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Mora Gilley

Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Robin Li  
in 2011

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Mora Gilley

## **Table of Contents—Mora Gilley**

Interview 1: December 22, 2011

### Audiofile 1

Early childhood memories—Parents as ministers—Recalling the Depression—Potatoes as cash crop—Parents' political views—Going to a rural school—Mother's death and role on caring for siblings—Recalling the start of World War II—Aunt's internment in the Phillipines—War work: assembly of bombs in Akron, OH—Rationing—Social life while doing war work—Missionary training college in Nyack, NY—War work: moving bricks for the Pennsylvania Railroad—Moving to Bremerton, WA during the war

### Audiofile 2

Moving in and working at the Bremerton Navy Yard during the war—more war work in a Navy Yard cafeteria—Finishing college in Nebraska—Meeting her husband—Becoming a teacher—View on the role of war work in changing women's role in the workplace

Interview 1: December 22, 2011

Begin Audiofile gilley\_mora\_01\_12-22-11.wav

Li: This is Robin Li, speaking with Mora Gilley on December 22, 2011, in Bellevue, Washington. Thank you for sitting down with me today and talking to me about your experiences during World War Two. I have a lot of questions about your work in the factories, but I wanted to start asking you some questions about your family and where you grew up. Could you tell me, just for the purposes of the transcript, your full name and your date and place of birth?

1-00:00:31

Gilley: Okay. Mora Mae Gilley, and I was born in Gem, Alberta, Canada on April 1, 1924. My father was a minister, or whatever, in the lumber camps up in Alberta. They went up sort of like missionaries or whatever, and three of our family were born up there. I had two brothers and two sisters. I was the oldest of the family. When I was four, my dad had by that time decided that he was not a preacher, that he could do better just as a laborer or workman. He had had education including high school, and so had my mother. But he decided he couldn't do public speaking, and he didn't have the personal ability to go around and care for people.

So we moved back to Pennsylvania, which was where my mother was from, and went to the farm, where my mother's parents lived. I also think now that they had asked them to come because—my grandfather died within the next year and a half, and he was getting so he couldn't do the work. So my dad came back to the farm there, and he did the farming for my grandmother. He was able to do that. That was something he could do. He was raised on a ranch in Colorado. He could transfer it to Pennsylvania to a farm.

Li: What age were you when you moved to Pennsylvania?

1-00:02:32

Gilley: Well, when I was four we came from Canada to Pennsylvania. I was probably four and a half, maybe, I don't know. Anyway, when I was six my grandfather died. It was a big house, and we had four rooms on one side of the house. My grandmother was on the other side of the house.

Li: What denomination was your father a missionary in?

1-00:03:09

Gilley: Christian and Missionary Alliance.

Li: How did he start doing that, or why did he start doing that?

1-00:03:15

Gilley:

Both my parents had gone to this Bible school training institute in New York. Nyack, New York. They had both gone there. They were both trained—in fact my mother had been a pastor. There weren't many church denominations that would let women be the pastors. She wasn't ordained, and my father was never ordained because he had decided by that time that he couldn't do the pastoral work. But she had had a church with another lady; they had pastored this church in Binghamton, New York. I guess that's how she had met my father anyway, at a church conference.

Li:

Did she talk about that work much? Did she talk about her pastoral work in New York?

1-00:04:17

Gilley:

Yes, she talked quite a bit about, you know, about pastoring this little church. She liked to relate to the people; she was good. But that wasn't my dad's skill.

Li:

Did she stop working when they got married?

1-00:04:34

Gilley:

Yes. She stopped, and then when they went to Canada—well, I'm sure she was good, but then when we came back there were three of us; three of us were born very fast. So she was probably very busy with having the babies and having the children. [laughs]

Li:

Do you remember life in Saskatchewan? Do have any memories of living in Canada?

1-00:05:04

Gilley:

There's not very much. I do remember—I think we had a trunk or something at the window, and when my dad would go out for wood it seemed like I climbed up and watched for him to come in. Then I was to open the door because his arms would be full of wood. Either they told me that or else—either I remember it.

Li:

Was that your first job? [laughs]

1-00:05:38

Gilley:

That was my first job, yes, holding the door.

Li:

Can you tell me a little bit about your siblings?

1-00:05:45

Gilley:

I had a sister, Laura, who was two years younger than me. And then fourteen months later, after Laura, my brother Ray was born. So we were the three that were born in Canada. Our citizenship was based on—let's see, how did they say that? "American parents living abroad." So that was how we claimed our citizenship. We could have claimed Canadian, we were told later, but we didn't want to. We wanted to be citizens of the United States. Our family was

here. So we all got papers to prove that we were citizens. But the Naturalization and Immigration and so on called it—they said it was “American parents living abroad.” It would be like embassy or anything, you know, the children born in a different country for an embassy employee.

Li: So you were an American citizen, not Canadian?

1-00:07:04

Gilley: Yes. We were American citizens.

Li: What year was it when you moved to Pennsylvania?

1-00:07:14

Gilley: Let’s see. I was born in 1924, so it was in 1928, then. It might have been right after the first—yes, it was in 1928.

Li: Do you have personal memories of the Great Depression?

1-00:07:32

Gilley: Yes, I have some. I remember that my dad repaired our shoes. He had this shoe thing that had different sizes, and he put soles on. Yes, I do remember that. And I remember that things were—for one thing, we would have meat on Sunday, but we might not have it any other time during the week. But my mother always wanted to have some kind of meat on Sunday. And that was a big thing; that was another thing that set Sunday apart was that we were going to have some meat on Sunday.

Li: What would you eat during the rest of the week? What kind of food would your mother prepare?

1-00:08:29

Gilley: Oh she did macaroni, and she could do rice all kinds of ways, and all kinds of things. She did a lot of pastas. And I forgot potatoes. We had potatoes fried every way.

Li: With vegetables or—

1-00:08:38

Gilley: And then the vegetables. And she canned so that then in the winter time she would open up the cans. I know Bill’s mother had said she would make all of these huge jars of canned vegetables that were ready for soup, and then she’d just put it with a soup bone and things. Well, my mother would open several cans to get the different vegetables because each one was separately canned, the corn, the peas, the green beans and everything.

