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Altha M. Humphrey

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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

Interviews conducted by
Brendan Furey
in 2005

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Interview with Altha Humphrey
Interviewed by: Brendan Furey
Transcriber: Julie Allen
Interview #1: January 17, 2005
Begin minidisc 1

01:00:00:02

Furey:

We are rolling here. Mrs. Humphrey, will you please start the story from where it began? Where and when you were born and a little bit about your early years.

Humphrey:

I was born in Berkeley in 1933, January. I grew up in Kensington, which is like North Berkeley. I was a quiet child. Well-disciplined. [laughter] And probably a little bit over-protected.

Furey:

Tell us, what's your father's name? Could you tell us a little bit about your father's life, where he was born, his background?

Humphrey:

He was born in San Francisco in 1903 and his parents were of German descent. He was in the military, in the army, after the first World War. He was in the army of occupation in Germany at that time. I guess he met my mother in Berkeley when he came back. Then as a small child, Kensington was rather rural at that time. It was more country-like. There were lots and lots of trees to climb and so on. All the neighborhood kids, we used to play outside a lot, just in our own few blocks. Everybody knew everybody, everybody knew everybody.

Furey:

Could you tell us a little bit about, first your father's full name and secondly a little bit about his career. You mentioned that he worked for PG&E, can you describe that job for us?

Humphrey:

His name was Adolph Raszat. He worked for PG&E in Berkeley as a special collector he read meters also. They did that on foot, like a mailman. I went with him a couple of times, hiking around Berkeley. That was fun.

Furey:

Can you describe that for us a little bit?

Humphrey:

Well, you just hike around. You find the meters next to the house, he used to read it, and he had a book and he'd write it down. Nothing was automatic. You had to go hiking, and sometimes in the rain. Special collector was collecting delinquent bills, so you had to knock on peoples' doors and maybe turn them off. That was where he worked.

Furey:

How was it for him during the thirties when Fascism took over Germany? How was his ethnic identity reconciled with the current conflict?

Humphrey:

Well, I think at work—I remember my parents talking about he with his coworkers, because his name was Adolph, were very discriminatory against him at that time. His nickname was Rudy, but someone must have found out his real name was Adolph.

Furey:

Did he mention anything about his time in Weimar Republic Germany?

Humphrey:

Oh, he had a grand time. [laughter]

Furey:

He spoke fluent German?

Humphrey:

As a young man. Yes, they did speak German at home when he was a boy. Then of course—yes, he could speak some German. He had a grand time over there, a good time.

Furey:

Tell us a little bit about your mother—her name, where she was born and when?

Humphrey:

Her name was Bernice Fleury. She was born in Winthrop, Maine, never to go back and visit, which I think is a shame. She was French Canadian, her grandmother was from Quebec and Maine. They also spoke nothing but French until they came to California. Then they didn't, they spoke English. My mother went to Berkeley High School.

Furey:

What did she do? Could you tell a little bit about how she met your father?

Humphrey:

I really don't know the full story, I really don't know.

Furey:

Did she have a career prior to being married?

Humphrey:

Well, no. She worked at one of the old sort of residential—I guess we would say residential hotel—near the UC campus. I think she waited tables and whatever there. Yup, that's all I remember of that.

Furey:

How did your parents affect you as a person?

Humphrey:

Oh! I think my quietness. I believe in discipline.

Furey:

Well, maybe we can back up. Can you describe in detail your father? What he looked like?

Humphrey:

Oh my, he wasn't a large man. I just remember him probably sitting in his chair reading his paper. [laughter] That's about it. I remember gardening and feeding the chickens and things like that. That's about it.

Furey:

And you mother? What was she like?

Humphrey:

She was more outgoing. She was into teaching and scouts and more of the community things than my father was. What they enjoyed together, they liked to play poker, and dance, they went dancing a lot. Of course the PG&E had dances for their employees, they gave dances and they used to go to all that, extra, PG&E club—PSCA.

Furey:

Do you know where those clubs were?

Humphrey:

It was called the PSCA. Well, I think they were local. Maybe the PG&E of Berkeley and Oakland got together and they had programs for their employees. They had Christmas parties. They had whist parties, I remember whist, playing whist. They'd go to that.

Furey:

What is that?

Humphrey:

It's a card game. It's done something like bridge. They usually had prizes. I remember that.

Furey:

Describe an average day growing up in your household in Kensington.

