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Albert and Hortense McGee

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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

Interviews conducted by
David Washburn
in 2005

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Interview with Albert and Hortense McGee
Interviewed by: David Washburn
Transcriber: Julie Allen
Interview #1: February 23, 2005
[Begin minidisc 1]

01:00:00:07

Washburn:

Okay, let's start the interview. What I know about you: this is an interview with Mr. Albert McGee on February twenty—

McGee:

Third.

Washburn:

Yes, thank you. Twenty-third, 2005. We're in Mr. McGee's home in Vallejo, California. You're being interviewed for the Rosie the Riveter project by David Washburn. What I know about your life—let me just adjust one thing here. What I know about your life, I will read here: "Worked in Yard Three and a little bit Yard Four in the marine electric shop, made phalanges for bulkhead, welded phalanges, made smooth hole to go through ragged edge." I don't know where we got these notes from. "All electricity was water proof cables, made Liberty ships after Victory ships, was in electricians' union."

McGee:

The other way around.

Washburn:

Just had to belong.

McGee:

Made—the Libertys were the first. The Victories were an improvement over the Libertys.

Washburn:

"A very technical talker," it says here. "Richmond was so overrun with people that schools had to go on double shifts, so he would work as a teacher by day and a marine electrician by—"

McGee:

Swing.

Washburn:

"On swing. Was not allowed in military due to ear operation."

McGee:

Mastoid.

Washburn:

“After war continued as teacher, is a valuable story, is now 92, born in Modesto, lived in San Joaquin Valley for a while, then with appendicitis was shipped to SF hospital where established a record for being alive after thirty-six hours with a burst appendix. His great-grandfather D.H. Clinton was pioneer in Point Richmond in 1900.” I guess I know a lot about you already.

McGee:

[laughter]

Washburn:

So why don't we just start with some of the basic questions? Why don't you tell us when and where you were born?

McGee:

Where I was born?

Washburn:

Yes.

McGee:

I was born in Modesto, Modesto, California. The doctor was Dr. {Sherine?} and he went around with his horse and buggy. In those days the doctor went to the house. We had a rather spacious place there in Modesto. I remember my dad cultivated a field on the side of the house where we could grow some of our own produce and so on. He worked for Standard Oil and did this on his own time.

Washburn:

What year were you born in?

McGee:

1912.

Washburn:

Okay. So you were going to continue. Talk a little bit about why your family was in Modesto. What did your—

McGee:

My dad was in Modesto as far as I know because my dad's job was in Modesto.

[laughter] I don't know which came first, whether he just moved there and got the job or he went there because he got the job, I don't know that.

Washburn:

But it was with Standard Oil, as you say.

McGee:

Yes, with Standard Oil. Then after, when—you know where Chowchilla is? When they were opening up a substation in Chowchilla, also in the San Joaquin Valley, my dad was

made the head of it, so we moved to Chowchilla from Modesto. Then my dad, who had done farming as a young man, you couldn't take the farmer out of the man, so to speak; after working a shift at Standard Oil, he'd go home and would irrigate. The pump would pump water and fill the reservoir for the twenty-four hours or however long it took. Then he would get up early in the morning and irrigate some, and then after work he'd do some more irrigating. He was a businessman-farmer, so to speak.

Washburn:

What was the irrigating, what was the crop?

McGee:

Well, I remember a field of corn, and I know we had a lot of watermelons and I'm sure other crops. I don't know—oh, alfalfa. We had fields of alfalfa. There was always a good market for alfalfa hay.

Washburn:

What was your responsibility as a young boy and man around the farm?

McGee:

Well, I was pretty young, and I remember bringing—I was a pretty strong kid, so my dad would let me bring two five-gallon cans about half full of slop to slop the hogs. About that time my aunt had—she had gone to Europe with Mrs. {Makai?} and in appreciation, who happened to be a millionaire or a millionairess, she bought a couple of toy French poodles. One of them bit her youngster so she gave them to us. Here we had these very valuable French poodles out on the farm. My dad took the clippers and clipped them so they wouldn't get full of foxtails and they would go in the hog pen and one of them would grab one ear and the other one would grab the other ear and the hog would be trying to throw them off. That was an interesting recollection.

Washburn:

What's your family background? Your mom and your father? Can you tell me their names and a bit about their ancestral background? What were their names?

McGee:

My dad's folks were from North Carolina, or he was from North Carolina and they lived in North Carolina when he was a boy. He told me once that there were so many Magees around, they were getting each other's mail, so they changed their name to McGee. They worked very very hard, and my dad's dad probably worked himself to death. He died, and his sister got married and he went to live with his sister and brother-in-law. He was at the age where he didn't like to be told what to do, so he took off and rode the rails and saw a good part of the United States before he landed in San Francisco. In San Francisco he took the Bear, ran between Nome, Alaska, and San Francisco, and got in on the Klondike gold rush. The Bear, to land at Nome, they didn't have a wharf at that time, so the Swedes would come out in a longboat and he asked his friend, he said—he asked the sailor, "How do I get on that longboat?" And he says, "Well, the longboat goes up and the longboat goes down, and when the longboat is just about even with the ship you throw your satchel in and jump." Well, he didn't know anything about the water, so he

stood up and the Swedes grabbed him and slammed him to the bottom of their longboat. [laughter] He went from there to the—what’s the river there? The Yukon, I guess it was or Athabasca.

