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Berkeley, California

Mary Head

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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

Interviews conducted by
David Washburn and Susie Dodge
in 2005

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Discursive Table of Contents—Mary Head

01:00:00:00

Born and raised in Louisiana, migrated to Berkeley in the 1940's, moved to Parchester Village in the 1950's—growing up in Louisiana—family livelihood, recycling—racial discrimination in residential housing in Louisiana—coming to California with future husband, finding work the first week—signing up for work at the shipyards, training to be a welder, and becoming a relief welder—post welding processes to prepare ships for painting—migration to California motivated by father's stories of better pay and better life—father's employment as a construction worker, he helped build the Alameda Tunnel.

01:00:10:12

How she met her husband in Louisiana, marriage in Berkeley—future husband stationed at Navel Air Station in Alameda, sent money to her in Louisiana because wages there were poor—assimilation into the Bay Area: covert discrimination versus the printed sign directing “colored people” to the back entrances of public places in the South—socializing where welcomed; military bases (Treasure Island) and restaurants in Chinatown—hardships at work, disgruntled co-workers, reconciling co-workers in the name of bringing the soldiers home safe.

01:00:10:00

More on job discrimination against African Americans in the shipyard—relations with co-workers most of whom were women—travel to and from work—husband approves escorts—work activities equipment and protective gear, gender dynamics in the yard.

01:00:30:00

Social life outside of work—prejudice in Richmond against Native Americans and Chinese American—housing scarcity--renting a room in Berkeley--shipyard housing, own apartment on San Pablo and Tenth Street in Berkeley—Cordonices Village—move to Richmond in the 1950's—the experience of buying a home only to have it sold out from under them—purchasing a house in Parchester Village—the history of Parchester Village.

01:00:40:01

Religion—ethnic ancestry—thoughts on ethnic identity in the racially segregated south—racially mixed communities in Louisiana—being a homemaker during child rearing years except for seasonal work at Del Monte Packing Company—shipyard closure—saved money from shipyard employment to purchase a home—difficult adjustment to Richmond with continued banking and shopping in Berkeley.

01:00:50:04

Adjusting to Richmond—retail center development—more on the history of Parchester Village and how she came to own her home in Parchester—similar housing development at same time going up for whites—one interracial couple in Parchester—black flight from Parchester

Village—changing face of Parchester Village as more Latino families move in—Leroy Heights, for whites only—more on prejudice in Richmond against Native American and Chinese American—hate crime, the murder of a Chinese American couple—reputation of Richmond—the closing of Richmond Community Center.

02:00:00:00

Reiterates respect for husband's prerogative to choose their social contacts—living arrangements were not conducive to visitors: one room, with shared kitchen and bath—taught to honor and respect husband—worked with men and women in the shipyard—men helped women with welding equipment—organized neighborhood activities to enhance communication—neighborhood women organized to help people up-keep their yards—brought up to always grow your own food, not part of victory garden movement.

02:00:10:00

Work skills and experiences after the shipyard—income from foot reflexology—lesson from working in shipyard: “be a woman and get out there and work” —doing heavy manual labor around the house with the help of her girls—cement work—received a Certificate from Berkeley Senior Center for participation in mostly Chinese national tap dance troop—profession of reflexology after raising her family—hospitalized for a night while working in shipyards.

02:00:20:00

Kaiser assigned pregnant women to lighter work in shipyards—illness and Hospitalization while working in shipyards—membership in Kaiser Health Plan in later years through husband's job—current role in Kaiser Work Team as hostess—accessing Kaiser after the war before the medical plan—learning about women's health/sex education from her mother, the Catholic rhythm method—decision to defer child bearing while husband in service.

Interview with Mary Head
Interviewed by: David Washburn, Susie Dodge
Transcriber: Julie Allen
Interview #1: April 4, 2005]
[Begin minidisc 1]

01:00:00:00

Washburn:

Interview with Mary Peace Head, recorded on April 4, 2005, in her home in Richmond, California, in Parchester Village. She's being interviewed by Susie Dodge and David Washburn.

Dodge:

Mary, can you tell us a little bit about where you were born and when?

Head:

That's going to be kind of hard for me because I didn't find out until I thought it was time for social security and they had no record of my birth. Supposed to have been born in New Orleans, and later in life my family moved to Shreveport, Louisiana. I don't know too much about it because of my age. Most all the people my age, if they're {?} other places, they're dead and gone. So I spent most of my life in Berkeley and then from Berkeley to this area called Parchester Village. That was I think 1940, I came to Berkeley and early fifties moved into this area. I've been here ever since.

Dodge:

Before you moved to Berkeley in the forties, what was it like growing up in Louisiana? Did you live with your parents or your brothers and sisters?

Head:

I have one sister and we grew up with our parents.

Dodge:

So when you moved to California did your family come with you, in 1940? [phone rings]

Washburn:

Is that you? Is that your cell phone.

Head:

Yes.

Washburn:

Do you want to get it? Okay, let's keep going. Tell us a little bit about life in Louisiana, despite when and where you were born, that doesn't matter. Just some of your earliest childhood memories growing up in—like, for instance, what are your parents' names? Why don't we start off with that?

Head:

My mother, her name, her maiden name was Ross. She married, her first marriage, Clark, and then my father, Starns. My father traveled all over doing construction work. He was even in California before the forties, coming back, giving us history of things that he did like helping to build the Alameda tunnel. How jobs and things were. I was always sort of like a go-getter person. At the age of ten I was making almost as much money in Louisiana to feed the family—because—I did recycling, like nails and old wood and stuff. We would sell that off. It takes all day to make about fifteen cents a day. [laughter] But it was good for me because it was so hard for us. I don't know anything about Depression, but they say just before I was born it was the Depression where people didn't hardly have food to eat. So it was so great for me to go out—at that time we could get three loaves of bread for ten cents. The slaughter house—my parents went maybe about once a month because they would give you all the meat that they sell in the meat counters now, like chicken feet, pork meat. We could not just pile up on that because we had improper refrigeration. The ice man came about once or twice a week and put a lump of ice somewhere where you could get it, but you had to have a place to put it and keep it wrapped so it can last long. Very interesting life.