Li: You were living on a working farm.

1-00:09:23

Gilley: It was a working farm.

Li: So did you have rations, do you remember, or except for the meat were you able to access food pretty readily?

1-00:09:32

Gilley: Yes, we had food. There was plenty to eat. My mother baked the bread, and she baked twice a week. My grandfather's cash crop was potatoes. One of the things that I can remember when he was still alive, I was with him in the basement, and he had these huge bins of potatoes because he would sell them when they needed some more money and so on. A family came, or a man or somebody came, and he gave them a bucket of potatoes. And he said to me, "We do not want our neighbors to be hungry, do we?" But I can remember that very distinctly that he shared his potatoes, which was his cash crop, with the neighbors that had need. My dad had said—my dad worked in the mine part of the time, but some days there wouldn't be any work or anything; then he'd work on the farm—he would go into the coal mine, and my dad said there were times when the workers in the mine came in with only the potato peelings in their lunchboxes. And they had left the potatoes at home for their family to eat. They were doing the hard work in the mine. So, yes it hit—and all the people that lived around us, they had gardens, and they grew things. But they didn't have the acreage that my grandfather had. He had a lot of acres. I don't even remember how many.

Li: Did your mother and grandmother also have a private garden for the family?

1-00:11:39

Gilley: Oh, yes. There was a garden for the family where we grew different vegetables and things. My grandmother raised chickens, so there were always eggs. And they made butter and cheese and buttermilk, which I never did learn to like.

Li: Was your family very political? Did they talk about politics?

1-00:12:14

Gilley: Oh, yes. Now, one of the things that you have to realize is that women didn't get the right to vote until about the time I was born. I can't remember; is it—I should know.

Li: I think it's '24, but I'm not sure

1-00:12:31

Gilley: Yeah, '24, when I was born, yes. And my mother never missed voting. I remember this one year, she was pregnant, and she couldn't walk to the polls. And my uncle came and got her in the car and took her so she could vote. That's why I tell my granddaughters, "You be sure and vote." Because women didn't have the right to vote until recently.

Li: Would your mother talk about politics? Would she talk about how she voted, or was that private?

1-00:13:17

Gilley:

No, I don't know. My mother and dad would talk, and they would study the ballot before they would go. So they knew exactly who they were voting for. They just didn't go; they knew who they were voting for. I think that my one uncle, I think he tended to be Democratic. And my grandmother, I think, was quite a Republican, and I think she had quite a bit of influence, also. But then the one daughter got a job as a postmaster, and I think they said, well, she had to vote. She had to be a Democrat because Franklin Roosevelt was the President at that time, she had to have voted for him, or she wouldn't have gotten the job. That was one of the things I do remember from among our family. But I don't think my grandmother wanted any controversy about it.

Li:

Can you share with me some recollections about elementary school at this time?

1-00:14:47

Gilley:

Okay. We went to a one-room schoolhouse for eight years. I guess I should say *I* went for eight years because by the time my brothers—let's see, they didn't go there. I know; we moved. After we moved, they went to a different school; they went to one that had more rooms and more teachers. It was not much farther away, but it was—okay. I thought it was a good school. I thought we had a good education. We had good teachers. I remember that when I was in first grade, if it snowed my mother would watch for the teacher going past. When the teacher walked past our place then she would get me out on the road, and I was to go in her footsteps. Then I could get to school. It was about half a mile to the little schoolhouse. The teacher, of course, had to build a fire; she had to do everything. I didn't go out right away. She waited a while so the teacher would get the fire going and things for the schoolhouse.

Li:

How many students were in the school?

1-00:16:27

Gilley:

I think there were probably about thirty. And she taught eight grades.

Li:

Did you enjoy it? Was school something you looked forward to?

1-00:16:38

Gilley:

Oh, I liked school very much although I had some difficulties starting. I wondered afterwards why my mother never did teach me at home. But I think maybe she didn't want to interfere with the program or whatever. But I was not reading, and I was struggling. Then at Christmas time my Aunt Mary—she had been a teacher in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—came home, and in whatever the time, Christmas vacation, my mother said, "You know, Mora's having trouble with her reading." So she got me straightened out on reading. From then on it was easy. She knew how to do it, and maybe my mother didn't have any clue how to do it. But I wondered why she didn't try to teach me, why she didn't do something. In second grade I had trouble with

subtraction. We had a substitute teacher who came in, and she taught me how to subtract. [laughs]

Li: You went there from kindergarten through seventh grade? Is that right?

1-00:18:14

Gilley: There was no kindergarten.

Li: So first through eighth grade.

1-00:18:17

Gilley: First through eighth grade. We had the one teacher for three years, Miss Korman. Then we got a teacher when I was in fourth grade, Mrs. Henderson, but she only taught one year. Then we had Mrs. Copenhaver for five, six, seven and eight. What they did was, at the end of eighth grade everybody in the county went to Janesville, Pennsylvania, and what we did, we all had to take a test. It was a like a standardized because then everybody in the county was taking the same test, and then that meant—maybe it meant your placement in ninth grade. The high schools were ninth through twelfth.

Li: Did you have a favorite subject by this point? Did you have a favorite subject in school?

1-00:19:37

Gilley: No. I liked school. If we're going to talk about school I'll tell you what happened, some things. When I was in seventh grade, I guess, my mother died. I was the oldest, and there were four younger. She died in childbirth. There was a new baby. By this time my grandmother was not able to live alone, and another aunt and uncle had come in onto my grandmother's side of the house. They had three children. My mother was in the hospital, and she was there for nine days before she died. She died Christmas morning, 1936. Then my aunt, who was in the house there, kept the baby. We would get her in the evenings, and we'd get to play with her, fun things. And then the weekend we'd help her out with the chores and washing the diapers and things. Because they had to be washed every day, and we didn't run the washing machine except once a week. So the diapers were washed by hand every day and so on.

Li: Were you sort of in charge of your brothers and sisters at that point?

1-00:21:16

Gilley: Well, I was in charge—I don't know how they figured. (I've read *Motherless Daughters* [Hope Edelman, 1995], and that woman was fourteen when her mother died. And she found in her research that the fathers are so overcome with grief, and don't know what to do. They just assume that the daughter knows everything.) So here I was, twelve and a half, and supposed to bake bread and cook. I had no conception. We just struggled along. Muddled along would probably be a better word for it.