01:00:10:00

And a paddle-wheeler. He got to the Yukon territory, but he never did get to gold mining because he had been good with horses, and a provisioner hired him to take provisions to the different miners’ shacks that were located around. What he would do, the horses would have snow shoes on—there was plenty of snow most of the time—and they would pull a—I forget what you call it anyway, a sled made of logs, and so many barrels of flour, so many sides of bacon, and like that, with a crude map of how to get to where these miners were, where these miners’ cabins were. He said that sometimes there would be a white out and he couldn’t proceed during a white out because he might wind up in a gully or a stream or something. I asked him what he did. He said, “Well, I would tie the reigns around my waist and walk in front of the horses and go around in circles, whether it was six hours or eight hours or twelve hours, it had to be done.” Oh, flapping his arms, he tied it around his waist so he could flap his arms, to avoid freezing and to keep the circulation in his hands. Then when the white out would lift he would proceed.

Washburn:

Did he meet your mom there in Alaska?

McGee:

No.

Washburn:

Where did they meet?

McGee:

After he came back from Alaska he had a money belt, quite a bit of money that he had earned, and he had a full growth of beard, like everyone else, to protect their face against the weather. When he landed in San Francisco the Bear was late arriving, and he needed someplace to sleep. So he paid his fifteen cents and went to a flophouse. He said any one of the guys there would probably have been happy to have murdered him for what he had on him, but he looked so disreputable that he figured it was okay. [laughter] Then he met my grandfather, or great grandfather, D.H. Clinton. He met my great grandfather and they became good friends and he brought him home and introduced him to his daughter, granddaughter. The daughter was single at that time, and he thought that maybe he could do a little matchmaking. But he fell for the granddaughter. The granddaughter was my mother, so that’s how he met my mother.

Washburn:

They ended up in Modesto, and did you graduate high school yourself? I hate to move along, but we have to skip a lot of things to get to the war years and that’s why we’re here.

McGee:

Oh yes.

Washburn:

You graduated from high school in what year?

McGee:

1930

Hortense:

1930, wasn't it?

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

In '30. What was your first kind of job that you held for some time after high school? What were you doing to earn a living right then?

McGee:

Well, during the Depression, one did whatever one could do. [laughter] My mother, being single at the time, I had to help. After school I would spade, garden, do garden work and stuff. I don't know what my—I guess my first real job, permanent job, was teaching.

Hortense:

Yes, but you did some jobs that made you go into teaching.

Washburn:

Yes, were you involved with any of the New Deal—we're losing a little light here.

McGee:

Oh yes.

Washburn:

Were you involved with any of the New Deal work? CC camps or anything? Can we turn on a few of these lights, actually? Do they turn on alright?

Hortense:

Yes.

[pause while lights are turned on]

McGee:

Yes. During summer vacation I joined the Three C, the Civilian Conservation Corps. First, we went to the Presidio and it was managed, primarily, by the army. We learned to march and got our shots and stuff there. Then they sent us to Big Springs, up in the mountains, out of Redding and Red Bluff. We were the first members of the camp, so we had to build the camp. We got up there ahead of the truck, and the truck had all of our bedding and bed rolls on it. There was still snow on the mountains around us. So the army made a big circle and they put stacks of firewood in a circle. Then they'd start a fire in between. They had softened up the ground in between so we could lie on the ground

and the fire was supposed to keep us warm. Anyone who got cold was supposed to go and take some wood off of the woodpile and put it on the fire to keep the fire going. It didn't work out that way. [laughter] Everybody, as they got cold, would just leap-frog over the other guy, closer and closer to the fire. The army fellows that were supervising, they had to stay up all night and feed the fire.

Washburn:

Let's get to the—you said that you ended up going to Cal. What years did you attend Cal?

McGee:

Let's see. [pause] I said I got out of high school in '30, 1930. Then I worked for a year in the Hines pickle works, going to work at four o'clock in the morning, lifting tomatoes on a conveyer belt. Then I worked for Pacific Star Roof. Pacific Star Roof was okay, except an incident that helped me change my mind, decide that maybe I'd better go to school some more, was I had to carry a bundle of roofing up a ladder on a three story building on Piedmont.

Hortense:

Ninety pounds.

McGee:

The standard bundle was ninety pounds. They were having jumbo put on there, which was 110, and that was quite a—it's a good thing I was a pretty husky kid, or young man, because I got the—I took it up the ladder alright, and then I went to step on the roof, and the shingles crumbled under my feet. I kind of panicked a little bit and I saw a ventilator pipe sticking up, and I threw it off my shoulder, threw the bundle off my shoulder, and it fell down, and I grabbed the ventilator pipe.

01:00:20:00

Then I heard swearing down below. "Somebody's trying to kill me." I thought that maybe I'd better come down the other ladder. So I came up and over and down the other ladder where the guys who were roofing, and came around and he told me for about five minutes about some crazy guy up there trying to kill me, throwing this stuff down, and I commiserated with him and so on. [laughter] I let it go at that.

Washburn:

You attended Cal at some time during the thirties?

McGee:

Yes, I think, it was about 1931 to '36, I think.

Hortense:

He graduated in '36.

Washburn:

You graduated in '36.

McGee:

Yes, I went five years because I had another major.

Washburn:

So pretty much, before coming to Richmond you were teaching elementary school, or high school? What were you teaching before you moved to Richmond?

Hortense:

You were principal in Raisin City and then Prunedale.

McGee:

Oh. Yes.

Hortense:

Principal and teacher.

McGee:

I worked as a utility man up in the mountains for the City of Berkeley.

Hortense:

Yes, but we're talking about after you graduated.

Washburn:

We're talking about, right before you came to Richmond, what was the job that you held?

McGee:

I got a job in Fresno County as principal and teacher of the seventh and eighth grade.

Hortense:

Raisin City.

McGee:

Raisin City. I started out as the principal and teacher of the seventh and eighth grade. My wife here, Hortense, had trouble coping with the heat for one thing. We figured that two years in the same school ought to be enough to show that I wasn't thrown out. I sent resumes around and then I taught for three years, the same situation, as a principal and teacher of the seventh and eighth grade in Prunedale. I went from Raisin City to Prunedale. I went from raisins to prunes. [laughter] Prunedale was in Monterey County, out of Salinas.

