, and the NAACP stood up with them, you know. So I still think it's a good organization. I just hope it still stands for both black and white in the right way.

Washburn:

I think Tiffany had a question about Harborgate. Did you want to talk about Harborgate a little bit? I mean, the conditions in Harborgate?

Foster:

Yeah, Harborgate, you had all the private homes, you'd say, two duplex together. And that's where discrimination was and some of the people, they wanted some of the areas to be left just a certain race of people. And I think that's why they first organized the NAACP there in Harborgate, I think.

Washburn:

Why is that? It organized people--?

Foster:

Because discrimination was going on, you know. White people who thought they should have certain areas, you know.

Washburn:

Within Harborgate

Foster:

Right. Just like they have duplex here, they didn't want a black person to have the second one, next door. But that was all protesting, there were certain black people who, teachers and things, some of them were saying, "Just let it alone." They told us, "People will lose their jobs and all that kind of stuff," they say. If you lose a job, go get a job somewhere else and fight for that, too, you know. If you have proof that you were fired because a certain area you wanted to live in or you were living in, report it.

Lok:

Was there like a strong sense of community among the African Americans there?

Foster:

Hah?

Lok:

Was it hostile, was it friendly? What was the sense of community there?

Foster:

What kind of community was it then?

Washburn:
In Harborgate.

Lok:
Yeah, Harborgate.

Foster:
They said the white man wanted that area for all white people. I lived on Griffin Street. And I think most of those houses, adjoining us, both sides were all black. But in the further area over, they said white people wanted all that just for themselves. They did some real nasty things, they said, too, you know. They'd do things, maybe throw something out in the streets, then claim that a black person did it. That's why some of them said we don't clean enough and all that kind of stuff. But it's not that true. Some people is clean everywhere they go and some isn't. And my neighbor right here, she and I been living—she's a white lady, this is a white lady—but we all get along. Just neighbors, people.

Washburn:
Tell us about the NAACP meetings, where were the meetings and what was done at the meetings?

Foster:
They had the meetings once a month at the recreation—each project had what you call a dormitory or recreation center. We have a church and other meetings and sacred programs and dances and stuff like that in that same building. So, the NAACP had meetings there a couple hours, once a month, on third Sundays, I think it was. And they would be discussing different types of plans and reports and things. They had national and then local reports, you know, that came in from San Francisco, where our headquarters was. And we had leaders from the NAACP to come out. We paid them donations and change to come out and speak in the community. We have had some good, large meetings, mass meetings here in Richmond. And lots of white people—our leaders used to be [Assemblyman Knox and Masters?]. And George Miller and all of them always cooperate with the NAACP.

Washburn:
Yeah, were there white religious leaders that cooperated with the NAACP?

Foster:
Yeah.

Washburn:
Who were those?

Foster:
You know John Knox, don't you?

Washburn:
No.

Foster:

Oh, ya'll pretty young. [laughter] Yeah, John Knox lived in Point Richmond. He used to be one of our District Assemblymen. And after him, George Miller's daddy was our state Assemblyman. And then, [Conman?], I think, he was our national Congressman. And there was another one, he died, both of them died. And after that, it was [Waller?]. I have his pictures on one of the albums there. He was our Congressman until he retired and then George Miller. George Miller has been there since he was a young man, over twenty some years, maybe thirty. And they always have given us information and helped us and supported us too in our NAACP work.

Washburn:

But during the War and during the forties, were there other white religious leaders that came to the NAACP meetings or supported or was it a long time before the white religious leaders--?

Foster:

For some time, there was more whites sometimes in the meetings than there was blacks. I don't know if it was depending on the leadership or what, but when Mr. Brown was President, he got good cooperation. Numbers, you know, and financial support, too. Mr. Fowler had it for a while and then finally falling away. We had always had board members until [Dr. Robertson?] took over. We had lots of white board members, [poetry reading strong, everything and all that.] Then Dr. Robertson, P.T. Robertson come in and he was elected President in the fifties and sixties, I think, maybe. He run all the white folks away from all the meetings, saying things, you know, that hurt they feelings. Called 'em Communists and all that kind of stuff. But he get his white friends to come and speak, you know. Like, Johnny [Catchapple? K. Chapel?] was our speaker several times. He was a radio commentator, Johnny Catchapple.

Washburn:

What were you just saying about that—I think I talked to you over the phone about the political reputation of the NAACP and some folks being labeled Communist. Tell us why was that. What was that about?

Foster:

I don't know where it started from. The first that I head of it, Mr. Brown, that's why they say he gave up being president, because they labeled him Communist. Because he married a white lady. But they stayed together until death did part them. Everything changed. Mr. Brown came back to Richmond and got to be one of the labor leaders, you know, and also a member of the NAACP and president of some homeowners club or something. When they started building this [Fort Knox?] Freeway, he was head of a club they had organized on that, and real active and everything.