Humphrey:

It was probably pretty quiet. I had school and I probably came home and played with the chickens, probably did a little bit of homework, played with my neighbor children, visited with neighbors, ate dinner, probably went to bed early. No television. Probably went to bed early.

Furey:

Are there any special memories growing up? Now, you grew up during the end of the Depression.

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

So could you just describe any memories from those years?

01:00:10:00

Humphrey:

As far as I'm concerned, as a child, I think they were probably very good years. I don't remember doing without anything. I don't think children really think about that much. As long as you have food and reasonable clothing, food and so on. We didn't have all the stimulation that they have today. I think we were quite poor. I think why we didn't—why we were barefoot all summer was because we didn't have shoes. But we were in a climate where we could do that. But I don't think I really felt like we did without anything.

Furey:

Were you aware of the Depression? Did you know that there was a hard time?

Humphrey:

Not until probably after. Not until after. We just didn't—we didn't have sweets in the house. Sweets were for like Valentines or Christmas or something like that. We didn't have a lot of the extra things, when you try to compare, we didn't have those things.

Furey:

Did you have any siblings?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

No siblings, you're an only child?

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

Describe for me your chores. What were the chores you had to do around the house?

Humphrey:

I don't remember chores. [laughter] It doesn't mean I was spoiled, I just don't remember chores.

Furey:

Okay, now tell me a little bit about your earliest memories of the war. Do you remember where you were when you started to become conscious of this global conflict?

Humphrey:

Well, we heard it on the radio. Then of course my parents started doing all these things, and we had rationing. That's really it. We had a map and we put pins where the war was, and as it progressed or went the other way we put pins where all these things happened.

Furey:

Where were you December 7, 1941?

Humphrey:

I was at home and it was in the morning. I heard the announcement on the radio. I went and I was with a friend of mine up the street, girls getting together. We heard it, and that was about it. Then as we heard more about it the Pacific was closer to Japan than Germany was to us. So then they organized block wardens. My dad was a block warden. He learned about incendiary bombs, and of course that frightened us too. He, as a block warden, we'd have practice air raids and black outs. The black outs—they smoked—and you weren't supposed to even light a cigarette. It was a complete black out. He went to a movie to learn about the incendiary bombs. I believe I went too, because they showed how to put them out with sand. He had a bucket full of sand. He had a gas mask, he was taught how to put the gas mask on and off. He had a hand-pump container of water that he would maybe have to use.

Furey:

How did your parents, how did they talk to you about the war? Did they sit down and tell you, this is what's happening, and explain it to you?

Humphrey:

No, it actually, most all of it came across the radio, and then talking with my friends, most of it that way. Of course I was involved, my dad being the block warden and all the other things going on, like buying the bonds. That was an important thing to do. Having a victory garden was very important. Those things were very important.

Furey:

So you had a victory garden in your neighborhood?

Humphrey:

In our back yard, which was very small. The back yard wasn't much bigger than this living room. [laughter]

Furey:

Can you describe what you grew in the victory garden?

Humphrey:

Yes, we had chard for the chickens. He fed the chickens chard plus their feed. We had string beans, we had strawberries. Probably peas and carrots and those kinds of things, to supplement our diet.

Furey:

Because there was rationing of a lot of other products. Do you remember going to grocery stores and having ration cards?

Humphrey:

I don't actually remember that part.

Furey:

Could you briefly summarize the mood in Richmond during the war? Part of this project is specifically about the city of Richmond.

Humphrey:

Richmond, we used to look and see the lights in Richmond, where there were no lights before. All the sudden there were lights all around the shipping port and we could see them from where we lived. It was a town that grew up overnight. It wasn't there and then all of a sudden it was there, bright lights everywhere, day and night, all the time.

Furey:

Do you remember people coming, immigrating into Richmond?

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

Could you talk a little bit about that?

Humphrey:

Yes. I remember that a lot of trailer parks, there were a lot of trailer parks. I didn't know anybody that lived in a trailer park. Then there was the war housing that they built up. They were like barracks.

Furey:

The one on Forty-seventh and Cutting?

Humphrey:

Forty-seventh and Cutting—that's way up there toward San Pablo.

Furey:

And Atchison Village?

Humphrey:

Yes, Atchison Village. And then there's one up around Marina Way there.

Furey:

What did those look like?

Humphrey:

They looked like barracks. [laughter] But people lived in smaller houses then. We lived in a small house also. So it was okay.

Furey:

Could you describe for us what your house was like?