Washburn:

So, did you live in Prunedale just before you went to Richmond?

McGee:

Yes.

Hortense:

No, we didn't live in Prunedale, we lived in Salinas. They didn't want us to live in the—

McGee:

We lived in Salinas, and the Prunedale school wasn't too far from Salinas.

Washburn:

So, what happened to make you move from Salinas at this time to Richmond, what was your motivation?

McGee:

Mostly nostalgia on the part of my wife, who actually missed her family. And of course my family was close by in Berkeley. So that was the primary reason. So I had a junior high credential, so I started teaching.

Washburn:

What year did you then move to Richmond? Was it during the war that you moved to Richmond?

McGee:

Just about the beginning of the war.

Hortense:

1940, Al. The year Penny was born we moved there.

McGee:

Oh, yes. Well, then after I got to teaching, well, so many people came to Richmond that they went on double session. That's when I decided, "Well, I might as well make a little extra money."

Hortense:

Besides, you wanted to contribute to the war effort.

McGee:

Yes. I went to naval officer procurement to try to get a commission, and they said, "Well, with that ear we can't take you." Because of the big guns being fired off. Then I went to army officer procurement and it was the same story. About that time I got to working at the shipyard while still teaching school on the morning shift and making extra money, and helping the war cause, too. So when the selective service would call me, I would tell them what I was doing, and they would say, "Well, you're doing a lot, you're contributing plenty to the war, so you just stay right where you are." They did that twice. Then the second time, when they phoned me and got the story from me, they said, "Well, the war is just about over. We're over the hump, so you just stay where you are."

Washburn:

So you lived in Richmond before the war broke out?

Hortense:

No.

McGee:

No. England was involved—

Washburn:

I guess, before the United States got involved.

McGee:

Yes, the United States after a year got into it. They were making these Liberty ships primarily for England. Then we were making Victory ships which were an improvement. The old Libertys, they were welded all—the plates were welded together and they couldn't expand when the one side of the ship got hot, they couldn't expand. And they were diesel driven, which wasn't as good as the steam turbine. Besides, they built the victory ship with the idea of having a hold fore and aft, and passenger accommodations in the middle. Their idea was to sell it to some of the island nations and people because it would be a small ship and ideal for their use. That was one reason why they designed it the way they did.

Washburn:

So, did you have any idea beforehand—I guess, by the time you had moved there, Kaiser already had a small shipyard building for the British—when did you start to realize things were going to change in Richmond? At what point did that occur to you that there were going to be some big changes?

McGee:

Well, we lived near the main drag out to Yard Three, and we could see these huge dumpsters, huge dirt movers bringing out dirt. They were undoubtedly putting in their basins for launching the ships. We could see the lights—they built villages all around to accommodate people, temporary houses. You could see lights all over the town, day and night. Primarily the Okies and the Arkies came in great numbers and they would sleep in their car or go to the show for someplace to sleep and so on before they could get a job and get housing.

Washburn:

I guess that answered it. So you were working as a teacher at what junior high?

Hortense:

Roosevelt.

McGee:

No. Oh! Yes, Roosevelt first. Then—what was the name of it?

Washburn:

Longfellow?

McGee:

Longfellow, yes.

Washburn:

So you were working first at Roosevelt and then Longfellow.

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

I guess the whole movement of the people into Richmond—people say it didn't affect the schools until later, until their kids got older.

McGee:

Well, they brought their kids.

Washburn:

Did you see it affecting the schools right away?

McGee:

Oh, yes.

Washburn:

Describe how that—what you saw.

McGee:

Well, one year I tried being a vice-principal at Peres, wasn't it? Wasn't that the name of it?

01:00:30:05

Hortense:

Yes, I think.

McGee:

Peres. And there were a lot of kids we called latch-string kids. These kids would have their key around their neck on a string. The parents were off working in the shipyard or somewhere and the kids would have to come home and let themselves in and stay at home until their parents got home. Of course, being on double shift in the wintertime, the kids would actually be starting to school, walking in the dark to get to school. I suppose the same thing happened going home on the second shift. It was probably dark, too, in the winter.

Washburn:

Describe that for someone who doesn't know. What are you talking about there? What was the change that happened in the schools? What did they do to adapt? Can you describe that history a little bit? The two shifts thing?

McGee:

Well, the way they worked in two shifts was they started early and got in one shift and then about the middle of the day they'd start another shift and end up late. The buses of course carried, transported the kids, particularly the young ones, back and forth.

Washburn:

But the two shifts were scheduled by whom? Why was it scheduled? Who decided to do that?

McGee:

Well, I imagine the superintendent of schools. Walter T. Helms was the superintendent at that time. It was just a necessity. They had—the schools were rather normal. They had classes, and the young children would stay with the same teacher for the whole time, and the older kids would move from room to room, from subject to subject in the junior high and high school.

Washburn:

How did some of these kids who came from Oklahoma and Arkansas and Texas, how did they get along in the schools? What was their—did they fit in okay? What were some of the issues that you guys as teachers and administrators had to deal with?

McGee:

Well, not so much in the elementary school, but in the junior high there was some rather undisciplined people that we had to get physical with, breaking up a few fights. On the whole it worked pretty good. Surprisingly well. [laughter]

Washburn:

Now what about some of the black kids that came in, did you see an influx of black kids?

McGee:

Yes. There were quite a few black people that came in to take advantage of the employment at the shipyards and of course their kids were at school. There wasn't—I didn't break up very many fights between black and white. It was mostly the black kids fighting over somebody stealing their boyfriend or something like that. Two girls were fighting and I grabbed one in one hand and one in the other and pulled them apart. They both started chewing on my hands. I took, and went like that [gestures] and they both landed on their backs. And I walked away. I wasn't going to stay there—[laughter] I don't know what happened after that. That was beyond the call of duty.

