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Jean Michell

Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Sam Redman  
in 2011

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Jean Michell

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Interview 1: December 1, 2011

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Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and today is December 1, 2011, and I'm here in Orinda, California with Jean Michell. First, I'd like to ask if I've stated your name correctly, and then if you could spell it for me, that would be terrific.

1-00:00:23

Michell: Surely. It's Jean J-E-A-N, and Michell, M-I-C-H-E-L-L.

Redman: Let's start with the basics. I'd like to just ask who you are now today. You live in Orinda, and you had a career for quite some time. Is that correct?

1-00:00:50

Michell: Yes.

Redman: And what was that career?

1-00:00:56

Michell: Okay. In 1960 my husband started his own business, and it was an air conditioning and heating business, and I ran the office, and did the billing and took care of the finances, et cetera.

Redman: And have you lived in Orinda for some time?

1-00:01:14

Michell: Next year will be fifty years in this house.

Redman: I'd like to turn back now if we could to your parents, and talk a little bit about who they were, and how they met, and when you came along.

1-00:01:42

Michell: Okay. My mother was born and raised in Petaluma, and her father was a farmer. Then she came to San Francisco and went to the Teachers' College.

Redman: In San Francisco.

1-00:02:03

Michell: In San Francisco. And that is now Cal State San Francisco.

Redman: How did they meet?

1-00:02:11

Michell: Well, then he went to Berkeley. He was in the Class of '22 and was a tennis player, on the tennis team. He ended up in Petaluma as the football coach and PE teacher, and my mother ended up there as the music teacher.

Redman: They were both interested in education.

1-00:02:32

Michell: Yes, So they ended up at Petaluma High School and got married. He was born and raised in a small town in Humboldt County called Loleta. So I'm a third-generation native-born Californian.

Redman: Now, your father was in the service, is that correct?

1-00:02:58

Michell: No, that was my step-father. My parents were divorced when I was about five.

Redman: So some of your earliest memories, then—did you stay with your mother or—

1-00:03:15

Michell: Mother.

Redman: About kindergarten age, do you have some early memories, or do you have early memories of your parents going separate ways?

1-00:03:22

Michell: Not really. I mean, he just disappeared out of our lives. I never saw him again until I was a freshman at UCLA. There was no contact between the two.

Redman: Did you have siblings?

1-00:03:43

Michell: No. I'm an only child.

Redman: You and your mother, where did you guys go? Did you stay—?

1-00:03:47

Michell: She went back to school at San Francisco State because when she got her original degree it was what they called a normal school, and you got a teaching credential. But in the early thirties things had changed, and you needed a four-year college education. So she went back to San Francisco State to get a credential for two years.

Redman: Did you, then, start about kindergarten in San Francisco?

1-00:04:25

Michell: I went to—they had a training school at the University, or College at the time, and so I went there for kindergarten, first, and second grade.

Redman: So this would have been around the time, I suspect, of the market crash and then—

1-00:04:52

Michell: The market crash was in '29, and I was four. I don't remember that.

Redman: The effects of the Great Depression, of course, were felt for several years.

1-00:05:06

Michell: Oh, yes. My mother had a very difficult time getting employment.

Redman: So this is after she completed her new degree.

1-00:05:10

Michell: Right. And we moved in with the head of the music department and lived there for a year in Sausalito.

Redman: Now, your mom being educated, and herself studying childhood education, was she very keen and interested in your development as a child?

1-00:05:33

Michell: Oh, yes. We were very close.

Redman: What sorts of things would you do together that made you so close? Were there particular activities that you two enjoyed?

1-00:05:44

Michell: I remember taking many trips up into the area which is now around Napa and stuff, and they used to have all different kinds of wild flowers. And we used to pick wildflowers. I can remember that.

Redman: So those were some fond times with you and your mother?

1-00:06:07

Michell: Yes. As far as that goes—I was telling someone the other day about it, the movies, that we hadn't gone to movies for several years, and how expensive they were now, you know, even with the senior discount—and I was telling them that when I was in third grade my mother gave me 15 cents every Saturday morning. And I went down—and this was in Sausalito—and I went down the hill, because we lived up on a glen, and spent a nickel buying candy, and you could get a lot of stuff for a nickel in those days, and then a dime at the movie. And they were all westerns, and John Wayne was really big in those days. I mean that's before he got to be—and Tom Mix and Roy Rogers, I think, were coming along, but anyway. And they always had in the theater what they called a serial, like *The Perils of Pauline*, you know? And at the end of one chapter the heroine would be roped to the railroad track, and the train was coming. And then that would be it, "Come back next week, and find out how she escaped," you know. It was funny. They would last like maybe ten or twelve weeks.