Dodge:

And did your mom and your sister help with the recycling? What did they usually do?

Head:

Oh, my parents, they went to the rural part of the country and bought land, because black people couldn't buy houses in Louisiana, old shack houses. Sometimes the shack houses would have to be demolished. That's where we went in and recycled what wood that could be used and nails and all this. The recycling has been going on way long. It's not anything that just happened a few years ago.

Dodge:

So finally in 1940 you moved to Berkeley?

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

Can you tell us a little bit about your trip here? Who did you come with and what was it like?

Head:

The man that I married was born in Louisiana and my mother gave me permission to come on out here with him because I wasn't old enough to be married. We lived in Berkeley and then, being the one that always wanted a job, I think the first few days that I was there I got a job at Red's Pie Shop. Later on, one of the employees come in, hadn't showed up on the job, came in and showed her paycheck. I think that next morning Red didn't have anybody there to do his pies. [laughter] Because we all left and went to the shipyards. So I went and signed up. They sent me down in Oakland, I think it was on San Pablo Avenue where you could register to go into the shipyard. Then we had to go to

school. I became a welder and later on became sort of like a release person when one of the ladies needed to go and have a cigarette or to the bathroom before break time. After the welding, there came a huff-like scale, that you have to use a special gun to huff that off. Then they have someone to come along after that and kind of sand it down, the steel down, for a coat of sealing paint, before they did the main paint. It was just a group of people that learned to work right in that area with welding.

Washburn:

[to Dodge] Let me interrupt you just for a second, can you move your chair this way just six inches? I'm getting you in those mirrors back there. Better.

Before you move on to Berkeley quite yet, you left Louisiana at fifteen?

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

And by that time you already had met your husband?

Head:

I met him in Louisiana.

Washburn:

Let's talk about being a young gal—if you can remember back to those days in Louisiana, did you—and before the war—did you have any idea, “This is what I want to make of my life?” Did you see yourself as different from your mother at all? Did you say, “This is what my mom does, this is what I want to do. This is what my siblings do, this is what I want to do. This is what people around me do, and this is what I want to do.” What were you—did you have any idea at a certain time what you were going to make of your life?

Head:

My life was after my father had traveled and I think his area was the northern part of California—he helped to build the Alameda tunnel and got in on some parts of the Bay Bridge, and just general instruction. He would tell the story about they paid more, the living was better here. That was one thing when the person that I married was drafted into the navy and was in Alameda and I was in Berkeley during the time that they was building the Alameda tunnel because we had to go over on a ferry to the Alameda Naval Air Station.

01:00:10:12

Come in here right away, getting a job at Red's Pie Shop, and living a little bit different than I lived when I was coming up, my husband and I decided that we would migrate here and this would be our home.

Dodge:

How did you originally meet your husband?

Head:

Well, he was working at a meat company before he went into the navy. After that he came back on a leave, that's how I met him.

Dodge:

And then your mom let you leave Louisiana at the age of fifteen after marrying him to go? Or did you get married when you reached Berkeley?

Head:

No, I married when I reached Berkeley.

Washburn:

Was that exciting for you to think that you were going to be leaving Louisiana and going to this place that your father had been talking about all these years?

Head:

Well, it was kind of hard for me to really make up my mind at the last minute. Because I did not know anyone. But my husband had found a place for me on Ellis Street in south Berkeley, and the place that I lived in is still there. One of the ladies that had a room there, she became married to the young man that his family owned the house. The house was willed to her and she's still there.

Washburn:

Did your husband—were you told to save any money for this trip? How did the financial side of it work?

Head:

Oh he would always send me money, because it was hard for Louisiana people—you know, you work a whole week and you wouldn't get five dollars.

Washburn:

So he was already in California?

Head:

Yes.

Washburn:

How many years ahead of you was he in California?

Head:

Well, he wasn't in California—hmm—maybe about a year or two years at the naval air station in Alameda.

Dodge:

When you first moved here did you find that it was really hard assimilate into the Bay Area, being from the South and not knowing anyone?

Head:

It was not hard for me. The only thing that I found out right away, that it wasn't a pleasant thing, like people say the mixture of different nationalities of people—that wasn't true.

Dodge:

How was it then?

Head:

Well, some restaurants that you went in, they would make excuses not to serve you. Like in San Francisco I can remember an experience where we went into this restaurant. They served and waited on us very well, and after we paid the bill and walked out of the door, the little cart that they put the used dishes on, the particular waitress put them in the table cloth, and as we walked out he slammed it to the ground and asked us did we know what that meant. My girlfriend, she wanted to fight—she was saying all kinds of things, but I always know that having a temper and getting angry about something, that don't settle it.

Dodge:

So would you say that there was more discrimination over your race—

Head:

Yes, it was.

Dodge:

In Berkeley?

Head:

Yes, because in Louisiana, one would know by signs. In Louisiana they called black people "colored folks" and the big signs said, "colored folks," with an arrow. We went into the better restaurants in Louisiana but we went in through the back, we followed the arrow. Same thing about the movies, and wrestling matches, games and things. I felt more comfortable knowing what to do with myself, than to go somewhere and be turned down.

Washburn:

Than what, in California? Describe then what the comparison was to California.

Head:

Well, you think that you could—right now, a lot of these restaurants, if you really have to go in a restaurant to use the bathroom, they'll tell you, "not here." If you're in a hurry, don't buy anything—but if they have the signs here like they had there it made it much easier for me.

Washburn:

So there it was more coded, it was more hidden?

Head:

Yes.

Washburn:

But people must have been able to start picking up on some codes, some kind of—there weren't big signs, but there were some kind of non-verbal cues or something?

Head:

No, there were big signs. Big signs.

Washburn:

No I'm saying, here.

Head:

Oh here, there's no signs here.

