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**Doris McCuan**

**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  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2008

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Interview #1: June 12, 2008

Begin Audio File 1 06-12-2008.mp3

Rigelhaupt: It's June 12, 2008. I'm in Oakland, California, doing an oral history interview with Doris McCuan. This is tape number one. And to start, if I could ask you to say your full name and the year you were born.

01-00:00:23

McCuan: Doris McCuan, 1921.

Rigelhaupt: Where were you born?

01-00:00:29

McCuan: St. Paul, Minnesota.

Rigelhaupt: And did you live in St. Paul for much of your life?

01-00:00:34

McCuan: Twenty-one years.

Rigelhaupt: And where in St. Paul did you live early in your life?

01-00:00:45

McCuan: I was born and raised in the same house.

Rigelhaupt: Okay. Could you describe the neighborhood and the house where you lived?

01-00:00:52

McCuan: I'd say middleclass.

Rigelhaupt: And whereabouts in the city is it?

01-00:01:00

McCuan: Well, it's residential, and about a mile from Minneapolis. Everybody knows Minneapolis, nobody ever heard of St. Paul.

Rigelhaupt: Had your family been in that area for a while before you were born?

01-00:01:18

McCuan: Yes. Not that area. My mother lived close to the University of Minnesota. My father was born in southern Minnesota, and he was in the navy for four years, and the army for a year-and-a-half.

Rigelhaupt: So your father's born in southern Minnesota. Where in southern Minnesota?

01-00:01:49

McCuan: Austin, on a farm.

Rigelhaupt: And did he live there until he was an adult?

01-00:01:56

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Did your father tell you what it was like growing up on that farm?

01-00:02:03

McCuan: Yes. He was raised by his grandmother and his grandfather, while his mother probably went to St. Paul and became a doctor of osteopathy. And she more or less walked all over Minnesota and Iowa. Didn't make any money being a doctor, but they got a lot of chickens and eggs and stuff like that.

Rigelhaupt: Now, I may be mistaken, but I don't picture that many women being osteopathic doctors in that era. So this would be your grandmother.

01-00:02:57

McCuan: My grandmother. And she walked with another lady. And I understand that she had a gun with a holster. She was a big lady.

Rigelhaupt: And the gun, she carried it for safety?

01-00:03:14

McCuan: I suppose, yeah.

Rigelhaupt: Did your grandmother ever tell you what it was like going all over Iowa and Minnesota?

01-00:03:22

McCuan: No, my grandmother died before I was born.

Rigelhaupt: And did your father ever share stories that she had told him?

01-00:03:34

McCuan: No, but my grandfather did, told me the stories.

Rigelhaupt: Are there some that are particularly memorable to you?

01-00:03:44

McCuan: Well, he fell off a hay wagon when he was sixteen, and they didn't get to him for a long time, of course. And when they did, the doctor was Dr. Mayo. And he kept telling the doctor that he could feel something moving in his leg. Well, finally they operated, and there was maggots. So he wore a brace and limped. And his job was he was a telegrapher on the railroad that went from Minneapolis to Seattle. So he was traveling on the railroad, and my grandmother was walking around. And my great grandma and great grandpa on the farm raised the two children.

Rigelhaupt: And the farm that your father was raised on, had that been in the family for some time?

01-00:04:50

McCuan: I don't know. Lot of things I asked my grandfather, he wouldn't tell me.

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever get a sense as to why?

01-00:04:59

McCuan: I don't know. I'd say, "If you don't tell me, I'm going to tell everybody we were related to Black Bart." He says, "Go ahead." [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: I don't know who Black Bart is.

01-00:05:09

McCuan: Oh, he was an Irish stagecoach robber. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: These early years of your life, in the neighborhood you were in in St. Paul, was it an Irish neighborhood?

01-00:05:36

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And I ask in the sense, were there other neighbors also in St. Paul that were, say, Italian or—Were there ethnic neighborhoods?

01-00:05:49

McCuan: Not really, not that I remember. Because we're a very religious state. Didn't care what religion you belonged to, as long as you went to church on Sunday or Friday or whatever the deal was. But I say it was an Irish neighborhood because we had the Catholic orphanage, and the church, and a grade school, and the boys' college, right within one block of where we lived.

Rigelhaupt: What was the boys' college called?

01-00:06:32

McCuan: Cretin.

Rigelhaupt: And your mom, was she also from Minnesota?

01-00:06:42

McCuan: No, she was originally from Pennsylvania, and she came out because my grandfather's brother made pianos in Minnesota. And my mother was one of ten children, and so my great-uncle sent for all of them from Pennsylvania, to work in his piano factory. Some were salesmen, some were piano finishers, carpenters.

Rigelhaupt: So your mom worked in the piano factory.

01-00:07:27

McCuan: No, my mother didn't ever work. My mother, well, when they came from Pennsylvania, they put all the kids back in school. Well, my two uncles, my Uncle Jess and my Uncle Sam, they were almost six-feet tall by then; they

were fifteen and sixteen. And they wanted to put them in the third grade. They tested them, and I guess they tested third or fourth grade or something, and they wanted to put them in there. Well, the kids couldn't get in the seat! So they just quit going to school and went to work as salesmen. And both of them were salesmen the rest of their lives. My mother, they put her back, too, I imagine. And she graduated from the University of Minnesota High School when she was twenty-one. Which was great that she was little and didn't look her age.

Rigelhaupt: Do you know what year she graduated from high school?

01-00:08:36

McCuan: No, I don't. Well, I do know, she was thirty years older than I, so it would have been—1918, '19 or some—whatever.

Rigelhaupt: And how did your mother and father meet each other?

01-00:09:04

McCuan: My mother and my father's sister were friends at high school.

Rigelhaupt: Did your father also go to the same high school?

01-00:09:16

McCuan: No, he went to the same high school I did, Central High. And he was on the football team, and he got kicked off for swearing. And he was sixteen or seventeen, I don't know which, and so he joined the navy—and probably lied about his age. So he spent four years in the navy, and then carried on a correspondence with my mother. Then he got out and they got married. And then World War I came along, so he was drafted for that.

Rigelhaupt: So he was originally in before World War I, and then served again during the war.

01-00:10:08

McCuan: Yes, just eighteen months at the end.

Rigelhaupt: Did he talk about what he did while he was in the service during World War I?

01-00:10:18

McCuan: When he was in the navy, I know he had a pretty good time. And in order to get in the navy in those days, you had to swim, learn to swim. Well, of course, most guys didn't know how to swim. So he would charge them, naturally. And for these guys, they'd call a name out, and then my father would swim, swim around. So he swam for those people who didn't know how to swim. Among other things.

Rigelhaupt: What are some of the other things?

01-00:10:55

McCuan: Well, he learned how to drink.

Rigelhaupt: He's probably not alone in that—

01-00:11:03

McCuan: No.

Rigelhaupt: —coming out of the service.

01-00:11:05

McCuan: Yeah. It's too bad. No, he traveled a lot and—He was an oiler, whatever that is.

Rigelhaupt: So, say, around kindergarten age for you, what was a typical day like for your mother and your father?

01-00:11:33

McCuan: Well, my mother never worked, so she was a housekeeper, and very clean. She was Pennsylvania Dutch, so everything was scrubbed up. And she didn't let us girls help her in any way, and we just played. Came in when we were called.

Rigelhaupt: And what was your father doing at this time?

01-00:12:05

McCuan: My father was in the coal and ice business. In the winter time, they hitched up the horses and cut the ice off of the lakes. Many lakes in St. Paul-Minneapolis, many, many lakes. And they stored it with sawdust, and it lasted all summer long. I don't know how that works, but that's the way it was. In the wintertime, he dispatched the coal trucks for delivering coal. We all had a basement with a coal chute and a coal bin.

Rigelhaupt: So most of the houses were heated with coal in the area.

01-00:12:49

McCuan: Yes. Wood or coal.

Rigelhaupt: And did your father stay in that business throughout your childhood?

01-00:13:00

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Was this a small business that he owned? Or was he an employee?