Humphrey:

Oh, it was like four and a half rooms. We had two small bedrooms, there was a small bath between. Then there was a small living room, maybe a little bit oblong, and a small kitchen and then what I would call a kitchenette. That's why I call it a half room. Just enough for table and four chairs, tight. That was it. But it was okay, we got along just fine. The house is still there.

Furey:

Where is it? What part of Kensington is it in?

Humphrey:

It's in the lower part of Kensington between the Arlington and Colusa Circle, half way up the hill. I never learned to ride a bicycle because of the hills.

Furey:

Kensington is directly adjacent to Richmond, correct?

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

So if you keep going to Arlington, eventually you will drive into Richmond.

Humphrey:

That's right.

Furey:

How would you describe Kensington as a town?

Humphrey:

Well, it was unincorporated. It was just quite rural at that time. It was like North Berkeley, so a lot of people were tied to the university. It was a nice little quiet community.

Furey:

Were there working class folks living in Kensington? Because during the war there was a major housing crunch for the workers in the shipyards.

01:00:20:04

And were shipyard workers living in Kensington?

Humphrey:

I don't believe so because we didn't have the commuting that we have today. So they were mostly, probably in Richmond, El Cerrito.

Furey:

So describe for me your education, your grammar school and junior high school.

Humphrey:

There was a small little Kensington School. That was, I guess it was kindergarten through sixth, I guess, only. Then seventh grade through twelfth was the new El Cerrito High School. Then I had a scholarship when I left high school to go to California College of Arts and Crafts. Though I was college prep, I was the best student, but that wasn't all of it. My parents didn't encourage studying, and they felt that girls didn't go to college. Boys went to college, and girls grew up and went to work. I graduated from high school in 1951 and I went directly to work at the telephone company in Berkeley. I was a telephone operator. I was on the A boards and B boards. I'd say, "number please, thank you, number please, thank you." It was lots of fun. I enjoyed the job very much. It was fun.

Furey:

So speaking of gender expectations in those years. What did your mother do during the war?

Humphrey:

Well, she was always active in the community, and she did Girl Scouts. During the war she worked at Hines Canning, which was near Ashby and San Pablo. She worked there at night to work out, because the canning for the war effort was twenty-four hours a day. She did that. Later on she became interested in disaster because of the threat of invasion or war here on the west coast. She started looking into Red Cross, and she taught first aid for Berkeley Red Cross.

Furey:

Could you explain what she did at the Hines factory? What was her position there?

Humphrey:

She worked on the line and then after that they put her in the office. She did work with the vegetables and picking them out and so on. I didn't go down at that time. I didn't go see her.

Furey:

During the daytime?

Humphrey:

Well, probably taking care of me, as mothers did in those days. They didn't work outside. Her Red Cross work and her scout work, Girl Scouts.

Furey:

And for the Red Cross, what were the types of classes that she was teaching?

Humphrey:

First aid.

Furey:

First aid, so basic information about how to stop bleeding, resuscitation?

Humphrey:

Yes, how to lift people, how to splint. I remember that, how to splint.

Furey:

Now, did she ever consider going to work in the shipyards? Was it an option in your family to have a second income?

Humphrey:

No. No, not until after the war. And not until after I was grown up and gone.

Furey:

Did she have friends, female friends who worked in the shipyards?

Humphrey:

No, no. The ladies in those days, as a child, they used to get together for knitting, something like that. They just get together, like we're getting back to again, knitting and little groups of women. They used to have desert and have a get together in the afternoon, a group of lady friends. Some from high school, and I don't know who the others were.

Furey:

Was this the same network of women who worked in the Red Cross, or was through a separate connection?

Humphrey:

Separate, separate.

Furey:

Back, another question about your school. Was there much talk about the war effort in school? Do you remember that being in the classroom?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

There were no—what was it, drop and duck drills like during the Cold War or any preparedness exercises that were done in the classroom?

Humphrey:

I don't remember that.

Furey:

How would you—how did the social life—or did the social life change much when this whole influx of immigrants came into the East Bay?

Humphrey:

It didn't affect us, I don't think, other than during the war efforts. The friends remained the same, the war effort was extra-curricular, but I think their life remained pretty much the same, day to day.

Furey:

Did you know any immigrants?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

None?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

Do you remember, were there African Americans in your school?

Humphrey:

Yes, in high school, but not as a small child. My mother taught the first Negro Girl Scout troupe, she taught them, I believe it was first aid. That was in south Berkeley. There was a little community there. But not the influx, the communities that we have now.