Washburn:

So how did you start picking up on, "All right, I've heard don't even waste your time with that restaurant in that neighborhood, over there." I heard people in San Francisco say that in a lot of neighborhoods, some restaurants wouldn't serve people who lived in the Fillmore or wherever, but folks in Japantown would. I don't know if you remember that.

Head:

No I can't.

Washburn:

I guess what I'm trying to say is, did you ever discuss among friends or somehow start finding ways to kind of comfort yourself or—[interruption for phone] I'm going to stop.

Head:

That's going to beep for a while.

Washburn:

It is?

Head:

There's a little white button right by the—

Washburn:

My question was pretty much, could you start to interpret some kinds of signs, not physical signs, but some kind of way of saying, "Okay, I'm not going to waste my time with that place because I know there's not friendly service there." Do you see what I'm saying?

Head:

We only did eating out and things like that with military things because we went to Treasure Island and different places where we knew that we were welcome. I think the most welcome place we were was in Chinatown. Those better restaurants.

Dodge:

So during the war years, you mentioned that you briefly worked at a pie shop before going to the shipyards?

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

How did you like your jobs?

Head:

At the pie shop?

Dodge:

Well, you were only there briefly, so how did you like that and also your relief work when you were at the shipyard?

Head:

Well, at the pie shop it was fun because we was young and active and wanted to prove our jobs. I've always been like that, even when I went to the shipyards. It was hard for me—like in the mornings we had to get to work and make sure that we were there on time. Certain people didn't want to work with certain ones and it was always a discussion about—because people was from all over the world and my thing was to sit on a log, you saw in this first page—and people would gather around me because I was always a fun person—and ended up saying a prayer before we started to work. Then asking questions to ones—like someone say, “Well, she don't want to work by me and I don't want to work by her,” I try to ask questions, “Why are we here? If we go to work angry we might make a mistake or something building the ships, and what we're here for is to try to make things comfortable on the home front so that our soldier men will come home safe.”

01:00:20:00

Dodge:

So did you feel that the main reason for you doing work there was for patriotic reasons?

Head:

Yes, it was to do my—anything that I chose to do, even now, I do my best. I thought it was very important to get on the job to do your work and do it well. You don't do anything when you're all mad and stiff about who you're going to work next to. It just don't work.

Dodge:

What kind of people did you work next to? Who were your coworkers?

Head:

Most of the women that I worked with were very few blacks, because blacks was kind of discriminated on what type of jobs that they had.

Dodge:

How did they feel then about your being black and also you being from Louisiana originally?

Head:

Well, a lot of people, when you're working with them like that, they don't know where you're from. It's just the attitude and the way that you carry yourself to try to be friendly with people.

Dodge:

Were they friendly with you, though? Did you become friends with any of them?

Head:

I always make friends. I always try my best to stay my distance, because it's something about me that I can tell with people just don't want to be bothered. It's not only the nationality of a person, it's just moods that we get in.

Washburn:

What, can you describe for somebody who doesn't know anything about the shipyards, how did the jobs kind of get sorted out? Who took what jobs? You said that people were discriminated against were black. What jobs were they given, versus jobs that other people were given?

Head:

Well, I think once a discussion was—it comes from the union, because they had started being a union member to do certain jobs. If the union didn't send you out then you can't get certain jobs.

Washburn:

What jobs were these that you're talking about?

Head:

The high skilled jobs like welding and painters got more money. The one that did fork-lifting and things like that. It was certain skills of jobs.

Dodge:

Were you involved with the union at all?

Head:

I never had any problems on any job that I go on.

Dodge:

Why didn't you want to be in the union?

Head:

I didn't say—I was in the union.

Dodge:

Oh, you were.

Washburn:

Talk to us about that. Do you have any memories about the union, or do you remember, “I just joined and that was about it.”?

Head:

Well, they sent us off to school to get the training when that would release {?} and the boilermakers union that I remained paying my dues long after, and I think that when I went off into working at the Del Monte packing company, I still get letters from the union. I don't know whether it's the same union that carried the shipyard.

Dodge:

Who else was in the union?

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

Were most of your coworkers in the union as well?

Head:

That's the only way you could get certain jobs like welding, painting—a skilled job you had to be in the union.

Washburn:

Can you—how old were you when you started working in the shipyard?

Head:

Eighteen.

Washburn:

So you were eighteen, you didn't have to lie about your age?

Head:

No, I didn't have to lie about my age.

Washburn:

And what year was it that you entered work there?

Head:

It was going into the first of '43.

Washburn:

So early on you went to the shipyard.

Head:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

So can you run us through—for someone who doesn't know, can you run us through—you wake up, how do you get to the shipyards? And what is that trip like from leaving Berkeley to go out there?

Head:

Leaving Berkeley from it was Grove Street at that time. I lived on Ellis, it was a block down. We had to walk about ten blocks down Ashby to San Pablo Avenue to catch the F train and the F train would put you off right at the shipyards, right there. So it rained like this rain that we had this time—you'd be soaking wet. But you couldn't stop, you had to keep right on going.

Dodge:

So then you were working outside?

Head:

Well, no. Because usually the parts—when a ship is being put together, they bring panels at a time. Then sometimes, certain areas have certain places that they worked to get that to move ahead.

Washburn:

Pre-fab, it was brought in—

Head:

Pre-fabricated.

Washburn:

It was brought in pre-fabricated.

Head:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

So describe—I don't mean to interrupt you too much—you got off the F train, you're walking—for someone who has never seen it, what are you walking into? How are you getting from the F train, you're walking through this space, how are you getting to where you're going to end up? What that was like.

Head:

Well, just like I say, I'm a fun person and I always make friends. There were three men that used to escort me, because it was dark, dark morning. They got permission from my husband, if they could escort me to the F train. My husband told them as long as they didn't come in the house or anything it was fine. I can't even think of it—every once in a while the name comes to me—one of them was Bob, he was a little short. They had two umbrellas. [laughter] And they used to walk side by side, and the sidewalk was just like people going shopping somewhere, everybody trying to get where they're going, and you didn't see too many cars, because at that time they were rationing tires and things of that

sort. It was fun getting there, and then having—you could not go on your work space until—then you're standing almost in the rain until the work time. It was hard.