Li: And you continued to go to school during this time?

1-00:21:58

Gilley: I went to school but then in ninth grade my sister next to me became ill, and my brother also. We found out that it was a reaction to my mother's death. We were never allowed to grieve. I mean, there was no time to grieve; you just lived. So they grieved by—they got like a Saint Vitus Dance. My brother was in the hospital. They had to tie his one arm down, it shook so much. And then my sister, bad, I had to stay home a lot of days. I remember on my report card it said, "Missing too much school." But my dad had made arrangements. I would bring home—they would give me the homework. I kept up; I was able to pass the grade in ninth grade. But I did miss a lot of school. On days that she could not go to school, then I had to stay home with her (my sister).

Li: A lot of responsibility for a young person.

1-00:23:11

Gilley: I know. I can't believe it. I've looked at my granddaughters, and I've wondered how would they have ever done this.

Li: So then you continued through high school—you stayed in school?

1-00:23:35

Gilley: Yes. Then we moved. My dad wanted to get off the farm. There was another family there with my grandmother, the other sister of my mother. So we moved I guess about two miles away to a little mining area called "Twenty-Nine." And Daddy worked in the mine. He told me, when I was fifteen then, that I would have to stay home with the baby. I was just crushed, because he had been the man who advocated education, and I thought, "Oh, how terrible," because he had been pushing, "You need to get educated" and so on. Then I said, "What if I find somebody to care for her?" Well, that was okay. My responsibility—I was fourteen, maybe I was fifteen—and I found somebody to take care of the baby for one year. Then he decided that he would work swing shift. So we would go to school and as we got home on the bus then he would go to work. The mine was not very far. And he would just go to the mine.

Li: And that's very difficult work, I mean, mining work.

1-00:25:05

Gilley: Oh, it was very difficult and very unsafe. It was dangerous.

Li: So then you graduated from high school in?

1-00:25:17

Gilley: 1942

Li: 1942.

1-00:25:25

Gilley: And on December 7, before graduation, when the war started, I was seventeen then. I was in my senior year. Some of the fellows in my class, on the Monday after Pearl Harbor, they quit school even though they were that close to graduation. There was such a feeling of “You’ve got to do something for this.” Congress declared war that day, on the Monday after Pearl Harbor, and I think there were three of the fellows from our class went and signed up for the service right away.

Li: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

1-00:26:12

Gilley: Yes, I think we were coming home from church, or just after church, on Sunday.

Li: Did you hear it on the radio?

1-00:26:25

Gilley: Yes. Well, no, from the neighbor. People were just standing around after church. They had heard it. Some people were being picked up in cars, and they’d had the radio on. Or they’d heard it at home, and then they came. So they told them there at church.

Li: Had you been hearing about the war in Asia, the Japanese invasion of China?

1-00:26:51

Gilley: Oh, yes. In fact, I know that both of my parents were exceedingly concerned about the war in Europe. My dad was very concerned about—we were collecting iron and all these things.

Li: This was before the US was involved.

1-00:27:21

Gilley: Before the war, yes. Before we were involved. And he didn’t like the idea. He said, “You know, it’s going to come back to us. We’re selling it overseas, and it’s going to come back to us.” He didn’t like that at all. I do remember, we had this long porch—to me it was long; it wasn’t just a little porch; it was a long porch—and they would walk the porch and pray. They were so concerned about the war. They were concerned that we were going to be involved in it. They might have been considered isolationists; I don’t know. They didn’t want us to get involved, but they were afraid that we were going to be because they felt that the situation was so bad.

Li: Did they subscribe to newspapers that you remember?

1-00:28:25

Gilley: Yes, we got a newspaper and we listened to the news on the radio. We had radio and a newspaper.

Li: Do you remember what newspaper they subscribed to? Was it the local paper?

1-00:28:39

Gilley: The local paper was probably Pittsburgh. Oh, no, Altoona would have been closer, wouldn't it? But I think the paper came from Pittsburgh. What it was, it was delivered with the mail. It came into the post office, and then rural carrier brought the newspaper. Now, I do not remember if the newspaper was a day late. I don't remember that at all, or if it was a later edition from whatever the Pittsburgh—

Li: Do you remember hearing about the internment of the Japanese on the west coast?

1-00:29:24

Gilley: I was very concerned. Oh, I guess what you mean is putting the Japanese into internment camps.

Li: Yes, do you remember when that order was issued?

1-00:29:38

Gilley: Yes. And of course it didn't particularly affect us, you know, in Pennsylvania. But the other internment—we were concerned because my aunt was in the Philippines. She was interned in a camp in Manila.

Li: By the Japanese. The other Japanese internment.

1-00:30:00

Gilley: Yes. So we were very aware and very concerned.

Li: What was she doing in the Philippines?

1-00:30:09

Gilley: She was a missionary. She had been the one who was a school teacher. At the end of that school year she went to the Philippines, and she was in the southern island. Somehow or other she was captured and taken. Her internment camp was in Manila, Santo Tomas.

Li: So your family had first-hand experience, or close experience, about the Japanese aggression.

1-00:30:40

Gilley: Yes, yes. In fact my mother and father both were, shall I say, world—they didn't live within a cave. They were concerned about world events and the people around the world. And then with Aunt Mary being in the Philippines we were very aware of the war in the Pacific and how things went in the Pacific.

Li: Do you remember people having a negative feeling about the Japanese people, or was it about the Japanese government more?

1-00:31:17

Gilley: Oh, it was the government. I don't think in our family it was the people. It wouldn't have been people. After the war the one nephew married Amy in Japan. He was stationed in Japan, and he married Amy, and her parents had been Japanese. She was Japanese. I don't think there was any—

Li: There was no negative reaction to the—

1-00:31:45

Gilley: No. Amy was accepted into the family. But the government, yes. There was a great deal of concern about the government.

Li: Prior to the war breaking out what were your plans for yourself in adulthood? What did you dream of being?

1-00:32:07

Gilley: I thought I was going to be a missionary. But the continent I was leaning toward was Africa. I didn't know which country, probably one of the West Africa countries.

