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Margaret “Peg” Hensler

Rosie the Riveter  
World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

*This interview series was funded in part by a contract with the  
National Park Service, and with the support of individual donors.*

Interviews conducted by  
Sam Redman  
in 2012

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Margaret Henssler, "Rosie the Riveter World War II American Home Front Oral History Project" conducted by Sam Redman in 2012, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2016.



Margaret "Peg" Henssler, 2012



George Cecil Bennett and Margaret Oaks Bennett  
Peg's mom and dad on the way to work at shipyard #3 of Kaiser Richmond



Margaret Oaks Bennett (second row, fourth from left in white blouse and dark suit)



Margaret Oaks Bennett (back row, fourth from left in white blouse and dark suit)



Kaiser Richmond operations room  
Margaret Oaks Bennett (back of room, left of center, white blouse and dark suit)

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Interview 1: October 15, 2012

Audio File 1

01-00:00:06

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and today is October 15, 2012. I'm in Berkeley, California, today with Margaret Peg Henssler. But before we dive in, Margaret, would you mind doing me the favor of stating and then spelling out your full name for the benefit of the transcribers?

01-00:00:24

Henssler: My full name is Margaret Bennett Henssler. That's Margaret spelled as usual, M-A-R-G-A-R-E-T. Bennett spelled B-E-N-N-E-T-T. My last name is Henssler, H-E-N-S-S-L-E-R.

01-00:00:48

Redman: Peg, whereabouts were you born?

01-00:00:50

Henssler: I was born in Normal, Illinois.

01-00:00:55

Redman: Would you mind sharing your date of birth? What was your birthday?

01-00:01:06

Henssler: I'll be happy to. I'm proud of it. It was August 22, 1927.

01-00:01:12

Redman: I want to dive into a little bit about what life was like for you as a young child, but before we get into that, would you mind telling me a little bit about who your parents were?

01-00:01:26

Henssler: My mother was born Margaret Maud Oakes, in Mason City, Iowa, and my father was George Cecil Bennett, and he was born in Colchester, England. My father traveled around the world after he fought in World War One, and he lived in San Francisco for two years, and then went to Mason City in Iowa because my English grandfather had part interest in an office supply business in Mason City. Daddy stopped there to check on the business and met my mother and never left.

01-00:02:15

Redman: Is that right? That's a great story. Were you ever told how they met, what the story of their courtship was?

01-00:02:21

Henssler: Yes, they met at a party. My mother was coming down the stairs, and my father looked up and said, "That's it."

01-00:02:29

Redman: So this would have been the mid-1920s.

- 01-00:02:31  
Henssler: Yes. They were married in 1926.
- 01-00:02:35  
Redman: So just one year before you were born.
- 01-00:02:37  
Henssler: Before I was born.
- 01-00:02:42  
Redman: You would have been a very young girl when the stock market crashed and what we think of as the Great Depression came along. But I've heard from a number of people that times were already tough in the 1920s in places like Iowa.
- 01-00:02:55  
Henssler: They weren't so tough in the Middle West yet. My father went to work as a salesman, and he sold McLaughlin's Coffee, and their headquarters was in Chicago, where they did the roasting of the coffee, and then my father went out all through parts of Illinois and Iowa to mom-and-pop grocery stores. He would sell them the coffee, and he would take some with him in the car, but the rest of it was shipped railway express to these small towns, because there weren't any supermarkets. That's how he earned a living, and he did that until about 1937. That's when things really got tough in the Middle West.
- 01-00:04:00  
Redman: There was a crash, I understand, in '29, but things started to recover, but then in 1937, there's another crash. What you're saying is your family really felt that.
- 01-00:04:12  
Henssler: That's right. We lived with my grandparents because my grandmother was a semi-invalid. We moved to Clear Lake, Iowa, from Des Moines, and that's when my mother took over the running of the house. We lived there until 1942, '43.
- 01-00:04:44  
Redman: First let me ask, actually, about FDR. I wonder if your parents had a strong opinion one way or another about Franklin Roosevelt and what that opinion was.
- 01-00:04:55  
Henssler: That was really funny, because my family had always been Republican. There was all kinds of conversations in our house, because we've always discussed politics, and we still do, as my daughter can tell you. What happened was they were very much against Roosevelt. In Iowa, you didn't see a lot of the benefit of what was happening with the New Deal. My mother was a committee woman for the Republican Party in Cerro Gordo County. She also was an alternate to the convention, which I think in 1936 was in Chicago. So the family was always involved and they always stayed Republican, but, believe it

or not, we all benefited from what happened when Roosevelt started the New Deal in '32. What did hurt our family were the bank closures, because my grandparents had their life savings there. It was years before they got twenty cents on the dollar back. So that was impact to the family.

01-00:06:40

Redman: Before the FDIC, if you had your money in a local small-town bank, and if it crashed—

01-00:06:47

Henssler: Roosevelt actually closed—there was a bank holiday. So—

01-00:06:54

Redman: That was a pretty important—

01-00:06:55

Henssler: It was a very important thing, especially to my grandparents, because it took what security they had. They never really got that security back.

01-00:07:13

Redman: I'd be remiss not to ask about some other New Deal programs. There was the National Youth Administration, the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and all of these other acronyms. The WPA, Works Progress—

01-00:07:26

Henssler: Yes, and the PWA.

01-00:07:27

Redman: Right. Like you'd mentioned, many of these impacts were probably not felt in, say, rural Iowa, or even smaller-town Iowa, the way they may have been in other places.

01-00:07:42

Henssler: Well, that's true, and Clear Lake was summer resort, so there were still people with money who owned cottages in Clear Lake and came there in the summer. The local women did the laundry. They did housecleaning. They did all kinds of things to earn money. They were the help that those people who still had money could avail themselves of.

01-00:08:14

Redman: Tell me about what an average day would have been like for you as a young girl, maybe in elementary school. You talked a little bit about some of your mother's responsibilities in the house, but I wonder if you could maybe walk me through that a little more.

01-00:08:31

Henssler: I can tell you one awful thing I did. It was 1936, the election of 1936, and Alf Landon was running for President against Roosevelt. Of course, my family, being Republican, supported him. My mother had all these wonderful supplies. She had placards, she had—and the buttons were wonderful, because

they were a big sunflower with a picture of Landon in the center. I thought, well, my family was talking about this, and I was in the third grade, so I took placards and buttons to school without asking. At lunchtime, I got everybody to march. If they marched with me around the school, saying, "We want Landon," with the placards, then I would give them a button. Well, I was called in and sent home with my placards and my buttons.

01-00:09:52

Redman:

Did you get in trouble a lot as a young girl, or was that a pretty rare instance, pretty rare event?

01-00:10:06

Henssler:

Yes, I always was in trouble of some kind, because I always had opinions. I thought that people should express their opinions. So yes, I said and did things that probably were improper. I guess I have never been sorry.

01-00:10:29

Redman:

Tell me about school. I wonder what your favorite subjects were in school as a young girl.

01-00:10:34

Henssler:

I loved reading and writing. Math was never my heavy subject. The problem was I learned to read before I went to school, and so the first three grades, I thought the other kids were all dummies, because I was way ahead of them. When I got to the third grade and had to start doing arithmetic, I found out I wasn't as smart as I thought I was.