01-00:13:08

McCuan: No, it was a small business, but—He was a dispatcher during the twenties. And then we had a depression, and he was out of work for three years. And then they opened up the business again, and then he hauled it on his back, the coal.

Rigelhaupt: Do you have siblings?

01-00:13:51

McCuan: Just a sister. Older sister.

Rigelhaupt: Did you have extended family living around St. Paul?

01-00:14:01

McCuan: Oh, yes. A lot of aunts and uncles, and cousins by the dozens.

Rigelhaupt: And did you guys all do things together?

01-00:14:16

McCuan: Yes. We could walk to each other's house.

Rigelhaupt: Were the cousins in your extended family on one side of your family, more from your mother's, more from your father's?

01-00:14:38

McCuan: Of course, more from my mother's.

Rigelhaupt: And so then it sounds like her sisters and brother also lived in St. Paul.

01-00:14:47

McCuan: Yes. Well, one lived in Seattle. One sister in Utah. One in Ohio. And the rest of them were all in St. Paul.

Rigelhaupt: Had they all been born in Pennsylvania?

01-00:15:12

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And then they all moved to St. Paul?

01-00:15:15

McCuan: Well, one was born in St. Paul, my Uncle Albert. The rest were all born in Pennsylvania. So there was nine of them, because the tenth one was born in St. Paul. I think.

Rigelhaupt: Did your mother ever tell you what it was like growing up in Pennsylvania?

01-00:15:39

McCuan: Yes, she did.

Rigelhaupt: And how did she describe it?

01-00:15:45

McCuan: Well, she was more or less isolated. And when I think back about it, I'll bet you it was the Appalachian Mountains. I forget the name of the town. But anyway, my grandfather would go to Scranton, the closest big city, and he

would work all summer long. And then he would come home for a couple of months—long enough to make another baby, I guess. I don't know. But anyway, my grandmother made all of the rugs during the wintertime. She made braided rugs. And they had this farm that all the kids had to go out and pick rocks. I guess it was terrible. Couldn't grow anything.

Rigelhaupt: Did your mom ever talk about what school was like in the area?

01-00:16:48

McCuan: Mm-hm. All the grades were in one room, and they had to walk to school. I had her—I guess I still have—a report card and a list of the people that were there.

Rigelhaupt: What are some of your earliest memories from elementary school?

01-00:17:23

McCuan: Well, I liked school and I liked recess. And I only had to walk, oh, maybe five or six blocks. And I believe I came home for lunch. I don't remember. But I went through the sixth grade there, and went to junior high.

Rigelhaupt: What was junior high like?

01-00:17:59

McCuan: Well, it was not very far, maybe a mile. But coming back was all uphill, I remember that. And that was only three years I was there, and then I went to high school. And that was a level walk, but that must've been two, three miles. And my kids used to say, "Mama, every time you say it, you say it's farther." By then, I was up to five miles. [laughs] It was a long ways. And of course, back in Minnesota, it gets dark early, and so I couldn't go to any extracurricular activities because I had to get home before it got dark. Four o'clock.

Rigelhaupt: Well, going backwards a little bit, you were probably about eight years old when the Depression began?

01-00:19:04

McCuan: 1933? I was 12.

Rigelhaupt: Well, the stock market crash was in '29.

01-00:19:08

McCuan: We didn't feel it in Minnesota until 1933. Between '29 and '33, we lived like we did before. '33 is when it hit Minnesota. Minnesota is completely in the center of the country. And it was all farming. The industry was farming. So it just depended upon how it rained and how much sunny days we got. Our economy depended on that. So it wasn't until '33 that the Depression hit. That's when my father didn't work for three years. There wasn't any work.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in those years between '29 and '33—You were young, so you may not have been following newspapers or anything like that, but do you recall any conversation from your parents, or sense that they knew this was going on in the rest of the country? That the Depression was taking place, even though it wasn't directly affecting your family yet.

01-00:20:28

McCuan: Well, Minnesota was an isolationist state. And like I say, they were more interested in religion. It was very religious. And you helped one another. So it was isolated. And when they talk about atomic bomb, well, we weren't interested in that. We weren't in any way affected by any war or anything else. And that's the way they lived. Pacifists.

Rigelhaupt: So '33 your father loses his job. What were some of the things you recall your family doing to cope with the loss of his income?

01-00:21:20

McCuan: Well, my mother used to send me to the butcher shop. And she carried a line of credit there, of course. And she'd send me, and ask the butcher for a soup bone for Mrs. Kelley, and make sure there's meat on it. They gave you the soup bone. I didn't like that very much. But my mother was very economical. If it wasn't for her, we would never have made it. And for three years, we had a for sale sign on our house. And if anybody would've bought it, we would've been in our automobile.

Rigelhaupt: But it never sold.

01-00:22:11

McCuan: No. We had strict orders not to try to sell it. But we had to have the sign out, for some reason; I don't know why.

Rigelhaupt: Did your extended family in the area go through similar experiences during the Depression?

01-00:22:32

McCuan: Oh, yes. Everybody did. We all just coped. Everybody.

Rigelhaupt: Did you try and pool resources? Share food? What were some of the things that the family tried to do? As a bigger unit, I guess.

01-00:22:51

McCuan: Well, I remember my uncle coming over, my Uncle Jess coming over with a can of corned beef. And that was the highlight of the week. And my mother, of course, always had bread and butter and mustard, and they had corned beef sandwiches.

Rigelhaupt: So you started high school probably about 1935?

01-00:23:32

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And still in the middle of the Depression.

01-00:23:39

McCuan: Yes. I needed \$50 to go to school, come September. So I started babysitting when I was eleven; I remember the girl was twelve I was babysitting. But then I did housework during the summer, in order to get the \$50. I needed \$25 for books and \$25 for clothes. There wasn't any way around it, because I had grown and needed a bigger size. Now, that was during the Depression, when there wasn't any money anyplace. But I had all the business. I charged twenty-five cents a night to baby sit. I had all the business! [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: And you went to high school where in St. Paul?

01-00:24:36

McCuan: Central High. About a mile-and-a-half or two from where I lived.

Rigelhaupt: And what was that like? Could you describe a little bit about the student body there?

01-00:24:51

McCuan: Oh, it was just wonderful! I've had a wonderful education, from the beginning to the end. And the fact is that I flunked shorthand. I had dictation in the morning, and then in the afternoon I had to write up the dictation. Well, by that time, I couldn't read my writing. So I flunked shorthand. I had plenty of units to graduate, but because I selected a secretarial course and I flunked shorthand, I did not graduate. They did not care about me at all! It's not like now. So I had Chaucer and all those terrible books to read.

Rigelhaupt: And then you graduated high school about 1939?

01-00:26:01

McCuan: Mm-hm. And because I—We had half terms. And I was going to graduate in January. Well, so we only had the graduation exercises in June—or May, whatever it was. June, I think. And so I just continued going to school. I took a few more courses, because I had to have two units for the shorthand. So about April, Montgomery Ward's wanted some workers. And so my teacher gave me my credits and I went to work at Montgomery Ward.

Rigelhaupt: So was Montgomery Ward your first job?

01-00:26:51

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And what did you do there?

01-00:26:54

McCuan: I was a index clerk.

Rigelhaupt: What does an index clerk do?

01-00:27:03

McCuan: I was in the mail order department. So the order comes in and then somebody opens up the letter and all, and then we were the next one. And we kept a record of everything they bought on a little card. All the customers had a little card.

Rigelhaupt: Was this where all the national data was collected? Or was this more regionally, for Minnesota?

01-00:27:40

McCuan: Oh, it was national, Montgomery Ward. And of course, like I say, everybody worked and lived on a farm, and that's where they bought their stuff.

Rigelhaupt: Was Montgomery Ward based in Minneapolis or St. Paul at the time?

01-00:27:55

McCuan: No, I don't think so. I think it was Chicago or someplace like that. I don't know.

Rigelhaupt: Well, now trying to think back to before you started your work at Montgomery Ward, and trying to place yourself in high school, what did you think you wanted to do when you were done with high school?

