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Bertha Hicks

Rosie the Riveter
World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2011

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Bertha Hicks, 2011

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Interview #1 May 24, 2011

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01-00:00:03

Redman: —Fourth, 2011, and I'm here today with Bertha Hicks at Richmond, California. We'll be speaking mostly about her early childhood and recollections of growing up, especially around the Second World War, but I'd also like to explore Bertha's life following the war. I'd be especially interested to ask her about her later, postwar events, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the takeover of Alcatraz Island by American Indian activists, and see if she has thoughts on the American Indian Movement. Bertha, I'd like to just begin by asking you to tell me your full name, if that's all right.

01-00:00:37

Hicks: My name is Bertha Hicks. Maiden name is Vallo.

01-00:00:41

Redman: Could you spell the last names for me?

01-00:00:44

Hicks: Okay. My last name is spelled H-I-C-K-S. My maiden last name, V-A-L-L-O.

01-00:00:52

Redman: Excellent. Can you tell me when you were born?

01-00:00:56

Hicks: I was born August 3, 1937.

01-00:00:59

Redman: All right. You were born in New Mexico?

01-00:01:03

Hicks: I was born in a little village north of the Pueblo of Laguna. The village is in Encinal. We didn't live in the village at all. My grandfather had built a two-story house for each of his daughters, so we lived away from the village, divided by an arroyo. Although we did associate with the people in the village, going to church on Sundays and then having maybe dinner or lunch with other relatives in the village.

01-00:01:37

Redman: What denomination of church was your family when you were growing up?

01-00:01:42

Hicks: Predominantly Catholic.

01-00:01:45

Redman: Presumably, that had stretched back for many generations? Is that correct?

01-00:01:49

Hicks: Yes, I would think so. Probably during the Spanish era—the acquisition and everything.

- 01-00:01:56
Redman: I'll then jump back, I think, a little bit, but let me ask about how old you were when you came to California?
- 01-00:02:05
Hicks: I was probably about four, maybe four-and-a-half.
- 01-00:02:11
Redman: What were some of your very earliest memories on the reservation, then? Your family lived outside of the village.
- 01-00:02:20
Hicks: They did, but my early childhood was primarily playing with my cousin. There was only two of us, so we were cousins and we were also playmates. We got along really well. We didn't hunger for other children at that time, because we were just the two of us.
- 01-00:02:41
Redman: Very little, and that's kind of your world. What were their names and how old were they, approximately?
- 01-00:02:49
Hicks: My cousin, his name is Albert Aragon, and he was two years older than myself. He is currently living in Albuquerque, retired from the University of New Mexico. He was working at the Title Four group as an instructor.
- 01-00:03:11
Redman: I'd like to hear a little bit about what your family history was, in terms of who your ancestors were. If your parents had sort of passed down any information to you about who your ancestors were.
- 01-00:03:28
Hicks: Actually, my dad was Acoma, and when he married my mother, he relinquished his tribal citizenship and became a Laguna person on the census roll itself. My earliest knowledge was probably being raised by my grandmother. I questioned my mother at one time, asked her why she wasn't around to take us for walks. My grandmother's answer, and my mother's answer, was because my mother was newly married, and she was going through the procedures of learning how to maintain a household and bring up a family. And so my grandmother was the one that would take us every place, my cousin and I.
- 01-00:04:14
Redman: OK. So this would have been in New Mexico, then. Was it just your parents and you that moved to California, or was it a larger group of your family?
- 01-00:04:29
Hicks: My dad was working for Santa Fe already. On the way, he worked at Calloway and in San Bernardino. When he got himself situated here in Richmond, then he sent for my mother and myself, so we came.

- 01-00:04:44
Redman: That leads me into my next question. I'd like to hear what you've heard and what your understanding was of the verbal agreement between the Santa Fe Railroad and the pueblos, and what were the basics of that agreement? Now, my understanding is that both Laguna Pueblo and Acoma Pueblo had a verbal agreement with the Santa Fe Railroad for jobs.
- 01-00:05:05
Hicks: Correct. I'm not really into the laws or the history, only what I've heard. But yes, the Laguna and the Acoma people had a handshake-type of agreement with Santa Fe, because the railroad was running through our reservation. The governors from each tribe approached the Santa Fe officials and said, OK, if you're going to do that, you're going to have to provide employment for the men. So that's how our dad came about living in Richmond.
- 01-00:05:40
Redman: So he found that work before you had moved out to California, and then had several stops along the way, you had said? Is that correct?
- 01-00:05:51
Hicks: Correct, yes.
- 01-00:05:54
Redman: Do you recall or do you know, did he have that job about the time you were born or did he have that before you were born? Is that something that happened during your lifetime?
- 01-00:06:03
Hicks: I'm not quite sure. I'm not quite sure whether he was employed with Santa Fe prior to my birth. I'm not sure.
- 01-00:06:12
Redman: Do you know what he did for the railroad?
- 01-00:06:15
Hicks: Actually what they did was they laid the tracks. Then when he got himself situated here in Richmond, he worked in what was a place called Roundhouse. At that time, the men would be in charge of the engines, primarily working with the engines, at the Roundhouse.
- 01-00:06:33
Redman: I see. So they were doing repairs on the trains?
- 01-00:06:38
Hicks: Correct, yes.
- 01-00:06:42
Redman: In previous oral histories with folks who lived at the Richmond boxcar village, a lot of people who grew up in the village had some striking recollections of first seeing the village and contrasting it in some ways with, in the interviews I've read, with the houses that they had, and then having these

boxcars. It was a bit of a different experience. Maybe you could tell me about some of the differences that your family encountered when they moved first to Richmond.

01-00:07:14

Hicks:

My dad never told us that we were going to be living in boxcars. Well, I was a young child, so even if he mentioned it, I don't remember. But I do recall that as soon as my mom and I got off the railroad, the train at the depot, it was foggy. I'm not sure whether it was the early part of the year or towards the end of the year, because Richmond itself, we get a lot of fog. So I remember getting off the train, and I didn't speak English. I spoke my language. So my first question to my dad was, "What is this? Where am I?" My dad says, "I'll explain everything." He says, "Right now, this is fog." I had no idea what fog was.

01-00:07:59

Redman:

In Laguna, the climate's a bit different.

01-00:08:02

Hicks:

Exactly. So I was kind of flabbergasted at that time. I didn't know what had happened. My dad took our luggage, and we went over the viaduct at that time. We didn't catch a cab. I don't recall whether there were any taxis around at that time, and he didn't have a car at all. So what we did, we took whatever luggage we could carry and went over the viaduct. At that time, we weren't really living in the Santa Fe Village. There was boxcars set out the railroad tracks. My dad had built a little stairwell up to the boxcar. We had the rooms, the kitchen and then two bedrooms at each end. Being a child, and I was tired, my dad says, "You go to sleep." He says, "Tomorrow, we'll discuss the whole situation."

Well, when I woke up the next morning, naturally, as a child, you look around, and what was there to see except boxcars. I didn't really understand at that time boxcars. So my dad had to kind of explain where we were. Thinking back, the transition was so different, because we had a house at home in Encinal, and then to come out to California, to Richmond, and to live in a boxcar. But it didn't bother me. I just thought, well, there was a roof over my head. My parents explained to me, eventually, they are going to build houses down at the village. I had no idea where it was going to be. My dad says, "When it comes to that, we'll go down and see the layout." The Acoma people were already living at the village, and because my dad was—

01-00:10:02

Redman:

He was born in Acoma.

01-00:10:03

Hicks:

Yes, and we had relatives. We visited the village, the Acoma village, and then we went to my aunt's place, and my cousin's. Then my dad says, "Beyond this area, they're going to start building the houses for the Laguna people.

They're going to bring the boxcars in and then sit them up on a foundation." Although the wheels were still on the boxcars itself. It's something similar to a duplex. Two families living in one unit.

01-00:10:43

Redman:

Now, it seems to me that children, on the one hand, that would have been a very surprising and, in some sense, it could have been a traumatic thing, but children tend to be pretty durable. They tend to be able to roll with it if the parents seem okay and comfortable with it. It sounds like your father was pretty matter-of-fact about saying, here is this home for us now, and this village is going to be made, and this is kind of this temporary thing. It seems like you were okay with it, in terms of the tone of how you're describing this, and you just kind of went along with it in some sense. Is that correct, as a child's perspective?

01-00:11:22

Hicks:

Probably so. I was so secure. I felt really secure because of my upbringing from my grandmother and my parents. I was so protected, you might say. I was the only girl amongst all my boy cousins. Even growing up later in life, during my teens, my cousins were always there. They wouldn't allow me to go for a couple of hours, because I was a girl, and if I went off for a few minutes, my cousins were always there. I was just there, and my cousins were around. So I think, in a sense, as a child, I felt secure. I really had no idea where we were going to move to, but it was going to come to that eventually.

01-00:12:15

Redman:

Do you know how far your dad had to go to the Roundhouse? How far away that was from your boxcar?

01-00:12:26

Hicks:

Maybe about a quarter of a mile.