Washburn:

But there were—it was a big change for Richmond that these kids from Oklahoma, white kids and black kids—

McGee:

Oh, it was a big change for everybody. People were taking people into their homes as renters, and that was pretty common all over too, because housing was so scarce. That was a big change in many ways.

Washburn:

Why did you then decide to get a job at the shipyards? Was the pay of a teacher, was it not good enough? What was your motivation behind getting a job at the shipyards?

McGee:

We had been renting up to that time, and we thought it would be nice if we could buy a place. So it was a chance to not only help in the war effort but it was a chance to get ahead so that we could buy our home. We bought a home in Point Richmond and we stayed with Hortense's mother quite a bit, you know, on vacation.

Hortense:

That was when you were teaching out of town.

McGee:

Yes. I don't want to digress.

Washburn:

Your motivation then was not out of necessity, but out of trying to get ahead?

McGee:

Get ahead, yes.

Washburn:

So what did you do? Tell us, what was the job that you took at the shipyards?

McGee:

I got in the marine electric shop because I'm somewhat mechanically inclined and I figured that would be better than—I was told that if I work out on a ship or something, somebody's likely to—might drop something on my head or something like that. [laughter] That also appealed to me. I'd be inside during inclement weather. The big thing in the marine electric shop was, since all the wiring was through cable, so it would be weather-proof, so it wouldn't matter whether the wiring was inside or outside it would still be water-proof. Where the cable went through the bulkhead—the bulkhead being the walls of the ship they would have to have a gland coupling welded into a slab of steel. The cable would be put through the gland coupling after the gland coupling was welded in place and taken out to the ship, and the piece of the bulkhead was welded in place. The cable would go through the gland coupling and then they'd tighten up the gland coupling so it would be watertight. Where the cables were on the outside they had to be supported and so they were making straps to—they called it a strap iron. It was about three sixteenths by about an inch and a half. They would drill holes through this and put a U-bolt through the holes to hold the cable in place. That was primarily what we did. But we also made—I forget what they called them anyway—where they had to make a passageway through a bulkhead. They'd burn it out, then there would be ragged edges. Then they would have to bend a piece of flat iron and weld it to it, so people wouldn't be raking up against the raw edge. So we had to bend quite a few of those and shape them.

Washburn:

So describe your schedule.

McGee:

It was the swing shift.

Washburn:

The swing shift. So you'd work at the junior high—describe that, how your day would go.

McGee:

Well, I'd work in the morning, morning shift, and then when I'd come home I'd take a nap and then I'd go to work out at Yard Three on the swing shift. There was an interesting story, I don't know whether this is appropriate or not.

01:00:40:00

They were making—in Yard Two they were making double-bottoms on ships. There was this one fellow that would, he would go to work, he'd punch the clock, then he'd go climb into a double-bottom and sleep with his alarm clock, and sleep the whole time and then he'd come out of there and then he'd come over to Yard Three and punch in and do a regular shift. He was sleeping on one shift and working on another. [laughter] But they caught up with him and made him stop that. [laughter]

Washburn:

So who was the crew that you were working with? Were there people from different parts of the country?

McGee:

Oh yes.

Washburn:

Talk about the crew you were working with.

McGee:

Well, there was a lady machinist changing the—what do you call them? Changing the dies—changing the end of the lathe, can't think of the name right now. It was too heavy for her, so I would change that for her and talk to her. She was a very nice lady from Wisconsin. I asked her what she was going to do after the war. She said, "Well, we're saving money and when we get enough money we're going to go back to Wisconsin and buy a farm." She was a fair, Caucasian. And then there were some very agreeable black men working in there. There was a fellow by the name of Bart from Oklahoma, and he would sing and play his guitar and entertain us at lunch time. [laughter] It was a kind of a hurry up and wait deal. If they needed something, oh, we would have to hurry up and work very fast. Sometimes there would be a lull, and they'd tell us, "Keep busy, keep busy." So we would take broken power saw blades and shape them into knives and put on and use mycarta and make a mycarta handle for them in two different colors. This one fellow from Russia, he was a czarist guard and he had escaped through China, by the name of Ben. He was a real nice guy. He built a whole balalaika in there, I don't know where he learned to make them, but he apparently knew how to make them before he came here. He did a beautiful job on it. He invited us to the Russian ball. This was the time when the Russians were our friends. The Germans had attacked Russia and so we were taking supplies up to Mermansk and supporting the Russians. He invited us to the Russian ball. It was on Van Ness Avenue over in San Francisco. We went over there and finally I saw Ben, he was over there doing the hopok, pumping away on his heels and so

on. He took us around and showed us the different rooms, what was going on in the different rooms. In one room they were laughing hilariously. He said—who's the Russian—

Washburn:
Stalin?

McGee:
No, no, a playwright. Chekov? Anyway, he said, "Well, they're telling some pretty raunchy jokes in there." This guy was not only a great playwright but he also wrote a lot of rather smutty stuff. These people were laughing at these jokes, at these stories that he wrote.

Washburn:
It sounds like you had a rather diverse—a mixed bag of people that you were working with, Russian, black, women—what was, for many of the men who were there, what was their sense of women working along side them? Now that we've had this Rosie the Riveter sort of memorial, but at that time I sense maybe it was a bit—some people thought it was a bit different. What was the sense among many of the men about the women and their jobs that they were doing?