01-00:11:05

Redman:

Tell me about the building, the school building.

01-00:11:07

Henssler:

Okay. It's still there, and it is still in use. It was the Lincoln School. It was a brick building. Two-story. They have since added other classrooms. But we had a wonderful janitor. His last name was Jefferson, but we all called him Mr. Jeffy. He would be there early in the morning to start the furnace and to get the school warmed up. It was an old school, and I'm sure they've modernized the interior some, but it was a very nice school, about eight blocks from my house.

01-00:11:54

Redman:

Do you have any particular memories about teachers?

01-00:11:58

Henssler:

Yes. Two sisters were teachers, and I had one of them in part of third grade, and I had the other one in fifth grade. They were the Misses Anderson. One was very blonde, and she had a wonderful fur coat, which was something you didn't see. The other lady, Miss Anderson, was dark-haired and dark-eyed. She was not pretty like the first Miss Anderson.

- 01-00:12:43  
Redman: Those memories stand out?
- 01-00:12:45  
Henssler: That's what I remember.
- 01-00:12:46  
Redman: No, that's fine. That's fine. How about the Dust Bowl?
- 01-00:12:50  
Henssler: The Dust Bowl never really affected Iowa very much. That top soil is twelve feet deep. We did not get the drying and the wind that other states did. Nebraska, yes, but not Iowa so much.
- 01-00:13:15  
Redman: To what extent did you hear about what things were like in Nebraska and Oklahoma and Texas?
- 01-00:13:23  
Henssler: Because my family was always interested in everything, and we always took the newspapers, and we always had magazines coming into the house, I knew a lot about it.
- 01-00:13:34  
Redman: Tell me a little more about newspapers and magazines. Do you remember either what newspapers and magazines you were reading or—
- 01-00:13:41  
Henssler: The *Saturday Evening Post*.
- 01-00:13:43  
Redman: Great.
- 01-00:13:44  
Henssler: And a couple of other. I'm trying to think what other magazines. I can't think right now, but we subscribed to the Mason City *Globe Gazette*, because Clear Lake was too small to have a daily newspaper. Then on Sundays, my grandfather and I, or my father and I, went down to the railroad station to get the *Des Moines Register*, the Sunday paper. We had newspapers and news in the house all the time, and we had a radio. Anything important going on, we would hear on the radio.
- 01-00:14:34  
Redman: Let me ask, then, about radio programs. Fireside chats were a regular feature—
- 01-00:14:44  
Henssler: We wouldn't have listened to those.

01-00:14:45

Redman:

You would not have listened. Interesting. How about any other radio programs? Comedy shows, variety shows, music.

01-00:14:54

Henssler:

There was Jack Benny and Fred Allen. But we were not allowed to listen to popular music. There were some wonderful shows that I could listen to when I went to my cousin's house in Mason City. There was *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* and some others that played popular music. The thing that we did was, on Saturday mornings, we listened to the station at the University of Iowa in Ames. We had opera music. As soon as I could write reasonable letters, I would write to the man that ran that program and ask him to play particular pieces of music.

01-00:15:57

Redman:

You had a love of music from a pretty early age.

01-00:15:59

Henssler:

Yes.

01-00:16:00

Redman:

You mentioned something interesting, that your parents were opposed to your listening to certain kinds of popular music. Was that a consideration because of religion or politics? Where did that come in?

01-00:16:12

Henssler:

No, they just didn't want us contaminating our minds, I guess, although we learned all the music anyway, because I had cousins who loved to listen to everything. So if I went—

01-00:16:29

Redman:

Inevitably, eventually it would get to you. How about church on the weekends? Did your parents go to church services regularly?

01-00:16:41

Henssler:

When my father was home, when he wasn't on a trip, we went ten miles to Mason City. The family belonged to St. John's Episcopal Church in Mason City. During the summer, usually we didn't go to Mason City, but what we did do was Father Whitehead would come to Clear Lake once a month and have a service on a Sunday. But I went with my friends to every church there was. I went to the Congregational church and the Methodist church and the Lutheran church, and went to the vacation bible schools, and any church that my friends were going to. I wasn't restricted from doing that.

01-00:17:44

Redman:

Is it fair to say, then, that some of those distinctions that might have been drawn were actually pretty permeable for a young kid? They could go to other services and—

01-00:17:55  
Henssler:

Oh, sure.

01-00:17:58  
Redman:

The differences were maybe minimal.

01-00:18:00  
Henssler:

They were. They were.

01-00:18:04  
Redman:

Is there anything else you'd like to add about elementary school and your time growing up, and young childhood in particular?

01-00:18:14  
Henssler:

I was the eldest of four girls. No brothers. My responsibilities were, "Watch your sisters." Those were the magic words. To this day, some of them say that I was very bossy. I probably was. But I felt that I was given a responsibility, and I was going to live up to it. My one sister that's next to me, she's three years younger, she said the first thing that she remembers about me and bossing her was that I forced her to learn to write her name. Now, she couldn't have been more than three and a half or four. The reason I wanted her to write her name is because, in Clear Lake, we had a Carnegie library, and you could only take out six books a week and you had to be able to write your name. So if I took her to the library, I had to share my six books. Once she could write her name, she could have a library card, so she could get her own books, and I could have all six.

01-00:19:42  
Redman:

That is a funny story. That is great. Let me ask, what was on the dinner table most nights?

01-00:19:50  
Henssler:

My mother was a wonderful cook and very good at amassing whatever needed to be done. We had very healthful meals. We had dinner at noon and supper at night. My grandmother was diabetic, so my mother cooked a very special diet for her, and the rest of us ate a very normal diet. My mother worked very hard, because all summer long she canned and prepared foods for the winter. We had a cellar where we put potatoes down in bushel baskets with sand. Carrots went in bushel baskets with sand. None of us liked turnips very well, so we didn't do turnips, but we did parsnips and things like that. Root vegetables.

01-00:21:01  
Redman:

A very active garden from the sounds of it.

01-00:21:03  
Henssler:

Yes. We had a garden, and then there was a man in the town who had a truck garden, and he would bring the things to us, to tell us about what was ready, what was ripe. Bushel baskets of tomatoes, corn, beans, peas. My mother really did a lot. We had no running water in the house until—I guess I was

about eleven. There was no water heater. We had running water. We didn't have to go to the well and pump it and haul it.

01-00:21:45

Redman: So outhouses, presumably?

01-00:21:48

Henssler: Absolutely.

01-00:21:49

Redman: How about heating in the wintertime?

01-00:21:53

Henssler: When we first moved to Clear Lake and moved in with my grandparents, we had a potbelly stove in the living room, and that was the heat. Then my grandfather had a gas floor furnace put in between the living room and dining room. Then later, when they added another bedroom onto the house, they put another one in a doorway kind of thing so that it heated the whole house. These were floor furnaces that you had a long thing like this, and you put a lit match in it, and held it down there and turned the handle, and that lit the gas furnace.

01-00:22:40

Redman: First, let me clarify. You and your family moved from Iowa in what year?

01-00:22:52

Henssler: My father went in November of 1942.