01-00:12:28

Redman:

So it wasn't terribly far at all.

01-00:12:30

Hicks:

It was not very far at all.

01-00:12:31

Redman:

My understanding is that there was no running water in the village at first. Is that correct? And then later, there was? I mean, you would have been pretty small.

01-00:12:40

Hicks:

The first home that we had, the boxcar, we didn't have any running water. But down at the village itself, when we moved, there was running water and electricity in that.

- 01-00:12:54
 Redman: I'm interested in the village as well, and not just the boxcar, so I'm curious how long it was that you spent in the boxcar before moving to—a few years?
- 01-00:13:07
 Hicks: Maybe about a year. About a year, probably.
- 01-00:13:10
 Redman: So it wasn't a terribly long time.
- 01-00:13:12
 Hicks: No, not that I remember. I don't recall.
- 01-00:13:17
 Redman: Some of our oral histories have suggested—and it seems like you would be the perfect person to speak to this, because I'm interested in the relationship between the Laguna people and the Acoma people. Obviously, that relationship goes back a long time, but now you're putting them in sort of a new situation. You're putting these traditionally distinct people in a new situation. I've heard that the separate people would sometimes have different color boxcars. Some gray boxcars and some red boxcars. Do you remember if the people were separated in some sense by their ancestry? But it seems like your father, on the other hand, had relatives, and he was fluent in different cultures and different languages. As a child, were you told this group is different than this group, in a sense? How did you navigate that?
- 01-00:14:21
 Hicks: Actually, because I was of two tribes, I just never thought otherwise. I would go and play with the children on the Acoma side. The majority of the Laguna kids that were living in our village at that time would not go to the Acoma side. For me, I felt like I had the freedom to come and go.
- 01-00:14:51
 Redman: To what extent was that a formal separation versus just they didn't have any friends on the one side, whereas you had cousins on that other side that you can go play with? Or was it their parents telling them, don't go play with these other kids? To what degree was that a formal separation?
- 01-00:15:14
 Hicks: For my case, I think it was my upbringing. If we went to a fiesta, we never ran around. I would sit on one side; my cousin would sit on the other side. My grandmother would look across the plaza after the dances would cease, and she says, "That person sitting over there is your cousin," or is this clan, or that clan. In a way, she was telling us, if there was a boy cousin, she's trying to tell you, you don't mess with that clan. Like I said, only my cousin and I were playmates, so we didn't know anybody in the village, although I think I should have listened more. I should have paid more attention, and I regret to this day that I didn't pay a little bit more attention.

- 01-00:16:07
Redman: But as a child, you're sort of like, OK, grandma, this person's of one tribe, or this—
- 01-00:16:12
Hicks: Exactly. So in a sense, at the village, I didn't distinguish these people as Acoma, these people as Laguna. I just kind of mingled because of my upbringing.
- 01-00:16:23
Redman: There was an awareness, on your grandmother's side certainly, and presumably of your parents' generation, of those clan distinctions.
- 01-00:16:32
Hicks: Correct.
- 01-00:16:34
Redman: You, in some sense, wish you'd gotten all that extensive knowledge of who's in what clan. But that will come in again later, I think, in some ways. I'm interested in those themes going forward. How about languages? Can you tell me about languages that people spoke?
- 01-00:16:58
Hicks: My grandmother did not speak English. She spoke our language, and she spoke Spanish fluently. My language is the Keran language. My Laguna and Acoma language are almost identical, except the dialect is different. The Acoma people, they drag their words, I tell them, and the Laguna people are specific. I spoke the language and then I learned to speak English growing up, but that was always instilled in us. My parents spoke English when we were there. Amongst themselves, they spoke in their language. Although up to now, I understand my language fluently, but I cannot speak my language. At times, I'll sit here and I'll kind of, let me see, how can I say this word? I'll say a couple of words in Indian and I say, how am I going to finish it? I'm stuck.
- 01-00:18:09
Redman: But if someone else were to speak it, you would comprehend it?
- 01-00:18:12
Hicks: Oh, definitely, yes. When I go home during the summer, we can at least sit around and we talk. They talk Indian. I know what they're talking about, so I'll answer them in English.
- 01-00:18:25
Redman: I see, okay. It must have been an interesting moment in your upbringing, then, as far as the way you learned a language when you then started to transition to English. How about Spanish? To what extent were you taught Spanish?
- 01-00:18:45
Hicks: Poquito.

01-00:18:50

Redman:

We've also seen in some of our oral histories that people from different tribes gradually started adopting and blending different traditional foods and other things, like dancing. I was wondering if maybe you could speak to, as you were growing up, to what extent did people start adopting some of those traditions versus to what extent were they separate and distinct traditions? I'm curious about food and dancing in particular.

01-00:19:21

Hicks:

Actually, the dancing in the southwest is quite similar, but they have different varieties. They would have the deer dance. They would have the buffalo dance. They would have the eagle, the hoop dance. I think the hoop dance, more or less, was picked up from the Kiowas, in Oklahoma, the plains Indians, that type. Our pueblo dances are quite similar, although you get the Zunis in there. That's another tribe. Then you get the Hopis. That's a different tribe. The dances are not quite the same as in our community. The only time that the non-Indians cannot attend these dances is when there's a sacred dance. Earlier in life, when my sisters married non-Indians, then the husbands were not allowed to attend the dances at all. Even up to now, they cannot.

01-00:20:36

Redman:

Were there separate dances or separate get-togethers? You had mentioned at some of these events, your grandmother might point around a circle and explain to you how they related to you or to your family. Can you explain, were there particular ceremonies that were still distinct in terms of maybe a clan would get together, or maybe the Acoma people would get together, or the Laguna people would get together, or were there events where everyone would get together?

01-00:21:08

Hicks:

Actually, they took part in social-type dances, whether it's social or Indian dances. They participated with one another. But the only time they didn't participate was when the Acoma people had their government meetings, and the Lagunas had their government people. That's when they did not sit in at the meetings. But other social functions, they shared.

01-00:21:38

Redman:

Did you get the impression that the connections were still quite strong to both Laguna and Acoma in terms of—because you'd mentioned a governing meeting. I assume that that would mean governing the people that were there in Richmond. Your father also seemed to have connections to the village, and probably all of your family had some connections. I'm curious if those political and social connections were maintained to an extent, or was this sort of a separate thing now?

01-00:22:14

Hicks:

Well, probably separate, their political—the Laguna portion of it and also the Acoma portion of it. My parents were the ones that would participate. Mainly the men would go to the meetings and the women would not attend—well, I

don't know whether they were allowed at that time to even partake in any of the meetings. My dad would come and discuss issues. Us young folks, we listened, but that was it. So I didn't really quite understand the aspect of the governing portion of it.

01:00:22:54

Redman:

Yeah, sure, certainly. Also, when you were quite a young child, the Second World War starts. A lot of people start coming into the Bay Area from all over the country, including white folks from the South and from the Midwest, and African Americans from the South, especially. Did you have any early interactions with these types of people, or was it pretty isolated, in a sense, that you were mostly playing with other Indian kids?

01:00:23:28

Hicks:

It's funny, because although we lived in the village, it was like a private property, sort of. We weren't told that we couldn't associate outside the village. I, for one, I've always been outgoing, because my dad was very, very outgoing. So naturally, I didn't distinguish whether this person was orange, black, or purple. I just talked to people and got along with people. With my family, it wasn't like that. My dad, like I said, was very outgoing. My mother was kind of quiet. My dad was the one that would interact more. I don't know how the others felt, whether they felt that they were segregated. I never pictured myself in that sense.

01:00:24:27

Redman:

To what extent do you think you and your father, in terms of both of you bridged what could have been a cultural divide between different groups, to what extent was the outgoing nature playing a part in that, versus having ancestral blood from both of these peoples? It seems like you were able to freely go and play between both of those sides. To what degree was the fact that you had parents from different places or ancestries versus you were just an outgoing kid that liked to play with the other kids?

01:00:25:05

Hicks:

I guess I had both sides. I saw it from my dad's side and from the Laguna side. I'm going to jump forward. I went to boarding school. I spent certain holidays with my dad's side of the family, and certain functions I would do with my Laguna family. Even to mingle with the children in the boarding school—I could not say I didn't like that person. I spoke to them. If they didn't speak to me, fine. Still, up to now, I'm like that. I love people. I love to talk to people. I like to know where they're from. I like to know. So I think, in a sense, growing up, and my grandmother would say, "You talk to be people, and be nice. Always be nice to people, because in return, they will be nice to you." That sense. So that was embedded in us. Growing up, my sisters were different. My sisters were quite different. I was the oldest, and I think the obedient one. Wanted to set an example for my sisters while my sisters were just kind of—they were different. There's a five-year difference between

myself and my sister. Growing up, they had their own friends. My sisters were friends, and then I was alone. Well, not alone—

01-00:26:37

Redman: But you had the cousins that were your main—

01-00:26:38

Hicks: I had the cousins. Because I was in boarding school. I was in boarding school from the age of thirteen until I was a junior in high school.