Washburn:

Who is "they" that called them communists? Who's that?

Foster:

Some of the people, that's all I know, some of the people in the government. Because we had letters, I had seen them letters, calling him and others they name. And I went to Mr. Fowler, our president, and he said he had got letters, too. And called one of our congressman's. I'm trying to think of that man's name. He's mixed up, you know. He was a Democrat. And they just, letters and things, anonymous letters, you know, calling people Communists. But I never really knew what "Communist" meant, myself.

2-00:40:05

Washburn:

So, it wasn't something that was talked about openly in the meetings?

Foster:

No, uh-uh. People, some folks, they said, "Doing underhand work in political and civics" and what not. And Miss [Blake?] she was working with us, a white lady, and she was a good supporter of anything that Negroes had going on, you know. She'd bring memberships and whatnot to the NAACP and all that. And they claimed she was a "sly Communist" or whatever they called her. But that word kind of vanished away, didn't it?

Washburn:

Yeah that did. But we do know, though, from some of the records, Miss Foster, we do know that some of the members of the NAACO were members of the Communist Party of America.

Foster:

Yeah.

Washburn:

I'm just trying to find out whether it was something that was talked about openly in your meetings about how we can change the United States, whether capitalism—did they ever talk about changing the economic order at all?

Foster:

They wanted to wipe out national, state, regional—yeah, they [railed?] poor Communists. They really did. The branches couldn't even take memberships of people that had been branded as Communists. They was real rough on Communists. Yeah, National.

Washburn:

The National branch.

Foster:

Yeah.

Washburn:

They wouldn't take people.

Foster:

Right, their memberships.

Washburn:

They wouldn't accept them.

Foster:

Uh-uh.

Washburn:

But was it something that was talked about in your guys' meetings, how we need to—
how there was discrimination not only in the social order but also in—there is not only
discrimination in society but he economy is bad for colored folks?

Foster:

That's what they claimed, that Communists was trying to overthrow the government.
That's what I was always was told. That's why people opposed them.

Washburn:

What I'm trying to see is was it talked about in your meetings at the NAACP.

Foster:

Yeah, they had issues with people come in explain to us about what Communist was and
not to participate. They said that, if they could get your letter or any kind of document,
you know, they could use it, you know. And, get into the government, you know, and
cause you to lose lots of support and everything. Because I had several folks to run for
public office and things like that would come up, and they say "This is a Communist."
You couldn't vote for them. Well, just tell me what is that anyway?

Washburn:

A Communist?

Foster:

Yeah.

Washburn:

[laughs] Oh, well, it's different political system where they believe the state should have
more control over the means of production where instead of privately owned railroads
and shipyards and all of that, they want to see more state ownership of business. Where
capitalism--

Foster:

Oh. They don't believe in the government, a capitalist government, do they?

Washburn:

They don't believe in a private sector. They believe in more of a public ownership of
business.

Foster:

Well, how do you feel? You think that's right?

Washburn:

In some ways, I agree with it.

Foster:

There's some other people--lots of other people must feel the same way. Because I think lots of things should be more [broader?] than what it is. That's the reason I don't like—I don't support Republicanism because they don't like the Democratic Party because the Democrats believe in giving black—I'd say minority people, don't have to be just black—minority people more recognition and public office. And we only have—we don't have as many Republicans—one Republican in Congress, he's from Oklahoma, that's the only black that I know. All the other that's in Congress is Democrats.

Washburn:

Yeah, what's his name? J.C. Watts?

Foster:

I think he is. He ran for President four years ago, didn't he? In the primary.

Lok:

I think he did twice.

Foster:

Yeah, that's the only Republican. And Mr. Bush got more than some of them have had. That's just like Mr. Houston, this bus company he had, [Land____?] I think it's called. They fought over that for months and months because he want to have the whole city—to furnish the buses for the whole city. He don't want no other small business to come in. He don't want no competition. He want it all. And I think that's wrong. I think somebody else, if they qualified and had a bus company should furnish for transportation, I think they should be given a chance. But they want to keep things small where they can make all the money, you see. That's the whole point, some of it, is the money. What you think about that guy they sent us yesterday? I think, throwing in money for corporate—I think in New York, he said in for eight years?

Washburn:

Oh, that Worldcom guy, Eggers or something, yeah. I think they deserve it. Those guys are—they're crooks. I think what we should do, we have fifteen minutes. I think I've talked too much. [to Lok] Do you want to ask about post-war life? [to Foster] We'll go for about ten more minutes and then we'll be done, okay?