01-00:22:56

Redman: Maybe, then, before asking about moving, what I would like to ask about is the start of the war and Pearl Harbor in particular.

01-00:22:07

Henssler: Big deal.

01-00:22:07

Redman: December 7, 1941.

01-00:23:09

Henssler: Big deal.

01-00:23:10

Redman: Do you remember where you were?

01-00:23:11

Henssler: I certainly do.

01-00:23:13

Redman: Can you tell me about that?

01-00:23:13  
Henssler: Because at fourteen, I went to work for a lady in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for my room and board. So I was in Cedar Rapids on December 7, 1941.

01-00:23:28  
Redman: What work were you doing there?

01-00:23:31  
Henssler: Just general little housekeeping kind of things.

01-00:23:33  
Redman: I see. For her?

01-00:23:24  
Henssler: Dusting and things like that. I wanted to go there because this high school in Clear Lake had no science and no language. It was rough times. There was no money to hire teachers for those kinds of subjects. I wanted to go someplace, and that lady made it available. I went to high school for two years in Cedar Rapids.

01-00:24:05  
Redman: Out of curiosity, did you end up taking a language class?

01-00:24:08  
Henssler: Yes, I did.

01-00:24:08  
Redman: What language?

01-00:24:09  
Henssler: Latin.

01-00:24:09  
Redman: And sciences, classes like chemistry or—?

01-00:24:14  
Henssler: I took biology and chemistry.

01-00:24:17  
Redman: Those things were available at the larger high school?

01-00:24:20  
Henssler: Yes, in a bigger city.

01-00:24:22  
Redman: That is really amazing. Is there anything else you remember about the day of December 7?

01-00:24:30  
Henssler: Yes, I do. The man of the house was a retired state Supreme Court justice, and so Judge Grimm had the radio on. We just hung on the radio, listening to what they were telling us. Then, of course, the next day, listening to Roosevelt's

speech about the day of infamy. Yeah, it was a big deal, and Judge Grimm, his specialty was international law, so he was no longer traveling to Europe or to the Orient, but he was going to Canada. He had made a statement, probably three months before Pearl Harbor Day that the Japanese were going to attack us. So I was very impressed that he was so smart. He knew that.

01-00:25:40  
Redman:

A lot of people would have felt like this came out of nowhere, but people who followed the news, followed the developments in Asia—

01-00:25:51  
Henssler:

Yes. Well, and the fact that he traveled with world businesses and so on, did work for them, gave him an eye into the situation that the rest of the people didn't have.

01-00:26:04  
Redman:

How about you as a fourteen-year-old? I'm just curious how, maybe emotionally or mentally, you would have dealt with that news.

01-00:26:14  
Henssler:

I just thought that it was terrible. Of course, the thought of all those people being killed in that place. Of course, remember that it wasn't just Pearl Harbor that was attacked. The Philippines were attacked, and we had military in the Philippines. We had all known that the Japanese had invaded China and Formosa, which is now Taiwan. What they were looking for was the oil from Indonesia and expanding their empire. Of course, for us, because my father was a Brit and didn't become a citizen until 1947, the things that happened in Burma and Singapore, all of the awful things that were done, we followed very closely.

01-00:27:33  
Redman:

With your father having been from Great Britain, the US enters, even before Pearl Harbor, several agreements called Lend-Lease with Britain, so that must have been something, given how news-aware your family was and politically-aware your family was, that was maybe something that your father took notice of and maybe yourself as well.

01-00:27:54  
Henssler:

Congress had a—there was a bloc that were neutrality-pushing. The other thing was that there was a group, the German American Bund. So there was a lot in the newspapers, if you paid attention, of things that were happening all over the world. Plus, my English grandparents sent us bundles of English newspapers.

01-00:28:28  
Redman:

That's very interesting.

- 01-00:28:30  
Henssler: So that we saw things from another perspective. When England went to war, my father went to Canada to try and enlist, and they told him, no, he was too old.
- 01-00:28:47  
Redman: Is that right?
- 01-00:28:48  
Henssler: Yes.
- 01-00:28:53  
Redman: I asked about Lend-Lease.
- 01-00:28:56  
Henssler: That was a big deal.
- 01-00:28:58  
Redman: It's interesting, because historians have often talked about Iowa, or characterized Iowa, as being—because of one of the reasons you said, the German American influence—as being a real hotbed, or I guess you could say an extended layover, of isolationist sentiment. So people who wanted to stay out of the war as long as possible. Especially after the first war, people in Iowa maybe didn't see a benefit for them the way other parts of the country may have. It's interesting to me that your family, while having a Republican influence on one side and maybe some isolationist sentiment in Iowa, at the same time your dad is so internationally connected, and you're reading newspapers and you're seeing what's going on in the world. Did it seem like people wanted to stay out of the war in Iowa, and that Pearl Harbor was a real tipping point?
- 01-00:30:00  
Henssler: I think there were still a number of people, certainly in the Middle West, who remembered the price that had been paid in World War I. In my family, my mother's brother was killed in France just before World War I ended. That had an influence. My father having been in the British Army, and he fought not in France. He fought in Turkey and Greece. He was at Gallipoli. War was a terrible thing, and there were a number of families who'd lost family members in World War I, and they didn't want to repeat it. Also, there had been a group of men from Iowa, early Iowa settlers, who fought in the Mexican-American War. They were kind of familiar with what happened. If you look at the many names of counties and cities in Iowa, you will find that there are a number of them that are named with Spanish names. The county I grew up in was Cerro Gordo.
- 01-00:31:38  
Redman: And that's where that comes from.

01-00:31:39  
Henssler:

There are cities. They're either Indian—they're named after a person or they're named after battles.

01-00:31:49  
Redman:

Let's go to the decision your father makes, or your father being recruited, I guess, by Kaiser. Can you tell how that comes about and what your father's thought process was as that went along, to the degree you understood it?

01-00:32:07  
Henssler:

Of course, there were no jobs. There was no work, and people were very—especially in towns—were very poor. If you had a farm, you could at least get eggs and milk and things like that. Money was very short for everybody. Cash just wasn't there. You could barter things, but cash was hard to come by. Henry Kaiser sent people all through the country to recruit people to work in the shipyards, because he had this plan that worked, and my father needed a job. He had lived in San Francisco when he first came here, so he loved it, and the thought of being able to go back to the Bay Area was big deal. So I think he went very happily. What he didn't like was leaving his family. He went in November of '42, and my mother and my three sisters went in March of '43. I did not go until August of '43. The reason was two things. I wanted to finish my high school in Cedar Rapids, my sophomore year, and I spent that summer visiting with my aunt and uncle. My grandparents lived there also, because when my mother left, then my grandparents had to go to my aunt's house, because my grandmother could not take care of herself.

01-00:34:07  
Redman:

Can you talk a little bit about how your father found out about this opportunity at Kaiser, or how the recruitment process worked? How did that come about?

01-00:34:19  
Henssler:

As I understand it, there were ads in the newspaper. He went to Mason City, which was the next bigger town, and the county seat, to sign up, and they were happy to take him.

01-00:34:39  
Redman:

He gets signed up as a ship fitter?

01-00:34:43  
Henssler:

He went as a ship fitter, and then he became a ship-fitter foreman.