Dodge:

What did you do at work? Can you describe the daily activities of your job?

Head:

Well, my daily activities were, when I was released from welding, well, not really released, but set aside. If someone was late showing up then I had the skill to work in their place until they show up. And sometimes people didn't show up. So what they had to do was try and find somebody to go in that place. It was quite a responsibility.

Washburn:

What exactly—she's asking I think—you talked a little earlier today, they weld, then scale, then paint, but can you describe—did you carry around a bucket, what did you wear? Can you go into—if I were going to be you for a day, what would I do?

Head:

You would be like we had our lockers. We had to have leather fire proof garments and things to wear—you know about the welding outfit. You wouldn't want to get into that until you find out what area you would be in, to set up your hose, the hose was heavy. Sometimes the ladies could find men that kind of want to talk to you, they would set you up.

01:00:30:00

Then before you left you had to, if you didn't have your own equipment you had to check in and out of the machine shops where they would let you have things that you needed.

Dodge:

What did you do outside of the job? You mentioned that you liked to dance and things like that. Did you have an opportunity during the war to spend time with friends and go out dancing?

Head:

No, no. We had the Larks Theatre there that on Thursdays I think they had "sing along with Mitch" and movies, it was walking distance from me. But I never did care anything about going out at night and I don't care about it now. I was restricted on a lot of things.

Dodge:

Was that because it was during the war or because your husband was in the service and he wasn't around?

Head:

Well, my husband was in the service, and usually his day off, so many days on and so many days off, I could always wait on my husband to escort me.

Washburn:

Would you say, did you feel at all a part of the Richmond community at all? Or did you just feel like, "I go there and I work there and I leave." Did you ever spend much time in Richmond?

Head:

Well, I spent time in Richmond really before the war really got started. It always has been more prejudiced in Richmond than any place I'd ever been. Because during the war they had—the Indians were more or less migrated in Point Richmond, well that didn't last long. Then they had Chinese people downtown. That didn't last long. It was really hard during the war for people to get places to sleep. Some slept in their cars. It was just really hard.

Dodge:

When you were living in Berkeley were you staying at a house that you guys had bought?

Head:

Oh, we wasn't able to buy a house in Berkeley.

Dodge:

Where were you living?

Head:

Renting a room and later on I got acquainted with one of the ladies that worked at the shipyard and they had shipyard housing. She was able to get me in one of the apartments in Berkeley.

Dodge:

What was that like? The shipyard housing?

Head:

It was very comfortable. I lived on Tenth Street in Berkeley. It was very comfortable. At first they were going to put me way down on the back side, and I'd rather stay in the room. [laughter] Because I didn't get out too much, you know, after the work hours.

Washburn:

What was the Berkeley war housing called? Did it have a name?

Head:

Cartenesis {Cordonices?} Village.

Washburn:

Do you remember how that was spelled? Cartenesis?

Head:

[laughter] No. Cartenesis. No, I really don't.

Washburn:

Where was it located?

Head:

Right where Walgreens drug store is, that's where my apartment set. Right there. It was like between San Pablo and Tenth Street.

Washburn:

Right there near Gilman?

Head:

Yes.

Washburn:

Do you know when it was torn down?

Head:

Oh, it was torn down something like '49—between '46 and '49.

Dodge:

Did you live there until it was torn down?

Head:

No, I wasn't, because they built this place in '50—not in '49, '48, '49. I moved in here in '50.

Dodge:

This is the house that you bought in Richmond?

Head:

Hmm?

Dodge:

You moved into the house that you bought in Richmond?

Head:

The house two doors down, in 1950.

Dodge:

Can you tell us a little bit about what that was like, shopping for a house in Richmond? Was it easy for you or difficult at the time?

Head:

Well, I told you what happened is that I watched a young couple move into the house that we had paid a down payment on. My husband took that money that we had paid down on it and paid down on a car, and we were riding through a storm one Sunday evening, met these two older people, a man and his wife was driving through looking for Parchester Village. My husband made a U-turn, that's in this book here, and we found that the

model home was up on McLaughlin Way and it was storming rain, but the man had this—this house salesperson had a raincoat and boots, and if we didn't want to just look on the map, he walked us down and we picked out that lot and the house that we wanted. They built that house. When they built it I think it was like September 1950.

Dodge:

Can you tell us a little bit about the experience of having put a down payment on a house, which was later taken from you and sold to another couple? Why do you think that was?

Head:

Well, the attorney explained to us that if you owned property at that time you had no guides and no rules to go by. If you didn't want to sell it you just didn't want to sell it. You could sell it to who you wanted to. So, we forgot about trying to buy a house until we found these two people that was looking for the place and we found this house. So the salesperson gave my husband until—like it was on Sunday—that Monday it was a real estate agent on San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito. We went down there, I think we had to pay \$50 down on that. He got the money we paid down on it. We had to stand by until they built the house. We used to come out here every day. We were living in the house before they had streets. People used to get bogged in their cars trying to get out here. [laughter]

Washburn:

Where was that first house that you put a down payment on?

Head:

Two doors from this.

Washburn:

I'm saying the house that you did not get.

Head:

It was on Ellis Street in Berkeley.

Washburn:

Okay.

Head:

It was before you get to Ashby Avenue.

Washburn:

So coming here, it just seemed like it was happenstance, it just seems like it was chance that brought you to Parchester Village. You hadn't read something about it or heard about it from one person or the other?

Head:

No, I hadn't heard about it. It was just coincidence.

Washburn:
Coincidence.

Head:
Mm-hmm. But later on I found the history was two white men, one named Par and the other one was Chester. They put in and bought all of this land. They made it possible for black people and they went to most of the black churches, San Francisco and everywhere, and they talked to the ministers about how important it would be to have a street named after you. So all of these streets out here are named after ministers. Like Reverend Johnson was Johnson Drive, McLaughlin. But none of them, about two of them came out here and stayed for a short while until after the civil rights.