Li: Was there family pressure for you to go into that line of work, or was it—

1-00:32:28

Gilley: Well, because that's where my parents' interest was. My mother had wanted to go to India, and they had gone to Canada. Missions were just part of the family.

Li: When the US entered the war how did that change your idea of what you might do?

1-00:32:53

Gilley: The only thing is, I thought it might be harder to get the education. As it turned out, I was able to earn more money, I guess, and maybe get a job better because I don't think it was as easy to get jobs previously. [Pause tape]

Li: We were talking about how much money you maybe were going to be able to make working in the war industries and how that might help you pay for school. I understand you had an aunt and uncle in Akron?

1-00:33:37

Gilley: Right.

Li: Can you tell me a little bit about them and their factory?

1-00:33:43

Gilley: My uncle Vaughn, my mother's brother in Akron, Ohio—they told me in my senior year, "Come to Akron, and we'll help you find a job." Now, this was before the war. They made an offer for it. I would come the summer after I graduated—she knew that I wanted to go to the Missionary Training Institute

in Nyack, New York, where my parents had both gone. They know about that. There was no opportunity in the part of Pennsylvania where I lived.

Li: Were many other girls doing the same thing at this time? Were many other women looking for work, or—

1-00:34:43

Gilley: Well, yes. People that had graduated ahead of me in school—the only jobs were teaching, nursing and housework.

Li: Your aunt and uncle had a car dealership in Akron?

1-00:35:02

Gilley: Yes. My uncle Vaughn had had this car dealership, and as soon as the war started then they no longer made cars, so then he would no longer have cars to sell. Now, they still repaired. In fact, the repair was a big part of the business. To me it was a big building, going from rural Pennsylvania. They made the second floor, the top floor, into a small factory. And the factory assembled the bands that held bombs in the plane. It was considered an essential job because the bombs had to be held in the plane. I don't know if there had been men doing this before or not. But I know that this was a new factory that they made—

Li: Do you know if it was for any particular plane or a particular bomb?

1-00:36:14

Gilley: There were two different sizes that we worked with, small ones and big ones. I do know that they told us, when we were at the orientation or whatever, that inside the plane they had these almost like shelves, like there'd be like three here or something, and then I don't know how many rows of them. Then they had to take them off—but that was to keep them safe when they were flying. Then when they got to where they were going to release them, they had to take them and put them into the gun. I've seen pictures of the bombs coming out from the bottom of a plane, somehow.

Li: Did they show you a diagram of the bombs, like where the bands would go in the airplane when you were doing the work?

1-00:37:11

Gilley: They might have shown us. I just know that there were two different sizes, two different components. The main thing that I did was put these—these were metal pieces, and we had the screws, and we had to put the parts together for the bands. Then they went down the assembly line, and then there were other ladies that would hand them on a rack, and they would go through a paint. As the rack came down it dipped them in the paint, and then they went through a drying thing. Then there was somebody at the other end who took them off the rack and packed them in boxes that they were shipped to wherever—maybe to Seattle because of the B-17.

Li: So one of the bands was going into B-17s? You said there were two sizes.

1-00:38:10

Gilley: Yes. I assume that they would go to the B-17s because they were used as the bombers. I don't know.

Li: What did you do at the factory?

1-00:38:28

Gilley: I put the pieces together. I assembled the pieces. And I think that one or two days I may have gone hanging them onto the paint rack.

Li: How many employees were in the factory?

1-00:38:42

Gilley: There were probably about thirty women. It was a small operation. I think that my uncle said that this was what was being done by other—that they were setting up small factories, that there were lots of them across Akron.

Li: Was he asked to do this by the government, or did he start doing this—

1-00:39:12

Gilley: I think it was a contract that he had to assemble these bomb bands, but I don't know how he got the contract or anything. But I do know that in the downstairs part they were still repairing cars. They didn't have any cars for sale, but they were repairing the cars that people brought in. So he still had mechanics working for him.

Li: Were most of the workers young women like yourself just out of high school?

1-00:39:50

Gilley: No, most of them were women with families.

Li: And husbands in the service?

1-00:39:54

Gilley: Their husbands were either in the service or—we were all working for the war effort. The feeling was you were helping out. I think there was this whole feeling of needing to help—from the time the war started people wanted to help. There was a big deal about the toothpaste. “Save the toothpaste tubes” because they needed that metal. What else? My dad, who had to have his coffee, had trouble getting it except that he would give other people gas coupons because we didn't have a car, and he would give them the gas coupons, and they would give him the coffee coupons. So he kept up with his coffee. And sugar was another thing that was rationed. I think the main thing where we felt it in the rationing was the sugar and the coffee. Then there was the big deal about the toothpaste. They started to make tooth powder in cans, rather than paste.

Li: It must have been different when you left the farm in terms of the food you had available to you.

1-00:41:31

Gilley: We had had a big garden. When we moved to this little place in Twenty-Nine we had a big area; we still had our garden.

Li: Did you call it a victory garden? Would you talk about it as part of your war effort?

1-00:41:43

Gilley: No, we had the garden anyway, whether there was a war effort or not.

Li: A lot of the Rosies I've talked to said that they signed up to work at the wartime factories out of patriotism because they wanted to be a part of the war effort. But other women also said they needed the money; there weren't that many jobs that were high paying. Did both of those factors motivate you?

1-00:42:12

Gilley: Yes, both of those. I could have probably gotten part-time work in Pennsylvania at a store. There was one store. It wouldn't have been full-time work, and I might not have had enough money to go to school. As it was I earned enough money for a semester of education by working in Akron, Ohio.

Li: Do you remember what your wages were in Akron?

1-00:42:43

Gilley: I don't know if it was forty cents an hour or something like that?

Li: I understand that you were the youngest person in that factory?

1-00:42:58

Gilley: Yes.

Li: Did you make friends there?

1-00:42:58

Gilley: Well, you know, somehow I wanted to be independent of my uncle. So he showed me where it was; he took me on the bus so I would know how to get there, and I would go on the bus back and forth. He had to work later. He had to close up. I could have ridden in the morning with him, but I wanted to be independent. I didn't want anybody saying that I had favoritism because it was my uncle's place. So I went on the bus. Actually, I, who had been the oldest and who had all this responsibility at home—for that summer my aunt and uncle, who had only had boys, treated me as their daughter, and they took me to all kinds of places. We did all kinds of things. I don't remember having any particular friends because I just was with Aunt Lizzy and Uncle Vaughn.