01-00:34:48  
Redman:

I'd like to talk about what a ship fitter does and then what a foreman of ship fitters would do. Maybe now is a time where we can move to the shipyards a little bit, and then I'll eventually ask questions about your arriving at the shipyards, but first, can you tell me a little bit about what a ship fitter would do?

- 01-00:35:14  
Henssler: The pieces of the ships were all pre-fabbed, and then they were lowered by crane into the bed of what was going to be the ship. Then those pieces were fitted together and welded, and instead of using rivets, they welded, because it was faster and it was quicker and more safe. That's what a ship fitter did. My father became foreman, where he was supervising some people who were doing the actual work.
- 01-00:36:01  
Redman: When he became a foreman, do you know how many people—I'm saying guys, but—
- 01-00:36:08  
Henssler: It was a lot of women.
- 01-00:36:09  
Redman: A lot of women. How many people would he have been supervising?
- 01-00:36:14  
Henssler: Probably eight or ten.
- 01-00:36:16  
Redman: Did he work the day shift, swing shift, night shift?
- 01-00:36:19  
Henssler: Swing shift.
- 01-00:36:21  
Redman: So there would have been, probably, crews similar to his—
- 01-00:36:26  
Henssler: Oh, yes.
- 01-00:36:26  
Redman: —in the day shift and in the night shift as well.
- 01-00:36:28  
Henssler: Depending on which ship they were working on, and how far along it was, would depend on where he was.
- 01-00:36:35  
Redman: So they would move throughout the ship, making sure that each of these prefabricated sections were fitting together properly.
- 01-00:36:41  
Henssler: That's right.
- 01-00:36:46  
Redman: He would probably have to be adept in that job of being able to talk to the lunch-pail guys and the lunch-pail gals who are doing the welding, and then also people who are doing the drafting, the architects.

01-00:37:01  
Henssler:

My father was a British gentleman.

01-00:37:05  
Redman:

I see. That must have played to his advantage.

01-00:37:08  
Henssler:

Well, I think it did. He had a wonderful sense of humor so that he would see the humor in some of the things that happened. As far as I know, he never had anybody on his crew hurt. That's an important feature of being a foreman.

01-00:37:32  
Redman:

One of the things that a lot of people talk about, people remember, and historians have talked about, is these shipyards brought a lot of very different people together. You talked a little bit about your father supervising individuals. I wonder if you could talk a little bit—the sense of humor maybe deflating what could have been some other—

01-00:37:56  
Henssler:

One of the things that I remember particularly was the Chinese people in San Francisco needed jobs, too, and so they came to work in the shipyards. Because our laws were so unclear about citizenship and so on, he had several Chinese gentlemen who worked for him, and one in particular that I remember the story, because every so often, this man would say, "I have to go gimbling." He would go somewhere where he would gamble for a few days, and then he'd be back. But he went gimbling [gambling]. My father thought he was great.

01-00:39:06  
Redman:

Another aspect of this work, I understand, is not only were people from different backgrounds and nationalities, and then also different genders. It's the first time many men and women had worked together in a setting.

01-00:39:26  
Henssler:

It was hard for some of the older men, I think, to have women working beside them, earning the same money and doing the jobs that had been traditionally male jobs. With so many young men in particular in the service, there just really wasn't any other solution. A lot of these women had children. Certainly, the allotment that the Army sent, or the Navy sent, for spouses and children was minute. This was their chance to learn a trade and to get out and work. Back in Alabama or Mississippi or wherever it was, there were no chances. Nothing. I can tell you about a family that I met. The youngest girl was my age, and her mother, her father, a brother, and two sisters all worked in the shipyards. Now, they had come from Joplin, Missouri, and their whole focus was to earn enough money to go back and buy back their farm that they'd lost. My classmate, whose name was also Margaret, was the sole housekeeper, cook, laundress, whatever it took, so she took the short hours that I took in high school so that she could do her job at home. They saved every cent they

could, and they went back, when the war was over, back to Joplin. I'm sure they got their farm or a better one.

01-00:41:49

Redman:

If you could, bring me, for just a moment, back to Iowa. For a girl graduating from high school in that era, in the midst of the war, I wonder what the options were that presented themselves. For someone of my generation who might take some things like that for granted, I wonder if you could just briefly summarize what women were—

01-00:42:17

Henssler:

The only option, real options, for young women were nurse or teacher. That was it. Those were the only places that, on average, women were accepted. You didn't see women attorneys; you didn't see women doctors, but very rarely. There were certainly no chemical engineers and no computer people, or even the basics of that kind of thing. You might have been a bookkeeper. But those jobs really didn't pay. But if you were a nurse or a teacher, you earned a little bit more money.

01-00:43:11

Redman:

It sounds like it would have been a real transition, then, for these young women who were offered wartime training classes, who could take a welding course or something along those lines. That would have been pretty different. Can you say a word or two more about how your father reacted to this? It seems like it didn't affect him very much, but—

01-00:43:34

Henssler:

No, it didn't, because, as I say, he really had a sense of humor, and he could see that that was necessary. That there weren't any young men to do those jobs, and that in order to accomplish the goal, which was the ships; you had to take the help you could get.

01-00:44:08

Redman:

I wonder if you could tell me a bit about your first impressions when you yourself arrived in Richmond, California.

01-00:44:19

Henssler:

I can tell you that I drove with a family. A man and his daughter. The mother of the girl had been a schoolmate of my mother's. They drove across the United States. I was absolutely blown away, and especially when I saw the Rocky Mountains.

01-00:44:49

Redman:

Is that right? For someone from Iowa and Illinois, to see the Rocky Mountains for the first time must have been just magnificent.

01-00:44:59

Henssler:

It was. I said to myself, I never want to live where I can't see the mountains. For the most part, I haven't had to. It was really something. The fresh fruit and

the fresh vegetable, year-round. All of these things made a big impression. The sun shone and it didn't snow.

01-00:45:35

Redman: How about the Golden Gate Bridge or the Bay Bridge?

01-00:45:41

Henssler: I remember taking the ferry from Richmond. From the shipyard you could take a ferry to the Ferry Building and the market, and so you saw both bridges. Or you could take a little—they had a little train that went to Fortieth and San Pablo in Oakland. You got on the electric trains that crossed the Bay Bridge and stopped in Treasure Island and let the sailors on and off. Remember, I was sixteen.

01-00:46:27

Redman: Seeing the young, cute, handsome sailors must have—

01-00:46:30

Henssler: Oh, yeah. What was fun was the Navy ran a ferry from Treasure Island to the Ferry Building, and about four thirty in the afternoon, you would just see a sea of white hats coming up Market [Street]. It was really interesting.

01-00:46:57

Redman: Again, a thing that I think people now, if they come to San Francisco, would be surprised by is the lack of military presence in the Bay Area, whereas in that era there was the Oakland Army Base. Treasure Island was taken over by the Navy.

01-00:47:15

Henssler: There was Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland. As you're saying, Treasure Island.

01-00:47:21

Redman: There would have been more uniformed personnel just out and about.

01-00:47:25

Henssler: Alameda Naval Air Station. We watched more ships come in and out of the bay. Sometimes they were towed in to be repaired, because they'd been in a battle. You saw the effects of war, but you weren't necessarily in any danger.

