

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Louise Harris:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Ann Lage
in 2008

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Interview #1: July 8, 2008
[Audio File 1]

01-00:00:05

Lage: Okay, we're ready to start. This is July 8, 2008, and I am interviewing Louise Harris for our Oakland Army Base project. I'm Ann Lage with the Regional Oral History Office. So here we are, just beginning our interview, and I'm going to start with the simplest of all questions. Tell me when you were born and where.

01-00:00:31

Harris: I was born November 5 in Cordesville, South Carolina.

01-00:00:42

Lage: Tell me about your family and the kind of environment you grew up in.

01-00:00:51

Harris: I grew up in a small community. I had seven siblings. My father was a stevedore worker, my mother was a home keeper.

01-00:01:13

Lage: Now, stevedore, where did he work? What kind of an operation did he work in? Was it a city that you were in?

01-00:01:23

Harris: No. This was a small country town.

01-00:01:27

Lage: So what did stevedoring involve?

01-00:01:31

Harris: Well, he worked on the waterfront. I don't know what he did.

01-00:01:34

Lage: So you were near a port?

01-00:01:37

Harris: A plantation, yes. A plantation.

01-00:01:43

Lage: And what kind of schooling did you have?

01-00:01:46

01-00:01:50

Harris: I attended Cordesville Elementary School, and after completing seventh grade, I moved to Charleston, South Carolina.

01-00:02:10

Lage: Okay. And did you move there with your family, your whole family?

01-00:02:13
Harris: No, I lived with my sister.

01-00:02:16
Lage: I see.

01-00:02:17
Harris: And I attended high school, Burke High School.

01-00:02:24
Lage: Okay. So you moved to the city?

01-00:02:26
Harris: Yes.

01-00:02:26
Lage: More or less.

01-00:02:27
Harris: I did.

01-00:02:28
Lage: Did you move there for the educational opportunity?

01-00:02:31
Harris: Right.

01-00:02:32
Lage: Now, did you tell me the year you were born?

01-00:02:34
Harris: No. I'm not going to tell you.

01-00:02:36
Lage: You're not going to tell me? Would you give me a hint of about when?

01-00:02:39
Harris: No, no. [laughter]

01-00:02:42
Lage: I thought you might be avoiding the question. Well, it's just good to kind of know what decade we're talking about. This is all before World War II, right?

01-00:02:51
Harris: Well, yes.

01-00:02:54
Lage: Were the schools you attended segregated schools? They must have been in that era.

01-00:02:59
Harris: Yes. Segregated schools. And I graduated from Burke High School—I'm not so sure now about the date. It's so long. I was in a class of about fifty and I was the honored student.

01-00:03:30
Lage: So you were quite a good student?

01-00:03:32
Harris: Yes. [laughter] And from Burke, I attended Avery Institute.

01-00:03:39
Lage: Now, tell me about Avery.

01-00:03:41
Harris: Avery was a teacher's training school, two years teaching. Elementary school teacher, and I graduated from Avery in 1943.

01-00:03:57
Lage: Okay, so this is in the middle of World War II.

01-00:04:01
Harris: Okay.

01-00:04:03
Lage: And what's next?

01-00:04:06
Harris: I taught school for two years.

01-00:04:11
Lage: In Charleston?

01-00:04:13
Harris: Saint George, South Carolina.

01-00:04:16
Lage: Now, what kind of a community was that?

01-00:04:20
Harris: Just a small country place. [laughter]

01-00:04:23
Lage: Sort of like where you came from?

01-00:04:25
Harris: Yes, similar.

01-00:04:27
Lage: I see. Did your other siblings attend school the way you did?

01-00:04:33
Harris: Pardon?

- 01-00:04:34
Lage: Did your other brothers and sisters go to school the way you did?
- 01-00:04:39
Harris: My sister that's younger went away to school. And she had more training than I did. She was working on her PhD, but she was a teacher and she taught school in Florida. Okay.
- 01-00:05:12
Lage: But she was a younger sister. So this—
- 01-00:05:14
Harris: She's younger than I. The older ones did not attend school as we did.
- 01-00:05:25
Lage: But why do you think the two of you decided you wanted to go on for higher education?
- 01-00:05:34
Harris: Well, the older ones, my brother that I am next to went into the service. He retired with about thirty-some years, I guess.
- 01-00:05:51
Lage: So he made a career of it?
- 01-00:05:52
Harris: Yes. My other brother was a barber. He learned to be a barber from my uncle. And another sister went, lived in New York. She was a dressmaker. The two oldest sisters did domestic work in Charleston, South Carolina.
- 01-00:06:25
Lage: Okay, I see. Were your parents ambitious for you? Did they encourage you, or was this—
- 01-00:06:32
Harris: They encouraged us, but we were poor and you couldn't afford it. That's why the education was so limited.
- 01-00:06:44
Lage: But most of you made your way, it seems.
- 01-00:06:47
Harris: Yes.
- 01-00:06:48
Lage: Yeah. Well, tell me what brought you out to the West Coast.
- 01-00:06:53
Harris: One of my sisters lived here with her husband. Her husband was in the service, and because she was here, I came here with the intention of going back, but when I came, I didn't go back.

01-00:07:09
Lage: [laughter] When was it that you came out?