Foster:

Okay, that's okay with me.

Washburn:

She [referring to Lok] has a bunch of questions about life in Richmond after the War.

Foster:

Oh. That was pretty hard but we hung out here and went to vineyard patches and tomato patches [laughs] to stay—to make a living. Yeah, bigshots and all, honey, we was in bean

patches, tomatoes, prunes, and walnuts. Those are four products that people worked and did when the shipyards closed. Went all over California, gathering nuts and prunes and beans and tomatoes. I gathered tomatoes and beans. Way down in Southern California around in Santa Clara County. They had all kind of big crops--they are all taken in, now, I guess--but they had just acres and acres of crops of beans and tomatoes. You'd get on a row, you'd be on that row all day, and making nine, ten dollars a day. The whole field would be covered, everybody, so many people. Everybody would have a row.

Washburn:

Who were you traveling with?

Foster:

Well, you traveled with different people that had cars. And I had a brother-in-law that had a truck. And he made good money, a dollar a head carrying people to these places. We paid him a dollar, and the company paid him so much for bringing these people to work. They paid him about forty cent a day, head, and he really did well. He had a great big truck. And that's the way I traveled when I was picking beans and tomatoes.

See, I went one day just to pick out those walnuts, [Agnes?] walnuts, somewhere back up there where the redwoods [Brentwood?], in that area. I picked prunes one day, and I picked [Angus?] walnuts. But it was so hard, my back hurt so bad, I never did go back to that. So, I started looking for jobs, then went different places. So, I went to San Francisco, me and a whole group of women, we went to the place where we thought we'd get hired. All the [cabbies?] and everything was all taken up then. People got jobs way on out—they got one job way on out in San Leandro, there, a Navy Hospital. I would guess it's still out there now. Was a great big hospital, this is in San Leandro. They take a bus that left Richmond at three o'clock that morning then changed buses to get downtown at I think about six, yeah. We'd interviewed and everything and got hired and all of that. And then they'd show up being not there a certain time this morning, I said, 'Oh, no, I can't take that. I live in Richmond; I'd be all night and day and getting down here and back.'

In the other, they just leave it open and all three of us got the job. I put in for swabbing, you know, cleaning that building. And one of the ladies put in for cook-helper. But we have to—the ladies told us what we had to do. We gave it up and came back home. So I went to praying then. Because money was getting scarce and everything, and I had to pay rent to my sister and everything, didn't want to live off of them. [phone rings]

[interview interruption]

2-00:50:05

Washburn:

--question but what's that like working in the shipyards as like, earning good money, working in the shipyards, and then you go to work in the field, how was that in terms of—did you think, 'I don't like this change!' or you know--

Foster:

[laughs] No, it wasn't like that. You weren't working in the shipyards but still you want to make a living, that's all the jobs you can get for now. You accept that. A proud person will accept it and go on and do the best they can. Yes, some of them had run machines and everything else but after—they wanted a job and wanted to stay in California, so they went on out there to the fields just like the rest of us. That was the part. Yeah, they used to laugh about it. Shoot, people who had businesses and all of that back in my home. But they could better here, just picking those beans than they could back where they were. You wouldn't have any business. And honey, they got in those rows and picked beans and everything. And tomatoes. Where I picked tomatoes, they had to pay 40 cent a lug.

Washburn:

Why didn't you return to Arkansas?

Foster:

I could do better in California. That's why we all returned, what stayed out here, and bought homes and everything else. And some had businesses and all that, but still you could make more money out here where you were. Some went home, got business and everything that they built up out here. But much better than where you was. Yeah, I know some of them had barbers, had beauticians, had teachers, and people owned clubs and all that. [knock at door] Open that door. [continues] But they stayed on out here. We still out here. Some died out here, all of that. Some went back home.

Washburn:

Come on in.

Foster:

Hi Robert Lee. This is the people I was telling you about was coming today to interview.

Washburn:

How you doing? We're going to be finished up here in a little bit. We're interviewing your aunt about all the war years.

Foster:

Hah?

Washburn:

We're telling him about how we're interviewing you about the war years.

Foster:

Yeah.

Washburn:

Did you have health insurance out at the Kaiser--?

Foster:

Yeah, uh-huh.

Washburn:

Do you have any memories of going to the old Kaiser Hospital over here on Cutting?

Foster:

Yeah. I went there several times. That's where when I got sick with scaling, they took me to the doctor, and the doctor recommended I be moved to another lighter job. I never had stayed before at the hospital, but I stayed at home for a couple weeks during my treatment, you know.