McGee:
Well, the men accepted them very well. Of course there was a certain amount of hanky-panky as always. Some of the women would come in, the Okies and the Arkies you could kind of tell from their drawl, they'd come in and they'd have their hardhat on and it'd say "flanger" and I don't know what a flanger does, just the deck of the ship is steel, and certain places of the deck would hump. What they would do is they would direct their torch, a great big torch and get it cherry red. When they'd get it cherry red they'd throw cold water onto it and that would shrink the metal down to the point where the iron flooring was level. Anyway, they came in and they were so proud to be somebody, to have a label on their head and so on, there were several cases of women coming in with jewelry, with diamonds and so on, and then the next thing we'd hear was they were getting rid of their old man. They were making some money, they didn't have to stick with the bum. That happened in two or three cases. They were feeling prosperous and they wanted a new life.

Washburn:
You knew of women this had happened to?

McGee:
Yes. Because the sweepers would come in, and some of the flangers would come in, and they were so proud of their hat, their hardhats with the label of what they were on their hardhats.

Washburn:
You said there was some hanky-panky—what were some of the—we're interested in finding out some of the sexual relations that were there at the shipyard. Did some women

leave their husbands for men they met at the shipyards? Generally, as the story goes, the women who are working there are younger, the men are older because the younger men are serving in the war unless you're 4-F, which you were 4-F. Were there relations between many of the men who were working there and the women, or was it more professional?

McGee:

Well, I only heard what they did when the shift was over, who they'd go off with. I know there was hanky-panky going on from the conversations, but I don't think it was too excessive, it was probably normal. [laughter]

Washburn:

What about the race relations that were there? These are people from Oklahoma—California isn't segregated like Oklahoma was in those days, or Texas. So these are—these black men and women are coming to work alongside white men and women, and they're kind of not used to these things, or the whites from Oklahoma and Texas weren't necessarily used to working alongside blacks. What was the sense of the race relations that were—at least among your crew, at least?

McGee:

Because everyone was working for a purpose, pretty much for the war effort, they tolerated each other pretty well. There were these signs around, "A loose lip will sink a ship," and "Work or eat rice." [laughter]

01:00:50:01

That wasn't very good advertising for rice. We were always made conscious of the fact that we were there to do a job. That helped people get along. There was one fellow, they called him Slim, he was a white guy from Texas. He was telling about how he got along with the blacks. He said, "Well, if any of them got out of line, I'd take a two by four and break it over their back." I figured race relations weren't very good in some parts of Texas. [laughter] There was a black guy in there, and he seemed to get along okay with the black guy. So maybe it was just in one particular case.

Washburn:

Do you want to tell the story again about the guy who played music—what was this guy who played music for you at lunchtime? Can you describe that story again?

McGee:

Yes. I don't know his last name, but we called him Bart. He was a very out-going fellow and everybody liked him. At lunchtime he would play his guitar and sing. One song was "Who Threw The Overalls In Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?" You heard that?

Hortense:

[laughter]

McGee:

And "I can lick the Mick who threw overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder." Some other songs about the same caliber, humorous songs.

Washburn:

They weren't blues songs.

McGee:

No.

Hortense:

He was a comedian.

Washburn:

Did you befriend any of these people? Outside of the shipyard did you socialize with any of the people from your crew much? Or not so much?

McGee:

I didn't socialize at all, I didn't have time. I would come home from the morning session, and I would go to an old temporary police station, which her mother owned the building, and I had a victory garden in the back. I would work in that and feed my chickens after school.

Hortense:

He had the garden and chickens.

McGee:

Then I'd go home and catch up on some sleep.

Hortense:

And have dinner.

McGee:

Dinner, and then head out for Yard Three.

Hortense:

And ride his bicycle up the road to Yard Three.

Washburn:

Did your wife work during this time?

McGee:

Well, she had the kids to take care of, she had Penny and Gerry, so that was a full time job.

Washburn:

What was the sense then at the shipyards in terms of why people were doing the work they were doing? Were people doing the work to win the war, or were they doing the work to get ahead in their own life at home? What do you think was really the motivation?

McGee:

I think they were primarily—these were very poor people from the Dust Bowl, and they were there, this was an opportunity to make a little money and get ahead. I would say two thirds to get ahead, possibly one third for the war effort. Regardless, it still helped the war effort.

Washburn:

Because all of the propaganda of that era was, “Let’s win the war together, let’s win”—it wasn’t “Save some money and buy a home.”

McGee:

[laughter] Well, they’re trying to whip up morale and they said whatever was necessary to help morale.

Washburn:

So, people had to join unions to get in the shipyards?

McGee:

Yes, I had to join the electrical union to work in the electric shop.

Washburn:

What was your sense of the union, and its necessity for the workers, or what it provided for its members? What was your sense of the union?

McGee:

My sense of the union was I had to belong to the union in order to work there. [laughter] I never saw a union representative or went to a meeting or anything like that. It was—the arrangement was, the agreement was made without any participation on my part.

Washburn:

What is some of the ways—I guess you weren’t going to union meetings or socializing much, you said you were awfully busy. Was church at all a part of your weekly routine?

McGee:

No, we’re--as I say, we were so pressed for time, and there was things to be done and when I—or we needed a little recreation—did we go to Golden Gate Park at that time?

Hortense:

We didn’t do a lot of going out of town because gasoline was a problem.

McGee:

Oh yes. They had gasoline coupons and food coupons and the gasoline coupons were A, B, and C. A was you could buy the least amount of gasoline with A, and B you could buy more, and C you could buy quite a bit. I was riding my bike to school to save gasoline, because I was only—I could only get A coupons. Some of my big kids at school, they came along in a car, and they kind of acted like they were going to run over me, and I moved over in the gravel and my bicycle tires went out from under me and I tore my

pants. I thought, “Well, I’m not that patriotic.” So I started, like everybody else, I started dealing in coupons so I could drive my car to school.

Washburn:

How did that work? I’ve talked with several other people about that. How did people get around the rationing in that way? What did you do?

McGee:

Well, it was just—at work—

Washburn:

Because I don’t know about all the different coupons. Describe that.