01-00:07:12
Harris: I came here in May of 1945.

01-00:07:18
Lage: Well, tell me. I like the smile on your face when you said, “When I came here, I didn’t go back.” What was it you found here?

01-00:07:28
Harris: Well, because of the job. I was doing clerical work but I liked it, and so...

01-00:07:37
Lage: Did you miss teaching?

01-00:07:42
Harris: Somewhat. But I think maybe I lean more to clerical or business.

01-00:07:52
Lage: Okay, so how did you—you came out here. Did you live with your sister?

01-00:07:58
Harris: I lived with my sister, yes.

01-00:08:01
Lage: And how did you settle in? Find a job?

01-00:08:07
Harris: Well, I found a job right away because jobs were plentiful then. That’s when I started at Oakland Army Base.

01-00:08:13
Lage: The war was still in process?

01-00:08:16
Harris: Yes.

01-00:08:19
Lage: So did you go down to Oakland Army Base to be hired?

01-00:08:23
Harris: Yes. I don’t remember how I got there.

01-00:08:27
Lage: You don’t remember how you heard about it.

01-00:08:30
Harris: I don’t remember.

01-00:08:34

Lage: Do you remember what kind of an interview they gave you or how they decided what job you would have?

01-00:08:43

Harris: Well, they asked me what I had done and based on my application, I was given a clerk job. I was a clerk. I didn't know how to type. I remember that.

01-00:09:00

Lage: So what were your early—before we do that, I'm going to ask you to just kind of describe your career overall, and then we'll go back and look at more detail. Like how long were you with the army base, where else you've worked. Do you want to just sort of give me a little summary of your jobs?

01-00:09:26

Harris: Well, when I worked at the Army Base, at first I worked in the Overseas Division. On some occasions, there wasn't any work to do, so you would just kind of look busy.

01-00:09:43

Lage: In these early years, forty-five?

01-00:09:45

Harris: Yes. There were times there was not work. But—

01-00:09:51

Lage: Was that after the war ended, or just that they hired too many people?

01-00:09:58

Harris: Now that I can't remember. But I stayed at the Army Base for I assume about two or three years. I don't remember exactly.

01-00:10:13

Lage: So forty-seven or forty-eight. Did they lay you off?

01-00:10:18

Harris: I got laid off, and I got a temporary job at the Bureau of Mines at UCB, and I worked there for several months.

01-00:10:38

Lage: Was that also a clerk?

01-00:10:41

Harris: Clerk typist. From there, I was transferred to the US Army Audit Agent in San Francisco. From there, I went to—if I remember correctly—the Veterans Administration in San Francisco. And I think I took time off. I had my first child, and then I went to the Naval Supply Center, Oakland, for a while. Then I came back to Oakland Army Base.

01-00:11:28
Lage: Okay. And do you remember when it was that you came back?

01-00:11:31
Harris: I don't remember exactly.

01-00:11:33
Lage: You told me on the phone 1950, but maybe that was—

01-00:11:38
Harris: Well, if I told you that, [laughter].

01-00:11:40
Lage: Well, was it Korean War time? Do you remember that? That's about the time the Korean War was starting up.

01-00:11:56
Harris: The whole time I was there, it seems as if there was only—there was the Korean War the whole time. It doesn't seem—

01-00:12:07
Lage: Well, we won't quibble about what year. It's not that important.

01-00:12:10
Harris: I just don't remember.

01-00:12:11
Lage: So then you stayed there for quite a while.

01-00:12:14
Harris: And then I stayed.

01-00:12:15
Lage: Until you retired.

01-00:12:16
Harris: Yes.

01-00:12:16
Lage: In eighty-four, was it?

01-00:12:19
Harris: Yes. I retired on January 3, 1984.

01-00:12:24
Lage: But didn't you tell me they called you back even after that?

01-00:12:27
Harris: Yes. I was called back after being out two or three months, I guess. I worked thirteen months. But because of the pay and my retirement, it was kind of senseless working so I retired again. [laughter]

01-00:12:51
Lage: For real?

01-00:12:52
Harris: Yes.

01-00:12:53
Lage: And you've been retired ever since?

01-00:12:55
Harris: No.

01-00:12:56
Lage: No?

01-00:12:58
Harris: [laughter] No, I stayed home for a while, didn't like staying home, so I worked for Contra Costa School District as, well, I subbed as a clerk for several years, then I was given a permanent job at John F. Kennedy High School as a textbook clerk. I worked for the school district about nine years.

01-00:13:31
Lage: Oh my goodness. Then you had your third retirement.

01-00:13:37
Harris: That's it.

01-00:13:39
Lage: That's it. Okay, well that's quite a career life. You've been a hard worker, I can tell.

01-00:13:46
Harris: Well, I didn't like staying home.

01-00:13:50
Lage: Okay. Well, tell me a little bit about—before we get into the Oakland Army Base, about your life in the East Bay. You've always lived in the East Bay?

01-00:13:59
Harris: Yes.

01-00:14:00
Lage: Where have you lived? When did you get married? Things like that.

01-00:14:07
Harris: Well, I originally lived in Berkeley.

01-00:14:11
Lage: Whereabouts?