01-00:28:19

McCuan: I wanted to be a laboratory technician.

Rigelhaupt: What kind of a laboratory technician?

01-00:28:24

McCuan: Oh, I like to examine stuff through the microscope, stuff like that. That was my favorite subject, was biology.

Rigelhaupt: And did you ever try and pursue it?

01-00:28:37

McCuan: Oh, I wouldn't give it a thought! There's no way that I'd ever get the money to go to college. *No way!* I had a hard enough time getting through high school. To say something about the Depression, the first year of high school I went, I stood in a long line and got my books for free. Well, that was the last time I ever did that. From then on, I was the first one down to the used book store. I bought the best book for the cheapest amount. And I worked at the library, so I knew how to make the cover for the books. The first thing I did was cover it up. I never put one mark in it. And I sold most of them for more than I paid for them.

Rigelhaupt: How long did you work at Montgomery Ward?

01-00:29:35

McCuan: About a year-and-a-half. Then I was laid off around Christmastime, when they didn't need as many. And that's when I took my unemployment and went to comptometers school.

Rigelhaupt: Now, why do you think there were layoffs at that point? In the sense that I picture this as an era in which the economy's picking up, the Depression is slowing.

01-00:30:06

McCuan: Very slowly. Well, Montgomery Ward, their big season is Christmas. And after the Christmas season, well, then they lay off. But I went to school.

Rigelhaupt: Where was the comptometers school?

01-00:30:32

McCuan: Downtown St. Paul.

Rigelhaupt: And could you describe the school, and who else was there, the student body, what you were learning?

01-00:30:45

McCuan: Well, I say school, but I don't remember it as being a school building; it was a room in some building. And we had typing, typewriters in one room, and the comptometers in the other room. So I'd go early and practice on the typewriter.

Rigelhaupt: So you were efficient with both the typewriter and the comptometer. And when did you finish the school where you were learning how to use the comptometer?

01-00:31:24

McCuan: I don't know. '41? It was only a few months.

Rigelhaupt: Then what did you decide to do?

01-00:31:35

McCuan: Oh, then from the school, I got jobs doing inventory. I worked at Minnesota Mining, their inventory, and several other places. Then I thought, the heck with that. And so I got a job through the employment office. And I worked at Central Co-Op, which was in south St. Paul, where the truckers would bring in the livestock. And Central Co-Op bought them and then resold them. And I worked nights.

Rigelhaupt: Now, when you say working—inventory, right?

01-00:32:37

McCuan: No. That was kind of an auditing job.

Rigelhaupt: But I was going to ask about at Minnesota Mining. What were you taking inventory of?

01-00:32:50

McCuan: Well, I was checking the cost of the inventory. You just wouldn't believe this, but Scotch Tape comes in half-inch, three-quarters of an inch, an inch. Well, they figured it up by the yardage and the mathematical part of that, and that's how they did their inventory. You'd think a roll of Scotch Tape would be a roll of Scotch Tape; but it isn't, it's so many square inches.

Rigelhaupt: So you were ensuring they had enough supplies. If they ran out of Scotch Tape—

01-00:33:41

McCuan: No, no, no. They'd take inventory once a year, of their stock. They wanted to know the inventory.

Rigelhaupt: What year did you come to California?

01-00:34:02

McCuan: [1942] Well, like I say, I was working in the stockyards, making \$30 a week—the same as what my father was making hauling coal on his back. And this was, what? 1940. '41. And my aunt came through, and their daughter, and found out what a terrible situation I was in—working nights, mind you, with a naked light bulb above me. And so she came home and told my uncle, who was manager of Richmond Shipyard Number Three. And he says, “A comptometer operator? See if she'll come out and work in the shipyards.” So they wrote a letter and I said yes. Well, I was also going with a fellow that said that if I didn't marry him he was going to commit suicide, so that was the end of him. That's how I got out of that. And boy, I came out on the next train! I never looked back! But you didn't ask me what we did in the wintertime in Minnesota.

Rigelhaupt: It's cold.

01-00:35:44

McCuan: We did not think so. Everybody loves the wintertime and loves the snow. And I ice skated. Every half-a-mile there was an ice skating rink. The one I went to mainly had three ice skating rinks: one that we could skate on, and one that the hockey players practiced on, and one the hockey players played their regular game on. Great hockey.

Rigelhaupt: These are outdoor ice rinks?

01-00:36:30

McCuan: Oh, yes! And we had a toboggan. And about a mile from our house, we had [inaudible] stadium where they played football, the high schools played football. And so they made a toboggan chute out of it. So you'd go up all of

these stairs, the seats, and put the toboggan on the top and go all the way down to the back, and then just do that over and over and over.

Rigelhaupt: Had the Zamboni been invented yet? Or how did the ice get smoothed out?

01-00:37:10

McCuan: They pumped water in a ring. Oh, well, once a while my dad would flood our backyard. He just made a snow ridge around, and put the hose in it. There was no waves. Although I have seen lakes that were frozen with the waves. Frozen. That's what is called a quick freeze.

Rigelhaupt: Had your uncle—who you said was the manager at Yard Three—had he been out in California and working for Kaiser for a while?

01-00:38:02

McCuan: Yes. They called themselves dam people, because Kaiser started out with roads. Kaiser built the Caldecott Tunnel. It was one of five companies, that long ago. Anyway, but he mainly did roads. And he worked at Boulder Dam. And that's where my uncle met my husband's sister. And my husband's brother worked at Boulder Dam. But anyway, these people followed Kaiser all around. Like my uncle met him in El Paso. And my uncle was a cost accountant. Kaiser didn't graduate from high school. Maybe he didn't even go to grade school, I don't know. But he surrounded himself with all these smart people. Engineers and all that stuff. My uncle was a cost accountant for Kaiser. And he went with him all over. Like from the shipyards, he went to Kaiser Aluminum in Tacoma, Washington.

Rigelhaupt: And when you say he was a cost accountant, what does that mean?

01-00:39:37

McCuan: I don't know. Maybe he figured out whether this project was cost efficient. You mean there's no cost accountants anymore?

Rigelhaupt: I don't know one way or another, I was just wondering if it was a specialized field within accounting.

01-00:40:01

McCuan: To tell you the truth, I don't know. But when I think back, he was the manager of Oakland Yard Three. But he came home from work at five o'clock, like all the rest of us. But at seven o'clock, he went back to work. And I think he was doing all this managing in the daytime, then at night he was doing cost accounting. Well, like you say, whatever that is.

Rigelhaupt: Did you come to the Bay Area before the attack on Pearl Harbor?

01-00:40:41

McCuan: No, right after.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in thinking back to '41, did you have a sense that the country was building towards war?

01-00:40:55

McCuan: No. We were isolationists. We weren't going to have any part of that.

Rigelhaupt: But once Pearl Harbor happened—

01-00:41:05

McCuan: Then everybody pitched in. Everybody.

Rigelhaupt: So did you get here, say, January, February of '42?

01-00:41:20

McCuan: April.

Rigelhaupt: April '42, okay. And what were your first impressions of the Bay Area?

01-00:41:27

McCuan: Boy, I got off of that train and, this is *it!* [chuckles] I don't know. Well, I didn't like the restrictions and all in Minnesota. You couldn't hang your clothes up on the line on Tuesday; you're supposed to hang them up on *Monday*. You didn't wear white after—What? Memorial—? No, Memorial Day is when you started wearing the white; and then I forget when you could take that off. And then you wore all dark clothes in the wintertime, browns and blacks. And if you didn't do those things, then they all talked about you. Oh, isn't that awful?

Rigelhaupt: Isn't it Labor Day was the end of the whites?

01-00:42:17

McCuan: Labor Day. After Labor, then there's no more white shoes, white purses, white hats. You put them all away.

Rigelhaupt: Did your family belong to a church when you were growing up?

01-00:42:35

McCuan: Oh, yeah. Mm-hm.

Rigelhaupt: What church?