Furey:

Tell us about this black Girl Scout troupe.

Humphrey:

I don't remember much about it, but the mothers were just thrilled with my mother. They would invite her to church, and of course that was a totally different kind of church.
[laughter]

Furey:

Did she go?

Humphrey:

When she passed away, I still contacted some of the ladies. That was probably, you know, twenty years later. She was well-accepted and she accepted them. As we say, we had no prejudice as we think about or have today.

Furey:

So you would have, your mother would invite the mothers of these young women over for dinner and they would socialize?

Humphrey:

Not quite, that just didn't happen. That part didn't happen, but the church part did. They liked my mother.

Furey:

That didn't happen in the sense that that might be a little too much—

Humphrey:

Well, I don't think it was thought about on either side. I don't think it was. As far as inviting my mother to church, that was their way of showing their friendship, their outgoing way.

Furey:

Do you remember going to church with your mother, to these black churches?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

Your mother went?

Humphrey:

Yes, she did. I don't remember anything about, I just remember her describing how their church was.

Furey:

How did she describe it?

Humphrey:

Well, their singing was different. The way that they preached was definitely different.

01:00:30:03

Furey:

This is a good segue. One of the things we're interested in for this project is how religion, the role of religion during the home front experience in the East Bay. Could you tell us a little bit about your—how often you went to church and about your local church?

Humphrey:

I probably can't because my mother was Catholic, my father was Lutheran, so they decided between them that they would not discuss or have religion. So I grew up with no religion. But as a teenager I had many boyfriends, and I'd always be asked to go to church. And also the churches were more community-oriented. So you went to church activities with your boyfriend and the family. I used to go home and have Sunday dinner with them, and I was exposed to many religions. We didn't think of them as separate, just by name. It didn't mean much to a child. God is god. It was okay.

Furey:

Did your parents go to church?

Humphrey:

No, they did not.

Furey:

They didn't go to church. Were they religious, spiritual people?

Humphrey:

I think they were in their own way. But it was very personal to them separately.

Furey:

Let's move on to maybe some memories that kind of stuck out, during the war.

Humphrey:

Probably the first one was December 7, Pearl Harbor, was bombed. Then of course, Port Chicago blew up.

Furey:

Let's stay with Pearl Harbor for a second. Do you remember the exact moment when you heard about it?

Humphrey:

Yes, I was outside on the street.

Furey:

Who were you with?

Humphrey:

My little girlfriend, yes.

Furey:

The radio was on?

Humphrey:

Well, I had heard it either in my house or her house. I can't remember which one, but I remember that. Her name was Gayle.

Furey:

How did you react to that? How did you feel about that?

Humphrey:

Well, my grandmother had lived in Hawaii for a short time, so I did realize sort of where it was. So I felt it was close, to be afraid.

Furey:

How about—are there any other days, for instance, May 20, 1942, this is the day when the Japanese evacuation from California was complete.

Humphrey:

I don't remember that specifically, that day. It didn't stand out, no.

Furey:

Do you have any memories from the Japanese internment period?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

Did you know any Japanese people?

Humphrey:

Just the one housekeeper of a friend. She had been with the family for a long time and it was sad for them. I remember her, a little Japanese lady, going over and playing with the daughter. Then she was just gone, but I didn't know any of the details of that.

Furey:

I've edited several oral histories with Latin Americans, or Latinos in Richmond, during the war there were several dozen Mexican families, many of them worked for the railroad companies. Do you remember Latinos in Richmond?

Humphrey:

Hm-mm. As a small child Richmond was also rural. Probably from Solano north it was very country-like, and it was just—it was nowhere. [laughter] We used to drive down to San Pablo in El Cerrito to buy vegetables off a vegetable stand—it was just country. I don't know, I don't recall. I remember people talking about gypsies. There used to be gypsies out in north San Pablo someplace. There were a few bars around San Pablo then. That was it, that was it. And cowboy music was very popular in those days. We had cowboy bands.

Furey:

Do you remember seeing any?

Humphrey:

There was a bandleader that lived in Kensington and she sang and they had a cowboy band, but I don't remember anything past that.

Furey:

So it was western swing.

Humphrey:

Yes, western.

Furey:

Do you remember the name Dude Martin?

Humphrey:

Yes, oh yes!

Furey:

What do you remember about Dude Martin?

Humphrey:

Could he have been the person? Might have been.

Furey:

He had a television show in the late 1940s.