01-00:14:13
Harris: I lived on Parker Street and Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley. In Oakland, I lived on 39th Street, and I got married in 1947.

01-00:14:31
Lage: I see, Okay. Did you marry somebody from the base? Somebody you met at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:14:40
Harris: No. Someone from my church.

01-00:14:44
Lage: Okay, so you lived in Berkeley, Oakland, then you got married. And then what?

01-00:14:54
Harris: Well, I had three children.

01-00:14:57
Lage: Have you lived in this home [in Richmond] for a long time?

01-00:14:59
Harris: I moved here in 1964.

01-00:15:05
Lage: I see, okay. Was it difficult as a newcomer and as an African American to sort of settle in to life here in the East Bay and find your community and church and all of that? Tell me about that process.

01-00:15:23
Harris: Well, I don't know if you want to go back to the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:15:31
Lage: Oh, I do, but...

01-00:15:32
Harris: The people at the Oakland Army Base were very nice to me, and I had two people particularly I think that helped me a lot. James Johnson was a training officer. He lived in San Francisco, and he encouraged me to go back to school, and so it was difficult because of the children but he insisted. Columbia College, Columbia, MA, offered courses at Oakland Army Base at night for civilian and military, and so I was one of the civilians who attended, and I received my B.A. degree in Business Administration.

01-00:16:32
Lage: That's great. Columbia College?

01-00:16:34
Harris: Yes.

01-00:16:35
Lage: Now, can you tell me about when that was?

01-00:16:39

Harris: I received my BA in 1978.

01-00:16:52

Lage: It doesn't have to be precise, but sometime in the seventies. So you did this, you'd been there for quite a while.

01-00:16:58

Harris: Yes. And I also took advantage of several courses that were offered at the Army Base. I learned to do upholstery; I did all my furniture. And I did furniture refinishing I learned at the Army Base. I remember time management class, and there were several other classes. Engraving, I learned to engrave because I was doing awards, that was one of my jobs, and I had to do the plaques, had to engrave the names on the plaques. I learned that too at the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:17:47

Lage: Now, I haven't heard much about these courses being offered at the Oakland Army Base. Was this a big feature of employment there, that there was a range of courses you could take?

01-00:18:01

Harris: Well, they would have people come in and do these classes.

01-00:18:08

Lage: And were they free or you had to pay?

01-00:18:09

Harris: Yes, they were free.

01-00:18:10

Lage: In the evening?

01-00:18:12

Harris: Yes. Columbia College was not free. The government paid for me to go.

01-00:18:22

Lage: Did very many of your fellow workers take advantage of that opportunity to go to Columbia College?

01-00:18:27

Harris: No. I had one classmate, Grant Davis, he and I graduated. The rest of them that I remember were military people.

01-00:18:45

Lage: I see. So there were a lot of military in those same classes?

01-00:18:49

Harris: Yes.

01-00:18:50

Lage: And was that true also of the courses you took in upholstery? Were they military and civilian also?

01-00:19:02

Harris: There were civilians. I don't recall military being in the class, in the upholstery class. Could've been. And the refinishing class. But these were teachers from outside that came in.

01-00:19:22

Lage: Right. Came in for those evenings.

01-00:19:24

Harris: Yes.

01-00:19:25

Lage: How did those classes in getting your BA affect your job? Was it beneficial?

01-00:19:35

Harris: Well, I don't know that it helped that much. [laughter] That's why I retired, because I didn't advance as I thought I should, and I was at the top of my grade.

01-00:19:52

Lage: What does one do when you think you should advance faster. Is there a grievance type procedure?

01-00:20:02

Harris: No. You have to apply for a job and get hired. [laughter] You know, I guess based on your training.

01-00:20:15

Lage: We'll go back and talk more about the work that you actually did. I've kind of rushed you through it all, but I want to go back and hear more, and maybe you can tell me more about who did get promoted and who didn't. You mentioned your church. What church, did you have one church you've stayed with all these years?

01-00:20:39

Harris: No. Originally, I was a member of McGee Avenue Baptist Church in Berkeley.

01-00:20:48

Lage: Is that where you met your husband?

01-00:20:50

Harris: Yes. And after we separated [laughter], I moved to another church, [laughter] Downs Memorial United Methodist Church in Oakland, and I have been a member there ever since.

01-00:21:13
Lage: So that's an important part of your life it seems.

01-00:21:15
Harris: Yes.

01-00:21:17
Lage: So did you remarry?

01-00:21:19
Harris: No.

01-00:21:20
Lage: Once was enough?

01-00:21:21
Harris: Once was enough. [laughter]

01-00:21:23
Lage: How many children?

01-00:21:24
Harris: I have three children.

01-00:21:28
Lage: Well, that couldn't have been too easy, raising them—or did you share child-rearing with your husband?

01-00:21:35
Harris: He did his part. Although we were separated, it all worked out very well and he did well. He was nice to the children and nice to me, too, after we separated.

01-00:21:53
Lage: Well, that makes it a lot easier, doesn't it? Good. Okay. While we're on your children, do you want to just briefly tell me what they've done. They're all grown and have children of their own, you've mentioned earlier.

01-00:22:13
Harris: Well, my oldest daughter, Beverly, after finishing high school, she attended Contra Costa College for a short time. She went into the Navy and she spent six years. And my son, Curtis, in the middle, completed San Jose University. And my youngest daughter, Millicent, spent six years in the Army.