01-00:26:50

Redman: I'd love to spend a lot of time with your boarding school experience, because that's obviously very significant. Turning back to the wartime, I'd like to ask about the living arrangements at the village. Did you have the impression of how many families were living in the village versus single men? I don't need an exact number. It seems like there were a fair number of other families living in the village.

01-00:27:17

Hicks: Approximately, maybe thirty. Probably thirty. Because each unit was occupied by a family. There were a couple of single men that were living there by themselves. Life just went on during the war. There were certain times that you could not leave your lights on, or you had shades over your windows, and you weren't allowed to play outside or go into town because of the war.

01-00:27:53

Redman: You would have been fairly young when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I'm curious if you sort of recall how that was explained to you as a small child, what your parents sort of said. That's a difficult thing to explain to a small child.

01-00:28:09

Hicks: I remember sitting around. We were eating dinner. At that time, I think the day after, then my dad tried to explain as simply as possible that the United States had gone into war because Japan had attacked Hawaii. At that time, I don't think they really fully understood themselves what caused this, except there was war between Japan or that type of thing. No, I don't recall. I don't recall that.

01-00:28:44

Redman: How about rationing? Do you recall anything like milk, meat, or gasoline to be hard to get as the war progressed, or is that something that your parents just took care of?

01-00:28:55

Hicks: I think each family were given a ration book, and we were only allowed to buy two pairs of shoes a year or something. As far as getting food, I don't recall ever having not go without any food, really. Again, going back, we were brought up without having any ice cream or soda and all that. We were

mainly raised on vegetables, and we had an abundance of fruits. With that idea, then the people at the village had their little gardens. We grew our own vegetables. As far as meat and everything, or milk, I don't think we really had a problem of buying them.

01-00:29:43

Redman: Was it your impression that the garden had started before the start of the war?

01-00:29:50

Hicks: Was it? I don't recall. The Acoma people used to have large gardens. They, I guess, were in that area first. But as the Laguna people came in, they had their little gardens, either in the backyard or—where did they have their garden? Probably in their backyard.

01-00:30:11

Redman: Did the Acoma people outnumber the Laguna people?

01-00:30:17

Hicks: I don't know. I don't think so.

01-00:30:20

Redman: But the Acoma had been established first?

01-00:30:24

Hicks: Correct, yes.

01-00:30:25

Redman: But then eventually, you think, the numbers about evened out?

01-00:30:28

Hicks: I think so, yes.

01-00:30:28

Redman: I see, okay. We had asked a little bit about the war. Obviously, this was something that was very difficult to explain to someone as young as you were. Did you have sort of a growing awareness about what the war was or what it meant? Basically, during the entire Second World War, was it all sort of this kind of distant concept that was a little confusing to understand as a child, or did you start to understand it a little more?

01-00:31:02

Hicks: The only thing that I tried to comprehend was that they had rounded up all the Japanese people. I remember the folks saying how sad it was that they had to be removed from their homes and transplanted to camps in every part of the U.S. That was the only thing that I knew.

01-00:31:26

Redman: From a child's perspective, that was sad, maybe because you could identify with families being taken away from their home, and that was a sad thing?

01:00:31:36

Hicks:

Probably so. I don't recall ever having anybody say that a child was taken from the reservation into a suburban-type area until much later. Maybe that was done. I don't remember.

01:00:32:03

Redman:

It's interesting to me that you maybe hadn't met very many Japanese kids yet at that point, because you were still fairly young, and, like you said, playing mostly with your cousins, but that sort of awareness that this thing was happening to the Japanese and that they were being taken to camps. Most of the adults that you overheard talking about it, or that talked to you about it, had said that this was a sad thing, or that they had said that this was an unfortunate thing?

01:00:32:33

Hicks:

Sad and unfortunate for the American people. My grandmother was very wise, but she had such compassion for the people, for the Japanese people. She didn't quite understand why that was being done, because her knowledge of English or reading comprehension wasn't there, so it was just what she had heard or people had translated to her. She would say, "How could we do that when we are all God's children?"

01:00:33:17

Redman:

I'm curious. That's a great way to put it, and it's an interesting way to put it, because it says to me that there was a religious understanding of it, in some sense, as everyone is God's children, as opposed to saying, these are Americans or American citizens. Do you feel like your grandmother felt herself an American, or was she primarily identifying with her tribe, or maybe identifying primarily as a Catholic person?

01:00:33:55

Hicks:

Probably she considered herself as a Native American or an American Indian at that time. I would assume she would consider herself as an American, but I don't remember her even taking that into—or never—

01:00:34:18

Redman:

Specifically citing that.

01:00:34:20

Hicks:

Exactly, yeah.

01:00:34:25

Redman:

I'm curious if the kids were ever scared or worried living on the West Coast of a possible direct attack from the Japanese, or do you remember not necessarily being fearful of something like that? Thinking of the blackouts and some of the things that—

01:00:34:45

Hicks:

I guess I wasn't very fearful. But anyway, it never occurred to me that the Japanese people, or any other people that we were at war with, would come. I

don't know. I never looked at it in that aspect of it. Maybe because my parents would say, "That's not going to happen. We are so protected by the Americans." Other than that, I don't remember. I don't recall.

01-00:35:23

Redman:

Let me ask about your parents, actually. A follow-up question to the question that I asked about your grandmother. The way you had phrased that, "We're protected by the Americans." How about your father? Did your father primarily think of himself as an Indian as well, as opposed to saying, I'm an American? Or was it both? To what extent was his identity, do you think, blending these worlds?

01-00:35:49

Hicks:

Probably his whole idea was that he was an American, and he was a Native American or American Indian.

01-00:36:01

Redman:

It sounds to me that that generation, then—your parent's generation—identified more strongly, in some sense, with their American citizenship or being an American than had the previous generation. That it had, obviously, a lot of problems with even becoming a citizen then.

01-00:36:18

Hicks:

Exactly. Probably in the sense, too, because my uncle was serving in the Navy at that time. Fortunately, he didn't get sent overseas. The war had ended at that time, so he was more or less stateside, down in San Bernardino.

01-00:36:39

Redman:

I'm going to jump ahead a little bit, and then I want to jump back to the end of the war. I was going to ask you to recall how the soldiers who came back were treated. I was curious about the concept of Native Americans serving in the military, because this is obviously a very powerful and important tradition for a lot of native peoples to do this day, living in the U.S. In particular, around the time of the war, there was this growing myth or legend or story about, in particular, people like the Navajo code talkers, who were seen as these great heroes during the war, and their service was recognized as that. Do you feel that people who served, in particular Native Americans who served, were revered in some sense? Or did you not really pick up on that at that early of an age?

01-00:37:42

Hicks:

There were Native Americans that did serve in different branches of the service. The people from each village, or whoever had a son or a brother in the service, I guess respected them for that. My family, because my uncle was in the service, we had these little flags. If you had one star or two stars, that represented the number of persons in the service. I don't recall the village people ever really discussing that, other than they would honor them at different dances, or if they came home and released from the services.

- 01-00:38:28
Redman: So then, at that time, they would have some sort of recognition in a ceremony or at a dance or get together?
- 01-00:38:35
Hicks: Correct.
- 01-00:38:38
Redman: Let's go back. There's a question that you may or may not have an answer to. In 1944, there was a massive explosion at a place called Port Chicago, near Concord, California. Do you remember that event at all? I've heard from some folks that it shook windows and broke glass as far away as Berkeley, but some people don't recall it.
- 01-00:39:00
Hicks: No, I do not. I do not remember that, until long afterwards.
- 01-00:39:05
Redman: Right, long afterwards you'd heard about that, okay. How about the dropping of the atomic bombs? Do you remember hearing, when the war came to an end, that maybe Germany had surrendered, and then later that the Japanese had surrendered, and that the bombs had been dropped on two cities?
- 01-00:39:22
Hicks: There were a lot of old folks, like my grandmother, and they were not too vocal or very knowledgeable about situations like that. Only what my parents would tell my grandmother. In return, they said the bomb was dropped. Of course, my grandmother had no idea where it was dropped, other than it killed so many people and there was radiation and all of that. But I don't remember. I don't recall.
- 01-00:39:47
Redman: So this was something that was more just described in terms of current events? Your parents didn't seem to have strong feelings about this, necessarily?
- 01-00:39:56
Hicks: No.
- 01-00:39:57
Redman: Did your dad talk about work and what his life was like at work, and whether or not he enjoyed work at all or enjoyed the other men at work or anything like that?
- 01-00:40:09
Hicks: Yeah, my dad really enjoyed work, as a matter of fact. As a child, I would go up and take his lunch. He would have me sit there with his coworkers, or the men, and the men would talk to me. Of course, my dad was one of them, and because I was the eldest. He would tell them that I was his daughter and I was

the oldest and all that. Yeah, my dad was very vocal, and he got along really well with people. He made friends very easily.

01-00:40:40

Redman: It sounds like he's one of those guys that going to work is fun because it's like you get to spend time with your friends.

01-00:40:46

Hicks: Exactly.