Li: Was that a fun time?

1-00:44:21

Gilley: Oh, it was fun. I enjoyed being spoiled. I enjoyed that. And then she taught me lots of things, if I had had a mother, I'd have probably known. Then when I left to go back home at the end when I was getting ready to go to Nyack, then she took all the money that I had earned—I didn't have a check; I had cash—she fixed it all up and put it inside my brassiere, pinned it in there and said if I were to go to sleep on the bus, and somebody could take the purse, they would not get the money.

Li: And that was your tuition money.

1-00:45:16

Gilley: That was my tuition money for school, tuition and books.

Li: The school in Nyack was the same school your parents had gone to?

1-00:45:26

Gilley: Yes.

Li: What was school like?

1-00:45:32

Gilley: I liked it very much. I liked going to school. It was good; I made friends. My dad had wanted me to take violin. Of course he wanted me to play the violin because he played the violin. It was at that time, after I took lessons there, that I finally decided that the violin was not for me. Actually, I had a hearing loss, I guess even then, and I could not tell on the violin when I was off-key and so on. So I had to take the lessons in order to find this out. But I enjoyed the classes. I enjoyed the lessons even. Someone else had to tune the violin. I couldn't tell if I was on key.

Li: Were there many men in college that year?

1-00:46:31

Gilley: There were a few. There were very few in the incoming class. They either had to have something health-wise wrong, which was a 4-F classification. And there was a classification for chaplains and ministers. So they could have that classification, and some of them had that. But they were all registered with the draft, so there were not very many young men in the class. But the ones who had been in there before; they were finishing their education. Some of them were going to go in, and some of them had signed up. They were going to go into the service, but they got to finish. A deferral, I think that's what it was called.

Li: I want to ask you, did you see any of the Rosie posters that were up at this time, encouraging women to—

1-00:47:52

Gilley: Yes, I saw them.

Li: And did you feel like that was you? Did you identify with the poster?

1-00:47:55

Gilley: No, I didn't. I didn't identify with the Rosies until a few years ago when I was reading in this—I think it was called *Prime Time*—this little magazine for seniors. I was past sixty-five then, and all of a sudden I said, “You know, I did that. I was one.”

Li: But at the time you didn't think of yourself that way.

1-00:48:24

Gilley: No, because it was—

Li: It was just a summer job?

1-00:48:25

Gilley: It was a job, and I was doing my part to help. I knew I had done something to help.

Li: At the end of that school year, you went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Is that right?

1-00:48:46

Gilley: Right. Then we moved from a little town, called Twenty-Nine, that summer we moved to Altoona, which was the big city near us. My dad wanted to get a different job, which he did. By then there were more plentiful jobs because so many of the men were gone. We moved there, and I got this job with the Pennsylvania Railroad. And they kept telling you, “We are essential to the war effort.” It was constantly being told to you. “We have to keep the trains running because the troops move on the train, the food, everything moves.” Most of it moved by train then rather than trucks. So we were aware that we were working for the war effort.

Li: How did you get that job?

1-00:49:50

Gilley: I guess it was just advertised that they needed it. I went down and got it. And little qualifications. All you had to do was be able to lift two bricks at a time. [laughs]

Li: What was your job there?

1-00:50:10

Gilley: Unload a boxcar full of bricks. Now these bricks were regular bricks. We were told when we got there that all of these steam engines had to have bricks in the firewall. There was a firewall for every steam engine. In order for the train to run they had to bring them in every so often and replace the bricks. So the bricks came in from a factory where they were made, and we unloaded them from the boxcar. Again, I was probably the youngest woman working in

that particular place although there were women all over the place at the railroad. They were running the engines on the tracks and bringing in the engines and so on like that. They were doing a lot of jobs. Ours was without any training; you could learn this in ten or fifteen minutes. How to unload. So as soon as we could open the door, we'd get the bricks right by the door. Then we would put somebody up in there in the boxcar, and they would hand the bricks out to the others. Then the others would carry them to where they were taken to the roundhouse, to go in the engines.

Li: Heavy work, physically demanding.

1-00:51:50

Gilley: It wasn't heavy, but, you know, you would get tired bending over and so on. One of the things that was funny was when the foreman came, and he said, "You ladies have to stop working so fast because when the war ends the men are coming back, and they will get their jobs back. And they only do so many a day." Well, of course, there was not a war effort, for one thing. We thought we were doing something to help the war. Before the war they had just been keeping enough for the roundhouse to replace the engines.

Li: What shifts did you work there?

1-00:52:46

Gilley: Days. I think that was only a daytime shift, that particular one because you had to be able to see in the boxcar and see the bricks. I think that was only days.

Li: Was it a social job? Would there be talking and chatting during—

1-00:53:00

Gilley: Oh, yes. People were nice that I worked with.

Li: The women who had children, do you know what they did for child care? Was there discussion of that?

1-00:53:20

Gilley: Yes. You know, I've talked to several people who had children, and they said what they mostly did was worked it out among themselves. The child care was not a provided thing. Some of them would go together, and they would pay one of the ladies who would stay home and take care of the children.

Li: So somebody would not work in the factory—

1-00:53:44

Gilley: Then the other people would go to work. Two or three other ladies would— one would take care of the children. So that was probably the start of child care, probably.

Li: And they would all pitch in and pay her?

1-00:53:57

Gilley: They would pay her for taking care of the children. But they just said they worked it out. They were not dependent on—and there were very few daycare centers. Or maybe their neighbor was taking care of some children, and they would get in with them.

Li: Did any of your brothers or sisters join the service at this time?

1-00:54:24

Gilley: No. My oldest brother was just under the age, and after we moved to Washington and he worked in the Navy Yard, then when he became of age the war ended. He would have been accepted.

Li: Did you have friends in the service or friends who were working in factories also?

1-00:54:56

Gilley: I made friends with some of the people there, that summer that I worked in the railroad yard.

Li: Did you return to college that fall, then?

1-00:55:16

Gilley: Yes, I did.