01-00:48:00

Redman: That gives a lot of stuff to dive into. I'm wondering about blackouts and rationing. Maybe the final question I'll ask on this tape is how those sorts of things affected both your everyday life and how you would go about your day-to-day, and then also just thinking about exactly what you just said. This war is sort of off there in the distance, but it's also at home.

01-00:48:27

Henssler: Yes, it was. When I got to California, I had to get my ration book. Remember that there were six of us in the family, and getting shoes was one thing I particularly remember. The other thing I remember is not always being able to

get meat, and that my mother saved fat, and you turned that in because that was going to go for munitions. We kept all our tin cans and turned those back. My mother calculated very carefully to make sure that we all had decent meals, but we never could use—because you couldn't get, unless you went on the black market, more coupons.

01-00:49:37

Redman: But there was a black market?

01-00:49:39

Henssler: Oh yes, there was. Yeah, of course. It's like, today, dope or whatever. There's always a market.

01-00:49:48

Redman: There's a market for stuff for people to get it. I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but I want to ask just a little more about how that would work. Something that has come up is that large families would have problems getting shoes, just like you said. Would you maybe exchange some shoe rations with someone for some meat rations or—?

01-00:50:13

Henssler: A lot of people did. Because there were so many of us, six of us, we could shuffle them around, but I know that there was a lot of exchanging of coupons. You had to, to be able to do the things that you needed to do.

01-00:50:32

Redman: I see.

01-00:50:34

Henssler: Like if you wanted to buy sheets for the bed, because they do wear out, you had to put your name on a list at either the Emporium or Capwell's, and then you were called, and you got to buy one sheet.

01-00:50:56

Redman: Wow. How about housing? Did your father have any trouble finding a place to live when he first—?

01-00:51:06

Henssler: When he was there by himself, he lived in a hotel in San Francisco, down off of the Mission someplace. Then they found a house in San Lorenzo that they rented by the month, but they had their name in for public housing in Richmond. I went to high school in Hayward for a month, and then they were able to move to the housing. The fact that my mother worked in the shipyards, as well as my father, allowed us to get a two-bedroom place. What those were, were converted barracks. They were minimal. No refrigerators. You had iceboxes. You walked everywhere.

01-00:52:08

Redman: That's a good spot to pause, and then I'll—

01-00:52:10  
Henssler: Okay.

Audio File 2

02-00:00:08  
Redman: Today is October 15, 2012, and this is my second tape today, in Berkeley, California, with Peg Henssler. Peg, when we left off, you had just arrived in Richmond.

02-00:00:20  
Henssler: Yes.

02-00:00:20  
Redman: You were telling me a little bit about how your parents had applied for housing with the shipyards, and that because they both had jobs there; they were able to get double housing, a two-bedroom house.

02-00:00:34  
Henssler: A two-bedroom place.

02-00:00:36  
Redman: I want to make sure to ask what your mom did at the shipyards, but before I get to that question, can you walk me through that living space, if you would?

02-00:00:49  
Henssler: It was a very small—like apartment, and we were on the ground floor. I will tell you that the sand fleas were horrible. They were in everything. My mother was very allergic to them. This, I guess, is an aside. What you did was you bought Feeley's Flea Flakes, and you put them in the bed so that the fleas did not bite you when you were sleeping. They were wood floors. Not finished as such, with nice varnish and so on. The kitchen was just a wide spot, and it had a sink, and a counter of maybe four-by-four, an icebox that we had to empty the ice pan every day. The iceman came along, and you had to go out and get the ice and shag it in to your apartment. It did have a bathroom, with a bathtub. Of course, no showers. People didn't shower in those days much. It was just minimal. They were furnished, except we got the bunk beds, and my parents brought their own bed.

02-00:02:41  
Redman: We talked about your father's job, but what about your mom? What did she do at the shipyards?

02-00:02:46  
Henssler: My mother was the, I guess, lead person, or supervisor, for a group of women who did all the filing for the payroll. That was a very involved and meticulous job in those days, because payroll was run weekly with IBM punch cards. People's timecards were translated, in the keypunch area, to hours worked, and then they were filed. Each person had a lead card with their name and so

on on it, and then all these cards went behind it. Whatever deductions they had, that all went behind it. It was a packet like this for each paycheck.

02-00:03:52

Redman: Tell me what shifts she worked.

02-00:03:54

Henssler: She worked swing shift also.

02-00:04:00

Redman: Sort of organizing your day would have been organized around the swing shift in many respects.

02-00:04:05

Henssler: Sure.

02-00:04:09

Redman: Can you talk a little bit about how that may have been an unusual schedule for—?

02-00:04:14

Henssler: Because I had to go to school—

02-00:04:18

Redman: So this is at Richmond Union High School?

02-00:04:20

Henssler: Yes. Because I had to go to school, I was up early. Sometimes I got up early enough to finish my homework. Then I left for school about seven o'clock in the morning. My sisters were up and getting ready for school. My parents were still asleep. We all ate breakfast. We knew what we were supposed to do. Then I went off to school, and then the other girls went half an hour or forty-five minutes later. Then my mother got up and did chores. Then she cooked a meal, because the girls only went to school half-days, and I got home at one thirty, so mother fed everybody about two o'clock. That was the main meal of the day. Then there was stuff set out for a little snack before bedtime, but the girls were pretty much on their own. It was tough for them.

02-00:05:44

Redman: You would have been about sixteen, seventeen, by this point?

02-00:05:49

Henssler: I was sixteen when I started.

02-00:05:52

Redman: So your sisters would have been down to—

02-00:05:57

Henssler: The next one was thirteen. My sister, Hilda, was eight, and the younger one was five.

02-00:06:07

Redman: So definitely a tough transition and presents a change.

02-00:06:14

Henssler: They'd come from an at-home mom and their grandparents to being on their own, really. It was tough for everybody. Because I finished school about one o'clock, and then got home and had dinner, and then I went—at four o'clock—then I went to work.

02-00:06:38

Redman: Let's talk about this program that allows high schoolers in Richmond to go to school part-time and work at the shipyards part-time. I understand you start in November of 1943 in this program, and you work straight on through the end of the war.

02-00:06:55

Henssler: Yes.

02-00:06:56

Redman: Tell me, though, about that program that allows young people to work at the shipyards.

02-00:07:00

Henssler: What we had to do was, of course we had to have parental permission, and then we had to get permission from the school district. My grades had to stay up. Then I interviewed for the job, and I happened to work in the same general area as my mother. Every three months, the school sent a form to the shipyards to say, "What kind of a job is she doing? Is she doing what she should? Is she going to work?" Then they had to fill out a form saying that I was doing everything right, but the shipyard had to get a form that said my grades were satisfactory.

02-00:07:56

Redman: Did you get the impression that a lot of other young people at the high school were taking part in this program?

02-00:08:01

Henssler: It was interesting. The locals were not. They had stay-at-home moms in a settled community, and homes and so on. But many of the transient people, I guess, did do something. I told you about the one friend that went to Joplin. Then I had another friend who didn't work in the shipyards, but she was on the same program, and she worked for an office supply place on Macdonald Avenue in Richmond. There were girls that did babysitting, other things. They had the same restrictions that I had.