01-00:40:48

Redman: It's neat that you would get to go to work every once in a while. That's a cool thing for a dad to do. I'm curious about what your recollections, then, of going to work and seeing these other men and sitting and eating lunch with them and sort of hearing them talk over lunch. Was that a particularly—

01-00:41:05

Hicks: It was kind of fun for me. Like I said, it wasn't very far. Probably about a quarter of a mile from the village. Just walking from the house and taking my dad's lunch. My mother always put in half a sandwich or a fruit of some sort, so naturally I sat there at the table, next to my dad, and the men there would talk to me, or they would tease me. After lunch, then I would take my dad's lunchbox and go home.

01-00:41:36

Redman: Would your mom maybe pack a little lunch for you as well, or had you maybe already eaten lunch?

01-00:41:42

Hicks: I think she would put in an apple or an orange. Just something to sit so I can have lunch with my dad.

01-00:41:51

Redman: It's interesting. You mentioned fruit a couple of times. Fruit and vegetables. How big of a role that played, in some sense, as far as your early food. I've heard as well of people eating different kinds of sweet bread and sweet pudding, and then also fry bread is this major tradition, in some sense. Do you remember those foods as well? It seems like an extremely healthy diet. I'm actually kind of envious of all of the fruits and vegetables that you were eating.

01-00:42:29

Hicks: Well, let's see. Again, I'm going back to my early childhood, living at the village. We had a garden. We had an abundance of all kinds of vegetables. I think carrots and fruits. We had pears, peaches, cherries. We had melons of all sorts, and corn and all. Once a month, I believe, we would go from our house. They would call it irrigation day. People that owned a plot for their vegetables would go and they had to irrigate. My grandmother would take my cousin and I. She would pack a little lunch, mainly bread or a tortilla or something. We'd go up, as children, and we'd just pull the weeds while she actually did the

irrigating. During lunchtime, she would go over and pick some carrots, wipe it on her apron, and give it to us. Or peas. Like I said, we had an abundance of vegetables to eat. Up to now, I love vegetables, whether they're cooked or raw. The only thing that we didn't have at that time was sugar. We had a lot of tea. We drank a lot of wild tea. My grandmother would take us out for walks, and she would go and she would know where the teas were. She would pull them off the branches, bushes, and then she would take them home and we'd put them in little knots. She would store those. We drank our tea without sugar. So I didn't know what candy was, I didn't know what soda pop was or anything, until much later. It was always a treat. I remember the nurses would come to the village and they would give us castor oil to drink. Anyway, the nurses would give us two little pieces of Hershey or a slice of orange after that castor. I can't stand castor oil.

01-00:44:42

Redman:

Oh, man, okay. That's interesting. I was curious about health care. At the shipyards, I know people were given health plans. So nurses would periodically come to the village to check on people and the children?

01-00:45:00

Hicks:

Down here in Richmond?

01-00:45:01

Redman:

Yeah.

01-00:45:02

Hicks:

Did they do that? They were giving out TB shots, that kind of thing. I'm not quite sure. I think my dad had a Kaiser plan at that time. The people that didn't have any health plan would go to the county. They used to have a clinic. They would go.

01-00:45:27

Redman:

How about starting school? How old were you when you started school? The boarding school comes when you're thirteen, you'd said. You started some school before then?

01-00:45:39

Hicks:

I started probably when I was five years old. I started at Peres Elementary. All the kids from the village went to Peres. So we walked from the village to Peres School on Pennsylvania Avenue, and brought our lunch and mingled with the children. One thing that I recall, the Indian children kind of stuck together. I had little friends that were of different nationality. So I had little friends. At that time, Peres School had just a handful of black kids that came from North Richmond. I recall three of them that were really good friends. I don't know if they're still around. There was a brother and sister. Their last name was Stokes. Then there was one girl, one African American girl. She was a really pretty girl. Her name was Dallas. Those were my friends. Then I had friends that were—twins that were Anglo. Then I had my neighbor, who was Native American. She was Laguna. But other than that, I didn't really

mingle with the Indian children. It's really unusual. My sister says, "Yeah, you were just odd." I wanted to meet people. I wanted to know people.

01-00:47:10

Redman: Let's conclude this tape by my asking you about the other kids that you were meeting from these different races, these different backgrounds, experiences. What was that like for you? Was that an exciting thing? It seems like you got along pretty well with everyone.

01-00:47:29

Hicks: I won't say it was exciting. We just took it for granted that we met and we played as children, we befriended one another. I would go to their homes, maybe after school, if I was allowed to. Then special friends would come down to the village, if their parents allowed them to. It was that type of thing. It was nice. I really enjoyed it.

01-00:47:58

Redman: By this time, when you'd started school, the village had been constructed and you had moved into a more permanent home, is that correct?

01-00:48:07

Hicks: Yes.

01-00:48:11

Redman: Tell me a little bit more about going to school in terms of what were the teachers like? Do you remember any of your grammar school teachers?

01-00:48:18

Hicks: Oh, yes. There was a teacher, her name was Mrs. Darby. I remember her so well. As a matter of fact, just a couple years ago, she died at the age of either ninety-nine or a hundred. I remember this woman coming in—she always had her hair up and she always wore this navy-blue polka-dot dress. There was another kindergarten teacher. What was her name? Mrs. Darby or something like that. I had no problems with them. Although when I first started, when my mother took me to school, I didn't want to leave. I was carrying a lunchbox and I didn't want to go into the classroom. I was screaming. I dropped my lunchbox. My fruits came out. My sandwich fell out. I wanted to go home. My mother said I couldn't go home. Said I had to go into the classroom. We sat there. Of course, all the other children were crying, too. [laughter]

01-00:49:18

Redman: Exactly. That first day of school is a bit terrifying.

01-00:49:24

Hicks: Gradually, we ran out of tears. Our mothers just kind of snuck out. Then after that, it was just like, that's not a big deal.

01-00:49:35

Redman: Exactly, and then everything is fine. I assume your parents made a decision to send you to a boarding school. Is that correct?

01-00:49:50

Hicks: No, it was actually my decision.

01-00:49:53

Redman: Is that right? Okay.

01-00:49:54

Hicks: My cousin, Albert, the one that I grew up with, he used to talk about AIS. My cousin at that time was living in Albuquerque. My uncle was working at the hospital. My cousin would say, "I went to a boarding school in Albuquerque and it's fantastic. You get to go to the movies, to the games. You go off campus" and all that. He got my interest up, so I thought I wanted to go. My parents didn't say I could not go or they said I had to go; it was my decision, because I wanted to go. The first thing my dad says—he kept saying, "Are you sure you want to go?" I said, "Yes, dad." He says, "If you get lonesome, let us know and we'll send a ticket and you can come home." But I didn't. I had just turned thirteen, I guess. Got there, didn't know anybody at the school. It was coeducational.

01-00:50:48

Redman: What was the name of the school? This is in Albuquerque?

01-00:50:50

Hicks: It was Albuquerque Indian School. It was an Indian school. I remember standing there in front of the bulletin board, reading all these notices, until one girl came up and she got a hold of me. She says, "Oh, hi. I'm your cousin." I looked at her and I didn't know who she was. She explained that she's my cousin because my mother and her mother were half-sisters. That family lived in Tucson. The girl had three sisters, and they all came from Tucson to go to school in Albuquerque. That's how I met this girl.

01-00:51:29

Redman: Did you make friends, then? I'm curious if the school lived up to the expectations that your cousin had set.

01-00:51:41

Hicks: I was in the seventh grade, so I couldn't go off campus, because my parents said I could not leave campus. The only time I could leave campus was if my uncle or my aunt or my grandmother came up and checked me out for the weekend and brought me back to the school. They actually had to come down physically and import and export me out. I didn't regret that. I thought that was fine, because I went to the football games. We had a canteen. Although, like I said, it was coeducational, the girls' campus was on one side, the boys' campus on the other, so we couldn't cross over to the boys. The boys could, if you had a boyfriend. If they had a girlfriend, then they could come on our side, but the girls were not allowed to go on the boys' side. We were kids. We

didn't know anything about dating or the opposite sex. It was fun. I had a great time. Until I was a freshman, then I could go into town with permission from the girls' advisor. If you wanted to go and do some shopping, you had to leave at a certain time and come back at a certain time.

01-00:52:54

Redman:

It sounds like it was a good experience overall for a school.

01-00:52:59

Hicks:

Very good. I learned how to take care of myself, to do my laundry. It was fantastic. I really enjoyed it. Also, during my sophomore year, if you wanted to, you could go off campus and work. I came from a family of seven kids and I felt that I didn't want to put my parents in a situation where they had to send me money—although they did send me money. Back then, five dollars was like fifty dollars. So I thought, well, I'm going to go to work. So I signed up to work. I was really fortunate. I worked when I was in the tenth and the eleventh grade. I was fortunate enough to work with people that—all I had to do was baby-sit. That was all. Some girls went off campus and they did housecleaning and all that, but for the two years I was there, I just baby-sat. I worked for one lady, who lived in a little miniature mansion, and she had two dogs, two poodles, and that was my thing. I had to just walk the dogs.