Humphrey:

He might have been the fellow that lived in the community in Kensington.

Furey:

He had a band, he was on television. He was a guitar player, song writer. I think he was a California boy but he played the cowboy act really well. He had a western swing band, an accordion, drummer, guitar player.

Humphrey:

Anyway.

Furey:

Bass player.

Humphrey:

I was too small. [laughter]

Furey:

Do you think that cowboy music might have come from the fact that a lot of people from the South and Midwest were moving to the Bay Area?

Humphrey:

Might have, maybe. The cowboy music was very popular in those days, in this area.

Furey:

How about north Richmond, do you remember ever going up to north Richmond during the war? Because that was still unincorporated, I think, during the war. They didn't have a lot of the basic services out there. I think it was patrolled by the county sheriff. Do you remember going to north Richmond, or seeing it?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

Largely African American neighborhood back then. I think it still is.

Humphrey:

I don't know. See, we were more Berkeley oriented, and that's where the town was, in Berkeley.

Furey:

So let's talk a little bit about what your father did in the shipyards. Your father worked in the Oakland shipyards off-loading docks.

Humphrey:

Right, loading and unloading.

Furey:

During the day time—

Humphrey:

Stevedore, it was called stevedore. In the daytime he worked PG&E.

Furey:

So what was an average day in the life of your father?

Humphrey:

He probably worked normal eight—I think maybe four thirty. Then he'd come home, have something to eat, and go back to work again.

Furey:

How many hours would he work down in Oakland?

Humphrey:

Oh, I don't know. Probably four to six, I would say. I don't think a full eight.

Furey:

To make a little extra money for the family?

Humphrey:

Well, and to load and unload ships going overseas, supply.

Furey:

Did he explain to you what he was doing there and why he had to work these extra hours?

Humphrey:

Well, it was something he wanted to do for the war effort, and I guess to make some money. I remember the hook—he had a hook for lifting, I remember that.

01:00:40:00

It was like a T, and it had a big hook. It was for leverage, for lifting boxes and things.

Furey:

You went—did you go to his work site in Oakland?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

He just brought that home?

Humphrey:

He had it.

Furey:

So was there any—are there any other memories that you're like to share? I know you have some things written down. Let's let you take over the interview from here. What are some things you'd like to talk about?

Humphrey:

Did we get about—did we discuss about the rationing and the margarine?

Furey:

We briefly touched on the rationing, but could you just explain for someone who maybe doesn't know what rationing is? Let them know how it works?

Humphrey:

We had stamps, we had a book of stamps. Butter and sugar and gas—and I'm not sure if meat was rationed at that time. So they substituted butter with—margarine was just coming out, being sold. It was white and you had this little packet of yellow coloring to mix in with the margarine. Did we get into the stocking on this?

Furey:

We haven't, I don't think.

Humphrey:

Okay. There were no silk stockings for the ladies to wear. So my mother used to use makeup on her legs to make them look just a little bit tanned. Then they took a pencil, I guess like an eyebrow pencil, and they put a line up the backs of their legs so they could look like they had stockings on. My parents both smoked, so there was a shortage of cigarettes, so they had this little box contraption and they rolled their own cigarettes. So they made sure they had their cigarettes. [shuffles papers]

We had chickens in the back yard.

Furey:

Now was that a common thing?

Humphrey:

I don't think so, I think it was just my mother and father. We had chickens in the back yard to supplement our food. I liked the chickens. And there were horses next door, and there were cows across the street. So there really were cows in Berkeley.

Furey:

Now did they explain to you all these efforts, the stamps, the victory garden, your father working in the shipyards, did they explain to you why, the rationale behind why they needed to make this sacrifice?

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

And how did they explain it to you?

Humphrey:

Oh gosh, they didn't say too much, but it was like getting together and, "Let's do this," sort of thing. And it was on the radios, and on the posters. I remember the posters. I wish I had a couple of those today. They're collectors items.

Furey:

I wanted to—towards the end of this interview I wanted to talk a little bit about—I think what makes your story really compelling is that you saw the war and the home front effort in the East Bay through the eyes of a child.

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

Most of our interviewees were a little older and had more of a sense of the broader world around them. How as it being a young preadolescent and adolescent child during those years? Can you explain that?

Humphrey:

I was afraid, you know. And especially during the black outs and the air raid sirens. The air raid sirens are the things that really frightened me.