Redman: Oh, wow. Would you almost have to commit to going to—?

1-00:07:44

Michell: Oh, yes. I mean, this was my Saturday.

Redman: Sure, so you'd love following along.

1-00:07:46

Michell: Yes.

Redman: Now, would they also do newsreels?

Michell: Oh, yes. And sometimes—oh, what do you call those things? Pathé Newsreels, yes. And then short subjects, sometimes.

Redman: I'm going to pause this for a minute. [Pause] When we left off we were talking about movies, and going to see the movies. How about radio programs? Were they a big part of your life?

1-00:08:22

Michell: Oh, yes, In fact, we had a black cat that I named Chandu because there was a radio program called *Chandu, the Magician*.

Redman: That you were fond of.

1-00:08:35

Michell: Yes.

Redman: Were radios in the thirties when you were young—I understand that some radios were hard to obtain because maybe they were maybe prohibitively expensive—

1-00:08:45

Michell: Oh!

Redman: Was that ever an issue, or was it—

1-00:08:50

Michell: I don't think so because the lady we lived with that was the head of the music department, she was like a grandmother to me. And I don't remember anything about that.

Redman: But she would have had stable employment and—

1-00:09:09

Michell: Oh, yes. And was fairly well-to-do. I mean she had a really nice home in Sausalito up on the hill.

Redman: So that must have been a nice time in terms of your childhood and upbringing. Did your mother—you got along quite well with the head of the music program.

1-00:09:27

Michell: Oh, yes. She was really nice, yes.

Redman: Did you learn any music by living with her?

1-00:09:35

Michell:

Unfortunately, my mother was extremely talented. I can remember back in the “dark ages” being in Golden Gate Park on the fourth of July, and my mother signing *The Star Spangled Banner* in Golden Gate Park, and then in the early days of radio—and this was before we moved, I mean this was when I was a little preschooler—she was part of a women’s quartet that sang—it was a regular radio program, I think it was on KGO.

Redman:

Wow. So she was quite talented

1-00:10:27

Michell:

Oh, yes. She was. And before she married my father, there was vaudeville, and what she worked for was the Panteges Circuit, and she would go up the coast from San Francisco as far as—I guess this was before I was born that she did this—and go as far as Vancouver, BC, you know, to do shows. Yes, so she did have—she had a very good voice.

Redman:

Did you end up taking some music lessons as well, or were you a little shy about it?

Michell:

No, I was never particularly shy. I just was completely lacking in talent.

Redman:

I see.

Michell:

And she had naturally curly hair, and mine was just straight as a string. So I looked more like my father. And unfortunately, I did not inherit any of my mother’s talent.

Redman:

I can sympathize with that as far as far as the musical talent.

1-00:11:54

Michell:

But these ladies that were part of the quartet were long-lasting friends.

Redman:

Oh, wow. So they continued to spend time together.

1-00:12:00

Michell:

Well, yes. Like even when I came out here to Berkeley the one lady lived in Piedmont, and then they had a home out—a ranch, like—out in the Martinez area. And she belonged to the Orinda Country Club, and she would have me out here for dinner. Then when we got married, and we needed, like, fifteen hundred dollars or something for a down payment of the house, her husband, you know, advanced the money.

Redman:

Now, spending time growing up in Sausalito—

1-00:12:39

Michell:

We were just there the one year.

Redman: So would that have been in the 1930s, during the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge?

1-00:12:43

Michell: Well, I was in third grade, so it was probably '33.

Redman: So the bridge must have just been starting.

1-00:13:00

Michell: No, the bridge didn't get built until '36.

Redman: But it took several years.

1-00:13:06

Michell: Yes, that's true.

Redman: So do you remember what it was like to travel between the—

1-00:13:14

Michell: We rode the ferry.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to ride the ferry?

1-00:13:17

Michell: Sometimes we'd take bread crusts and throw them to the seagulls, because they followed the boat. And I can remember going into the bathroom and—you'll probably think I was really weird—they had liquid soap dispensers, and I would blow bubbles. With the liquid soap, you know. And then later, they sold that stuff in little bottles, and you had a little wand, and you dipped it, and it made bubbles all over.

Redman: So as a kid, that was a fun activity to take the ferry?

1-00:13:58

Michell: Yes. It was the way you got from Sausalito to San Francisco, yeah.

Redman: Can you maybe compare, then, going over the Golden Gate Bridge on cars when you became a little bit older—can you talk about the differences, maybe, between taking the ferry, being on the water—

1-00:14:19

Michell: Well, of course, they are practically obsolete now, but they have kind of revived some of them. They have ferries now that go to AT&T Park.