01-00:23:00
Lage: So they sort of picked up this military side of it.

01-00:23:05
Harris: Well, I think it had a lot to do with because I did have a lot of contact with the military people and invited them over for dinner. So I think it

had something to do with that, but it didn't influence my son at all.
[laughter]

01-00:23:25

Lage: He didn't want any part of it?

01-00:23:26

Harris: No.

01-00:23:30

Lage: Okay, well that's good to know. Now let's go back and look more carefully at what you did, as much as you can remember of your job over the years and how it changed. When you first were there, you were a clerk and you didn't know how to type. And you said there wasn't a lot of work? Now that's—

01-00:23:51

Harris: Well, I guess that shouldn't go in. [laughter]

01-00:23:58

Lage: Well, it's part of the times maybe, so it's important.

01-00:24:02

Harris: At certain times, I worked in different departments. I worked in the Administrative Division, and worked in Civilian Personnel. I worked in Military Personnel. In Military Personnel, I had to make arrangements for reserve officers coming from various states and when they came in, I had to make assignments to them. I just don't remember everything. I only found two job descriptions. [laughter]

01-00:24:53

Lage: Well, that refreshed your memory a little bit.

01-00:24:55

Harris: Well, I didn't have time to read it but it had to do with the reservists that I worked with when I was in Military Personnel.

01-00:25:04

Lage: So would you assign them to places to stay and that kind of thing?

01-00:25:09

Harris: Well, they stayed at the Army Base in the Officers' Quarters. I made arrangements for their travel.

01-00:25:19

Lage: I see. Like their travel arrangements?

01-00:25:20

Harris: Yes. And they came in to see me. I don't remember what I did.
[laughter]

01-00:25:29

Lage: Well, it's interesting, this mix of civilian and military workers. Was there kind of a divide there?

01-00:25:38

Harris: Well, one was Civilian Personnel and one was Military Personnel, so when I worked in Civilian Personnel I did something different. You know, worked with civilian records.

01-00:25:49

Lage: Right. Were there any military people working side by side with you?

01-00:25:54

Harris: Oh yes. I worked with military.

01-00:25:59

Lage: Okay. Doing the same kind of work that you did?

01-00:26:05

Harris: Well no. My job with the reservists, that was specifically my job. But each of us had our own job to do.

01-00:26:21

Lage: Right. Well, what other kind of assignments did you have that you can remember? Military Personnel, Civilian Personnel. Did you do any routing of the materials coming through the base, the shipping operation?

01-00:26:38

Harris: I don't recall that. I just found my job description last night and I didn't read it.

01-00:26:58

Lage: Okay, now this, are you telling me about the very early years of your job, or did that occur later?

01-00:27:06

Harris: No, working in personnel was more or less the middle part, and the last part I worked in a different part. We were all in the same building, but one part was called MOTBA.

01-00:27:42

Lage: Say that again?

01-00:27:43

Harris: Military Ocean Terminal, Bay Area, and that's the place I retired from.

01-00:27:52

Lage: I see. And what was that all about?

01-00:27:58

Harris: Well, I think I did more or less personnel work in that division.

01-00:28:08
Lage: Sounds like most of your work was personnel related.

01-00:28:15
Harris: Well, yes, yes. Except when I did the awards. The awards were for...

01-00:28:23
Lage: What was that? Tell me what the award program was.

01-00:28:29
Harris: Well, if you made certain achievements, you got an award. I received an award for community service.

01-00:28:50
Lage: Let me fix that. Okay, back we go. Now, tell me about that award. That's intriguing. You won an award for community service.

01-00:29:00
Harris: Yes. In 1970, I started working at Herrick Hospital with a group.

01-00:29:11
Lage: A group from the base?

01-00:29:12
Harris: No. With my own group, a group of sorority members. We made telephone calls and I had been doing that up until the present.

01-00:29:33
Lage: What type of telephone calls?

01-00:29:36
Harris: Sick and shut ins. My group was responsible for calling people on Saturdays, and we still do. And we have saved several lives, and now it's under Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, but we work on the Herrick Campus now. And through the years we have worked at different sites.

01-00:30:08
Lage: That must be very rewarding to know how important you are to some people.

01-00:30:12
Harris: It is because some people do not receive calls from anybody, and so they look forward to our calls.

01-00:30:24
Lage: Do you call the same person every week so you sort of develop a relationship?

01-00:30:32
Harris: Well, we have it divided up into four groups. So you may get to call this particular group each time you call. Most times I now work on the desk and receive calls, and kind of supervise the callers.

01-00:31:02
Lage: So people call you when they feel a need for something?

01-00:31:06
Harris: No. They are supposed to call in if they are not going to be at home. They are supposed to be called at a certain time, and they're called every day but our group only calls on Saturdays.

01-00:31:18
Lage: I see, I see. Now, what is your sorority? You mentioned your sorority.

01-00:31:23
Harris: Iota Phi Lambda Sorority, Inc.

01-00:31:27
Lage: And how do you become a member?

01-00:31:33
Harris: Well, in order to become a member you have to have a certain number of college units and pay a certain amount of dues, attend meetings.