Furey:

There were actually a couple of close calls, they thought that the Japanese were actually going to come and bomb maybe one of the bridges. Do you remember those specific instances?

Humphrey:

Just—no, not really. The being afraid was there.

Furey:

And your other friends, as a child, do you remember them expressing fear?

Humphrey:

We were all about the same age.

Furey:

What were the types of fears that you had?

Humphrey:

Well, that they actually would bomb. Because they took me to see the movie, the preparation for bombing, and that sticks with you. Whenever you went to the movies, there were always news reels and the news reels were very scary. They were also the actual bombing and fighting, planes going down and things like that. And Port Chicago shook us up a little bit.

Furey:

Yes, tell us a little bit about Port Chicago.

Humphrey:

I don't remember very much about it, but I was in the back yard with my father, and it was like a huge earthquake.

Furey:

That was a little earlier, that was '44? Correct? That was towards the end of the war when the Port Chicago blast occurred. Could you just explain that memory to us?

Humphrey:

I was in the back yard and you heard it, and it shook everything. We were probably protected because of the hill there.

Furey:

Port Chicago is out near Mare Island right? It's a little further up.

Humphrey:

Up the river a little bit.

Furey:

So, I think we've covered the wartime experience pretty thoroughly. I'd like to now talk a little bit about how the changes that happened during the war, how they affected you after the war. One of the first changes that comes to mind is the role of women. You explained earlier that women just—you weren't expected to get a college education.

Humphrey:

That's correct.

Furey:

Did women entering the work force during the war, did that change your perception about potential career paths that you could take?

Humphrey:

That didn't affect me at all. But I started to work in '51 and then I took advantage of my scholarship. I took a leave from work to do that. I just went to one semester at California College of Arts and Crafts. But then I went back to work again.

Furey:

And what were you working as? What was this first job you had?

Humphrey:

My first job was telephone operator in Berkeley, California.

Furey:

What would you do?

Humphrey:

I answered the phones. [laughter] I was on the A switchboard and the B switchboard. I'd answer and say, "number please, thank you, number please, thank you." By the way, the work place was very strict. You had to be on time. You had to raise your hand to be excused to go to the bathroom. No talking. The chief operators would come around, they'd plug in, and they'd listen to you. So there was no fooling around at all. That's the way things used to be. I remember in school, I was probably in the sixth grade, one boy was misbehaving and the teacher took a ruler and hit him, on the hand.

Furey:

You can't get away with that nowadays.

Humphrey:

You can't get away with that now, yes.

Furey:

After the war a lot of the servicemen came back, the Richmond shipyards were all closed down except for one, and Kaiser kind of shut down operations to a large extent in Oakland and in Richmond.

01:00:50:06

How did you perceive all of those changes? What was the immediate post-war period like?

Humphrey:

It really didn't affect me except my uncle came home. He was in England at the time of the war. So it really didn't affect me a lot.

Furey:

Do you remember in August of '45 when the bombs were dropped?

Humphrey:

Hiroshima.

Furey:

Yes.

Humphrey:

Yes. I remember soon after that there was a book written called Hiroshima and I think it only has seventy something pages, and everyone should read that. It's about the survivors in the zero section of the—I don't know whether it's on the list of books to read, but I would tell everyone to read that book.

Furey:

You don't remember decommissioned soldiers coming back to your neighborhood in Kensington?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

So there weren't many servicemen living around?

Humphrey:

There probably were, but people were so community and family-oriented, there were more close—it's hard to explain. Now, television comes into your room. Then, not much came into your room, or into your house.

Furey:

Except radio?

Humphrey:

Yes, and newspapers.

Furey:

One thing I forgot to mention about the war time experience was race relations. Can you talk a little bit about how African Americans, how different minority groups fit into the Kensington social life?

Humphrey:

They just didn't. [laughter] Just didn't. I think—gosh, I don't know. It just didn't exist for me. It might have for my parents. Now, my parents, as I remember, used probably every derogatory name in the book of those days. Hmmm. Can we stop for a minute?

[begin minidisc 2]

02:00:00:00

Furey:

Okay, so we're back on. We were just talking about how race—how your parents thought, what your parents thought of black folks. Could you just talk a little bit about that?