01-00:54:11

Redman:

Take care of the dogs, okay.

01-00:54:14

Hicks:

She was the owner of a department store, almost similar to our Marcus Neiman store. She would go back to New York and do her shopping and bring the clothing back to her store in Albuquerque. So each time she was away for weeks at a time, she would always put the key under the mat, and I would go down and get myself in and just take the dogs for a walk.

01-00:54:39

Redman:

Wow, okay. It sounds like a good job.

01-00:54:40

Hicks:

Because she had a housekeeper, too, so I didn't have to wash dishes. If she was there, she would just say, "Bertha, come and sit by me." So we'd sit and she would talk. I would brush her hair and she would tell me stories. She says, "Why don't you stay for the summer, and you can work at my store?" But my parents didn't want me to. But each time she went back East, she always brought me a little gift.

01-00:55:07

Redman:

Is that right?

01-00:55:08

Hicks:

She had one daughter that was going to Sarah Lawrence. It was fun. It was really good. She was one of these ladies that always had a party, a big social party. She would have lots of food leftover, and before I would go back to

school, she'd say, "Bertha, make yourself a couple of sandwiches. Take them back and share them with your girlfriends."

01-00:55:28

Redman: Oh, wow. Yeah, that's wonderful.

01-00:55:30

Hicks: And she gave me good money.

01-00:55:32

Redman: Yeah, it seems like a good job. All right, with that, I'm going to stop this tape, and we'll go onto the next.

Begin Audio File 2 hicks_bertha_02_05-24-11

02-00:00:06

Redman: All right. This is my second tape today with Bertha Hicks. It's May 24, 2011, and we're at her home in Richmond, California. My name is Sam Redman, and this is the second tape of our interview today. Now, on the second tape, we'll be talking about her life following the war. In particular, you were mentioning off tape that your relationships back home in Richmond had changed when you would come back. After the academic year at the boarding school, you'd come back and relationships were a bit different. Can you describe to me how that was the case?

02-00:00:46

Hicks: I would come back for the summer. I tried to pick up the relationship with the girls at the village, but they just sort of—I don't know how should I say it. I guess the girls at the village stuck together. They didn't want to go out. They were always within themselves. So when I came back, because I had all this open relationships with all the girls from different villages that were Indian and non-Indian at boarding school, so when I came back to them—I don't know what the reaction was, but they didn't talk to me, except this one girl that was my neighbor. She and I were friends. I would never get included into their little social get togethers. My girlfriend would take me along and they'd just kind of whisper. Of course it didn't bother me. I stayed, and if I wanted to leave, then I left. But it was just this strangeness, because as children, we all played together, but then when I went away to school and came back, they just said, oh, I don't know her.

02-00:02:03

Redman: All the kids were Indian at the boarding school, or the vast majority, or maybe all of them?

02-00:02:07

Hicks: Mmhmm, yeah.

- 02-00:02:10
Redman: To what extent did kids of different tribes intermingle at the school? It seems like everybody intermingled based on what you'd said earlier, but did they pair off based on—
- 02-00:02:23
Hicks: They paired off primarily with their village people. The Navajo people would stay with one another, and then the Zunis and the Hopis would always kind of mingle. With the girls that became friends, I had friends that were from different villages, Laguna villages. I had a couple of friends that were Apaches. We all kind of hung around. And from the northern pueblos. It wasn't like I stuck with my village group. I just kind of mingled with everybody else.
- 02-00:03:02
Redman: But some kids did.
- 02-00:03:04
Hicks: Yes, definitely.
- 02-00:03:05
Redman: Would you say a lot of kids did?
- 02-00:03:07
Hicks: Yes, a majority of them did.
- 02-00:03:11
Redman: One of the ways I've heard Native American history described is that, prior to what's known as the American Indian Movement, a lot of people did exactly that. They would stick within their tribe, and that was their main sort of political group. Then when people did things like moved into the cities, following the Second World War, in the 1950s especially, they started to intermingle with other Indians from other tribes, and the political awareness sort of changed. There suddenly was this Indian identity that stretched beyond the tribe that related to other Indians. I'm just curious if you have thoughts at that stage in your life, in terms of people identifying you as Indian versus Laguna versus Acoma, because you were kind of straddling those worlds anyway in terms of tribal distinction. Can you describe that for me a little?
- 02-00:04:15
Hicks: A mentor—I had a home ec teacher at boarding school, and she was of the San Juan Pueblo tribe. She always talked to me. She would always tell me, "Bertha, you don't live on a reservation. You're from California." She would say, "Try and better yourself. Try and do a bigger picture instead of just putting blinders on. There are more people than just Indian people there. Spread yourself." With that in mind, I just kind of take that. And because of my different upbringing, I just kind of mingled with all people.

- 02-00:05:00
Redman: You had mentioned in particular that the teacher had said to you, "You're from California." You maybe hadn't been aware of the fact that, hey, you'd had an opportunity to play with kids that were black and kids that were white and kids that were Indian from other tribes, whereas maybe many of these kids had only played with—
- 02-00:05:23
Hicks: Their Indians, yes.
- 02-00:05:25
Redman: Do you think, then, that really influences their lives later on?
- 02-00:05:30
Hicks: I imagine so. There was one teacher. She was a military at one time. I was in one of her history classes. The first day in class, she came around and she introduced herself, of course, and she wanted us to introduce ourselves. So I told her, and she says, "Where are you from?" I told her I'm from Richmond, California. She looked at me. She says, "What are you doing here?" My first reaction, "Going to school." Then she says, "Well, why not public school?" All I said was I wanted to go to Indian School. That was it. But I'll never forget that. Later in time, she and I became friends. She was very, very helpful.
- 02-00:06:21
Redman: To what extent were your teachers—their backgrounds were mixed or were they primarily Anglo?
- 02-00:06:30
Hicks: At boarding school?
- 02-00:06:31
Redman: Yeah.
- 02-00:06:32
Hicks: There was a mixture. There was a mixture of teachers. We had Anglo teachers that were in history and math and English. That's where I think a lot of the teachers were very good from that sense. The Native teachers primarily were in art, the Indian type, weaving and stuff.
- 02-00:07:01
Redman: So you would take classes in more traditional artistic practices as well?
- 02-00:07:06
Hicks: If you wanted to. It wasn't required.
- 02-00:07:09
Redman: And you did take some of those classes, then, or maybe not?

02-00:07:14

Hicks:

I took silkscreen, and I'm not an artist, so I had the hardest time trying to create an Indian design. We were supposed to create an Indian design, and females were going to make a dress and put the silkscreen on their clothing someplace. Well, I didn't have any idea what to do, so I thought, well, I'm going to start with a cowboy boot, or cowboy shoes. I thought, how am I going to do this? Until this lady, she was a Navajo lady, so she looked at me like, what are you doing with these cowboy boots? I said, "I don't know what to do." So she kind of gave me an idea of how to do it. So all I remember is—I'm going to put all these cowboy boots around my dress.

02-00:08:00

Redman:

Let's talk just for one moment about—you'd mentioned you put down a cowboy boot. It seems like kind of a Western image. You're there in the West. You often see Indians wearing Western gear, in terms of the ten gallon hat, or today, the cowboy boots. I'm curious about the mixing of traditional Indian designs with the cowboy culture of the West in terms of designs like that. It makes sense to me that you'd put down a cowboy boot as your first sort of reaction. I'm just kind of curious about that.

02-00:08:50

Hicks:

I don't know. Actually, I don't know why I did that. As a matter of fact, I have a friend—I'm going forward now—and we were talking and he was saying, "Bertha, I used to go to Western movies, cowboys and Indians." He said, "Who did you root for?" I said, "I rooted for the cowboys." And he looked at me. He said, "What? You're Native American and you rooted for the cowboys?" And I said yeah.

02-00:09:19

Redman:

It's sort of in the culture, then, in some sense, that cowboys were to be admired, I guess. It's kind of a confusing thing. Several years, then, later, the Civil Rights Movement really starts to gain steam for African Americans. Historians have argued that rights movement for minorities were linked to the experiences of the war, and in particular, historians have pointed to a campaign that was called the Double Victory Campaign. In particular, African Americans were arguing that they were serving in the military to fight against fascism abroad and racism at home. Did you notice any of this type of politics, either in terms of very early on, when the war is going, or after the war? These civil rights movements maybe go seemingly dormant for a few years before Martin Luther King starts really making headway, and some prominent other African American leaders in the South. Tell me about this idea of minority rights in terms of your life. Do you think that that was introduced early on, or was that something that you weren't really aware of for a while?

02-00:10:36

Hicks:

Probably not too aware of. As a young kid, I didn't see that many African Americans in uniform in Richmond. I didn't realize that there was a majority of African Americans that were working at the shipyard until I just recently

started hearing things about it. My husband is a teacher. He's a historian, history buff, and so I ask him. I said, "I don't remember. I don't even recall that there were African Americans that were at the shipyard." I didn't see them on the streets on MacDonald Avenue when I was a child growing up. During the Martin Luther [King] era, it just never really occurred to me. I just kind of blended everything else into it. I wasn't against him, I wasn't really for him, or I wanted to understand.