01-00:42:39

McCuan: Presbyterian. Well, my mother was a Methodist, but my father was Presbyterian. But the church was only a block-and-a-half from our house, so my mother transferred over to that church. And my father wouldn't go to church because he said he had to go three times on Sunday, all the time he was a kid, he had all the religion he needed; and he knew the Bible backwards and forwards—which he did. My dad was very intelligent, but he didn't want to do anything.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about going to church? Did you like it?

01-00:43:24

McCuan: Oh, I *loved* it! On Sunday I went to Sunday school at nine-thirty, and then we stayed for church. And then seven o'clock Sunday night was Christian Endeavor. And of course, we girls went because the boys were there. I was thirty years old before I figured out the *boys* came because the *girls* were there!

Rigelhaupt: And did you find a church when you came to the Bay Area?

01-00:44:02

McCuan: I tried.

Rigelhaupt: But was it something you found soon after you moved here?

01-00:44:10

McCuan: Oh, yes. I was used to going to church every Sunday. But nothing was the same.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember which church you started attending?

01-00:44:21

McCuan: It was the Presbyterian church in El Cerrito.

Rigelhaupt: And did the church play a role in helping you to meet people, build a community?

01-00:44:34

McCuan: No.

Rigelhaupt: You didn't make any friends with people at the—

01-00:44:39

McCuan: Oh, well, when I stepped off of the train, there was my cousin and her friend. And I married the friend. So I didn't meet *anybody*. And I had to marry him because I didn't have any chance of meeting anybody else. And he took all of my time.

Rigelhaupt: How long was the courtship before you got married?

01-00:45:06

McCuan: From April to September.

Rigelhaupt: And what was dating like in 1942?

01-00:45:18

McCuan: We went out to dinner. We both bowled. And that's what we had in common, so we did a lot of bowling. And all of our lives, we always belonged to a league. But that's about all, I guess, we could do.

Rigelhaupt: Where did you live when you first came to the Bay Area?

01-00:45:52

McCuan: I lived with my aunt and uncle and cousin. In order for us to get to Richmond, he had to buy us a car. Because there was lots of transportation. Buses, and they even put a train that went out there, out to the shipyards. But by the time the train and the buses got to El Cerrito, there wasn't any room. They never even stopped. I worked in the invoice audit department, and we didn't have anybody to work for us. The men were all called to the war, and the women followed their husbands. And I trained them all in. And the first thing I said when I sat down was, "Do you have any trouble getting to work?" "Oh, yes!" She says, "I stand there and stand there. Bus goes right by." And so I says, "Well, I'll tell you what, my husband will pick you up, if you're there." So I asked him, and he always said, "Yes, but I don't wait for anybody." And he wouldn't let me charge them for anything, which I didn't care anything about that, either. But boy, they were always there. We picked up everybody we could.

Rigelhaupt: Well, just before jumping into a little bit more about your work at Kaiser, what do you remember about the attack on Pearl Harbor and how you learned about it?

01-00:47:45

McCuan: Oh, sure. I was in church. And when I got home, my father told us. We were shocked.

Rigelhaupt: And when you say you were shocked, does that mean that the attack was not only shocking in how it took place, but a surprise that it even took place? That at this moment, as a young person, a young adult, even though the war had been raging in Europe, Japan had clearly been an imperial power, taking over Korea, it was still surprising that it came home to the US?

01-00:48:48

McCuan: To me, yes. Maybe my parents. But to me, everything was fine. It was just a shock, just a complete shock for anyone to do anything like that.

Rigelhaupt: And how quickly after the attack on Pearl Harbor did you get a sense that the US was now going to be a part of the war raging around the world?

01-00:49:21

McCuan: Well, see, that happened in December, and I left in April, first of April. So they were still in shock. I mean, here's a bunch of passive people that, to a person, we were all—We were isolations, that's what we were. Passive. Not antiwar or anything like that, but just a very help your neighbor thing, very kind. And everybody was. We didn't lock our door or anything.

Rigelhaupt: So in those months—from December of '41 till April of '42—that you came out to the Bay Area, did you see friends, especially men, begin getting drafted, signing up for the service and leaving the St. Paul area?

01-00:50:18

McCuan: Yeah. Yeah, we had a big CCC camp. In fact, any kid, boy, that graduated from high school and didn't have a job, well, they'd put him in the CCC camp. I don't know whether they joined or whether they put them in the CCC camp, but that's where they went. And the idea was they would get a little more mature, and they might learn a little something and decide what they want to do when they come out. And whatever the years were; I don't remember whether it was two years or four years or what it was. And they did a lot of construction work and stuff like that. Well, they took those boys immediately. Well, everybody signed up, also. Everybody. And like I say, we were still in the Depression.

Rigelhaupt: And when you say everyone signed up, obviously, it was probably mostly young men signing up to join the service. Now, what did people who were men who, say, were too old, couldn't join the service, women who weren't going to be in the service, in the early months before you left for the Bay Area, how do you remember other people in your community trying to contribute to the war effort?

01-00:51:47

McCuan: I don't remember. All I remember is being kind of in shock.

Rigelhaupt: Did your father's business change at all?

01-00:52:03

McCuan: No, because about a year after I came out—of course, I used to send the—We had a weekly paper called the *Fore and Aft*. And I used to send that to him every week. I was trying to give him the idea of moving. I never thought they've ever move. The house we lived in, they had had built. And I never thought they'd ever move. But I was trying to talk them into it that way, a subtle way. And so less than a year after I came, why then my mother and father came. They had an old Chevrolet with a rumble seat. My father bought it because it was cheaper. And they got rid of all their property, all their stuff, and put the rest in the car and drove out with a gas stamp, special gas stamp so they could go to do the war work. They went thirty-five miles an hour from Minnesota to California. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: Did they talk to you at all about what it was like to leave the community they knew so well, to sell their home and move across the country?

01-00:53:31

McCuan: No, they didn't. Not either one of them. Not either one of them. Of course, you see, my mother had two brothers and a sister here. *Three* brothers and a sister here. So my mother, of course, she hated the winter, like most women

did, of that age. And so she wanted to come out and see her brothers and sisters.

Rigelhaupt: Did you get a sense that your parents' decision to move to the Bay Area was as much about the family that was already here as it was about working in the war industries?

01-00:54:40

McCuan: Well, mostly working. My father was making \$30 a week in nineteen-forty— They probably came out the latter part of '42. Maybe '43, I don't remember. He's still making \$30 a week.

Rigelhaupt: And what about your older sister?

01-00:55:05

McCuan: My sister was already married, and she stayed in Minnesota for many years. And then they moved to Texas, and then she eventually moved to Florida.

Rigelhaupt: And where did your parents decide to live when they got here?

01-00:55:28

McCuan: Well, you couldn't find a room anyplace. In fact, in one block there in El Cerrito, somebody told me they had five movie houses. And I believe it. I don't remember that, but somebody reminded me there was movie houses. And what they did is, up in the top seats, that's where the guys slept. They came out here by the thousands every day. We'd get like 10,000 a day. And there wasn't anyplace to sleep, and so they slept in the movie. So I had a lot of nerve telling my mother and father to come out. And I was living with my husband's sister. They were married and I was living with them. So they couldn't live there. And anyway, I saw a for rent sign down in this place in El Cerrito, in the basement. And so when they came out, they spent the night with us in Berkeley, and then the next day I took them out to the other place, and they just loved it. They just loved California, both of them. My father had been here twice before, once in the navy and once in World War I.

Rigelhaupt: I'm just going to pause right here to change tapes.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 06-12-2008.mp3

Rigelhaupt: Okay. I'm on tape number two with Doris McCuan. And I'd like to ask you if you could describe your first day of work at Kaiser.