01:00:40:01

Dodge:
Did church play a big role in your life at this time?

Head:
Well, I never have been really a church-goer. When I was in Berkeley I was with St. Andrew on Gilman. When I came here I changed to St. Paul's here in San Pablo.

Washburn:
Were you originally Methodist or Baptist?

Head:
Catholic.

Washburn:
You were always Catholic? Your whole life?

Head:
Almost all Louisiana people are.

Washburn:
Oh really?

Head:
Mm-hmm.

Washburn:
Tell me, why is that? I didn't know that.

Head:
I don't know. It's just the way that your parents chose for you, just like my children.

Washburn:
Maybe some of the French influence brought Catholicism there to Louisiana?

Head:

Yes, because my mother, her mother, my grandmother, was full-blooded French. She married a black man and none of them could hardly speak any American language. So my—

Washburn:

What's they speak?

Head:

It's different dialects in Louisiana, like the Geechee-type people. Like my father was, his parents were Indian and French. So mostly all, in Louisiana, it was sort of like a seaport town where a woman who had a hard time trying to make a living, then they would meet when those big ships come in, something like what's going on around here now, San Jose, San Francisco, a lot of prostituting. At that time, women wanted a baby for a man that she was going to see once in a while to support her. That goes on now.

Washburn:

Talk a little bit about your ancestry, though. You have a very diverse background. You have some French, you have African, African American, and Native American.

Head:

And Indian! [laughter]

Washburn:

And Indian, right. Do you—I was actually going to ask if you had any Indian in your background because I can see a teeny bit of, some kind of physical characteristics a little bit.

Head:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

Did you grow up knowing these things?

Head:

Oh yes, I did.

Washburn:

What did you think as a young girl? Did you think—what was that, what were your thoughts about who you were?

Head:

In Louisiana, if you knew what direction to go in, you're clear, you have a peace of mind. Because you can go to private schools, and you can go to the regular schools. They had mixed communities where all nations of people lived because I can remember Texas Avenue, certain sections where there was Spanish-speaking people, Chinese people. It's something about the way that you get along when you know what direction to go in.

Washburn:

When there were ever signs saying, “Colored this way,” did you ever think to yourself, “Hey, I’m not—there’s more to me than just colored.”?

Head:

Well, you know, I just got a high school diploma. That kind of takes me back to—I don’t know how to turn that one off. [interruption for telephone]

--Italians. And just like I say, you get ready to eat the Chinese food, you follow the sign. My children went down and they thought—we took them down to visit and they thought it was fun. You know, to have—“Why don’t we do this?” To go to the movie, we have to sit way up. Even in the Catholic Church. We started--people of color, black skin, started from the back and go to the front. The whites go from the front to the back. But you felt comfortable because you didn’t really know any better. That’s the way that you was reared. It didn’t bother one. My children laughed about going to theatres and we had to go through the back door and walk up—it was fun to them. [laughter]

Dodge:

What year were your children born?

Head:

I have one, my oldest daughter was born in ’47.

Dodge:

’47?

Head:

I have one born in ’47, two years apart would have been—well anyway, they was two years apart.

Dodge:

So you had—and those were both girls?

Head:

I had three girls and one boy.

Dodge:

So shortly after the war you had your first two children. During that time where were you working?

Head:

I did not work. I did Del Monte packing company, season. We used to can peaches. My husband worked the day shift and I worked the night shift at Del Monte cannery. Other than that, that’s the only work that I done.

Washburn:

To pick up on that, what happened to you when the shipyards were closing down? Can you remember, did you know, “Okay, the war is ending, the shipyards are going to close

down, I'm going to be out of work."? What did you think to yourself, what was going on at that time?

Head:

See, I really didn't depend upon the war because I was a married person and my husband took care of me. During the war we tried to save money to purchase a home and that made it a little bit easier.

Washburn:

Then if you were dependent upon your husband, why did you go back to work at Del Monte?

Head:

Well, when I worked at Del Monte it was seasonal. You only worked about three months out of the year. When that season was over, that's extra money that we could have. It was really a great thing because they paid you unemployment after that. After your season was finished then you drew unemployment. A whole lot of the ladies that I met after I moved in here were ones that introduced me to the factories, the Del Monte packing company.

Dodge:

So those ladies all lived here in Parchester Village?

Head:

Yes, we were all young adults here and they were working at the plant. Some of them worked year-round and got pretty good retirement pay.

Dodge:

Did you feel more a part of the Richmond community after moving into Parchester Village?

Head:

I did everything in Berkeley.

Dodge:

Oh, you did?

Head:

My banking I did not change, and grocery stores that I was favorite of going to.

01:00:50:04

It took me a long time to get adjusted to Richmond.

Washburn:

How did that finally take place then?

Head:

Well, they built a little shopping mall right here in this community, at the front here. They made it easy. Then I was among one of the first customers with Mechanics Bank when they came to Richmond on Sixth and McDonald.

Washburn:

Do you want to talk a little bit about the changes that happened here in Parchester Village real quick? Originally this was started out to be a mixed race development.

Head:

No.

Washburn:

So tell me why not.

Head:

There was two men, I told you. One's name was Par and one was Chester. They was trying to get people who didn't go back to their home where they came from. They wanted them out of Richmond, so these two men bought this property and he went to different churches and things. [phone rings]

Washburn:

Maybe you should just answer that.

Head:

What was we talking about?

Washburn:

Talking about Par and Chester.