McGee:

They had food coupons, for instance, butter. Charlie Saradono said, “I’ve got some butter for you,” and he’d pull out this old butter. [laughter]

Hortense:

He’d keep it till it would walk away, and that’s when I learned I didn’t want to eat butter! [laughter]

Washburn:

Go ahead, describe what you had. What were the different coupons and how did you trade ones for ones that you wanted, how did that work?

McGee:

Well, the only trading that I knew of was gasoline.

Hortense:

Because we never did anything with food.

Washburn:

How did you trade for gasoline coupons?

McGee:

Literally, we’d sell them. If a guy wasn’t using something, if he was a friend he would give you one, and if he wasn’t he’d sell you one.

Washburn:

You’d buy them from people who had them and weren’t using them?

McGee:

I can’t remember.

Hortense:

He really didn’t do much of that.

McGee:

We didn't do that much traveling.

Washburn:

So was rationing in many peoples' minds seen as a burden or seen as their patriotic duty? How did people understand that?

McGee:

Both.

Washburn:

Describe that.

McGee:

It was both a burden and we realized it was for a patriotic purpose.

Hortense:

We never were grieved about it.

McGee:

We never crabbed about it.

Hortense:

I'll tell you one thing about the coupons. I didn't realize at the time, because I was really careful with sugar and things, and when I had another baby, well, I got another coupon book. The people who had children, they didn't really suffer with the coupon books, I didn't think. I know we didn't.

Washburn:

I've got to change this tape here.

[begin disc 2]

Washburn:

Okay. So, discuss—I'm interested in finding out why didn't—I want to let him describe it because he's on camera. Why didn't—for instance, your wife, work? There was childcare provided at the shipyards. I was interested in kind of figuring out how you guys as a family were thinking about getting ahead. You had mentioned that that was one of the reasons that you went to the shipyards.

McGee:

Mm-hmm.

Washburn:

I want to discuss a little bit you guys' dreams as a family or what you guys were talking about you were going to do when this war ended. You mentioned you went to the shipyards. Why didn't your wife go to the shipyards also to get a job?

McGee:

Well, as I say, she was taking care of two small children as well as maintaining me and doing the all the cooking and housework. We just opted to do that rather than farm our kids out to some care place.

Washburn:

What were you and your wife talking about as you were saving more money? What was you guys' goal that you were really aiming for? What was that?

McGee:

To get ahead.

Washburn:

What does that mean, to get ahead? I don't know what it meant for you guys to get ahead.

McGee:

Well, we wanted to break the charge cycle and get to where we were financially independent, was really a big motive.

Washburn:

And did that happen?

McGee:

Yes. My wife was the keeper of the exchequer. I told her if she wanted a fur coat and she could see where we could afford one, well, go ahead. So far, we never afforded one. [laughter] So that kept me from the need of denying her anything. She could deny herself! [laughter]

Washburn:

What did you guys do with the money that you were saving? That's kind of what I'm interested in, what did you do with it?

McGee:

Well, as I said before, we bought our home, our first home.

Hortense:

The down payment on our home.

Washburn:

Describe that again. Describe what you did and where you bought the home.

McGee:

Oh, we bought the home not far from where her mother lived, which was part way up a hill, on Scenic Avenue in Point Richmond. It was a big old mansion in its day. I understand that a Standard Oil executive used to live there, but it needed quite a bit of work. I refinished the floors—the floors were hardwood floors—but I refinished the floors and I painted the main rooms and so on. I fixed it up so it looked pretty good. The garage was kind of carved out of a hillside, and when it would rain, the water would run

down. I took tarpaper and I made a—I built a frame inside the garage with the tarpaper to catch the rain and run the rain off on the sides. We pretty much made do.

Washburn:

So this, Scenic Avenue is quite nice now, Point Richmond, houses are pretty expensive there.

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

You bought the home in what year?

Hortense:

1941, wasn't it? No, I meant '44, right after the war.

McGee:

'41 was when we came to Richmond.

Hortense:

I know, I said '46.

Washburn:

1946?

McGee:

Yes. I got a very good second hand Dodge car for seventy-five dollars and I overhauled it myself. After the war I sold it for seventy-five dollars. That was a number of years later. You can see what prices were. A pack of cigarettes, if you bought Wings, it was ten cents a pack for Wings. Gasoline at one time, when I was a young man, was ten cents a gallon. There was a gasoline war on, there wasn't any gasoline tax. The stations were competing with each other. So I took a trip in my cut-down Ford and paid ten cents a gallon for gasoline. But ten cents was kind of hard to come by. [laughter] [daughter, Penny McGee Canaris: He is referring to a 1930 Dodge, he purchased in 1940, which was the family car until 1950 when the new 1950 Pontiac was purchased.]

Washburn:

Can you talk about—you worked at the shipyards up until the end of the war?

McGee:

Yes. Until they started—until they laid us off, laid everybody off. Not everybody, but—

Washburn:

Was there a sense among the workers there that they knew the war was coming to a close and they knew this was all going to end pretty soon? Can you talk about when you first kind of understood that there were going to be some changes at Kaiser?

McGee:

I think what made me quit was they went on full session, and when they went on full session I couldn't work at the shipyard too. I don't know about the rest of the people, how they anticipated the rest of the war.

Washburn:

What do you mean, full session?

McGee:

Well, instead of being on double session, they went back to the regular session.

Washburn:

So describe the hours between the two—what were they?

McGee:

The regular session was about nine to three or three-thirty, something like that, and the second session from one o'clock to six.

Washburn:

And the double session was what?

McGee:

Double session was about seven to twelve or something like that.

Washburn:

So because of the influx of all the workers and their kids, schools had to go to double session, and therefore you were freed up to go work at the shipyards?

McGee:

Right, right. It was a golden opportunity.

Washburn:

Why do you say that?

McGee:

It helped financially as well as the war effort.