02-00:11:50

Redman: It didn't really relate to your life?

02-00:11:51

Hicks: It didn't really relate.

02-00:11:57

Redman: Now let's fast forward a little bit. You graduate from high school. About what year was that?

02-00:12:07

Hicks: I left Indian School. I transferred out from Albuquerque to Richmond High, and I graduated in 1956 from Richmond High.

02-00:12:18

Redman: What did you do, then, following that? Let me ask a question, because Richmond, the story there that I've been told is that it really changed rapidly after the war. That a lot of people lost their jobs at the shipyards, and then there was sort of this decay of the city. In some sense, it became more violent. There was more crime. Did you get that impression, that you were moving back to a different place than the place that you had grown up?

02-00:12:49

Hicks: Not really, because when the war ended, then a lot of the Native American men lost their jobs. The majority of them went back to their reservations as we stayed. My dad stayed. My dad passed away. He died very young. My mother stayed—lived at the village for a while longer until she purchased a house.

02-00:13:13

Redman: Back in—

02-00:13:15

Hicks: Here in Richmond. Here in San Pablo. So we never went back, although she'd had a home back there.

02-00:13:23

Redman: That's a two-part question, then. Why did your dad choose to stay? Do you have any sort of inkling why he chose to stay, when so many other men were turning to—

- 02-00:13:32
Hicks: I think primarily because he wanted education for my younger sisters. He didn't want to take us back to the reservation at that time. What can you do? What was he going to do?
- 02-00:13:46
Redman: So he felt like there were more opportunities here?
- 02-00:13:48
Hicks: Exactly.
- 02-00:13:50
Redman: And that if the kids could get an education—
- 02-00:13:52
Hicks: Yes, then they could go forward.
- 02-00:13:59
Redman: From the late fifties and then into the early sixties, you were in this area, in Richmond?
- 02-00:14:05
Hicks: Let's see. From '50 to '55, I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Then from '56 on, then I was here in Richmond.
- 02-00:14:22
Redman: Maybe if we could jump ahead a little bit, then what did you do for work, or did you do more school then after that?
- 02-00:14:30
Hicks: Actually, what I did was I got married young, very young. My husband had his whole life planned. He wanted to go back to Flagstaff. He's a Navajo, full blood Navajo. He wanted to go back and get his degree in education, so he and I moved back to Flagstaff. We lived there for three years.
- 02-00:14:51
Redman: And he attended Northern Arizona University?
- 02-00:14:53
Hicks: Exactly. He went through three years and he graduated. Then he was given a position as a teacher in a little school on the reservation. We came out here for Easter, visiting my parents. He had met someone that said there were openings here in the school district, so he signed up and that's how we came back. I never really wanted to leave California. When he came back, then he started working and I looked for a job. I was hired in San Francisco, working at an insurance company. I didn't have any experience, because in Flagstaff, when he was going to school, I tried to get a job, but the only jobs there were primarily for college students. I worked in a motel for two weeks and I couldn't take that. I worked in the cafeteria, serving food to the students. I thought, that's not my life. So when I came back, then I got the job in San Francisco. I worked there for, what, five years. Then I saw an advertisement

in the newspaper and they said there was another position with another insurance company, Chubb and Son, also in San Francisco. So I applied and I got hired right off the bat. I worked there ten years in the accounting department as a bookkeeper.

Then my husband took a leave of absence, a sabbatical, went back to the reservation and was a superintendent of schools. My daughter and I went out to Arizona to be with him. I worked in a little trading post on the reservation, selling Indian jewelry. I didn't know anything about Indian jewelry. The trader there liked me well enough. Every time he talked to me, he would encourage me to learn about certain pieces of jewelry and turquoise that came from this area or that area. So the more I learned, the more money he gave me. I worked there for a year, and then there was a principal at the school that knew of a job that Bechtel was starting up. So I got an interview with the manager, and it was in a little hole-in-the-wall place called Navajo, where we only had one restaurant and one gas station, and the engineers were living in trailers. I went in for an interview and talked to a group of engineers and the managers, and these guys were people from San Ramon or from Walnut Creek, and we got to talk. I told them I was so homesick that I wanted to come back, so the manager at that time says, "You can't do that. We need an administrator." He said, "Would you be willing to work for us?" I said sure. I said, "I'll get out of that trading post." So that's how I got hired on.

I worked there for a year. The Bechtel projects usually are just for a year. They were working on the—what is it?—Coronado Railroad. We were building a railroad from Navajo down to Saint Johns, the generating station. When my year was up, then my manager called our San Francisco office and said, "I have this lady that I want you to create a job for her, because I'm transferring her back to San Francisco." I took him up.

02-00:18:30

Redman:

So then did your husband come back with you?

02-00:18:33

Hicks:

No, he applied for another job, in a place called Tuba City on the Navajo reservation. He was then superintendent of schools. My daughter and I were with him, but I told my husband, "I don't want to live on the reservation." And because I had a contract with Bechtel to start working in August, my daughter and I packed up and moved back. From then on, I started working for Bechtel, back in 1977, until I retired thirty years ago.

02-00:19:05

Redman:

Wow, okay. Oh my goodness. So quite a career there. That's interesting. So you would have been back in the Southwest during the occupation of Alcatraz Island, which took place between 1969 and 1971. Now, to what extent do you think this bold action was a result of inspiration from other rights movements or power movements, or was this something that was new and surprising to you, that this had taken place?

02-00:19:33

Hicks:

Actually, years ago, we were part of the Indian movement, or the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland. We had, at that time, a council. What was it called? Bay Area Indian Council. My husband became president. So at that time when Alcatraz was just coming to attention, some of the men that were part of the members in Oakland went to Alcatraz, along with my husband. He didn't live there, but they would go there to visit and all. Many of the Indians that occupied, they were primarily probably from the Dakotas. They were more aggressive in that sense. But because my husband and other managerial type people had positions or jobs, they couldn't afford to live at Alcatraz.

02-00:20:24

Redman:

It's interesting, because so many of those individuals, the Dakota individuals, had moved to places like Minneapolis and Chicago, and sort of their activist mentality gained steam, but they chose this place in the San Francisco Bay Area. But from what I'm hearing from you, the activists living in San Francisco themselves may not have been as aggressive or may not have been as bold in trying to do something like take over a major landmark like that.

02-00:21:10

Hicks:

Exactly. Although they were saying that it was government property and it should legally belong to the Native Americans, but what can you do? You have to have funds to establish anything in that sense.

02-00:21:30

Redman:

Your husband's reaction—he went out there a couple times to visit, but was his reaction generally positive, or was his reaction critical at all? Did he think that this was too bold of an action, or too aggressive of an action?

02-00:21:42

Hicks:

Probably a mixture. He saw it, to a certain extent, while others were more gung-ho on it. What he tried to do was kind of, OK, if we did this, what's going to happen if we go this route? He tried to analyze the whole situation. But to do that amongst other men that are of different tribes, they didn't really accept that. They wanted to do it this way, not this way. They didn't want any, any, any white interference or that type of thing. They wanted all Indian. I couldn't see that. I couldn't see that, because I wasn't brought up with Indian people. So I couldn't understand why they wanted to do that. Well, it probably would be a good idea if it was a museum of some sort. Where are you going to get the funds for it? You have to get government approval. Because by then, I was working with money, so looking at that standpoint. The people that were really for it were the Dakota people, and they were more pushing for that in any route they can go.

02-00:23:02

Redman:

What I was going to say is that following the '69 to '71 occupation, American Indian activism in cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, Denver, and this area gained steam and popular attention. But fish-ins had been critical to the assertion of Native American rights, but this must have felt like something

new at the time, seeing as how fish-ins were primarily a Pacific Northwest mode of activism, and that the Dakota people had their own sort of traditions of activism. But in the Southwest, it was maybe a little different of a tradition. Then, certainly your experience, it seems like you, in some sense, couldn't identify with the fervency of the activism of some of the Dakota people, and you also saw some sort of problems with reality, basic problems with fundraising and how are we going to really make this change happen. I'm curious if you could sort of describe your feelings about these movements and how it was coming together a little bit more.

02-00:24:15

Hicks:

I don't really have any true feelings about it. I wasn't involved with the Indian organizations. The only portion of the organization that I was involved with—we had our Navajo Club, and Navajo Club catered to the Navajo people. We raised money for sports. We raised money to help people with their housing or relocation type of things, because the majority of the Indian people that came out here came through the relocation. Primarily the Navajo people, when they came from the reservation through relocation, my husband and I would go to the apartments where they were actually being settled, and these apartments were unbelievable. I don't understand why the Indian agency would put people with a family in situations as bad—

02-00:25:10

Redman:

In such bad living—okay. I'm curious. Seeing as how your husband was full Navajo—you weren't expected to relinquish your tribal—your name, still, on the census would have been—

02-00:25:30

Hicks:

Correct.