There used to be so many people when you go there on emergency. And you see people sitting on the floor and everywhere, all around. I remember one time, they took me there, and you had ambulances for the hospital, you know. But we paid so much a month. That took care of our health expenses. We wanted to keep it but after it closed, after I got the shipyard, I filed to get the insurance. I wished I had kept it because they say it's still good, people still have that same insurance.

Washburn:

So you wanted to keep Kaiser after you left the shipyards.

Foster:

Yeah. I just dropped mine.

Washburn:

Do you remember how much you paid for that a month?

Foster:

Two dollars. Ain't that something. [laughs] I got one insurance I pay \$31.00 a month, another one I pay \$10.00, another one I pay every three months \$79.46. Those are just life insurance. I don't have no health insurance. But that's what I pay for it, just the insurances, now.

Washburn:

That's amazing. You know Kaiser was the first health insurance in the country.

Foster:

Yeah, that's what you said.

Washburn:

That's an amazing story.

Foster:

Yeah, they got all sorts of hospitals, too.

Washburn:

Okay, we should finish up. Do you have any final questions? [to Lok]

Foster:

Yeah, I want to finish telling this story, if we have time, a joke. It refers to me. So many people were waiting out in the corridor. [laughing] And nurses would come out and [_____?] I will never forget about her. I remember [_____] two or three hours. [laughs!] And I said, to the lady, a white lady. I said, "Bye We'll be glad to [_____]?" She said, "Go fall out there on the floor!" She told me to fall out there on the floor and they would come pick me up. It's not that bad. Just, you set, and you're so tired, sick people [_____] they didn't have, I guess, enough doctors, but you had to stay so, so long. [laughs]

Washburn:

So you'd be sitting there for three hours.

Foster:

That's the biggest crowds I've ever been in, when I worked the shipyards. Because when you go getting on the bus, and off the buses, there's so many people, it's just like [____?] sometimes. One trying to get ahead of the other. They even had special buses, called special. Some people took those. They only made certain stops. And then, some regular buses, little trains used to run from Oakland into the shipyard, carrying so many people. In this area, all this transportation, we waited on buses, people would be waiting on the sidewalk and everywhere for buses. But it really was lots of people, more people than I've ever been in and working with, you know.

On the gangplanks, coming off the ships and things, sometimes people push each other and get to fighting and all that kind of stuff. But I never was close enough to get afraid but just saw some of that going on. I remember one girl pushed a man, he pushed her [laughs] so she pushed the man halfway down this gangplank. You know he was pushing so hard to get out ahead of her and she just got back and gave him a heavy shove. [laughing] He was white and she was colored. I saw that. He said—[laughs] he pushed him back so hard, he said, "What the hell are you [__?]" she said, "I want to get by, I'm pushing to get by! [laughing!]

Washburn:

She didn't get in too much trouble for pushing him. It was very crowded--.

Foster:

Yeah. People just pushed and pushed, and he pushed her and she got mad and sent that stuff back and gave a greater push. [laughs] Then, in the swing sometimes, when you getting in the bus sometimes and you get to the door and they would give you a swing and they push you on in. Oh, it was awful. But it still was interesting.

Washburn:

Do you have any final questions? [to Lok]

Lok:

Just to wrap up, what are your feelings about the Richmond community now? Like, how has it changed?

Foster:

Hah?

Lok:

A wrap up question is how has Richmond changed since you first arrived?

Foster:

Oh, Richmond has changed. You know, I just look at MacDonald. Used to be a beautiful place. We had stores from Fourth Street. [_____ Fulton?] And they were clear on up, at least out in this area. And it's just beautiful. Anything that you want, because these developers, they really tore Richmond up, for Redevelopment. It has changed so much, honey. It's a different place altogether. And then the police department used to be pretty rough. Lots of discrimination. Well, honey they got policemen all over now, black, you know, Hispanic and Black. The first black policeman we had, Doug Ellis—you might have read about him, I think he's dead now--

Washburn:

Douglas Ellis, right?

Foster:

Yeah. And colored folks didn't like him because he was so rough. He rode a motorcycle and everything. And they said white folks had him do it, but he was pretty tough. And the next black policeman was Washington. He's dead, too, I think. And from then on, we didn't have any city councils, honey, nothing like that. They said, wasn't nobody qualified to be that. We had some professionals to run for city council and for school boards and things. Mh-mh. They wasn't qualified. And we got it and tracked everything there, all over. First black mayor lady we have but had young black men, Jordan Livingston was elected twice, I think, for our mayor. Some criticized him, but still, he's still there.

Washburn:

Well, Miss Foster, I think we have to wrap up. I want to thank you very much for sharing all your stories with us.

Foster:

Well, you welcome. I hope something I said was worth it.

Washburn:

Oh, most definitely. Thank you.

[End of Interview]