02-00:08:49

Redman: So it wasn't just wartime industries. It was filling jobs that needed to be filled.

02-00:08:54

Henssler: Jobs, because the men who had had those jobs, or the women, had—

02-00:09:01  
Redman: Many of the women had moved into the shipyards.

02-00:09:03  
Henssler: The shipyards, and so they needed them in offices and things like that.

02-00:09:08  
Redman: I see. One of the unique aspects of Kaiser is the healthcare program that they innovate.

02-00:09:21  
Henssler: Absolutely.

02-00:09:25  
Redman: Worker safety is also an aspect of this. There's also unions, especially in wartime industries. Roosevelt and the government does an executive order on that matter as well. But for most people, that would have meant very little, or they would have noticed it when they signed up for work. I wonder if you remember being at the hiring hall at Kaiser, signing up initially, if you signed up for a union, if you—

02-00:09:59  
Henssler: No, I did not, because I was doing office work.

02-00:10:03  
Redman: So you were not eligible for union membership.

02-00:10:05  
Henssler: Had I been going to be a Rosie, a real Rosie, I would have had to at least consider it.

02-00:10:14  
Redman: I see. How about the healthcare plan?

02-00:10:17  
Henssler: Fantastic. It was really, for all intents and purposes, that was the grandfather of all healthcare programs. If you look at what Kaiser Permanente does today, they were the forerunners of all of that kind of thing. Those people could not have stayed healthy and worked without that childcare system and without that healthcare system.

02-00:10:46  
Redman: That's really interesting. You're pointing to both the healthcare plan, but then also the childcare system that—

02-00:10:52  
Henssler: Childcare plan.

02-00:10:54  
Redman: Did you know women that were taking their children to the—

- 02-00:10:57  
Henssler: Absolutely.
- 02-00:10:58  
Redman: —Childcare Development Centers?
- 02-00:10:58  
Henssler: There were people that I worked with, because their husbands were in the Army. They were gone. They had left grandma and grandpa. So where else did they have? He was way ahead of the rest of the business world in that respect.
- 02-00:11:20  
Redman: Do you remember anything else about your first impressions of being hired and being at the hiring hall? Was that an intimidating feeling for a sixteen-year-old girl?
- 02-00:11:29  
Henssler: I was so excited because I was going to earn money. It was cash.
- 02-00:11:35  
Redman: Do you remember what the pay was? It must have felt like a king's ransom in those days, but—
- 02-00:11:40  
Henssler: Eighty-five cents an hour. It was fantastic.
- 02-00:11:45  
Redman: So now let's talk about your actual job duties. You were also working on the swing shift, is that right?
- 02-00:11:54  
Henssler: Yes.
- 02-00:11:55  
Redman: After school, you might come home and have this meal that your mom had cooked and prepared, and then how would you get from your housing to the shipyard? Would you walk or take a streetcar?
- 02-00:12:10  
Henssler: You walked down to Cutting Boulevard, and you got on that little Toonerville Trolley. I think it was a nickel. Monday was my day off. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, I worked four hours, but because the federal law says that if you work four hours, you must have a lunch hour, a half-hour, I had to stay until nine o'clock. So I would go to the cafeteria and do homework for half an hour, then get on the trolley and go home.
- 02-00:12:51  
Redman: That, to me, this is a strange scene of young people, in the middle of the night, essentially, at a cafeteria in a shipyard, sitting and doing their homework. But a lot of unusual things were happening during the war.

02-00:13:04  
Henssler: Well, the thing is, I had to use every minute. Because on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, I worked a full eight hours.

02-00:13:13  
Redman: I see. Because the end of the week, the pay system would actually kick into—

02-00:13:19  
Henssler: Sure.

02-00:13:20  
Redman: Let's talk a little bit about that process.

02-00:13:23  
Henssler: Everybody worked six days. Minimum. Some of them worked seven.

02-00:13:29  
Redman: If they were willing to sign up for that seventh, they could get it.

02-00:13:32  
Henssler: If it was a critical time on a ship, they worked the seven days to get it done.

02-00:13:37  
Redman: That's amazing. This is in the payroll office. There are these very early IBM accounting machines. Essentially, early computers.

02-00:13:35  
Henssler: They were certainly the forerunners. They were accounting machines, and the way that they were programmed, if you can call it that, you had plug boards. You took this wire to here, and that made it multiply, or that made it print someplace, because the machines had only so many alphameric print bars in them that went up and down and that could print alphabetic. So your name and your initials, and then the rest were all numeric only. It was all read off the punch cards.

02-00:14:40  
Redman: This may or may not be something you know based on your experience, but how would you keep track of individual workers? Was it a name? Was it a Social Security number?

02-00:14:51  
Henssler: Badge number.

02-00:14:52  
Redman: Badge number, okay. So each—

02-00:14:53  
Henssler: You had to show your badge to pick up your check.

02-00:14:56  
Redman: I see. Oh, that's interesting. So each Kaiser employee at the shipyard would have, like, an aluminum badge with their picture in it.

- 02-00:15:04  
Henssler: It wasn't aluminum. They were plastic. Believe it or not, they were—they had your picture, and a number, and where you worked, and so on. Then they were enclosed in plastic.
- 02-00:15:32  
Redman: So the timecards were punched and then filed into a packet throughout the week, and then run through at the end of the week?
- 02-00:15:41  
Henssler: There were reproducing machines, which reproduced the master card with the person's name, how many deductions they had, whether or not they were buying savings bonds, if they owed for they lost their hardhat, equipment, so on. Because you did pay back the money that Kaiser advanced you to get there. You had to pay that back, so you had a deduction over a period of time. Those things were on the master card. Then the hourly cards, and then other cards that did other things, because they had a machine that did the multiplication. If your deduction was four, it calculated how much income tax you were going to pay, how much social security you were going to pay, and so on.
- 02-00:16:49  
Redman: But you had to make sure that those wires were hooked up.
- 02-00:16:52  
Henssler: The wires had to be programmed. They were programmed in a way. It wasn't like it got later. It was very simple, but it was very effective.
- 02-00:17:09  
Redman: I'm imagining thousands of people working at these shipyards, and keeping track of all of this information would be this monumental task. Tell me a little bit more about how it was divided up, if you would.
- 02-00:17:23  
Henssler: It was divided up first by shipyard, because the payroll department I worked in did shipyard number three and number four. We did that payroll. It was well over 100,000 people. So there were paydays—
- 02-00:17:42  
Redman: Just between those two shipyards?
- 02-00:17:44  
Henssler: Yes. Payroll was run seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. As you got off shift on your payday, whatever it was, you went to the payroll office, and there were windows all across. You showed your badge and they pulled your check and handed it to you. What I did with the group that I worked with was the paychecks were printed out first. Not on checks, but on a big piece of IBM paper. It was three copies.

Then what we did was, where it broke at a hundred, we calculated whether or not it cross-footed. If it did not cross-foot, we looked back and worked across every one until we found the error. Then we took it and had it corrected, and a different punch card put in, and then we okayed that lot of 10,000 checks to be printed. It was very organized, and of course it was, to many people, so new to have automated anything.