02-00:00:20

McCuan: Well, I came with another lady, neighbor of mine where I lived. And so the rumor around the office was that one of us was Mr. Raudenbush's niece. Well, the other lady was very outgoing, and I was a shy little thing. And so

everybody thought the other lady was she, and I just loved it. Just *loved* it! [laughs] Sit back and watch this stuff going on. Anyway, I had a comptometer desk and an electric comptometer, and I was off to the side someplace. And they really hadn't set up much for paying the bills. Up to that time, there hadn't been that many bills. And so I didn't have any work to do. Maybe five invoices for eight hours. Well, of course being from Minnesota with the work ethic, I looked around for something to do. So I was the one who collected the money when the boys went off and when the women went to be with their husbands; and I was the one that went out and got the ice cream. And each one of the auditors had a desk and a chair, and I would just go sit by them and say, "Is there anything you want me to do?" "Well, you could take this up to the Maritime Commission and find out this and this." So I did everything. Well, pretty soon I knew more than anybody else, because of the turnover in auditors. And so then we got a new room, what was four times as big as the old one, and more auditors. And so they had me training everybody in. And I answered all their questions and everything, so then I was head auditor. And I was what, twenty-one? Twenty-two? And I never had any experience to speak of. And so I was training in this guy from Italy. His name was Enoch Estes. I'll never forget it. Ninety-four year old. Of course, he was a CPA. So he started questioning me about this and that, and I didn't know what to say. I didn't have any answer; I was not a CPA, I was only a comptometer operator. So I finally says to him, "Estes, there's three ways to do things in this world: the right thing, the wrong way, and the Maritime way. We will do this the Maritime way." And from then on we were friends. But that's what I did.

Rigelhaupt: Were you writing the invoices or checking the invoices?

02-00:04:33

McCuan: Checking them.

Rigelhaupt: And what did that entail?

02-00:04:37

McCuan: Mostly we did the addition. And all the other auditors had a calculator. But every time they promoted me I said, "I want my comptometer and my comptometer table." And so you could add, multiply and subtract and divide. But we had to make sure there was an invoice, a purchase order, a receiving order—I guess that was it—in the package. And they all had to agree—And then I had a desk and a table. When the auditors finished them, some lady picked them up and put them on my table in the back. So when I got to work in the morning, it was stacked up like this. So I went to work every day. If I was sick, nobody did my job. So when I came back, it was stacked on both desks. So I went to work sick. And I signed the thing. Oh, I remember one time the purchase order said, four nuts, ten cents apiece. And the receiving order said three, and the billing was for four. I'm talking ten cents. And the Maritime Commission kicked it out. And I remember I passed it. I thought, what the hell? For ten cents, I'm not going to do all that. And they threw it

out. From our department, it went to the next department, and they wrote the checks. And they used legal sized paper, single spaced, for all of these amounts. Was cost plus 10%. And so when they threw that out, they threw out the whole page, which was maybe \$230,000. So I'd have to go up and straighten it out. And I felt like I'd have passed these ones that they rejected, so that's what I did in my afternoons.

Rigelhaupt: Now, were there any surprises in checking these invoices? Things that didn't always seem accurate that you ended up catching?

02-00:07:33

McCuan: Oh, sure. And sometimes I'd change the purchase order. Might not have been legal, I don't know. But if the purchase order said ten, that's what you get, ten. So I think in this case, I changed the purchase order. I don't remember. But anyway, I went down to the yard and I told the guy at the yard what my problem was. And he says, "Well, we don't need any more. We got all we needed." I think I changed the purchase order. But they all had to be the same.

Rigelhaupt: So when you changed the purchase order, Kaiser paid more for those nuts, paid ten cents rather than three?

02-00:08:21

McCuan: No, we only paid for what we got. Yeah. We changed the purchase order from four to three. Now, what's legal or whatever, I don't know, but that's what I did. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: And what was it like training new employees? Was there a program, a system of protocols—

02-00:08:43

McCuan: No.

Rigelhaupt: —or did you have to invent something.

02-00:08:45

McCuan: I invented it.

Rigelhaupt: And tell me about what you did.

02-00:08:52

McCuan: Well, I just told them everything I knew. Just like I told Estes. If he said anything, that's what I'd tell him. "Three ways of doing things: the right way, the wrong way, and the Maritime Way. We will do it the Maritime way."

Rigelhaupt: And what did that mean, more specifically, the Maritime way?

02-00:09:19

McCuan: Because the Maritime Commission—The job was cost plus 10%. So we were getting our money from the Maritime Commission.

Rigelhaupt: Now, you mentioned that there was a lot of turnover.

02-00:09:44

McCuan: In the beginning.

Rigelhaupt: Was that because there were men leaving for the service?

02-00:09:47

McCuan: Yes. And women following their men.

Rigelhaupt: When you say women following their men, what—

02-00:09:54

McCuan: Well, say if he was stationed here in the Bay Area and then he was moved to Texas someplace; well, then she would just leave and go to Texas.

Rigelhaupt: And a lot of your family members worked for Kaiser. Could you tell me about what they did?

02-00:10:19

McCuan: Well—my father was my husband's oiler. My Uncle Stacy was office manager, and my Uncle Albert was office manager at Yard Four. My cousin Wanda worked at Yard Two, and I don't know what she did. And my husband was a crane operator. And his brother Harley worked in the office of Yard Three; his brother Norman was a crane operator at Yard Three; his sister Louisa was payroll at Yard Three; and his sister Jessie was receptionist at Yard Three. And my sister-in-law Mildred was in payroll, Yard Three. So it was a family affair.

Rigelhaupt: Did they ever talk to you about particularly memorable experiences they had? Or from your husband working as a crane operator?

02-00:11:22

McCuan: My husband did.

Rigelhaupt: Did he ever say, something really exciting happened today; we did this.?

02-00:11:28

McCuan: Oh, yes.

Rigelhaupt: Does anything stick out in your memory?

02-00:11:31

McCuan: Oh, he also worked at Boulder Dam, and he had a lot of stories about that. I don't remember anything other than normal work. We built cargo ships. And I think we built about one a month. Yard Two would throw them together in maybe a day or two. They were Liberty ships; ours was cargo. And so we had an outfitting dock. And when they finished the ship, then it went to the outfitting dock. And I don't know what they did there. But they would come in to be—whatever. After they had gone out to sea and did their job, they

would come in to be [outfitted]—I don't know what for. But anyway, if they had any leftover ham, they would dump it out in the bay because otherwise when they came back, the Maritime Commission, I guess, would count them as—They got a ration of so many hams, and they'd count them as having them, where if they went out to sea with them again, they wouldn't last that long. So they dumped them in the bay. Which is a sample of what was dumped in the bay.

Rigelhaupt: So there's lots of cans of ham somewhere at the bottom of the bay?

02-00:13:12

McCuan: No, fresh hams.

Rigelhaupt: Fresh hams. So they're probably not still there.

02-00:13:19

McCuan: Oh, I think the fish ate them.

Rigelhaupt: Was this common that so many of a particular family worked at Kaiser? Did you meet other people who had lots of aunts or uncles or siblings also working at Kaiser? Or was your family unique?

02-00:13:37

McCuan: Mine was unique. Well, for one thing, you see, my Uncle Stacy met my husband, of course, at Boulder. Between the two of them, they built Boulder Dam all by themselves. And then of course, another one of my husband's brothers, Curtis, worked there, too. So he knew the whole family. My uncle followed Kaiser around, but so did my sister-in-law and her husband followed him around. He worked in the payroll department.

Rigelhaupt: Did any of your family members talk about what it was like working for Kaiser in the Richmond shipyards compared to the Boulder Dam? Was it better work? Safer, cleaner? Where there any similarities or differences they talked about?

02-00:14:38

McCuan: No. Well, they're construction workers. They take whatever's coming, whatever's dished out. I know that when they built Boulder Dam, they had these little railroads to get the cement where they wanted it, stuff like that. Well, we had one of the railroads there that my husband had ran in Boulder, also did it in Yard Three.

Rigelhaupt: How would you compare and contrast what your office was like at the beginning of your time there and then at the end of World War II? And what a day in your work was like at the beginning and the end of World War II?

02-00:15:40

McCuan: Well, in the end, of course, most of them just left. Seemed like all the executives left. They were probably transferred to someplace else. And then

the workers themselves, they left. Just like I left. And of course, I guess some of them were laid off. But in the office, most of them just left. But I left because my husband was being laid off and we went back to Kentucky to visit his folks, and Minnesota to see my folks. My mother and father went with us.