Washburn:

At what point did schools go back to single session? Was that during the war or immediately following the war? Do you remember?

McGee:

Well, about 1945 when they were over the hump. Let's see, 1945, that was V-J Day. It was V-J Day when we went to Swayze's to get that landscape, the water—

Hortense:

The war wasn't over then.

McGee:

No, the war wasn't over then.

Washburn:

So what happened? Did a lot of the kids go home? All of a sudden the war ends, it doesn't mean the kids disappear. What happened?

McGee:

The war ended in stages. The last stage was Japan had to capitulate. Of course, by dropping the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that gave Japan the good excuse to throw in the sponge.

02:00:10:03

Washburn:

I mean, I don't mean to—this may be a difficult question, I don't mean to be too challenging, but were you happy—obviously in some ways everyone was happy to see the war end, but at the same time you were deprived of an opportunity to earn more money and these things, and many of these shipyard workers were out of work. How did that work? The war ended, people were happy, but at the same time they know that their jobs are going to be taken away from them. Did you get a sense that some people were conflicted about that?

McGee:

Not particularly. I think even though people knew that their jobs were coming to an end they were glad that the war was over and the slaughter was over and so on.

Washburn:

The country was going to get back to normal.

McGee:

Yes.

Hortense:

Right.

Washburn:

What about the—you were a vice-principal at Roosevelt?

McGee:

No, at—wasn't that at Peres on Tenth Street?

Hortense:

Yes.

Washburn:

Peres, yes, Tenth and Pennsylvania.

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

There were many Japanese families in Richmond during the war and they were relocated.

McGee:

Right.

Washburn:

First moved to Tanforan, I guess near San Mateo, then to other places. Do you have any stories about that? Any memories of anybody you knew?

McGee:

Well, one of the teachers I worked with, George {Norokane?} he said his family was sent to a concentration—well, they didn't call them concentration camps, they called them something.

Washburn:

Relocation camps.

McGee:

Relocation camp. The one that he went to was in Nevada.

Washburn:

Who is this person?

McGee:

George Norakane. Norakanee, but we all call him Norokane.

Hortense:

He taught in the Richmond school district.

Washburn:

Ok, so you knew him, you knew George at that point, during the war, you knew him?

McGee:

No, after.

Washburn:

What did he think about his relocation?

McGee:

He didn't think much of it. [laughter]

Washburn:

What did you and other teachers think about that?

McGee:

Well, we thought that was a lot of hokey about them being such a threat. Because we didn't know any Japanese that were betraying or—they were so appreciative of living here that they wouldn't think of betraying. We thought, as it has been explained, that it

was a matter of protecting the Japanese people from the prejudice of the rest of the people.

Washburn:

That's how it was explained to you?

McGee:

Yes, that was—when it was pointed out that it wasn't—they couldn't find a single case of a traitor, then their justification was that it was to protect the people from the ire of the rest of the people, to protect the Japanese from the anger of the rest of the Caucasians and et cetera.

Washburn:

Was there a sense that there would be some hatred towards them? How did people, both understand that we're fighting Japan but many of the Japanese and Japanese Americans here were not involved? How did they think about those two things?

McGee:

At first people were hysterical, they were for confining the Japanese so they couldn't do any harm. Then later on when they became a little more rational and found out that they weren't doing anything against the United States they were already in these relocation camps.

Washburn:

So it happened very fast, you're saying?

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

Was there any protest—

McGee:

On the part of the Japanese?

Washburn:

No, on the part of any of the people in the school district about the relocation of George?

McGee:

Well, I don't think—I didn't hear about any protest at the time, because I think they were powerless to do anything about it, because this was all dictated from above. But I'm sure there were a lot of people who thought that it was unnecessary.

Washburn:

Do you know if he's still alive, George Norokane?

McGee:

Gee, I don't know. Most of the guys I taught with are not alive.

Hortense:

We haven't seen him—we used to have a friend that would have a get-together of the teachers that were his friends and George was one of them and we'd see him there about once a year. But he passed away so we no longer have that opportunity. He didn't come to Retired Teachers anymore.

Washburn:

So did you see George Norokane after he was in the camps? Yes, that was the only time we saw him. Did he come back to teach in Richmond?

McGee:

Oh yes, he came back. When I was a counselor he was also a counselor for some other grades. [laughter] The other counselor next to him was a Chinese fellow who also went to Cal but his folks came over from China. Wait a minute—no, George was Japanese and the other guy was Chinese.

Washburn:

So did George come back and teach at the school afterwards?

McGee:

Oh yes.

Washburn:

Did he have any stories about when he was gone? Did you guys ask him or did you kind of avoid the subject?

Hortense:

He was married over there. He had a darling wife. [laughter]

Washburn:

Did you talk to him about it at all?

McGee:

He wasn't a very talkative guy about his personal life. I know I loaned him a big tarp one time when he was building onto his house, he needed some protection and I had this big tarp that I could loan him. We didn't talk too much about his life on the relocation. He just—he indicated they just accepted it, and the kids just accepted it and played their games and stuff, just the same.

Washburn:

I've talked to the kids, the kids generally have some fond memories of it, the younger kids who were relocated. Some of them were able to do things they were not able to do when they were at home. It's ironic of course.

Hortense:

[laughter]

McGee:

Yes.

Washburn:

Well, we should finish up here in a little bit. What do you see as the war's legacy in Richmond? If you could describe what happened there to someone who doesn't know Richmond, what would you describe happening to that town?

McGee:

Well, it didn't get an awfully lot smaller. A lot of people that came out stayed. They liked the climate. There were some boys from Bemidji, Minnesota who were used to foul weather. They were out and they were in the coast guard, and they married local girls. They went back to Bemidji and they were back within one or two years.

Hortense:

Almost all of them.

McGee:

Almost all of them.