02-00:19:33

Redman:

Do you know how it was that you were put in this particular job rather than, say, some other job?

02-00:19:42

Henssler:

I'm guessing it was because of my mother.

02-00:19:45

Redman:

Because your mother was also in accounting.

02-00:19:47

Henssler:

My mother was in there, too. Yes.

02-00:19:52

Redman:

But you didn't have much interaction with her, is that the impression that I'm getting?

02-00:19:55

Henssler:

No, I did not.

02-00:19:57

Redman:

Was she at another yard or—?

02-00:19:58

Henssler:

I would see her at lunch. I'd say something, or she'd come and say something to me, but no, we didn't see each other a lot. We saw each other at the main meal.

02-00:20:13

Redman:

Why was that? Was that because she was working in another yard doing accounting, or a different office?

02-00:20:17

Henssler:

No, she was working in the same big area, but she was busy. We all were. There was a lot of pressure to meet deadlines to make sure that the checks could be printed and would be ready when the people came off shift.

02-00:20:36

Redman:

One of the things you'd mentioned to me was that this is such an important job, because without—

02-00:20:42

Henssler:

Being a smart aleck.

02-00:20:44

Redman: But without getting people their pay—

02-00:20:45

Henssler: I said I had the most important job, because people wouldn't have come if they didn't get paid.

02-00:20:52

Redman: That's true. That, I think, is true. Let's talk for a moment about the other people working in that office. Were they predominantly young women?

02-00:21:04

Henssler: No. I would say that most of them were middle-aged women whose husbands were either in the service, or they had never been married. This was a chance to earn money. You could not get any job that paid what Henry Kaiser paid on the outside.

02-00:21:28

Redman: So even though it was a busy, stressful environment, would you describe the mood as people were positive and happy to have a job, contributing to the war effort?

02-00:21:38

Henssler: Everybody was really happy to have a job, and especially one that paid well, because things got more and more expensive as the war went on. I would say that, yes, we had a lot of fun along with doing our jobs.

02-00:22:01

Redman: You're meeting other people, but I also got the impression, through the school program, you were meeting other young women that you would—

02-00:22:10

Henssler: Yes. Yes.

02-00:22:12

Redman: I wonder if, for a moment, could you talk about, were there moments where some of your coworkers, the women in particular, might lose a husband abroad, and would that affect the mood of—?

02-00:22:29

Henssler: It made it very sad. There were several younger women whose husbands were either missing in action or killed in action. Not always on swing shift, but on the other shifts, and we all heard and knew about it. Of course, it was sad.

02-00:22:52

Redman: A reminder of—

02-00:22:54

Henssler: Yes. It was a reminder why we were all there.

02-00:22:59

Redman:

How about war bonds? You'd mentioned that people were encouraged to buy—

02-00:23:04

Henssler:

Yes. You were encouraged to buy them out of your paycheck. Everybody was. There were bond drives. There were movie stars that came and encouraged everybody to buy bonds. War bonds, they were called then. Kaiser's payroll system was arranged so that you could put in up to eighteen seventy-five, which was what a twenty-five dollar savings bond cost, or you could have portions of it come out of your check until you got to eighteen seventy-five, and then, pretty soon, you'd get a bond in the mail. Almost everybody gave something, because it was a way to save money, and also we were supporting the war effort.

02-00:24:20

Redman:

I wonder if we could talk a little bit about the end of the war. Well, first let me ask how the men and women interacted at the shipyards. Do you have any comments on that?

02-00:24:35

Henssler:

There were some men who had a hard time. First place, "the woman's place is in the home." They were taking men's jobs, which really wasn't so. They were filling in for men who were gone. But yes, there was some of that. But as the war got going further and the women showed how well they could do the jobs they had, that sort of died down. You didn't hear much of it anymore.

02-00:25:11

Redman:

How about in the shipyards? Were there stories of hanky-panky or—?

02-00:25:18

Henssler:

I told my kids one. Yes, of course. People being human. The story that I told the kids was there was one of the ships that was out of Shipyard Number Three, and it went out on its shakedown cruise. What they did was they went out through the gate and around the Farallon Islands and came back. Well, this one came back being towed, and when they tore the engine apart, because they couldn't figure out why it quit, they found a pair of lady's underpants.

02-00:26:07

Redman:

So there you go. How about, taken from another angle, the age factor? Being so young, working in a place, was that again sort of, we need all the able-bodied folks that we can get?

02-00:26:26

Henssler:

Yes.

02-00:26:28

Redman:

Were there jokes or comments or things like that about you being so young or anything along those lines?

- 02-00:26:34  
Henssler: No, I never heard anything. I learned so much from those women who had been bookkeepers and accountants and receptionists and so on. They were all older. I learned a lot from them. Not just about the work, but about how life should be.
- 02-00:26:58  
Redman: The world.
- 02-00:26:59  
Henssler: And how I should act and so on.
- 02-00:27:03  
Redman: How about people of different backgrounds? In particular, I want to ask you about race and if there were things you recall, or things that you saw or witnessed, of either groups coming together, or tensions between groups or different individuals that were based on either race or racial prejudice or anything like that.
- 02-00:27:27  
Henssler: Richmond was a different kind of town. There had been African Americans in the town, but they lived in a particular area. They did not come into the white area. I remember that there were only a couple in my high school class. They just were not accepted. There was one young man who was a marvelous athlete, and he was accepted because he played on the football team and they were winning. Unfortunately, he joined the Army and was killed. It was very obvious. When you have people that come from Arkansas or Oklahoma or places like that, and all of a sudden they're working side by side with black, whom they have been led to believe are either inferior or not American, it was an eye-opener for everybody. I had lived in a little town that, until I was about ten, there were no blacks. The one family that came in, it was a man and his wife, and they played at a nightclub. They played music. So they were never around when I was around, in the daytime. But other than that, I had never been around them. So it was a learning experience for me, too. What I think we all found was that they were not inferior. They were just as smart and just as talented as anybody else. So it was good for everybody.
- 02-00:29:57  
Redman: So you think a lot came out of that experience—
- 02-00:29:59  
Henssler: Yes, I do.
- 02-00:29:59  
Redman: —of people being thrust together in a sense.
- 02-00:30:04  
Henssler: You found out who covered for you was your friend, regardless of color or race.

02-00:30:13

Redman:

There's some talk that there was obviously a major campaign to hire women workers in particular as the war goes on; '43 in particular. But then, by the end of '44 and '45, some women start even leaving some of those jobs, and they have to sort of re-recruit and get more and more people to come in. Was that your sense, maybe, that some women either had felt, "I've made enough money now," and they left their position, or that some women maybe felt like the work wasn't for them and left?

02-00:30:49

Henssler:

I think that those women who were married were getting pressure from their spouses, and I also think that there were a lot of family situations that I heard about—Mom back East needs you to go home.

02-00:31:09

Redman:

I see.

02-00:31:12

Henssler:

So that there were times when people had to leave because of a family situation.

02-00:31:19

Redman:

Great. Let's talk about the end of the war. I wonder if, first, before we get into V-J Day, I wonder if you recall at all when the Germans surrender, V-E Day.

02-00:31:31

Henssler:

V-E Day.