Humphrey:

My father did have a lot to do with south Berkeley where there was a small community of Negro people. He always got along with them. Then in our own family, and I believe it's

an internal family feeling, was that they used most derogatory remarks about other people and religion. It was always distasteful to me as a child, and maybe because it was internal in the family, aunts and uncles and so on. One of my mother's sisters married a Portuguese man. Then they always referred to him as the "goddamn Portugee." For some reason, they didn't get along, the sisters. So then it was always the "goddamn Portugee." They used the word "kike" for Jewish. I just—that was distasteful to me, maybe because of their emotion against these people. So it was always distasteful to me, so I don't use anything like that today, and I don't think anything like that today. As a child there was no prejudice in the school and when I started high school was probably when I started mostly to interact with other races. I believe I really don't have as much prejudice as a lot of people do, because I was brought up with all kinds of people.

Furey:

Was your father or any of his attitudes towards Jews—

Humphrey:

I don't know if it was my mother or my father, but when they got together—it was within the household that all this would come out, I remember. Within the family.

Furey:

In what context would they be talking about Jewish people?

Humphrey:

Well, they knew somebody—maybe they were distasteful to them or something. They would then say those words at home, about this person. I don't think it was—it was prejudice because it was said in a prejudiced way, but probably ignorance on their part, total ignorance.

Furey:

During the war there were a lot of accepted derogatory remarks about "Japs" and—

Humphrey:

"Japs," we used, the word "Jap" was used. Nazi, "Jap," and then there was another one, "Okie." "Okie" was used. "Okie" was used a lot. Mexican not so much, the Oriental, besides "Jap." Those are the only things I can remember that were used.

Furey:

Was there a Chinese community in Kensington?

Humphrey:

No. The only thing I knew was Chinatown.

Furey:

You mentioned an orphanage?

Humphrey:

Yes. I was in high school though.

Furey:

So that was a little after the war?

Humphrey:

Yes. It was Chiang Kai-shek.

Furey:

After the Chinese revolution.

Humphrey:

Yes.

Furey:

In what context would blacks come up in the household conversations?

Humphrey:

It was rather favorable all the time. Maybe it was because they were so far removed. My mother knew a lot of Negro people, my dad knew a lot of Negro people. So it really wasn't derogatory towards the Negro.

Furey:

But they wouldn't necessarily invite them over for dinner?

Humphrey:

No, no.

Furey:

Just one more stab at it, ideas about women—were they, did they change much in your milieu? In your life?

Humphrey:

Well, my mother started to work after her experience in working outside of the house with the Hines company during the war. Then she continued to work outside the household. Of course I was expected to work, and I went to work, and I just kept working. I enjoyed my work very much. I worked a man's job most of my life, I was very fortunate in that. I was always interested in what I was doing. I was good at it—the best. [laughter]

Furey:

And what was this career?

Humphrey:

I was an electronics draftsman. Designer and draftsman. I worked into it from the beginning. My first job actually was from the war time, an effect from the war time. Because during the war time the men went off to war and a lot of the jobs that were done by men before the war were done by women. One of the jobs was with the telephone company. They had women doing the plant records. Plants records is like keeping track of the maps and the telephone poles and the manholes and things like that. Then they

found out after the war that women were really better at it than men were because women are very—more meticulous and very [clock chimes, Humphrey laughs] detail is more important to them. They found out that women are much better at drafting and such than men were. They had women as draftsman—or, they say draftsperson today. It's all nonsense. So that's the job I had. But they called us clerks, so we had clerks' wages. Then I progressed from there because I was the best there into the first electronics little lab that Pacific Telephone had—special services in San Francisco. We did the first printed circuit boards.

Furey:

What year is this?

Humphrey:

Probably '53. Probably—no, probably '56 that they started doing electronics. But how we did the first electronics is that we had parallel ink pens, and we would do the traces with a parallel ink pen on linen. Then we'd fill it in with ink. Do you know how they're done today? They're done by computer. Then between that we had tape. We had black tape that you did the traces with. I know from the beginning and today a lot of people don't know that.

Furey:

And you worked at Pacific Telephone services? Is this Pac Bell?

Humphrey:

Pacific Bell.

Furey:

Yes, Pacific Bell. Did you work there for your whole career?

Humphrey:

No, I worked there for a little less than twenty-five years. Then I have, I'm probably one of the very few people that had prejudice against me. I took a leave of absence and they had rules and regulations for leave of absence.