Li: How long was the program that you were doing?

1-00:55:23

Gilley: It was a three-year program.

Li: Did you finish it?

1-00:55:27

Gilley: I finished it in Seattle. I came to the school in Seattle and finished it.

Li: What brought you west?

1-00:55:33

Gilley: My dad had been raised in Kansas and Colorado, and he always talked about the crowded east. So after my mother died his goal was to get back west. And when we lived in Altoona—and I do think now that's why he wasn't just looking for another job—I think he thought, "Well, this is where they come. They'll do recruiting and things." So he found out that they needed workers in the Navy Yard in Bremerton. So he came home one day and announced that he had signed us all up to go west and go to Bremerton.

Li: All of you who were of age, he signed you up to go work at the Navy Yard?

1-00:56:22

Gilley:

Well, I had a seven-year-old sister. She had been the baby before; she's seven now. She wouldn't have. And my fourteen-year-old brother, of course he couldn't have. But the one who was fifteen, Ray, fifteen and a half, he said, "You'll be able to do"—so he just had signed us all up. I was twenty then. I had just turned twenty, and I could have stayed in Pennsylvania. But it seemed like an adventure, and also I was very close to my family. I didn't want to be away from them. And I was very concerned about my seven-year-old [sister]. She needed me because—(she keeps writing to me even now and tells me that I was the only mother she knew, even though I was twelve at the time. I knew nothing about mothering.) So, anyhow, she depended upon me, and I felt she needed me.

Begin Audiofile 2

Li:

This is Robin Li, talking to Mora Gilley, December 22, 2011 in Bellevue, Washington. This is Tape Two. We were just talking about your family's decision to move west and your decision to come with them even though you were twenty at the time. Had you ever been this far west before?

2-00:00:22

Gilley:

No. I guess when I was a baby my parents had taken me to Kansas to my dad's parents. But I didn't remember any of that. I didn't remember much about Canada, so Pennsylvania was my area in my life. I'd been east to New York at the school. No, we thought it was like falling off the earth to come to Washington. We didn't know how it was going to work. But my dad was so determined to come west. He didn't care if it was farther west than where he'd grown up. He just wanted to get west and have more space. Then he said, "What we'll do is we're going on the train, and we're going to stop in Chicago and spend two days, and we'll do some sightseeing." So we got to go to our first zoo, and we got to go to a planetarium and eat our meals out and stay in a hotel. It really was a big event that I wouldn't have wanted to miss, the couple of days in Chicago.

When we got on the train from Chicago west we were on the *Milwaukee*, which is no longer running. My seven-year-old sister was the only child on the train. Lots of other people were coming west to go to work, but none of them had young children. She was the pet of about two or three passenger cars of people. And we slept on the train, which was a big deal. We ate our meals on the train. Then for our exercise we would walk back and forth on the train too. But it was a good experience.

Then when we got to Bremerton they had housing for us in—oh, dear, what's that little area across from—anyway, it wasn't too far across. [Port Orchard, Washington]. We had to take a ferry over to where they had the housing for us. And these places were furnished with beds and tables, the basics, because we didn't bring any of that with us. We brought our clothes, and I guess we

brought dishes and pans and things like that. We had that come by freight. And I think we had brought our own bedding. But the furniture was already in the house.

Li: What was the housing like?

2-00:03:39

Gilley: There were like about six or seven units all in a row, connected housing.

Li: Had they been built specifically for workers?

2-00:03:44

Gilley: Specifically for workers, housing projects. And because we were a big family we got three bedrooms. The three girls had—we had one bedroom, and then the boys had one, and my dad had one.

Li: Could you walk to work?

2-00:04:04

Gilley: No. In fact, when we were at Port Orchard which we didn't stay there very long, we had to take a little tiny ferry back over to Bremerton to work. This was spring and summertime, May, June. Then, as soon as he could, Daddy found a place, which was still wartime housing. The only housing available, I think, was this—what did they call it? "Housing Project" they called it. So we moved into Bremerton, and we rode the bus to work.

Li: What did you do at the factory?

2-00:04:50

Gilley: I guess we took tests to see what we qualified to do. I got a job in the machine shop. What I did was to hand out tools in the tool room. They were all older women, again, that I worked with, but there were men on the floor, mostly elderly men. There were only one or two younger men. Whatever tool they needed they'd come. And then they had a number, their number. We put that where the tool was, and then we gave them the tool. Then when they returned the tool they got their number back, the little metal piece thing with their number on it.

Li: Was this the first time you worked in a co-ed work environment, the first time you'd worked where men were also working?

2-00:05:53

Gilley: Well, there had been some men at the railroad yard, but not in the area where I worked. Yes, that was the only time where I worked where there were men around, yes. And you know what the big excitement was? It was that President Roosevelt came to Bremerton, and he spoke from a ship. We could look right out the machine shop window and see him. We couldn't leave to go out, but a lot of the people did sneak out a little bit. They had to have some

people out there to listen to him speak. It was exciting to see a living president.

When we took the tests, my sister that was next to me was eliminated. They said that she was not qualified for any of the jobs that they had. Well, they gave us a physical test, too, and she did have physical problems; she had mental emotional problems.

Li: This was the sister who had been ill when you were in eighth and ninth grade and you'd had to stay home.

2-00:07:26

Gilley: Yes. This is my sister that—and when had lived in this little town, Twenty-Nine, she had rheumatic fever. I guess she carried with her the results of that all of her life. I know when she died, which was suddenly and she was forty-seven, the research people who had been following her said that it was left over from the rheumatic fever. She had never really had treatment; I mean, we just took care of her at home. She didn't have a doctor's care or anything. So she wasn't able to work in the Navy Yard. Since they had eliminated her my dad didn't have to repay for her trip. But he had to pay for my youngest brother and my seven-year-old sister. He had had to pay for their travel. Then my brother that was next to her, my brother Ray, he was too young to .work full-time. So what they did with him he went to school; he did his high school in the morning. He worked for the machine shop in some part—not the machine area where I was but in some part—he learned to do machine tooling and so on, which carried over. He was able to carry it over to do some light work later with Boeing. So he got his high school diploma from the Navy Yard in Bremerton. He finished his high school there.