02-00:31:33

Redman:

What were your memories of that?

02-00:31:36

Henssler:

Because my father was English, that was so important. That was really almost equal to V-J Day, because it meant that he could be in touch with his family on a regular basis, and that, for the most part, his family had made it through the war. Times were tough. We sent food to England.

02-00:32:09

Redman:

Do you remember your dad's—his reaction when he found out? Were you—?

02-00:32:14

Henssler:

Oh, yes, he was ecstatic, because it meant that his family had survived. But because we had had an English connection, we had stayed very much on top of what was happening in Europe. I remember my father sitting with tears running down his face when the British were evacuating out of Dunkirk. That was before we were in the war. But because we had that connection, we probably were much more interested and involved than the average American.

02-00:32:58

Redman:

Of course, many of the interviews I've done are with Californians, so there's sort of this focus on the Pacific and Japan, but then also meaning the end of

the war. But for you, the focus in many respects was looking towards Britain and Europe.

02-00:33:18  
Henssler:

As much, certainly, as equal, as the Pacific.

02-00:33:26  
Redman:

I wonder if you could talk about hearing the news of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and then a few days later, Nagasaki. Maybe you could talk about that in combination with the end of the war, or if you heard about those events and the end of the war means something a little different to you.

02-00:33:49  
Henssler:

I remember V-J Day.

02-00:33:52  
Redman:

Let's talk about V-J Day. That's fine.

02-00:33:58  
Henssler:

A bunch of us met in downtown Richmond to celebrate. That really meant the end of the war. But as far as the atomic bomb was concerned, I have to give you my personal opinion here, not anybody else's. I felt that it was a blessing in disguise, because it meant that we did not have to invade Japan. The Japanese are a very nationalistic people, and they would have fought to the last man. We would have lost another hundred, two hundred thousand people, men primarily. Yes, it was a horrible thing. It scared the world, which is good. They have tried to control atomic weapons ever since. So I think there was good and bad out of the bomb.

02-00:35:17  
Redman:

I forgot to ask a question about 1944. In June of 1944, there was an explosion at Port Chicago.

02-00:35:25  
Henssler:

Yes, there was. There were two things happened in June of 1944.

02-00:35:30  
Redman:

Can you talk about that?

02-00:35:31  
Henssler:

Yes, I can. I was at work when the explosion happened in Port Chicago, and our building was kind of a pile of fill dirt, and there were windows along there, and it shook our building and hit that pile of dirt, and came back and echoed a couple of times. We had several people that worked on our shift that lived in Port Chicago. So the minute that we found out what the explosion was, those people were given permission to go home.

02-00:36:10

Redman:

But what you're describing is not just one sort of concussion, but that there were multiple sort of—

02-00:36:15

Henssler:

Yes. It was awful. What it did to that community and the people that lived around there. You figure how far the bay and Richmond is from Port Chicago. It must have been tremendous.

02-00:36:33

Redman:

There was no mistaking it. You could feel it?

02-00:36:35

Henssler:

No. Yes. Yes.

02-00:36:37

Redman:

Another question I forgot to ask you about but I'd like to get your opinion on is—and your memories on—the executive order that sends Japanese and Japanese Americans to internment camps. If you knew of that and you were aware of that, and what your thoughts and feelings on that were at the time and maybe today.

02-00:37:02

Henssler:

I thought at the time—and of course I was sixteen—I thought it was horrible, and it still is. It was unnecessary. It was cruel. People in the Bay Area, there were many Japanese who had nurseries and orchards and things like that, who had been there for two or three generations. Their property was taken away from them, and there were other people, Anglos, if you will, who took advantage, who bought up their property for taxes, who destroyed their livelihood. After the war, I worked with a young woman who had been in an internment camp. She was a very lovely person, and I can't believe that she was as forgiving as she was. I certainly wouldn't have been. Because her family lost their nursery and their property, and had to start over from nothing when they were released. I have some pretty strong feelings about that.

02-00:38:42

Redman:

Let's talk for just a moment about what life was like for you, then, after the war. I understand you continue on, in some sense, in accounting, and using this skill now that you have gained. Can you tell me how that worked?

02-00:39:08

Henssler:

It made it possible for me to find jobs when other people couldn't, because so many of the returning servicemen were looking for jobs, but I had a skill that I had learned, because I've always been nosy and I like to see how things work. I had learned to operate some of those machines, even though that was not my responsibility. When I had free time, I went and learned. I was able to get jobs that other people didn't have the knowledge of.

02-00:39:45

Redman:

Of course, many women who had gone through training programs for things like welding or riveting, they were of course replaced by the men when they came back. There was a cultural expectation of them.

02-00:39:57

Henssler:

The shipyards were closed. Where would you take that skill? A few of them went to work at Bethlehem Steel or someplace like that, but for the most part, those jobs were gone away, and so they had to go back to being Mrs. Housewife.

02-00:40:18

Redman:

Do you think that was hard for a lot of women of your generation?

02-00:40:20

Henssler:

You bet. You think about yourself. You get a paycheck, and all of a sudden you're at the mercy of somebody else, even though they may be your spouse or your parent. It really hurts, because you've been independent, and now you're now dependent again.

02-00:40:44

Redman:

For young women of that generation, I wonder—because we often think of the fifties as a pretty conservative time. I think we've got this misconception, then, of the sixties being the awakening of feminism and things like that. That must have affected women of that generation—

02-00:41:10

Henssler:

A lot.

02-00:41:11

Redman:

A lot. Even if there wasn't overt protest in the 1960s, my guess is that those women who went through those experiences would have been sympathetic to women's rights.

02-00:41:22

Henssler:

Oh, yeah. I certainly was. I was gung ho for that. Because I've always thought men and women think differently, but they don't feel differently.

02-00:41:45

Redman:

Do you have any other recollections about the parties in V-J Day, in either Richmond or San Francisco, and the celebration?

02-00:41:52

Henssler:

They were wild, drunken. It meant that, for some people, especially the ones that wanted to, were going to be able to go back to the life they had left. I think that was very important to a lot of people. I was still young enough that I thought the world was still my oyster and I was going to do something.

02-00:42:24

Redman:

Is there anything else that you would like to add and close with today about the war? Actually, the question that I'd like to ask is actually the hardest

question. I ask you the easiest question at the start, is to state your name, and then I build all the way up, I guess you could say, to this. If you could look back in your life, the whole story of your life, and think about what the time of the war means for your life, and how that fits into the story of your life, what do you say about that? What do you think about that?

02-00:43:04  
Henssler:

I guess it gave me a lot of confidence. It allowed me to feel that there were no boundaries. That if I was willing to work hard, I could do anything. I think that is probably the lesson I got from all of it, was that I could do whatever needed to be done. I wasn't always sure, but I was willing to give it my best shot.

02-00:43:48  
Redman:

Is there anything else that you'd like to add today? Those are all of my questions.

02-00:43:59  
Henssler:

Not really, other than I'm grateful for my family and that I've lived this long and I can still motate. I think that I've been blessed in that respect.

02-00:44:14  
Redman:

I want to thank you very much for sitting down with me today. Thank you.

02-00:44:16  
Henssler:

Thank you.

[End of Interview]