02:00:10:03

When you come back you're supposed to telephone and then show up for work ready to go to work, right? I telephoned and my boss said, "Don't come in, don't come in." I went in. It's a very complicated story. I went in and they forced me on another leave of absence and they had told somebody that had taken my place while I was on leave of absence, which was granted, that they were going to hire her. They hadn't hired her yet. So it was all under cover and all illegal. I went to the state and I went to the federal, and I went to the EOC. You know EOC? Equal Opportunity Commission, it's federal. The fellow on the other side of the desk said to me, he said, "I'm sorry, you're the wrong color and you're a woman, so we're not going to do anything for you." I couldn't talk—I couldn't physically talk for three days. I went to a lawyer but they wanted money which I didn't have. So I didn't pursue it. That was in 1976.

So from then I went on and I worked in other industry outside. I was able to find other jobs doing drafting, designing and I was fine. I got caught when they started laying off senior people, I got caught in that. So that sort of all just petered out.

Furey:

Did you ever have kids?

Humphrey:

No, no children.

Furey:

No children. So then a final question, how do you think, in a general sense, how did the war, the home front experience affect your later career?

Humphrey:

It gave me my job.

Furey:

It gave you your job?

Humphrey:

Yes, because women could do drafting.

Furey:

And what do you think about this oral history process?

Humphrey:

Oh, I think it's wonderful!

Furey:

To narrate your life.

Humphrey:

It's very interesting, very interesting.

Furey:

Have you ever thought about your life in these terms before?

Humphrey:

No.

Furey:

No. And how is it for you?

Humphrey:

Fine. It's fine. I'm interested in how you will go on ahead with it, if there will be other people from this time, other than me. It will be fun.

Furey:

You can definitely access the collection, some of it on the internet, if you'd like.

Humphrey:

Mm!

Furey:

I'll give you my card when we're done.

Humphrey:

Okay.

Furey:

Just another question along those lines. Did you think of those times as historical as you were living through them? I know you were six to twelve years old during the war. Did you think of what was happening at that point to have some kind of greater meaning, that someone like myself would come and interview you?

Humphrey:

[laughter] No, it was far beyond. I mean, we've really taken leaps and bounds in how people live, and expectations, being spoiled by how we live now and the politics. There's just—it's just so much. It's just so much. You can't do everything, so you have to pick and choose.

Furey:

Well, do you see World War II as being kind of—as a big turning point as the history of Americans?

Humphrey:

Oh yes.

Furey:

In what way?

Humphrey:

Just the change, the change it gave people. The change and the progress. I think it advanced—it advanced the medical definitely. Mechanics, cars, electronics—definitely electronics. But I don't say it's all good. [laughter] I'm more concerned about World War III and the effect that that may have. It might not be a step forward. It might not be. We as Americans have too much.

Furey:

Well, so do you look back on that pre-World War II American experience as in a way, a more idyllic time?

Humphrey:

Yes I do, yes I do. Maybe it's because a child's mind thinks of it in a different way. They have more time on their hands. They don't have to do certain things. It did seem more

idyllic. Though I still love animals—those kinds of things stay with you—child's pleasures. Ice cream cone is a child's pleasure.

Furey:

How about this question: do you think that some of the social cohesion that happened, that you described during World War II, the block organizations, you said everyone was kind of a tight-knit family because there was no television at that point—do you think that's kind of a good lesson for us? That maybe there was a lot of positive that came out of that World War II home front experience?

Humphrey:

Yes, I'm still community-minded here. A lot of people aren't, but I'm still community-minded here. I like all my neighbors, I talk to all my neighbors, and my little Point Richmond community is very important to me. I'm in the ladies group, which is a service group. We raise money for just projects in our own community—not trying to do a world-wide thing, but within our own community—know our older people, know our children. The neighborhood council is very important.

Furey:

Is that tied just in Point Richmond or is it connected to Richmond as well?

Humphrey:

That's just in Point Richmond. I can't take care of everybody. [laughter]

Furey:

What are your thoughts on Richmond in the last twenty years?

Humphrey:

Well, Richmond has struggled from the beginning. It's a poor community, it's struggled from the beginning. I think it hasn't had the right direction or the right vision of Richmond. It gets sort of lost and too many people with their hands out, sort of thing. It's just been pathetic. It's sad. I think it could be better. But it takes people to make it better. You have to have that in you, I think. I still want to be involved with my community. I don't want to be in an old person's home. I want to be as much in my community as I can. I want to see that the streets are clean, I want to talk to everybody at the store when I go down to the store. And I do. I think it comes from the way you're brought up and the person that you are to continue that, and that is important, from y'all high to forever.

Furey:

I think we can wrap it up there. Thank you very much for sharing these stories with us.

[End of Interview]