Head:

Par and Chester. They got all the black preachers that they could find and brought them out here and established this place. You see this house that I'm living in now? How I came about this house, my second daughter married a man and they divorced and another man started her buying this house. But when she died, I was able to move in here. That's how I came about the second house. This house was a model home. I was living in the original house when this was being one of the appetizing houses. I had two little girls and I used to drive by the house. Sometimes I would come in and talk to the salesperson. He would tell the white people—he wouldn't even show them the houses. I'd be passing along. He said, "Mt. Tamermanner," do you know about that? It's a group of houses off San Pablo Avenue before you get to Pinole. Houses made exactly like this was going up at the same time for white people. So the whites lived over there and the blacks lived here.

Dodge:

So was everyone in this neighborhood black? There were no white couples living here at all?

Head:

You didn't read this, did you? It was a black man that married a white woman and they lived here. Other than that there was no mixed. She would always say, like, when we did discover having a community council, just let her be the boss and she could make it what we wanted. And do you know, a lot of white people feel that way now.

Washburn:

So what about some of the changes that occurred in Parchester over the years, I mean, civil rights movement happened, there was black militancy in the East Bay, Black Panthers, these kinds of things. Was any of that, did you hear anything, any organizing, any kind of activities out here in Parchester?

Head:

I can tell you one thing, the way that I feel, is black people don't like black folks. We don't care for each other. We don't group up and help like most people do. Some of them moved out here without the knowledge of knowing it was going to be blacks and they didn't stay long. Most of them was in college, got jobs, and moved on. Some of them that I talk to now, too proud to come back here. But right now, the homes are so expensive. So, the changes—I always try to keep up with the council and politics and things that go on and I feel right now that there's going to be a drastic change in this community. I just don't understand why these houses is so expensive. And I do know that the Spanish-speaking people get together. They can live in houses together, families, but you very seldom find black people who can get along with their families well enough to have a man and a wife living in one house. You don't find that among black people.

Washburn:

Did you find then that there was an original—all the original folks that moved in here, there was a group of them that then left pretty quickly after living here, is that what you were saying?

Head:

Well, they got their education and was able to make more money. Because they wouldn't even let us look at LeRoy Heights, just to go in and look at the model home. I can't remember what year—you know where LeRoy Heights is. You don't get on the freeway, you would go down past Stanton. Go out Stanton and go across the hill there. There's a lot of nice houses. That's where we couldn't even look at the model homes. They would send you back for two years back income tax statement, check stub, and still wouldn't let you look. But when the civil rights come in, that's when they had to have a few there anyway.

Dodge:

What made Richmond so special then that you wanted to stay here in Parchester?

Head:

I did not like the title of Richmond.

Washburn:

Why not?

Head:

Because the prejudice. They ran the Indians away. There were so many Chinese stores down on McDonald and one of the girls there was in college with my daughter, said she watched them drag her parents on the back of a car until death. The girl still tells that story. But I said, "We're going to move to Richmond?!" He said, "Yes, we want a house." So what happened is that he found out that it wasn't Richmond. It wasn't Richmond when we first moved here. It was San Pablo. Some of the mail that I get now is still San Pablo. I said, "Oh we live in Richmond in Parchester Village," people said, "I'm not coming out there, I'm scared!" [laughter] Black people, "I'm scared to come out there!" From Berkeley.

Washburn:

You think that reputation was—

Head:

So now I am so proud of being one of the persons who is trying to help Richmond out of some things that they going through now with the reputation of being the worst place. You've heard, haven't you? Right here in this area where I live. Most of the negative things come from people who once have lived here. It's not that bad.

Dodge:

So you think that a lot of the stereotypes that go around are just that, they're stereotypes and they're not necessarily true?

01:01:00:01

Head:

Right. And right here the only problem we have, they hold me responsible for closing our community center, down, and the boys tell me, "Police can't do nothing with you for walking in the middle of the street." Sometimes it be eight or ten of them walking with white shirts on and black shirts, they say there ain't a thing they can do about them, as long as they stay off of your property.

Washburn:

Let's stop here you guys.

[begin minidisc 2]

02:00:00:00

Washburn:

We talked a little bit about white race relations. She has some questions just about male-female relations at this time.

Head:

Okay.

Dodge:

Particularly when you were working in the shipyards, you said that a couple of guys that you worked with had asked your husband's permission to walk you to work, things like that.

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

Was that normal? Or how did things usually work between the men and the women who worked at the shipyards?

Head:

I don't know how they worked with the other, because I've always been sort of a private person with no best girlfriends, people to be with, none other than who my husband chose. That was one thing that he explained to me, that when he came in from war, from the navy, that he wanted to be with me, not with a group of people, not unless he was the one that made the choice. I respect him for that.

Dodge:

That didn't ever make you feel that you wanted to have more control in your life, or if you wanted a job for—you said you had been working since you were ten—that he wanted you to stay home with the kids—was there any disagreement in things like that?

Head:

No disagreements because if you live in one room and share the kitchen and bathroom with others, you couldn't have company. And if you did, you would have to go out to dinner or do something of that sort. And in Louisiana, people was taught to honor and obey and respect their husbands. Women were taught that. Two people can't be the boss. The lady or the man, one of them got to be the leader. When things came upon me like wanting to be with someone, I had to sit down and talk to him just like I did with three men. The three men came and met my husband and asked, said, "She walks by herself and we'll protect her." He said, "Well, as long as you don't come in the house I appreciate it very much." Then they couldn't come in. I only had one room and I had to go out the back door and go around through a gate. He said, "Don't ever bring them through the gate." Sometime, like, on off days—I can't remember how they gave us off days in the shipyard, whether they were Sunday, or worked so many days, I can't remember. But one of the men asked if he could just pick me up, and my husband said, "No." He disagreed. It was fine with me.

Dodge:

And what was it like actually in the workplace? Did you only work with other ladies?

Head:

I worked with ladies and men, it was both ladies and men working on jobs together. Some of the men would stay over to help you drag your welding holds out, to help you get it set up.

Dodge:

Did they treat you any different than your women coworkers?

Head:

The men?

Dodge:

Mm-hmm.

Head:

Well, there was no difference.

Dodge:

What about when you were living here in the Parchester community? Since you had some time just with your kids at home and your husband was at work, did you ever try to make friends with your neighbors who were also staying at home with their children?