Li: So his high school diploma actually was issued by the Navy Yard?

2-00:09:31

Gilley: Yes. I forgot what they called that kind of a program, but he learned—.

Li: Like a GED, was it?

2-00:09:36

Gilley: No, it wasn't the GED; they may have used the GED program, but anyway, he did his high school.

Li: At this point you had worked in three different jobs, three different factory environments in three different areas of the country. Was Bremerton particularly racially or ethnically diverse compared to the other places you had worked?

2-00:10:07

Gilley: Yes. People were coming in from all across the nation to work. There were different races. And they were very accepting of the women doing any of the

jobs. I'm sure I heard about Rosie the Riveter and so on while I was there because there were all these big posters around about helping in the war effort and doing your part.

Li: Would you say there was sexism going on, or not that you saw?

2-00:10:52

Gilley: No. You know, the only time in the war effort was in the railroad year at Altoona, Pennsylvania. There was this one man that kept hanging around at lunch time. I was the only young single one that was there, so he was hanging around me. Then the supervisor, who was a nice fatherly guy, around fifty or so probably, he moved him to another section and changed his lunch time, and that took care of the situation. So I had nothing sexist; I was always accepted. I was never harassed. I've spoken at a different group—a couple of groups I've spoken to—and one lady that spoke there, she really had to put up with a lot because the men harassed her and would tell off-color jokes and things in front of her, things that should not have been. Evidently they didn't like her being in their area—she was running a crane, and maybe she was making more money than they were. I don't know what it was. But I didn't have any of that.

Li: Was Bremerton pretty harmonious, though, in terms of all these people coming from different regions? Did people seem to get along okay?

2-00:12:38

Gilley: Yeah, in the housing area we seemed to do okay. We didn't have—

Li: Were people segregated in terms of the work they did?

2-00:12:50

Gilley: No, there were families, several families. So Faith had friends to play with there. They were bused to their school.

Li: What did people do when they weren't working?

2-00:13:08

Gilley: We were working seven days a week most of the time. If I worked days, then I'd get off then I'd go to church in the evening. Really only one evening a week. A bus came through our housing area, picked us up, and took us to church. Then it seemed that you would just take care of your regular duties. Seemed to take all the time. In our family, like my brother who was studying in the school, he worked days. And I was on swing shift, and my dad was on graveyard. So we didn't really see each other. We would see Faith and my sister Laura and my fourteen-year-old brother.

Li: The three older people would just rotate through the house.

2-00:14:14

Gilley: We were rotating, yes.

Li: With three people in the family working did it feel like you were doing pretty well financially during this time?

2-00:14:24

Gilley: Oh, yes. We had never had this much money in our lives. Then when September came I came to Seattle. I quit my job and came to Seattle and went to Simpson Bible Institute, which was four blocks from Woodland Park Zoo.

Li: Could you finish the program that you had begun in Nyack?

2-00:14:54

Gilley: Yes. It was the same denomination, and I could continue, and I graduated from there in 1946.

Li: Did you still have the same plan, to become a missionary

2-00:15:07

Gilley: Yes, I did although I was told by the mission board that I either needed to be a nurse or a teacher, that my training there was not enough. So I had decided that I would have to go on to school. And I was more inclined to be a teacher than I was a nurse. So I was going to get my training as a teacher, which I did.

Li: I wanted to ask you about the end of the war. Where were you when you heard about the bombing of Hiroshima?

2-00:15:55

Gilley: We lived in a little place in Bremerton, and we heard about it at work because that was the conversation. Then as soon as they knew the war was over the jobs were over. There was no thirty-day or two-weeks warning or anything. They came and said, "The war is over, so at the end of the day you will leave, and your check will be mailed." That was it. Now, there were some people, of course—but they didn't need to fix the ships up; they were repairing ships for the fighting. So the ships that they needed to repair they could take their time. They didn't need all this workforce. I'm not sure what the big exodus was out of Bremerton and some other places. Other people I've talked to have said they were told the same thing. When the war ended the job ended

Li: That day.

2-00:17:09

Gilley: That was it. What my dad did, he said we'll just move to Seattle. We'll be close to this school, Simpson. So he came over, and he found a place. He got a job working on the ferry, going back and forth to Bremerton. [laughs] He still was back and forth to Bremerton, but he was on the ferry. Then my brother and I both went to Simpson. I went for my last year, and he started there.

Li: Had your family saved up money from these war years? Were you able to buy a home when you moved?

2-00:17:55

Gilley: My dad never did buy a home. We rented an apartment, and we stayed in this apartment a couple of years so my brother who had been fourteen graduated from Ballard High School; we stayed there till he had graduated.

Li: So your apartment was in Ballard?

2-00:18:20

Gilley: It was near Ballard.

Li: Between Ballard and Woodland Park?

2-00:18:24

Gilley: Between the zoo and Ballard. We could walk to the school. We were about four or five blocks from the school.

Li: I wanted to ask you, {inaudible} you also worked at the cafeteria when you worked at the Navy Yard.

2-00:18:44

Gilley: When I went back after the—I had quit the machine shop in 1944 and had gone for a year at Simpson. And then the next summer, which was the summer that we lost our jobs, the war ended. Then in 1945 I went back, and this time I got a job in the cafeteria. This was still in the Navy Yard. And the ladies kept saying, “We are helping the war effort, also.” But I never did count that as much; I never did feel like it was a job that was essential. But they kept saying, “We are feeding the workers.” I had thought, “Well, they could go someplace else if they had to and get food to eat.” It was a good job. It paid good and so on.

Li: Did it pay better than the machine shop, or the same?

2-00:19:48

Gilley: No, but I meant from outside.

Li: Oh, compared with outside.

2-00:19:53

Gilley: Yes, like if I had worked at a restaurant outside.

Li: How did your life change after the war? It seems like you had continued your education throughout the war.

2-00:20:16

Gilley: Yes, I was able to do that. A lot of people, of course, weren't. But I had the strong determination to get through school. What I had changed was I decided to be a teacher. So I began then to—I went to Seattle Pacific College for one year. Then I went to Hastings College in Nebraska and finished. That was a Presbyterian school. It was a school, they said, where single girls could

complete their education. They did everything they could to help people get their education. There still were not a lot of men back because it took a while after the war to get everything back. And the few that were coming back, when I was at Hastings, the few people were on the GI—then they passed the GI bill for them. Then they were starting to come to school. So they may have been older when they were freshmen and so on.