Hortense:

June Konkell { } didn't come back.

McGee:

So I guess they didn't like the weather or like shoveling snow.

02:00:20:00

And the girls definitely were out of their element going back to that kind of weather. I think Bemidji has been dubbed as one of the coldest places in the United States.

[laughter]

Washburn:

What about the Rosie the Riveters? At what point during that era was it really thought of as something special that women are coming to work in these jobs? Or was it just kind of considered something that had to be done?

McGee:

Well, the one reason they're exalting the Rosie the Riveter is because the big contribution that women made to the war effort. There were so many things that women could do just as well or in some cases better than men could. Of course there was a shortage of young men, and that really helped them crank out more ships. I think I mentioned, I don't know if I mentioned this before, but I saw the biggie dray { } coming up the line to Yard Three and they had a superstructure of a whole ship on this dray outfit. They went over behind this huge crane, they had a crane that they always lifted hundred tons with to test it to see if it would lift that weight. It lifted this whole superstructure, swung it over on this ship, and they welded it in place. I asked where it came from. They said, "Oh, it was fabricated in Stockton." That was another reason they could crank out ships as fast as they did—parts of the ship were being made elsewhere.

Washburn:

Yes, it was an amazing production process they had, it really was amazing.

McGee:

Kaiser had a dispensary, it was part of his, part of the shipyard. And if we'd come in with a sore throat, they'd paint our throats with glycerin and ardurol {?} and people would line up and swallow, the next guy, they'd swab his throat, "Next," and so on. That was the beginning of Kaiser Permanente.

Washburn:

Do you want to—let's hold on for one second. [pause for ringing phone]

McGee:

I'll find out when I go.

Washburn:

Describe the health system that they had for you guys.

McGee:

Well, the modern Kaiser health center started out as servicing the people who worked in the shipyards. Naturally I belonged to that because I was working for the shipyards. So then when I wasn't working at the shipyards, I didn't get that service anymore. Then they gave the Richmond school district a chance to join Kaiser and so one of the benefits that we negotiated for was to, was for all the teachers that wanted to could either chose Kaiser or Blue Cross or some of the other outfits. We chose Kaiser at that time and the Richmond school system has been picking up the tab for us ever since.

Hortense:

You mean the school district.

McGee:

I mean the school district has been paying our Kaiser fee or Kaiser costs ever since. They have been very good about keeping that going. We are grateful to the Richmond school district for doing that.

Washburn:

What about the Kaiser shipyards themselves, how did the health care system—how'd the health system work for the workers at Kaiser?

McGee:

Well, whatever service Kaiser, whatever medical service Kaiser gave the employees was part of working for Kaiser. It was just automatically part of what you go. The extent—I don't know whether it was just first aid, I think it was first aid. I don't think they were doing anything with patching people up, operations or anything like that. Then Kaiser started the modern Kaiser and then we didn't belong until they negotiated with our school board. When they negotiated with our school board then we were in, we were entitled to their full services as they were at that time.

Washburn:

What would you do if you weren't part of Kaiser's health plan, what would you have done?

McGee:

You mean if you were working?

Washburn:

What would you have done, had the Richmond school district not negotiated with Kaiser? What would you have done for health care?

McGee:

Well, I can remember going to Painless Parker and other dental—

Hortense:

Don't forget the doctor that delivered our kids.

Washburn:

No, what did you do previous to Kaiser, how about that? How did you pay for your health insurance or your health care?

McGee:

Well we didn't have any health insurance until the school board negotiated for it and got it for us. We were paying private doctors like most people were.

Washburn:

Was that quite expensive?

McGee:

Well, not as expensive as it is now, of course. It was expensive enough, wasn't it?

Hortense:

Well, it was pretty remarkable actually.

Washburn:

So it was pretty expensive. What did you do, say, for some of your first children, what was the price of having them delivered by a private doctor versus when one of your children was delivered by Kaiser?

Hortense:

We didn't have any delivered by Kaiser.

Washburn:

None then.

Hortense:

But it's free at Kaiser without a co-payment since the monthly fees cover it. Prescription drugs were almost free with an affordable co-pay of a few dollars for year now.

Washburn:

I thought one was delivered in '46.

Hortense:

But I'll tell you, in those days women were in the hospital for ten days when they had a baby and my first baby, for ten days was \$60 and the second one was \$70 or \$75 almost two years later. Ten days and the care, it's unbelievable.

Washburn:

It was very affordable.

McGee:

What happened was besides inflation bringing up the cost, litigation is the big thing. Juries began to award huge malpractice suits against doctors and doctors had to pay expensive insurance payments for malpractice.

Hortense:

That was much later.

McGee:

That was later, but doctors had to pay these huge insurances against malpractice suits and they had to pass that along. That's one reason that medicine is so expensive. Of course as far as pills are going, the pharmacies are working to maintain prices, and that's, of course, you know that a lot of people are getting their medications from Mexico and Canada and so on because they've artificially pegged the price of drugs here in the United States. Kaiser has always kept their pharmacy services affordable.

Washburn:

I think we should end. We've gone about an hour and a half and that's where we should end things. I want to thank you very much, Mr. McGee, and your wife, Hortense, for assisting.

McGee:

If I've done any good.

Washburn:

Hortense is spelled—can you spell that?

Hortense:

Hortense.

Washburn:

Hortense, for the person who is transcribing this, you can fill in her name wherever her voice is heard. I want to thank you guys very much.

[end of interview]

[Note from Penny McGee Canaris at the end of the transcript: Al and daughter Penny wrote in some edits to make the conversation more in context when Kaiser coverage for healthcare was discussed. (Hortense, my mother died 4-28-05 at Kaiser Hospital, Vallejo, at ninety years-old.) So my dad asked me to help edit this—Our family was under Kaiser healthcare from 1947 to present.]

[End of Interview]