01-00:31:48
Lage: So people might have gone to college in many different places?

01-00:31:51
Harris: Right. But I was a member of an Oakland chapter at the time, and I moved to Richmond. My Regional Director and I established a chapter in Richmond. And this is when I decided I wanted to do some community work, and so I contacted Herrick Hospital and several other places about offering our volunteer service, and Herrick was the first to answer, so we got connected with Herrick. And this is when Tele-care first started this in 1970.

01-00:32:37
Lage: Boy, you've been at that a long time.

01-00:32:39
Harris: Yes.

01-00:32:40
Lage: And really the organizer, it sounds like.

01-00:32:44
Harris: Well, [laughter].

01-00:32:45
Lage: Or initiator.

01-00:32:46
Harris: Well, only our group.

01-00:32:51
Lage: Yeah, okay. So the Oakland Army Base recognized what you'd done?

01-00:32:57
Harris: Yes.

01-00:32:58
Lage: Very nice. So you got an award yourself, and then you got to help other people get awards.

01-00:33:06
Harris: Well, not at the Army Base. I think that was the only ever.

01-00:33:11
Lage: But you said you worked on others awards for people.

01-00:33:13
Harris: Yes, plaques for certain accomplishments were given.

01-00:33:26
Lage: It's interesting. I was just reading an interview that another person did with an Oakland Army Base individual, and he indicated, he thought people were very isolated from their community. That they just came to work, they left, and they didn't have any ties to their community. Now you're giving me a very different picture. Were you unusual at the base, or were there a lot of people involved in the community?

01-00:34:02
Harris: Well, I got a lot of people involved in working at Herrick.

01-00:34:07
Lage: You did?

01-00:34:08
Harris: Yes. Through the years, there were many people, from various sources.

01-00:34:12
Lage: How did you get people involved? What'd you do?

01-00:34:14
Harris: Well, I'd just invite them to join the group to do some calling. It's a very rewarding thing and very much appreciated by the people we call.

01-00:34:36
Lage: Yes. So you weren't the only one involved. You had other people from Oakland Army Base. Tell me about the people you worked with. Were they civilian, were they military, were they black, were they white, Asian, men, women?

01-00:34:53
Harris: Men, women, all nationalities. And I think as a whole I was treated well as a black person.

01-00:35:10
Lage: Were there very many African American employees where you worked?

01-00:35:12
Harris: Yes.

01-00:35:15
Lage: A fair percentage. And what about as you went up the ladder or as one goes up the ladder? Were as many African Americans promoted?

01-00:35:30
Harris: I don't think we were promoted as often, but some African Americans had higher jobs.

01-00:35:47
Lage: Did you feel that that was one of the reasons you didn't get promoted the way you would have liked to?

01-00:35:54
Harris: It might have had something to do with it. I was a hard worker and I got many letters of commendation and I have several certificates of outstanding service.

01-00:36:13
Lage: When you retired, what was your level? Was it a GS something?

01-00:36:19
Harris: GS-6/10.

01-00:36:22
Lage: And what was it when you started? Do you remember?

01-00:36:25
Harris: GS-3.

01-00:36:29
Lage: That doesn't mean a lot to me, but I'm sure it meant a lot to you. Did you have a nice retirement benefit?

01-00:36:39
Harris: Yes. It has increased over the years with the added amount for living cost.

01-00:36:47
Lage: From inflation?

01-00:36:49

Harris: Yes.

01-00:36:51

Lage: Well that's good. Okay, now I want to take you back and see if you can—this may be hard to go back in time like this, but when you came back to the base after your three or four years doing this number of other jobs, I think you came back, from what you told me, right during the Korean War. And I've read that that was really a busy time on the base. Do you remember what you saw or what it was like at that point?

01-00:37:25

Harris: Frankly, I don't. I don't remember. And the time, it may not have been so much downtime without work at the Army Base as it was at the V.A. in San Francisco. I remember having a lot of extra time because during that time, stockings were difficult to get, and we would get in line.

01-00:37:58

Lage: For stockings? Nylon stockings?

01-00:38:01

Harris: Yes. [laughter]

01-00:38:15

Lage: Right. It's interesting, the things you remember.

01-00:38:17

Harris: Yes, I remember that, from going to the Emporium in San Francisco because that was close to the V.A.

01-00:38:26

Lage: Was San Francisco and the East Bay an exciting place to live after coming from a small community in the South? How did you experience it?

01-00:38:39

Harris: Well, I like Oakland and Berkeley but I didn't like San Francisco. Working in San Francisco is okay, but I don't like living there.

01-00:38:48

Lage: Did you try it?

01-00:38:49

Harris: No, I've never lived there, but people who live there like it very much.

01-00:38:56

Lage: How did you get there?

01-00:38:58

Harris: I rode the train.

01-00:39:00
Lage: The Key Route.

01-00:39:02
Harris: Key Train.

01-00:39:06
Lage: You mentioned silk stockings which makes me think about dress, how you may have dressed for your jobs at the Oakland Army Base. Was it very formal or informal?

01-00:39:18
Harris: Yes. It was somewhat formal.

01-00:39:20
Lage: What would you wear to work?

01-00:39:22
Harris: Suits.

01-00:39:24
Lage: Heels? Silk stockings.