Rigelhaupt: And so did you resign your position at Kaiser?

02-00:16:34

McCuan: Yes. Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember anything you thought in particular that Kaiser did really well—In the sense that it was such a massive buildup in such a short amount of time.

02-00:16:54

McCuan: Such a miracle.

Rigelhaupt: What went really well that Kaiser did?

02-00:17:00

McCuan: Everything. For one thing, see, my aunt and uncle knew Kaiser well and they would have him over for dinner often. And he loved—My aunt was from El Paso, and she could make the best tacos in town. Not like tacos, but they called them tacos. But they're altogether different. Had an egg on top. Anyway, so she'd invite him for dinner and cook these tacos for him. And anyway, his wife, if you've ever seen pictures of her, she looked like a little old farmer's wife. Anyway, she died and he married the head nurse. Well, that head nurse—They don't say that. They say Kaiser had the idea. But I'll tell you, the head nurse had the idea of Permanente Hospital. And we had two field hospitals. They weren't hospitals, they were clinics or something. A lot of workers got hurt there. And then about a mile away in downtown Richmond, we had a field hospital. My husband had his appendix taken out there. But they charged us a dollar a week, and they took it out of our pay check. And the people that I worked for, they didn't want to spend that dollar a week. Oh! Oh, I was so angry at them. How dumb can you get? But eventually, everybody joined, it seemed like. And they built the Kaiser hospital plan. They bought Fabiola. I got a thing on that, too, where they bought the Fabiola Hospital. Kaiser bought it. They just tore it down last year.

Rigelhaupt: And that one was in Richmond?

02-00:19:17

McCuan: Oakland. Right over here. Now, she was the inspiration for all this healthcare, far as I'm concerned.

Rigelhaupt: So that's one of the lasting impacts of Kaiser's work in building up the war effort, in some respects. One of the more important lasting aspects is—

02-00:19:50

McCuan: I think so.

Rigelhaupt: —is Kaiser healthcare.

02-00:19:52

McCuan: Right.

Rigelhaupt: Did you move out of your aunt and uncle's home after you got married?

02-00:20:01

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And where did you and your husband move to?

02-00:20:04

McCuan: We lived with my husband's sister and husband. Then got an apartment by ourselves.

Rigelhaupt: Oh, and then so you moved out of the—

02-00:22:09

McCuan: We drove around [Berkeley] every Sunday and we had the ad in the papers. And I would run up, and no, it was already taken. Finally, I says, "Well, *you* go in." And so he went in. Well, of course, he came back and had it. It just happened that way. And what it was, an old house that had been made into a triplex, and we shared the bathroom. Now, that sounds terrible, doesn't it? But we had no trouble whatever. She worked nights and we worked days. We never saw her. And so we were there. We had a rabbit. We brought a rabbit with us. And then, of course, we got two puppy dogs. So that had to be the end of that. We could not have all of those things. So we started looking around, a place for the dogs. And I don't know what we did with the rabbit. Anyway, so we found this little house in El Cerrito. We had found it the year before, and we were looking at it with my mother and father, two families moving in together. I don't know what I was even thinking about. And anyway, that fell through, so it was a year later that we went again, seeing a for sale sign. And the same price, except that he was going to throw the furniture in—which you can imagine what that was like. And so that's when we bought the house in El Cerrito, because of the two dogs. My husband was just lucky that way. And it was a great big lot, 220 by sixty-eight, up in the hills, with a little bitty cottage in the middle. And then the last half, the last fifty feet was all fenced in, because they probably had chickens or something. Well, there was a chicken coop, so I guess they had chickens. So of course, that was a perfect dog run for the dogs. That's how come we bought a place in El Cerrito. And then one day my husband says he thinks he'll build a house in the front. I said, "Yeah, sure. Crane operator building a house. Yeah, sure." And so he had a survey and somebody draw up the blueprints and everything, and the guidelines for the foundation of the house. And in the meantime, my mother and father moved three doors away from us, up in the hills, too.

Bought a little shack. So then he had the—I don't know, I forgot what they were called, but they were guidelines for the foundation. And he had my father digging the dirt and putting it in the wheelbarrows, and me wheeling it next door, because next door wanted some dirt. One wheelbarrow load full and he says, "Just a minute. Just stop everything." He goes upstairs and he makes a telephone call. And he comes back and he says, "My friend with the backhoe will be here this afternoon." Anyway, he built the house. And I thought, well, if he digs a big hole, at least we'll have a swimming pool in the front yard. But he didn't. He and I finished it in two years.

Rigelhaupt: And how long did you live there?

02-00:26:24

McCuan: Sixty years. And we paid \$4200 for it, cash. All of our savings bonds. A big stack like that.

Rigelhaupt: What was the address up in El Cerrito?

02-00:26:47

McCuan: 7669 Stockton. Every morning I get up and I say, "Good morning, Mount Tamalpais." Well, when they showed me this place here, I says, "I'll take it." I looked out the window, there was Mount Tamalpais. I says, "I'll take it."

Rigelhaupt: How do you remember some of the things that were going on on the West Coast, in particular, affecting your life? And if you felt any sense of danger. Like the blackouts and having to have blackout curtains.

02-00:27:26

McCuan: I didn't have blackout curtains.

Rigelhaupt: But did you feel a sense of danger, being—

02-00:27:30

McCuan: Oh, absolutely! Absolutely!

Rigelhaupt: That the Japanese might attack the Bay Area?

02-00:27:34

McCuan: Absolutely! And when they decided to deport the Japanese, I thought that was the worst thing I ever heard of. That's inhuman and a few other things I thought of, being raised in Minnesota with a passive upbringing. Then I realized, either they went to the camps and were protected or we're going to kill them. We're going to kill them on the street, one by one. We were so angry at Pearl Harbor.

Rigelhaupt: And you could feel that, even after you got here?

02-00:28:13

McCuan: Oh, yes. More so. More so. Because we were closer. We were right in it.

Rigelhaupt: That the anti-Japanese sentiment was so great that Japanese and Japanese Americans living along the West Coast were in real danger.

02-00:28:32

McCuan: Absolutely! Not only that, they could never make a living. My gardener, {Adachi?}, that I bought all my gardening stuff from—And then we had a flower shop, American Roses, I think it was called, that I traded with, and a lot of gardeners. I don't know. But now, like {Adachi's?} family owned this big nursery. And they all went, and they came back and they opened up their nursery again. But I thought it was so terrible. And then all of a sudden I decided, well, it saved their lives. Because they weren't going to make a living.

Rigelhaupt: So even if there wasn't so much going to by physical violence aimed at Japanese and Japanese Americans—their physical safety may not have been as much in danger, but people weren't going to shop at a store owned by a Japanese American.

02-00:29:43

McCuan: Right. No, no.

Rigelhaupt: Okay. Now, how do you remember learning about what was going on in the war? Where did you get your information from?

02-00:29:56

McCuan: I suppose the radio. I don't remember reading the paper. I didn't have time.

Rigelhaupt: Well, how was it different learning about the war without television? In the sense that during the Vietnam War, current war, the images and the horrors of war are quite literally brought into your living room every night.

02-00:30:26

McCuan: No, we didn't.

Rigelhaupt: And so how was it different experiencing and learning about World War II, when you didn't have those types of images coming into your home on a daily basis.

02-00:30:36

McCuan: Well, it's different, of course. Well, of course, we all knew it was terrible. I had a cousin that was hurt in the Battle of the Bulge. Then I had another one that was very religious, and he was a pilot, I guess. And he turned white overnight. Raised not to hurt people and stuff like that, and have to drop those bombs. Against his religion.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember things that went poorly? In the sense that with so many people moving to Richmond—It was a town of 20,000 to 100,000 in a matter of a year or something. I imagine sewer lines, public services—all of those things are now stretched about as far as—How did those things like city

services and the fact that so many people were going to be impacting them now—Do you remember things that went well, went poorly, such as trash not being picked up or anything along those lines?