Head:

Well, most of the ladies around here—I think I was about the only one that had little children right here. I was the one that kept the community alive and I still do. I used to have a fish fry, breakfast for certain families, around on this street for communication. We came up with a little garden to clean the front up. Single women who didn't keep their front appearance up, we had a little club, we used to get with them and try to encourage them of what kind of neighborhood we wanted to live in.

Dodge:

How did people take to that?

Head:

It was just fine.

Washburn:

What was that club called?

Head:

It was the neighborhood women. It wasn't really serious, it was just that we'd get together and we'd talk to people who needed help with their yards, and we did that. I've always been a gardener. Right now when I leave my home I have a big basket that I take with me to each senior center with cuttings of flowers and speak sometimes about the seasons. Right now the earth is receiving, you can take mostly any plant and put it in the ground while the earth is receiving, bare root, they call it. So, everyone know me as the lady with the basket at these senior centers.

Washburn:

What about the victory gardens? Did you have a victory garden during the war?

Head:

Oh, I didn't call mine a victory garden, but I always grew vegetables and things that I eat.

Washburn:

Why was that—was that extra important during the war?

Head:

It was important, but it was my lifestyle. I can remember when I was very young and my parents bought the first property. We had to recycle water for about three blocks, carrying it in pails. Something came up onto me at a young age, why couldn't we connect water holes and fill up our tank? So we started doing that. My parents bought a great big old septic tank and we would fill that up with water—not for drinking, but to water the garden and plants and things and did the wash with.

Washburn:

I don't feel like you answered my question. During the war, with some of the rationing that was going on, more people were gardening.

Head:

I remember the victory gardens, but I never did do them.

Washburn:

You didn't.

Head:

No.

Washburn:

But did you grow food in your back yard?

Head:

I used to grow onions and garlic to last me for one season, almost to the other, and we'd hang them up to dry. Some of the gardens that I've done, I didn't grow the watermelons this year, but I had one that I did grow here, fifty pounds, right in the back. [shuffles paper] Watermelons, there it is. I was in a class. This class was teaching you how to write a poem, so these are my words and there's my watermelon.

Dodge:

That's a very big watermelon.

Head:

That's a fifty-pound watermelon that was grown right in the back yard here. Later on in life I put a few rose bushes. I used to have cantaloupes that weighed from one pound to two pounds out in the front yard here. Most things that I grow are something to eat, in back. Or types of herbs, parsley, things of that sort. That was a part of my rearing up in Louisiana.

02:00:10:00

I didn't know anything about going out and buying a Christmas tree because we could take any kind of branch from any tree and decorate it. Then later on my family, we found

places that we could go out, like in Auburn, California, we met people up there where you can go out into the forest and cut your Christmas tree. That was fun.

Dodge:

What kind of different skills did you try to pass on to your daughters, and then differently to your son? For instance, was gardening something that you considered a skill for ladies that you tried to teach your daughters?

Head:

I have cosmetology license and I wanted to be a foot doctor. I got a cosmetology license and that's what I'm semi-retired in, later become a reflexology person. You know about reflexology? Reflexology is inward healing through massaging pressure points in the feet. You see all of those executive people that I was with yesterday? None of them know about my life, and I told them yesterday that I earned money at home doing foot reflexology. Before you leave I have a chart in there—if every book you see in here is about holistic health, the way that I was brought up, I got a lovely letter in this book here from my doctor, who's been working on me since I've been in Richmond, Dr. Berman. He tells me whatever I'm doing to continue on doing it. It's all about what you eat and the proper rest that you get to make you grow older and stronger.

Washburn:

Did you ever teach—I guess she's asking, did any of the lessons that you learned from the war working in this job, working at the shipyards, doing what was considered men's work in some ways—did that teach you any lessons that you ended up passing on to your daughters?

Head:

No, it taught me to be a woman and get out there and work, which I have done all of my life, even as a young child. The war goes the history of my life. My mother's first husband was killed in the first World War. My husband was drafted into the second war. My son picked it up, the Korean War. I feel like I was just like a soldier on the battlefield in the shipyard. That made me a strong woman. See, I'm not afraid to get out there and paint a house or call Sugar City, when I was young, and have him deliver me the ready-mix cement, and my family, the girls and all of us, we did most of the cement work and things of that sort. So that war really—and I told that story, that it just followed my life on down, is having a family that was interested in the war.

Washburn:

That over the generations had some kind of connection to the war efforts—

Head:

Yes.

Washburn:

Whether it was World War I, II, or Korea.

Head:

Yes. Mm-hm.

Dodge:

Do you think that there were any opportunities that were able to present themselves to you after the war because of the skills that you made as a Rosie?

Head:

Well, it just made me appreciate having a home where I knew how to measure and do things in order to keep my house going as maintenance. I learned all that while I was working in the shipyards.

Washburn:

Maybe we should move on to post-war. Do you have any of those questions?

Dodge:

You mentioned that you recently received a certificate from the Berkeley Senior Center for ten years of dancing?

Head:

Yes.

Dodge:

Can you tell us a little bit more about what you're going to do there?

Head:

In the Berkeley tap dance group?

Dodge:

Oh, it was tap dance?

Head:

Yes. My instructor was Gill. I've always been a dancer all of my life. I become a star within. I have many pictures here where I have been on stage with them, and tried to link other nations of people with them because I was on this block, and it was nation-wide, the tap dance group. I was treated as a star with them! I think every one of them cared for me, because later on in life one of the girls asked me why didn't I try to find—most of them were Chinese that were in that Berkeley tap dance group—"We was trying to find a place where you could go to be with black folks." I said, "Well, I know where they are! [laughter] But it's not what I want. I want to be here with you all." Oh, and they gave a beautiful New Years party for Chinese New Years. I missed Gill's party because it was raining so hard. They really had a nice holiday. I was able to be with some of the tap groups that was in Berkeley. North Berkeley invited me to the Grey Panthers celebration that they just had a week ago. They want me part of that because I knew most of those ladies by going into the tap dance class. I think I'm involved right now with—if you don't go to the meetings and really get involved, it's not really what I would like. I haven't really accepted them yet, the Grey Panthers. I have a literature that they sent me since then.