01-00:39:27
Harris: [laughter] Yes, yes.

01-00:39:31
Lage: Did that change over time, how people dressed?

01-00:39:36
Harris: I don't think during my time. It may have changed since then.

01-00:39:42
Lage: But everybody dressed pretty nicely?

01-00:39:44
Harris: Yes.

01-00:39:45
Lage: What would you say the work ethic was like? Were people deeply involved in their jobs and hard workers over all?

01-00:39:55
Harris: I think most people did what they had to do.

01-00:40:02
Lage: Did they have a rigorous system of evaluating employees?

01-00:40:07
Harris: Yes. That's how you got your awards.

01-00:40:18
Lage: Like every year they'd evaluate you?

01-00:40:22
Harris: I had just a stack of letters, but I have them packed away and on my wall in there, I have several certificates.

01-00:40:35
Lage: Very good. Now, starting about 1965, the Vietnam War was happening. Did you experience a change in your work or in what you saw going on in the base?

01-00:40:58
Harris: Frankly, I don't remember.

01-00:41:02
Lage: It sounds like you were very much in the office and maybe not watching the loading of ships.

01-00:41:12
Harris: Yes. I worked in the office all the time.

01-00:41:15
Lage: So you didn't have that much sense of how it was out on the docks?

01-00:41:23
Harris: No. I also worked in the dispensary for a while on the Army Base.

01-00:41:36
Lage: Who used the dispensary?

01-00:41:38
Harris: Civilians and military.

01-00:41:40
Lage: Really? So for instance could you get medicines there as a civilian?

01-00:41:49
Harris: Well, if you got sick on base, they would take you to the dispensary and then, if necessary, they would send you to a hospital.

01-00:42:01
Lage: I see. What was your healthcare system? What kind of healthcare providers?

01-00:42:12
Harris: Well, I had Blue Cross Blue Shield, that's what I had then.

01-00:42:17
Lage: I see. So you could pick your own doctor and they didn't have any special medical system for you?

01-00:42:24
Harris: No.

01-00:42:28

Lage: Okay. So what was life like in the dispensary?

01-00:42:30

Harris: I liked working in the dispensary. Originally, I wanted to be a nurse, and that didn't work, so when I worked in the dispensary, I kind of felt, that was near. And the people in the dispensary were very nice. My supervisor was a very nice person. Anita Packard was her name.

01-00:43:09

Lage: You mentioned Mr. Johnson, was it? James Johnson as being someone who was particularly helpful to you?

01-00:43:15

Harris: Yes.

01-00:43:16

Lage: Was he your supervisor also?

01-00:43:18

Harris: No. He was not my supervisor. He was a training officer, but he knew me and the work that I was doing, and he encouraged me a lot.

01-00:43:31

Lage: That's so nice. Were there other people, you mentioned—was it Nina?

01-00:43:40

Harris: Anita Packard.

01-00:43:41

Lage: Anita Packard? Other people you'd point to as being particularly helpful?

01-00:43:48

Harris: Let's see. Chester Foresburg is another male from San Francisco. I don't recall anything specifically he did. I know once I was in an automobile accident and he'd call and say, "Come back to work!" But I know he was very nice.

01-00:44:19

Lage: Did you make close friendships that you've retained over the years?

01-00:44:24

Harris: Yes. That's one thing about the people at the Army Base. I think as a whole they were very friendly. I knew many people at the Army Base, and of course I've worked in Building One most of the time, but you knew practically everybody in the building.

01-00:44:49

Lage: At all different levels?

01-00:44:51
Harris: Yes.

01-00:44:54
Lage: Do you belong to the alumni group? I hear there's a group that meets. I don't know if it's a formal group.

01-00:45:02
Harris: No, I don't belong.

01-00:45:04
Lage: I think maybe that came out of the closing of the base. People who worked there then. You worked in Building One?

01-00:45:11
Harris: Right.

01-00:44:12
Lage: What other buildings were there? Tell me what the physical layout was.

01-00:45:18
Harris: Well, there was a building where they did printing, Printing Plant. Then there was Audio Vision, dispensary, a library. [pause]

01-00:45:40
Lage: Were there places to eat?

01-00:45:42
Harris: Yes. There was a large cafeteria near to Building One.

01-00:45:48
Lage: And would both civilian and military people eat there?

01-00:45:52
Harris: Yes.

01-00:45:55
Lage: How about the library? Was that for everybody, too?

01-00:45:57
Harris: Yes. I think there was a chapel on base.

01-00:46:15
Lage: And what other services were in Building One?

01-00:46:23
Harris: Well, they had lawyers. [laughter]

01-00:46:35
Lage: Lawyers. That's interesting. Why did they need lawyers on an Army Base?

01-00:46:39
Harris: Yes, because I know the time when I went to Columbia College, I was chosen, and a civilian employee sued because I was chosen and she wasn't, and so we had to go through the lawyers upstairs about that particular incident.

01-00:47:05
Lage: I see. So you had to testify?

01-00:47:09
Harris: I don't remember how it all happened, but I do remember her name and that she was upset because she was not chosen.

01-00:47:19
Lage: Was that a racially tinged complaint?

01-00:47:23
Harris: She was black, as well.