02-00:32:11

McCuan:

Yeah. Everybody worked towards the war effort. Like my mother saved all this grease. She saved other things, too. Cans. I don't remember what it was, but she saved a lot of things. My husband was a crane operator out to Yard Three. And he was digging a hole and dumping it in there. But the theory of the grease was, I figured, from Roosevelt, get the people interested helping the war effort. And the children all save this for the war effort and all that stuff. Everybody did. And we got our information about the war through the radio.

Rigelhaupt:

And newsreels before movies?

02-00:33:05

McCuan:

Yes.

Rigelhaupt:

But mostly the radio.

02-00:33:08

McCuan:

Mostly the radio, because we played that every night.

Rigelhaupt:

And one of the things I meant to ask you when we were talking about Kaiser was, what do you remember about unions and their efforts to organize workers at Kaiser?

02-00:33:27

McCuan:

Well, of course, they came in. The organizers came in and threatened us and a few other—I was an office worker. My husband was in the union. Of course, he hated it. But he had to or he couldn't get his work. And I thought there was no place on earth for a union in an office. And I used to come early—well, because my husband came early so he could oil his rig before eight o'clock. And I wasn't supposed to go sharpen my pencils before eight o'clock! Now, that's stupid! Oh, none of us liked it. But we all ended up joining. I can't remember why.

Rigelhaupt:

Did your husband talk about why he didn't like the unions?

02-00:34:26

McCuan:

Oh, sure!

Rigelhaupt:

How come?

02-00:34:37

McCuan:

You know what a whirly is?

Rigelhaupt:

It goes on the tracks?

02-00:34:45

McCuan:

Yes. Way up high. He was a whirly operator. There was only five or six of them in the area, after the war, good ones. And so he got laid off from his job. Well, this one time he was laid off. And so at the union, you get on the bottom of the list, and when your name gets up at the top he gets a job. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, he was a whirly operator. How many jobs are going to open up for a whirly? And so he argued with them. And no, you've got to stay at the bottom; that's the way the union works. Well, oh, he was mad. So all the times he was laid off, he'd never apply for unemployment. Which kind of irked me because I had two boys. It was not just him to think about, but my children, our children. So like I say, he had to stay on the bottom until his name came to the top. Well, so he went out and found this job out in Richmond. Perfect. Running the same whirly he ran during the war. And then he went out and applied for unemployment. Stood in that long time. And he told how awful—He didn't want anything for nothing. I forget the word for that. And how embarrassed he was to have to stand in line. And so anyway, he signed up for unemployment. Then he goes down to the union place and he tells them again, "There's only so many whirlies. You've got me at the bottom. I got a job." And he says, "You can't do that. You've got to wait until your name comes to the top." He says, "Well, in that case, I've signed up for unemployment. I'll write the government and tell them I have a job and you won't give it to me." "Okay. Here's your clearance. Get out of here." That's why he doesn't like the unions. It's not fair. He was also the best crane operator in the Bay Area, but he didn't make any more money than anybody else, than the guy who hid behind the steel. Oh, used to make him so mad. They'd hide behind a bunch of lumber or steel when four-thirty came. And then four-thirty-five, they'd come out and want overtime. They'd have to pay them.

Rigelhaupt:

Do you remember which union?

02-00:37:55

McCuan:

Sure, Operating Engineers.

Rigelhaupt:

But the union that came into the office, it wasn't as—

02-00:38:06

McCuan:

Oh, the one I was in? I was in the Office Workers Union. I never went to any meetings or anything, I just paid the dues, whatever they were. Oh, and then when my husband was hurt on the job and permanently disabled—This load of stuff hit him on the face. And he had amnesia. Never did remember anything. A little bit of his teenage period, very little. And I had nobody to help me. I didn't know anything. And I wanted to do the right thing. And so he was up for retirement. And if you took lesser money, well, then I would be covered if anything happened to him. Well, I was eleven years, almost twelve years younger than him. Well, women live longer than men; you're talking *twenty-five* years! To me, that's what I was thinking. So I thought, well, I should do this right and everything. I'll go to the union, who's supposed to

take care of their workers and love them so much to death. So he also had an attendant around the clock, from the insurance company. The insurance company was very good to me. Well, they should; I was very good to them. Anyway, and he drove my car to San Francisco. We went to this appointment, and I stated my case. He says, "Well, statistics show that if the man takes more money, it comes out more in the long run." Now, that is a lie. And dummy me, I believed it. I wanted to do what was best for my husband, so we took the \$500 a month. I can't believe that. And so that when he died, that was the end of that. So when he died, I had *nothing* coming in. Except what I—I had my nephew for a lawyer and he muffed it up. And finally—We belonged to the Elks Club. And Elks, everybody kept checking up on me, find out how Jack was. So this friend called and wanted to know how Jack was, and I told him. And my lawyer was my nephew, also from the Elks Club. And so she said something about what was Joe doing about it? And I said, "I don't know. I haven't heard from him." She says, "You haven't heard anything from him?" I said, "No, I haven't." And she hung up. And evidently, she called Joe and raised hell. And about three days later, my nephew Joe called and he said, "I'm a corporation lawyer. Would you mind if I gave you a industrial, whatever you call it, lawyer?" I says, "No, not at all." So I got him, and I told him I didn't want to sue for anything, I just wanted my husband taken care of. And so we ended up—Oh. Luckily, a year was almost up. And he went out and took pictures of the hole where the accident happened. The machinery went into this hole and knocked these pallets down and hit him on the head. Which they were, naturally, negligent. You don't have a hole and running all that equipment around. But I said, "I just want my husband taken care of." And so I was getting \$300 a month Workman's Comp. That's what I was living on, \$300 a month Workman's Comp, and the 500 from the Operating Engineers. \$800 a month. But the insurance company paid for these boys and everything. So my lawyer went to work and he put it before the judge that because he worked with longshoremen, and the longshoremen disability was 1450 a month, compared to 300, that he should get the 1450. Well, he dickered around with him for seven years. Therefore, when it finally went to court and he won, I got a check for \$85,000. All the back pay.

Rigelhaupt: But this was later, after World War II.

02-00:44:23

McCuan: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Well, let's jump backwards a little bit, back to World War II era. Do you remember the explosion of Port Chicago?

02-00:44:35

McCuan: Sure do. We felt it.

Rigelhaupt: What did you think happened?

02-00:44:39

McCuan:

Oh! I don't know. Earthquake. We were living in Berkeley at the time, and no, no, we felt it. Just like an earthquake.

Rigelhaupt:

There wasn't a fear that there had been an attack?

02-00:44:53

McCuan:

I wasn't afraid of anything. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about learning about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and what your reaction to it—

02-00:45:06

McCuan:

Oh, do it, do it, do it, do it, do it. Save those people's lives. Do it, do it, do it, do it. And how little old Truman, who was like a little farmer, would have the guts to do that—And everybody hated Truman, just like they hate Bush right now. Everybody hated Truman. And I thought to myself, Boy, history's going to show what a brave man he was. That took guts.

Rigelhaupt:

So there was a sense that brought the war to a conclusion, in fact.

02-00:45:42

McCuan:

Stopped. Stopped. Saved millions of Japanese lives, besides ours. Mostly the Japanese. We weren't losing as many as they were.

Rigelhaupt:

What did you think about the use of a new weapon, that this awesome power had unleashed on the world, that had never been seen before?

02-00:46:06

McCuan:

Well, scary! Scary.

Rigelhaupt:

So there were at least some ambiguous feelings about it, in the sense it was—

02-00:46:16

McCuan:

Yes.

Rigelhaupt:

—scary, but also that—

02-00:46:19

McCuan:

Necessity. Absolute necessity. It was going to go on and on and on. Tojo said no, no, no, no, no. And Tojo was going to kill all of his countrymen.

Rigelhaupt:

And then what do you remember about when you got the official word the war was over?

02-00:46:39

McCuan:

Oh, unbelievable. Unbelievable. Everybody was just so happy. Just crazily happy.