02-00:25:31

Redman:

Okay, as Laguna.

02-00:25:36

Hicks:

My two boys are on the Navajo census. My daughter is a no-man, she says. She is one independent child. We're Catholics. Got married. Everything brought as Catholic. She got baptized in the Catholic Church. She didn't want to go to catechism, while my boys did. Her thing is, I go to this denomination, that denomination. I want to what the whole denomination looks like in churches—religious services. I tell her, "Tanya, you're Catholic." She says, "Mom, I go." So now she's going with friends to a church in San Francisco, to a Lutheran church.

02-00:26:26

Redman:

Okay, so she's kind of experimented with different things. That's great. I would like to ask another sort of religious question, then, along with that. There's the tradition, of course, of Catholicism that's strong. Oh, let me just very quickly finish my last question. What I wanted to get at was if there were any issues with you volunteering on behalf of the Navajo, having come from a

different ancestry, or were people just simply happy to have someone to help out? Or was there any sort of tension there on any of these volunteer organizations or anything like that?

02-00:27:08

Hicks:

I think when we first started going, people kind of looked at me and said, who's this woman? Because the Navajo people that came were married to Navajos, and my husband and I were two different tribes. It took them quite a long time to get used to me, the Navajo ladies, or even the men were kind of shy and they wouldn't talk to me.

02-00:27:33

Redman:

Do you think the reaction would have been similar if you had been Anglo or if you had been, say, a black woman? If the reaction would have been any stronger or different?

02-00:27:46

Hicks:

I'm sure it would have been different. I'm sure it would have been different, yes.

02-00:27:49

Redman:

On some level, you were Indian, but on another level, you're not Navajo, so it takes a little time, maybe. But eventually, they did come to accept you?

02-00:28:01

Hicks:

Right, right. They did. But you know, in all the years that I've been working, I present myself as Bertha Hicks. I didn't have to put a name brand—I'm Laguna, I'm Acoma. So I never really told anybody or said anything unless it came up. People would say, "What nationality are you?" and then I would, at that time, "Well, I'm Native American. I'm of two tribes." They would be like, "Oh, you are? You don't look Indian." They would say, "You look more Polynesian" or "You look more Spanish." That was nice, you know. But no, I've never had to really defend myself as far as race for anything.

02-00:28:39

Redman:

Interesting. So the next question is related to religion, but then taking it of a different turn. My understanding is that a number of American Indians in this era were inspired by the activism in cities, but these were city kids. They've grown up in urban areas, and then many of them were sort of inspired to go back to the reservation and sort of try to learn—and I'm going to put this in quotes—"traditional ways." My understanding is that sometimes the older folks would roll their eyes a little bit. Here are these young kids trying to learn these things. But they also appreciated the fact that they were absorbing traditional songs and dances and other things. But one of the things that related to was the mind-altering substance of peyote, and the so-called Native American Church that's formed in this period. Can you tell me if you had any impressions of peyote as a drug or a symbol of Native American religion, and then freedom? The fact that it's been guarded as a form of religious freedom, in a sense.

02-00:29:45

Hicks: Actually, I had no idea what peyote was at that time. People would say, or the Navajo people mainly, they'd say, "Oh, he went home because of this peyote thing." I said, "What is peyote anyway?" It was a drug, some sort of a drug. My family never even mentioned it, because we were always brought up—there was no drugs or alcohol involved in our family. I would never have a glass of wine in front of my kids, or smoke in front of my kids. Up to now, I will not do that. I will not do that. It's just the upbringing that we had. I had no idea what peyote was. So I didn't really fully understand until I got older. People would talk about that.

02-00:30:35

Redman: But people maybe did mention it on reservations pretty early, you would say?

02-00:30:42

Hicks: Not that much on my reservation. Not that much.

02-00:30:44

Redman: So this was mainly only something that would come up in the sixties and seventies, even?

02-00:30:48

Hicks: Probably, yeah. I think at that time, if anybody mentioned it, they'd just kind of roll their eyes. Didn't have any knowledge of it. But I don't recall ever even talking with my family or relatives—that subject ever came up. It was mainly alcohol.

02-00:31:09

Redman: That was the main substance that people would abuse, definitely.

02-00:31:11

Hicks: Exactly.

02-00:31:13

Redman: Can you talk about alcohol and the troubles that people have had with it in some of the reservations that you were familiar with, and at the times that you were there? Was it a major problem that people were still fighting against?

02-00:31:25

Hicks: Even up to now. I'm talking primarily about the Navajo people. So much drinking. As a matter of fact, my granddaughter is on a scholarship, and her thing is that she wants to work next summer on the Navajo reservation to work with the alcohol abuse adults and students.

02-00:31:48

Redman: Obviously, the Navajo, it's a major space. There are a number of people there and it's got a lot of complex political problems. What are some of your thoughts on what they're facing as they head into the twenty-first century, based on your history of working with them, stretching back to the seventies and sixties?

02-00:32:17

Hicks:

Probably the main thing that brings on the alcoholism is jobs. There's no jobs on the reservation. A lot of them don't want to leave the reservation. Those that did come out from the reservation and spent time in the Bay Area would get so lost in it, and they couldn't survive, so they always ended up going back to the reservation, but to what? Some were lucky enough to find jobs, and some were lucky enough to go to school and get their education, but a lot of them just fell to death by alcohol.

02-00:32:58

Redman:

So you think a lot of folks unintentionally, and perhaps even with good intentions, made the mistake of they couldn't really get along in the Bay Area and decided to go back home when there were some opportunities here that they maybe wouldn't have had, as far as jobs, at the reservation? It's a tricky situation, because I can understand people being homesick and wanting to have the traditional life, but on the other hand, you see the opportunities that were here for people, in some sense.

02-00:33:37

Hicks:

Our club members, the Navajo Club members, we used to invite people up to the house. This was our second home up here. We used to invite them for dinners and all. A lot of them would ask, "How do I get a home?" We would kind of guide them and lead them. Those that became friends were able to buy homes, so there's still some Navajo families that live in the Bay Area, or they've bought homes and they're renting them out, but they've moved back to the reservation. That type of thing.

02-00:34:10

Redman:

I'd like to just ask a couple more questions about activism in terms of the '60s and '70s, and then we'll move on to the modern day, and I'd like to ask you about some modern-day things. In reading about Native American rights and activism, or learning about Native American rights and activism, were you particularly inspired by any particular leaders or thinkers, or was it more of just sort of this sentiment that, in the '70s, Native Americans should sort of band together to help one another and reach across tribal lines? It seems like this is sort of a new thing in some sense, and I'm trying to figure out where that drive comes from, that it's okay for you to volunteer with the Navajo, to help them. That it's okay to reach across tribal lines to help each other advance in some sense. Were you particularly inspired by any one group?

02-00:35:13

Hicks:

I really hate to say this, but not really. Primarily because I wasn't raised or had knowledge of tribal rights or different religious things. My whole concept of it was, get along with people. Get along with people. So I didn't really have Geronimo or this person or that person. I read about it and people would talk about it, so I would get interested and I would ask questions, but I was never one of these history buffs, until just some years ago. Then I started reading history because, like I said, my husband would talk about history. This

gentlemen or that general. I was like, who's he? He doesn't watch TV other than educational portion, or he'll read the newspaper before I would. He would ask me, "What do you think about this?" I said, "What?" I said, "I haven't gotten to that paper yet. My paper's here. I still have to read it." So it's always back and forth.

02-00:36:22

Redman:

I see. This is the final history question, and then we'll pause the tape, and then we'll do one final short series of questions. The events of Wounded Knee Two were in 1973, and they were sort of this tragic symbol of continued conflict between the federal government and American Indians. Can you speak if that event affected your life or thinking at all, and the subsequent political symbol of Leonard Peltier in terms of his arrest and people then continually fighting? You still see signs to this day, especially around the Bay Area, of "Free Leonard Peltier," and I wonder if that ever caught on in terms of your own personal understanding at all.

02-00:37:11

Hicks:

I hate to say this, but no. It just never affected me at all. There's a gentleman that goes to our senior center. He's constantly trying to push that issue about Leonard Peltier. Not really. But the people that are from the other tribes would talk about it, so I always go, "What happened?" So I was never really into it.

02-00:37:36

Redman:

So there was an awareness of it, but it was never something that really drove you?

02-00:37:40

Hicks:

Exactly. I knew about it, but I didn't really in-depth know what was going on with that thing.

02-00:37:47

Redman:

Very good. I'm going to pause the tape just for a moment. All right, so the next question I'd like to ask is, in your eyes, what are some of the major issues facing Native Americans today? We've talked about this a little bit, but I'm particularly interested in the rebirth of what used to be called the High Museum, that's now the National Museum of the American Indian in the Smithsonian. When that opened, that seemed like a big moment for Native Americans in the U.S. It was so close to the capital, in Washington, D.C., and thousands of Native Americans celebrated that event. But nevertheless, the past two decades have seen advances come pretty painfully slow in some cases. I'm curious if you have thoughts on Native American issues as of today, and in particular, do you have any thoughts on the Smithsonian and the opening of that major museum, if anything?