01-00:47:24
Lage: She was black too, so she wasn't saying you had some special—

01-00:47:29
Harris: No.

01-00:47:30
Lage: Isn't that interesting? How did that get resolved, do you know?

01-00:47:37
Harris: I don't remember. There wasn't anything to it. I don't know how they made the choice.

01-00:47:49
Lage: But anyway, you did get chosen. And you did very well, it sounds like.

01-00:47:54
Harris: Yes. [laughter]

01-00:47:56
Lage: You said you'd wanted to be a nurse at one time. Was that back in your youth?

01-00:48:00
Harris: Yes. Because I think at that time, one didn't have an opportunity to go in certain fields. It was either teacher or nurse.

01-00:48:15
Lage: You mean because of your gender?

01-00:48:18
Harris: Because of race.

01-00:48:21
Lage: So there were openings for nurses as an African American?

01-00:48:25
Harris: Yes.

01-00:48:27
Lage: But just, you took teacher. Was there a reason why you decided?

01-00:48:34
Harris: Yes. I had to go out of state in order to attend a nursing school, and I think I was waiting for something and my mother said I couldn't stay out of school, I had to get in school. So I didn't have much choice. I liked being a teacher at the time, but I like business better.

01-00:49:07
Lage: Okay. Now let me see what else I have here to ask you about. You don't remember activity relating to the Vietnam War?

01-00:49:16
Harris: I remember—when I was at the Army Base originally—we used to go out to meet the soldiers when the soldiers come home on the ships.

01-00:49:38
Lage: Was that a special kind of thing to do? Did you enjoy it?

01-00:49:42
Harris: Yes. We liked it. [laughter] Men in uniform. [laughter]

01-00:49:53
Lage: Okay, now let's see. You've answered a lot of the questions I had to ask you. Were you ever in a position to supervise your fellow workers? Did your job entail supervising others?

01-00:50:21
Harris: No.

01-00:50:23
Lage: Okay. But you got supervised yourself?

01-00:50:26
Harris: Yes.

01-00:50:31
Lage: I guess one thing I'm curious about, you worked over a long period of time and there were so many changes, especially toward the end, in technology. How did your job change with the coming of technology? We haven't even had you learn to type yet, but I know you must have done that.

01-00:50:54
Harris: Well, after being employed at the Army Base, I decided to go to school. I went to school at night to learn to type.

01-00:51:06
Lage: I see. Early on.

01-00:51:07
Harris: Early on, yes.

01-00:51:08
Lage: And where did you go?

01-00:51:11
Harris: I went to Merritt College, which was close to where I lived.

01-00:51:19
Lage: On Grove Street, now Martin Luther King, Jr. Way.

01-00:51:20
Harris: Yes. And I learned, I was a very accurate typist. I wasn't all that fast but I was accurate, so I was loaned out from my division quite frequently to type, because letters had to be accurate. I worked in the general's office on some occasions and did a lot of—

01-00:51:55
Lage: And was the general the top commander?

01-00:51:57
Harris: Right.

01-00:51:59
Lage: Oh yeah. So what kind of things would you do in the general's office?

01-00:52:03
Harris: Well, I would type and answer phone in place of the regular secretary.

01-00:52:11
Lage: Did you have to take dictation?

01-00:52:15
Harris: I took dictation for a while, but I wasn't all that good at it. And we also had machines way back, dictating machines I believe they were called.

01-00:52:29
Lage: Like little recording devices?

01-00:52:32
Harris: Now I don't remember. But they were—

01-00:52:25
Lage: Dictaphone!

01-00:52:36
Harris: Dictaphone, yes. [laughter] A long time ago. Yes. And I did that for a while.

01-00:52:42
Lage: So you would transcribe from the Dictaphone?

01-00:52:46
Harris: Right.

01-00:52:46
Lage: That's what we do with these tapes. We transcribe them.

01-00:52:50
Harris: Oh, I see.

01-00:52:52
Lage: Similar, very similar to using the Dictaphone. So was there a change in the way the paperwork was handled or, you know, I read about things that may have come after your time, where they went to sort of a paperless system. Everything's on the computer. Was that something you experienced?

01-00:53:15
Harris: No.

01-00:53:16
Lage: Were people around you using computers by the time you left, or was it still mainly a typing?

01-00:53:23
Harris: It was mainly typing.

01-00:53:26
Lage: So you never felt you were behind the times?

01-00:53:29
Harris: No. [laughter]

01-00:53:33
Lage: So how did you use to learn the computer at home? You mentioned to me that you do use email.

01-00:53:41
Harris: Well, I bought a computer.

01-00:53:44
Lage: After you retired?

01-00:53:45
Harris: After I retired. And more or less learned and then when I worked at the school, they sent me to school.

01-00:53:57

Lage: I see. You had to learn it for that. Very good. Okay. I think we've pretty well covered. You sort of laughed when I asked you if they had food establishments on the base. Did they have good food and did you eat there frequently?

01-00:54:33

Harris: If I remember correctly, I took my lunch most of the time, but I did on some occasions eat in the cafeteria. The food was good.

01-00:54:48

Lage: Now, there was an Officers' Club, but that wouldn't be something you'd probably—was that off limits?