Li: Why Nebraska? What took you there?

2-00:21:43

Gilley: Because the Presbyterian Church at that time had two schools, one in Tennessee and one in Nebraska, that did this; they worked to help girls to get their education. That was why. I had applied to both of them and was accepted in Nebraska. So that's why I went there. And also, as I went to college at Seattle Pacific, I was working for the Presbytery of Seattle, and the director pushed Hastings College. Oh, his wife had a wardrobe made for me and everything to go back to school. They were so determined that I would get my degree.

Li: Then you returned to Seattle when you were done?

2-00:22:39

Gilley: Yes, because this was where my family was. And I had always felt the call for my sister. She needed somebody.

Li: Looking back now, how important was your participation in these wartime industries in your life, personally or professionally?

2-00:23:02

Gilley: I think I personally helped. I feel like I helped to win the war. It took all of us, a lot of people together. It took the men in the service. And there were women, too, that were in the service. I had a cousin who went into the WAVES. But I felt like I did a part; I was a part of that war effort. I helped.

Li: Do you think this opportunity to work in the factories was helpful for you in terms of your profession or your education?

2-00:23:45

Gilley: I felt also that it broadened. For instance, in teaching I needed to understand what jobs the parents were working at, where the children came from, and what things were out there. I think it helped. I knew what factory work was like, and I know about doing boring jobs. That's what I've told my children and grandchildren, that there are times that you have to do jobs that are very boring, very repetitious; they do the same thing over and over.

Li: Like moving two bricks. [laughs]

2-00:24:37

Gilley: Yes. Lifting two bricks and handing them out.

Li: Are there any other stories about this time that you'd like to share?

2-00:24:49

Gilley: I had met a couple of fellows during the course of the Navy Yard. I hadn't in either of the other jobs. For one thing, I was very protected when I was with my aunt and uncle. [laughs] And then it just seemed like we were all very busy when I was at the railroad. But I did meet a couple of sailors that I— whatever would you say—had a short romance with. It was interesting.

Li: Was there much dating going on in the shipyards between workers or military—

2-00:25:41

Gilley: I think there probably was a lot more than I was aware of.

Li: Did it feel like a sort of a fun, an upbeat time to have young people in one area?

2-00:25:53

Gilley: Oh, yes. It was good.

Li: Were there dances and things?

2-00:25:57

Gilley: Oh, yes. And of course we didn't go to any dances, so we didn't know anything about these, but yes, there were dances. There were things going on in the USO effort.

Li: But the women who worked in the factories didn't attend any of these?

2-00:26:15

Gilley: They may have gone. They may have gone. I didn't.

Li: Did you know people who got married, who met people at the shipyards that they ended up—?

2-00:26:27

Gilley: No.

Li: I know your husband was in the service, but you met him after the war?

2-00:26:36

Gilley: After the war, yes.

Li: Through your church?

2-00:26:41

Gilley: Yes, we met through Pilgrim Congregational in Seattle. By then, I had my degree, but I was using it in Christian education instead of using it for teaching. I didn't start teaching actually till after I was married and, I think,

when my children were three and four. I'd done student teaching and things, but I hadn't actually had a classroom until then.

Li: How important was it for you to work after your children were in school or a little bit older?

2-00:27:29

Gilley: Well, when they were young I wanted to stay home, and we needed money. Then. So when our daughter was a baby I was a part-time Christian education director in Lake Burien Presbyterian, and I would have somebody who would care of her a couple of afternoons a week because I was only gone a little bit. Then, when they were three and four and I started substituting because we thought we needed the money. I'm sure we could have gotten along. But we wanted to go camping, we wanted to buy a trailer, we wanted to do these things. So that's what—yes.

Li: Did you enjoy having a job? Did you enjoy going to work?

2-00:28:34

Gilley: Oh, yes. That's when I began substitute teaching, and I really enjoyed that. I substituted in, I think, all the West Seattle schools and got to know the area, got to know the people, the children. I did that for a couple of years. And then I got assigned to this one job and found out that they weren't going to replace me. So that's how I got hired on as a full-time—well, the man teacher had evidently been in an accident and hadn't reported it and so on. Anyhow, I was substituting, and after three weeks I said, "Look, I have small children, and I need to know what I'm doing. I'm only supposed to work three days a week." Then they said, "Well, he's not coming back." So anyway, I got into the Seattle public schools then. After that I did half a day teaching in kindergarten until we moved to Bellevue.

Li: You mentioned telling your children and grandchildren that sometimes you just need to do boring jobs in life. Were there any other sort of professional skills or the things that you learned from your factory work that were useful in your career later on?

2-00:30:09

Gilley: I think that you have to learn to stick to something. And I always tried to do the best job that I could, I guess it would be the general things like that. My one granddaughter works for people who have been on welfare. And they don't even know about getting up in the morning and getting dressed. See, to me that's foreign. But people have to be taught that. I knew that you got up, you got dressed, you showed up for your job. You get up, and you show up.

Li: Do think that your Mom's education and having done her own pastoring in New York, did that give you a sense of legacy about having a career or wanting to be educated?

2-00:31:18

Gilley:

Well, I'll tell you what. Here's what I believe. I believe that the Rosies did more to open the jobs market for the women than the feminists. Now you probably need to delete that. But anyway, that's what I believe. These women went in, and some of them painted, they did riveting, they did everything. Now I didn't do as many things. But I talked to this one woman. She learned how to paint buildings, airplanes. And she said afterward when her husband came home from the service, she said, "You know, we could start a paint business," and they did. They painted some of the Seattle Center buildings. So the job market opened up for women.

Li:

So do you think it's because the women realized the work they could do or because other people realized the work women could do?

2-00:32:18

Gilley:

Well, I think women probably figured out they could do it all along. But either there weren't opportunities—

Li:

Right, to gain the skills.

2-00:32:32

Gilley:

Yes, to do it. Okay?

Li:

Yeah. Thank you so much for talking with me.

2-00:32:41

Gilley:

Thank you.

[End of interview]