02-00:38:43

Hicks:

I've seen pictures from the Smithsonian, and I would love to one day, in the future, take a trip and see that. I've got the whole diagram of Washington, D.C., the different museums I want to see. I've got those circled. In fact, I

Showed them to my husband. "Next year," I said, "We're going to go here. We're going to go up this street. We're going to go and hit every one of these." But that's one of the museums I would love to see. I'm interested in anthropology. I love anthropology. When people talk about it, then I get really into it. I don't know that much about it, but I try to learn a little bit.

02-00:39:28

Redman:

So were you interested in how other tribes were set up? Were you mostly interested in anthropology in terms of reading about your own tribes, or was it about all other people that you became interested in?

02-00:39:46

Hicks:

When I was growing up as a child, I thought I was the only Indian. I thought my tribe was the only, until I went to boarding school and I saw all these other tribes. Then as I got older, there were how many tribes? Hundreds of tribes, Indians, throughout the United States. So it's always interesting. People can distinguish at functions that you're an Indian. They say, "I wonder what tribe." So the first thing you do, at least when I meet somebody, I say, "What is your name?" They say, "My name is such-and-such." "What tribe are you?" That's when they say, "Oh, my tribe is this." So then we get to talking. But that's mainly my first thing, is when I meet an Indian person, I say, "What tribe are you? Where are you from?"

02-00:40:33

Redman:

What do you think are some of the major issues that Native Americans face today?

02-00:40:39

Hicks:

Probably jobs and health. I think that's the main thing. As a matter of fact, we were talking about that the other day, how there's so many elders that do not have health coverage, or they cannot afford them anymore. So health issues are very, very high priority.

02-00:40:59

Redman:

You linked the jobs issue to the alcohol problems as well. It strikes me that that's also a health issue, and sort of those things are connected in that sense. That's interesting. Finally, I'd like to ask about your experiences as an interpretive staff member for the Rosie the Riveter National Historic Park. Can you tell me when you began that job and what that's been like for you so far?

02-00:41:28

Hicks:

Oh, god, let's see. I hired on as an admin support. I was hired for sixty days last year, on a temporary assignment. When that expired, then I was hired on for two years, supposedly just as a temporary person. That temporary person became a permanent position for me, so I have the option to either stay on for as long as I want, or I can leave tomorrow if I want to. My job right now, I've been helping Donna with the archives for the budget and for all the documentations that were in the John Muir and the Eugene O'Neill. All the

paperwork has come to me, and I am making sure that they get filed properly, and eventually will be archived or destroyed.

02-00:42:31

Redman: That's a big task.

02-00:42:33

Hicks: It is a big task, especially for a person that didn't know there was a park this name, and that park that name, and for me to read these documents. They gave me a file book. They said, "Okay, these are the codes that you put on all these documents and see how they relate to this." Well, I was just like, what in the world did I get myself into? Because as an administrator on previous corporate jobs, I would delegate work that I have now to people. What am I going to do? I sat there. I asked a lot of questions. I was embarrassed because I had to repeat my questions at times. Now, gradually, I know why we have to upkeep this museum and why it's so expensive to repair these. It's interesting.

02-00:43:27

Redman: So you're learning a lot.

02-00:43:27

Hicks: I am learning.

02-00:43:20

Redman: In particular with the Rosie Park, do you feel like you've learned something about history? Do you feel like you're learning more about the shipyards in particular?

02-00:43:41

Hicks: Yes, most definitely. Although, growing up, shipyard was where the museum is. I remember at night that the whole area would be all lit up, and all you could hear was banging or sawing or drilling and that was it. Twenty-four seven, it was going on. Contra Costa College used to be down in that area. When they asked me had I been to the Red Victory, I said, "What is that?" So when I went down there, I said, oh my god. I remember this when all the ships used to be all in line. Even going to San Francisco—my parents and I used to go every weekend. Spent the weekend in San Francisco. Right there by the port, they had these battleships all in line. I tell people that and they say, "Really?" I say yeah. I say, "Now you've got townhouses and condos and everything in that area." Complete turnaround. It amazes me now, even, working with Rosie and learning what really happened and the whole transition of it.

02-00:44:48

Redman: It sounds like it's been an enjoyable experience for you.

02-00:44:51

Hicks: Oh my gosh. I'm still learning. Yes, I'm still learning.

02-00:44:54

Redman:

That's terrific. I always save the toughest question, I feel like, for the end. If you can get through this, it's all done. I'd like to take a moment, if you could reflect, if you wouldn't mind, on the place of the Richmond boxcar village, and then, in the Second World War and in your life as a whole, do you think it shaped you in who you are today, that experience?

02-00:45:22

Hicks:

I actually believe that, yes, because I'm one of these people—I'm going to refer to myself as people—that I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to start from A and go all the way to Z, and make my circle complete. I think with that whole concept of my life, it's coming to that. I did the whole corporate scene and then I retired, but then another chapter of it opened up, and that's with the National Park Service. That's another chapter that I will eventually one day write about. With the first thing, probably was I had always wanted to be a secretary as I was a kid. Then my dad giving me a typewriter. I had no idea how to type. My dad was a typist. He typed with two fingers. But I'd lug that typewriter to boarding school, back and forth, until I would open it up and I would type. I think that gave me the initiative to learn to type. In the tenth grade in boarding school, only upperclassmen were allowed to take typing classes. We didn't have any business classes in boarding school. In order for the lower class, the freshman child, to take typing classes, we had to draw straws. If you drew a short straw, that means you got into class. There were four positions. I happened to choose that. I was one of the short-straw persons, so that's when I started learning to type. From then, nothing stopped me.

02-00:46:52

Redman:

Nothing stopped. You haven't stopped typing since then.

02-00:46:54

Hicks:

I haven't stopped typing. I've enjoyed my whole life. I think with the whole concept of my grandparents, my parents—they never said I couldn't do it. Even myself, I always said, "I can do it. Big deal." I could stumble. I'm one of these people, working with engineers, if I didn't understand a drawing, then I would go and say, "By the way, could you please explain this to me?" and they would explain it. There was a man that was a piping supervisor, and I asked him a question. This was at Chevron. I asked him a question and he spoke to me like everything was over my head. So I said, "Please, talk to me in layman's language." So then he explained it to me. Now I can read a blueprint. It's funny. I was working at Chevron, and then there was a position that myself and my little clerk were supposed to get in Concord. Well, instead they brought on two agency people and we were left out in the rain. I had a mentor who was a manager of engineering, and he told me, "Bertha, don't sign anything." He helped me all the way. He says, "Apply for any position that they give to you, but don't sign anything." So I would apply. I knew some of the positions, I didn't qualify, but I went ahead and applied because Bechtel, at the end, gave you a rundown of what jobs you applied and what

jobs you didn't get. In reality, I went forward with the idea that I could have any job I want. I had the best of mentors or managers that believed in me.

02-00:48:50

Redman: It sounds like your father, too, really did a lot to—

02-00:48:53

Hicks: Exactly. Exactly.

02-00:48:55

Redman: So that was kind of passed down in some sense.

02-00:48:57

Hicks: Exactly, yes. I really had the opportunity where I came in contact with people of all nationalities that were there to help me. In return, as administrator, when I brought in my little clerks, I was there to help them as much as I could. I wanted to return or give back what was given to me. With my last job, with telecommunications, I was put in a position where I had all the territories and did a lot of traveling for them, and met with the field offices and interacted with vendors, with hotel business. With Rosie, when I got this, I knew the whole background of it. Except I didn't know the Forestry Department. That's why I tell people, I started from here, and now my whole life just kind of went into a circle. I wanted to do and better myself and make my parents proud of me. The lady that I spoke about, the home ec teacher, if she were alive, I'd say, "Hey, look, this is what I did." Because she always pushed me. When I was in home ec class, the girls would cook. I can't cook. I hate cooking. So I was in home ec class, and I was one of these people that was supposed to stand there and stir the pudding like this. Well, I was talking, I guess, and my pudding got lumpy. My home ec teacher says, "Bertha, concentrate. Your pudding is lumpy. It's not supposed to be lumpy." I said, "Oh, okay." Anyway, we still ate that pudding. The next class, the following day, she says, "Bertha, come over to my desk." I went and I sat down. She says, "From now on, I'm going to have you write all the recipes on the blackboard and let the other girls do the cooking." Yay!

02-00:50:52

Redman: So a little bit of a shift in responsibilities, but it worked for you.

02-00:50:55

Hicks: Coming home for the summer, I didn't cook. My sisters are fantastic cooks. My dad used to always tell my sisters, "Your sister is here for vacation." So I'd do the cleaning. I love to clean house, iron, and all that. Cooking? Pfft. My sisters did the cooking and I ate, cleaned the house, washed dishes.

02-00:51:19

Redman: Bertha, I'd like to thank you for sitting down and doing this with me today. It was a pleasure.

02-00:51:23

Hicks: It was fun.

02-00:51:24

Redman: All right, great. Excellent.

[End of Interview]