01-00:54:55

Harris: Well, the Officers' Club was for officers. [laughter]

01-00:55:01

Lage: Right, right. And there were a lot of people who actually lived on the base, right? The Army people?

01-00:55:05

Harris: Yes.

01-00:55:07

Lage: So it was a regular town almost.

01-00:55:10

Harris: Well, a certain area, I think. Not near Building One, but down further.

01-00:55:18

Lage: Did you or your fellow workers go into the community, the West Oakland community around the base for any of your eating or business transactions?

01-00:55:31

Harris: I didn't.

01-00:55:33

Lage: So you were either on the base or you were back in Oakland, Berkeley, or Richmond.

01-00:55:39

Harris: Right.

01-00:55:41

Lage: Was there a sense of being kind of not a part of that West Oakland community?

- 01-00:55:48
Harris: Well, I don't know. I think it depended on the person, what your life is like. I had to go to work and I had to come home and take care of my family, and so that's what I did.
- 01-00:56:06
Lage: How did you manage with your three children and the job and going to school at night? You've done so much.
- 01-00:56:15
Harris: Well, times were different. They could come home and they were old enough to stay home by themselves.
- 01-00:56:28
Lage: And kind of take care of themselves?
- 01-00:56:30
Harris: Yes.
- 01-00:56:32
Lage: That's good. Okay, well, if you were looking back at your career at Oakland Army Base, what are you proudest of?
- 01-00:56:49
Harris: Well, I guess of the people that I have met, friendship, the training I've had. And just to have had that experience.
- 01-00:57:10
Lage: Did you feel—tell me more. You mentioned earlier, and this is interesting, that you would invite some of the military people home for dinner. Tell me about that, how those relationships developed.
- 01-00:57:28
Harris: Well, I knew different people, and on holidays I would prepare dinner, and some who didn't have families would come over and have dinner.
- 01-00:57:45
Lage: Right. They weren't from here.
- 01-00:57:47
Harris: Yes. They were from different places.
- 01-00:57:51
Lage: And do you think that had an influence on your children over the years?
- 01-00:57:55
Harris: On my two daughters, yes. [laughter] That's what I think.
- 01-00:58:04
Lage: And how would you get to know these people so well? Were these some of the people that you helped make arrangements for?

01-00:58:12
Harris: No. These were people that I worked with.

01-00:58:15
Lage: You work with. Side by side?

01-00:58:17
Harris: Yes.

01-00:58:18
Lage: So it sounds like there were civilians and military working just in parallel positions?

01-00:58:23
Harris: Yes.

01-00:58:25
Lage: That's interesting. Okay, do you have any regrets about that time at Oakland Army Base, things you wish were different?

01-00:58:35
Harris: No. I don't. I wish I was a higher grade. [laughter] But it didn't happen.

01-00:58:44
Lage: Did you have some resentment about that? Back, you know, at the time you retired?

01-00:58:52
Harris: It's just that I felt working at the top of your grade and no chance for advancement, that you'd just sooner not work. [laughter] But after I retired and found out that I didn't like staying home, I said, "Maybe I shouldn't have retired so early."

01-00:59:19
Lage: How old—I know you don't want to tell me your age, but could you give me just a sense of about how old you were when you retired?

01-00:59:27
Harris: No.

01-00:59:29
Lage: Were you below the normal retirement age?

01-00:59:33
Harris: No, I was eligible to retire because of age and I had the time.

01-00:59:41
Lage: Okay. Well, did you ever think of filing a complaint or anything about not being promoted? Was it that strong a feeling?

01-00:59:49
Harris: No. I didn't feel that way.

01-00:59:53
Lage: Because apparently people did do that. Someone filed a complaint about not being able to go to school.

01-01:00:01
Harris: Well, I don't know that not being promoted, unless in that particular instant you feel you were discriminated against. But I didn't feel that.

01-01:00:15
Lage: Not in a particular hiring situation. Okay, well tell me, are there things that I've completely missed and haven't asked you about that are important or that you'd just like to tell me about?

01-01:00:29
Harris: No. I just didn't know what you were going to ask me. I thought you might have asked about who were the officers during that time.

01-01:00:42
Lage: I'd like to know.

01-01:00:45
Harris: I only remember just a few of them, but on my awards and certificates. I have names of different officers.

01-01:00:56
Lage: See, I think the names are known. They're in the record. But if you have something to tell me about one or more of them.

01-01:01:05
Harris: No.

01-01:01:06
Lage: That's the kind of thing we try to record.

01-01:01:08
Harris: No, I don't.

01-01:01:09
Lage: It's not something, like your personal note?

01-01:01:13
Harris: No.

01-01:01:15
Lage: No, that's fine. Because some of those facts are in the record, and we're trying to get a sense of the life and the work on the base. Now what have I missed?

01-01:01:25

Harris: I don't know. I feel so badly that I've forgotten so much. [laughter]
But I've had a lot of things going on that I just don't remember.

01-01:01:36

Lage: Well, I think you've given me a good view. I wouldn't expect a
detailed recollection of everything that happened. Nobody does that.
But people will piece together these different stories.

01-01:01:48

Harris: Yes.

01-01:01:50

Lage: Okay. Shall we finish up then?

01-01:01:55

Harris: Yes.

01-01:01:56

Lage: Okay.

[End of Interview]