Dodge:

After you raised your four children did you ever go back to work at all?

Head:

I had a profession.

Dodge:

And that was something that you were able to do outside the home, or did you try to stay inside the home with your husband primarily?

Head:

I did house calls, bedside calls, with reflexology.

Washburn:

That's good. Do you want to talk for one second about healthcare? Can we finish up with that? We should finish up, but we wanted to ask you about healthcare a little bit.

Head:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

Did you ever use, when you were in the shipyards, did you ever go to the hospital there on Cutting?

Head:

Yes, I did.

Washburn:

Why was that?

Head:

If you had a cold or wasn't feeling good, Kaiser had something like a paramedic truck that they picked you up in. If you didn't feel well they would put you to bed for that day.

02:00:20:00

What I liked about them so well is they, when a woman found that she was pregnant, instead of dismissing you from your job, they would find lighter work, like office work and things. I always speak very graciously and proud of Kaiser. They've done a wonderful job with us.

Washburn:

Why did you go to the hospital? Do you remember the story about the instance when you went to the hospital? Just a cold, or flu?

Head:

Just a cold, the flu, I went in because I didn't want to go home. My leader person told me I could take the day off, and I said, "No, I'd rather go check myself out first." What they did was examine me and put me in a warm bed for a while. Then the next morning I was up and ready to go on my job.

Washburn:

So then after the war, you were not on Kaiser anymore, right? Or did you continue?

Head:

I continued.

Washburn:

How was that?

Head:

Well, my husband was working with the Richmond school district and they had a Kaiser plan and all of my children were connected with the plan. Every once in a while the doctor would call me in for different treatments, like pap smear and all, and I got a lovely letter here from Dr. Berman in my book. Kaiser swore me in as one of their work teams.

Dodge:

What does being part of the work team mean?

Head:

Well, I'm hostess more or less when they have affairs like they had. Louisiana people have different things that they do to release their spirit, and I feel like I'm one of the seven sisters out of New Orleans. So the last party that they gave in that same place where we were yesterday, it was about a hundred doctors there from all over. They had me hostess. I counted out seventeen, because they said if you get seventeen hugs a day you can count your blessings. So I started, as they came up, when they gave me permission to let them in, I hugged—some of them go back down to hug again! [laughter] I was there for Judy Hart's retirement party. One of the doctors said, "Mary, are you going to hug me?!" He didn't forget.

Washburn:

It was like a special hug.

Head:

Yes. Just a blessing.

Washburn:

Back to the hospital there. Did you all—were all of your kids—where were they all born? Where did you, which hospital were they born in?

Head:

The oldest—Herricks. I was in Berkeley at that time. We didn't start Kaiser until we moved here. See, I moved here in '50, and my children were born a little bit before 1950, two of them. The oldest one, two that I had in Berkeley was born at Herricks hospital. The other two was born in the hospital in Oakland, Highland Hospital. I had two children born there.

Washburn:

So did you just pay out of pocket for those? Was there insurance at that time?

Head:

No, there wasn't insurance at that time.

Washburn:

You just paid out of pocket.

Head:

Mm-hmm. And I can't remember when Kaiser started their plan. But when they did start the plan, then the doctor that I started with is the one that my family has seen all the time, Dr. Berman. And I have a nice letter that he sent me—I have so many honors and appreciations that people have sent me since the war.

Washburn:

These guys—I showed Susie and some other folks some clips of other people, of the women talking about healthcare, learning about especially women's needs, talking about pap smears and things like this.

Head:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

Do you have anything, any comments on when you were growing up, living here during the war, when you were eighteen, nineteen, twenty, how you learned about women's health, and how you learned about sexual education? How did you learn about these things?

Head:

Well, I learned about sexual education through my parents, my mom. When we first become, like women with their monthly periods, we was just two of us, my sister and I, we had a little plaque on the wall, a calendar. I had my calendar and she had hers under it. We had to mark off—a lot of people say that their monthly comes every month, but from the cycle, it comes every twenty-eight days. That's how I learned that, by keeping up with a calendar. And that is how I taught my children. If they're going to have sex, it has something to do with their cycle. Is three days—you probably know that three days before your period is dangerous and three days after. The rhythm, the Catholic rhythm teaches you the same thing, every twenty-seven days and your safety. So that is the reason that my husband did not want to have children while he was in service is knowing that I wouldn't be able to take care of them like a man and a wife could.

Dodge:

So you guys chose actively not to have children.

Head:

Not to have children, mm-hmm. So that cycle means a lot. If you really know your days and check it up.

Washburn:

There was nothing—I'm trying to find out—Kaiser didn't educate women—there wasn't any kind of health program just for women or something like that. You said that when they were pregnant they would find them different work.

Head:

Not during the war, but Kaiser has now all kinds of classes that you can go to and learn more about the body.

Washburn:

Do you have any last questions? No, you're good? Do you have any last comments?

Head:

Comments is I'm very thankful that I got my basic training through uneducated people, my parents, that gave me strength that I have today. Being thankful that the persons who started this Rosie the Rivetter, I have a list of names here, I thank God for them.

02:00:30:03

And they almost waited too late. Because the day that they had the grand opening I had went into classes to do speech there that day, and my voice and my heart was broken to know that I had worked so many years at that Del Monte packing company beside women who were sitting there by me who had worked the World War, how they deteriorated. I'm just thankful that I'm able to be one of those who can try to continue on the work that you all are doing.

Washburn:

Thank you. We appreciate you letting us come out and speak with you as well.

Head:

And I think we said the little prayer, "God grant us the serenity to accept the things in life we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I want to leave with you young people, keep on doing what you have to do. And if there is anything I can do to encourage you, don't forget me. [laughter] Peace.

[End of Interview]