Rigelhaupt:

Celebrations in the street?

02-00:46:52

McCuan: Yes, everybody. What we were working for.

Rigelhaupt: And then what do you remember about learning about the Holocaust and that genocide had taken place during World War II?

02-00:47:11

McCuan: Oh, we didn't hear anything. And what little we heard, we didn't believe. Nothing like that would ever happen.

Rigelhaupt: But then after the war, when you learned that it really had taken place—

02-00:47:21

McCuan: Well, words don't express it. And thank God we went in there and stopped that guy.

Rigelhaupt: Well, part of my asking is in thinking backwards—and this may be hard to actually recreate in your memory but—what it was like to learn about that taking place and you didn't know about it. That something like that could be happening.

02-00:47:51

McCuan: I didn't believe—unbelievable that that could happen and we wouldn't hear about it, wouldn't be a leak someplace. But you couldn't do it without. I don't know how they did it. Didn't have the newspaper reporters, I guess.

Rigelhaupt: And then how would you describe El Cerrito changing—your home, the city you lived in now, your neighborhood—in say, the decade after World War II?

02-00:48:41

McCuan: More houses, and people moving in, building.

Rigelhaupt: Your work at Kaiser and being a part of the war effort, how do you think that impacted your future life? How do you think it impacted your future work, and your life in general?

02-00:49:25

McCuan: Well, I felt like I was doing my part of the war. We all did, down to a person. They wanted to send me to Oakland Kaiser, and my husband didn't want me to work.

Rigelhaupt: And so did you stop working right as the war ended?

02-00:49:47

McCuan: Yeah, I quit because my husband was laid off and my father was laid off, and we all went to visit our families.

Rigelhaupt: And you didn't go back to work after that?

02-00:50:00

McCuan: No. Yes, I worked in the house. And I felt like I did my part. I made my own clothes, I canned, I had chickens.

Rigelhaupt:

In thinking back to some of the other women you met at Kaiser—One of the things that World War II is known for is this idea of Rosie the Riveter; that for the first time, women were working in jobs that men had only held previously. But you had worked at Montgomery Ward, you had worked before working during World War II. And was that true of other women you met, that their first work experience actually was not during World War II; that many of them had had previous work experience?

02-00:51:00

McCuan: Most of them had not. They were young people, like I say, following their husbands around. As they got transferred, they would follow them. So they were easy to train, except for Enoch Estes. I don't remember anybody else's name, but I remember him, because we got to be such good friends. I used to come early, and he and I would work the crossword puzzle.

Rigelhaupt:

So you were one of the more experienced workers in the Kaiser office when you started.

02-00:51:45

McCuan: No, not when I started.

Rigelhaupt:

But over the course of the—

02-00:51:47

McCuan: No. Well, I've got to explain this, too because I worked in the general audit. I didn't do anything with lumber or steel. So now, those guys were professional auditors, no doubt about it. That was their line of work. But in our office, anybody could learn. I could teach them in just about an hour. I used to tell them, "Don't come and ask me any questions till ten o'clock. I wake up at seven, but I don't answer any questions till after ten." Terrible.

Rigelhaupt:

One of the things I've certainly heard about the Bay Area during World War II was that it was more integrated than a lot of other places in the country. Despite the fact lots of different groups of people were moving here, that it became a more integrated community. No.

02-00:53:07

McCuan: Mm-mm.

Rigelhaupt:

And what I was going to ask is if you could compare it, contrast it to St. Paul. Or maybe talk about the two separate—

02-00:53:15

McCuan: No comparison. El Cerrito was white only. Which I didn't know that, or I probably never would've moved there because I didn't believe in

discrimination. Now, St. Paul, we had our colored section. They had their own railroad, they had their own movie, they had everything. And I tried to describe it to my boys. My husband was so prejudiced, being from the South. And I didn't want them to be prejudiced, so I tried to explain it to them. They're more rhythmic than we are, and they have different—They're different. But we didn't have any trouble living in St. Paul.

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever hear about how El Cerrito got to be white only?

02-00:54:13

McCuan: Somebody told me. It was that way, I guess, for a long time. I don't know, but I was just astonished. I just couldn't hardly believe it.

Rigelhaupt: But how would it have been enforced?

02-00:54:28

McCuan: With snobbery. Just plain snobbery.

Rigelhaupt: Real estate agents wouldn't sell?

02-00:54:34

McCuan: That's right. That's right.

Rigelhaupt: It was done quietly and—

02-00:54:37

McCuan: Yes. Well, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it wasn't advertised in the paper, white only.

Rigelhaupt: So you remember seeing ads like that when you moved here.

02-00:54:47

McCuan: Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm.

Rigelhaupt: So rather than saying—it probably didn't say black then but—no black, no Chinese—rather the ads would say white only.

02-00:55:01

McCuan: That, and they'd say the other, too. No children.

Rigelhaupt: And that was for rentals and also for buying?

02-00:55:08

McCuan: Mm-hm. Oh, yes.

Rigelhaupt: So that was common. So the Sundays—you described going and having the paper, to try to find a place to live with your husband. As you're reading those ads, you would commonly see things like white only, no blacks?

02-00:55:23

McCuan: Yes. Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And that's just the way it was.

02-00:55:27

McCuan: That's the way it was. And so then when they lifted that, when the law says you couldn't say white only, well, then all the blacks wanted to come to El Cerrito because I suppose they were angry from before. And they managed to get a house on the end of the block, to kind of—Whatever. Anyway, in one block of where I lived in El Cerrito, there was ten black families. Well, of course, all of my [neighbors left]—I was the only one left. All the rest of them moved out to Walnut Creek. Well, the weather's better and the price was right and all that, besides. Anyway, because my husband worked in Richmond—We wanted to move, too but it was just too convenient for him. They would call him up in the middle of the night and he'd have to go out there. But when I left, there wasn't any on that—Those ten families were gone. The last one was the people right across the street from me. And with all of the other neighbors leaving, he was our only neighbor. And his house was the only one that could see mine. I was kind of isolated. It was kind of dangerous for me to live there, because I was isolated. And you could scream and nobody would hear me. Because the street made a curve and all that. But anyway, one time I came home, put the car in the garage. And I bought an electric lawn mower because I couldn't start the gas one anymore. And so I sat in the car and I thought, what am I doing? I've got that electric mower in the back of my car; how am I going to get it out? I never thought of that. So I thought, well, guess I'll go take a look at it. So as I rounded the corner, here comes Mr. Baker. "What you doing? What you got there, Mrs. McCuan?" I says, "I have an electric lawn mower. Could you get it out of the car for me?" He said sure. He says, "You want me to put it together?" I said, "Sure." He says, "You want me to mow your yard?" I said, "Sure!" So he turned out to be my best friend.

Rigelhaupt: Sounds like a good neighbor.

02-00:58:17

McCuan: Yeah. He was so fat, and his feet hurt him—he had diabetes—that he couldn't get out of my chairs. So when he rang the doorbell, he didn't just ring it, he just held his finger on it, so I knew who was out there. So I'd get one of the straight chairs and I'd put it right in front of my chair, and sat the chair down, and then I opened the door. Then he'd tell me all the gossip of the neighborhood.

Rigelhaupt: Well, as we're concluding here, I've covered just about all the questions. And the way I like to end is just to ask if there was anything in particular I should've asked that I didn't, or if there's just anything you wanted to add.

02-00:59:05

McCuan:

Well, going back to what Kaiser did, everything. Everything. I don't know whether it was him or the Maritime Commission. But we had a bowling alley—I think it was six lanes—between where I lived in El Cerrito and the shipyards. And so on our way home from work, we were in a five o'clock league. And so we would get off at four-thirty, and then we would bowl. And right after the war, I noticed that was torn down. But that was built just for the shipyard workers. And they tried to do those things for entertainment for all of the people.

Rigelhaupt:

I think the discussion of social activities is a nice place to end. And the bowling. Thank you.

02-00:60:00

McCuan:

You're welcome.

[End of Interview]