Redman: I'm curious if—

1-00:14:36

Michell: When they opened the Golden Gate Bridge, we left—third grade—we left Sausalito, and my mother got a teaching job in a little town between Paso Robles and King City. You probably don't know where that is. It's on

Highway One, or 101. And it was a one-room schoolhouse, and so she had everybody from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Maybe it was eighth grade. But I was in fourth grade by then. And there were like twelve kids.

Redman: Was that quite a difference moving from the city to—

1-00:15:22

Michell: Oh, yes, because it was like—there were only 75 people in this town. There was a general store and a few houses. And we lived in a house, you know.

Redman: But your mom was able to find a job there?

1-00:15:37

Michell: Yes, but it lasted only one year.

Redman: So it was pretty tough for teachers in that era.

1-00:15:47

Michell: And from there we moved—I think it was really tough for everybody because I can remember living in what they called a flat in San Francisco after my mother lost her house because she couldn't make the payments. And we lived closer to the school in a flat. And I can remember that the people across the hall from us were on relief. Now my mother had a stipend. You know, because she was like a T. A. I don't know what they called them then, but—anyway, they were on relief, and people would get deliveries of food outside their door.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit about—there were around that same time New Deal era programs like the WPA, and CCC, and NYA, and all these alphabet agencies. Do you recall anyone in your family or acquaintances talking about these or maybe working for the WPA or—

1-00:17:02

Michell: Never had anybody that worked for them, but I was aware of them.

Redman: What did your mom think and then later your step-dad think of FDR? Did they have feel a particular feeling toward—

1-00:17:13

Michell: My mother was a lifelong Republican. She voted for Alf Landon, who was the governor of Kansas. She voted for Wendell Willkie, who—I had a Willkie button.

Redman: What drew her to the Republican Party? Was there a family history there?

1-00:17:39

Michell: I guess so. They just were kind of very conservative. She had a brother and a sister, older. She was the youngest of three children.

Redman: Was she religious at all?

1-00:17:53

Michell: Actually, I was brought up as a Christian Scientist, but if I needed something we went to doctors. But my aunt, who was eight years older than my mother, was what they called a practitioner, which was, I guess, that they prayed or something, you know. In fact I have known people as an adult that had like breast cancer, and the prayers didn't make it. I mean, you know. So I went to the Christian Science Sunday School. So I had a background in the Christian Science. And there's a lot going for that because if you can control what's going on up here—

Redman: In your mind?

1-00:18:56

Michell: —then you don't end up with a lot of, you know, other problems. Do you follow me?

Redman: Yes. Certainly. I'm curious still in the differences between life in San Francisco, or Sausalito, and then moving out the to the country—

1-00:19:17

Michell: The boondocks?

Redman: —for one year, and then what happened after that year?

1-00:19:21

Michell: Well, she lost that job, and then she got another job in Monterey in the adult education.

Redman: Now, as a young girl, moving around quite a bit, it sounds like, what was that like for you as a small child?

1-00:19:41

Michell: You know, that's all you know, and you kind of just go.

Redman: Did you suspect that other families were having a similarly time during the midst of the Depression?

1-00:19:54

Michell: Not particularly. I don't think I was particularly aware. I always had plenty to eat. I know that there was a very very difficult time when she finished school, you know? And that's why we moved in with Mary, who was the head of the music department because it was either moving in with her and accepting charity or sticking me in an orphanage. Although she didn't ever—I found this out later. I mean, you know, this was not over my head, “You be good or I'll send you—”

Redman: Right. So you didn't realize, as a child, maybe, how tough times were for your mom at times?

1-00:20:52

Michell: No, no. I mean—

Redman: Right. So then she met your step-dad.

1-00:21:01

Michell: Yes. He was stationed at the Presidio in Monterey, which was where they have the language school now, but it used to be an army facility. The Presidio, like the one in San Francisco. So he was stationed there, and he went to take night classes, and he met my mother.

Redman: Oh, your mother, then, was teaching an adult education class.

1-00:21:27

Michell: Right. Non-music at that point. I mean, that kind of disappeared.

Redman: What was your reaction to your mom meeting this gentleman?

1-00:21:45

Michell: Uhh—

Redman: Did you take to him?

1-00:21:48

Michell: They knew each other for I guess about three years before they decided to get married. I liked him okay until I got to be a teenager, and then I hated him. [laughs] Not really. I mean, he was Army. Regular Army. He had been in the Army for thirteen or fourteen years or something. And everything was strict and by-the-book, and as a teenager, well, you were one once, so—

Redman: Right, I can completely understand.

1-00:22:30

Michell: Yeah, Your ideas don't always—

Redman: Match up to those of the adults.

1-00:22:42

Michell: Yeah.

Redman: I'd like to hear a little bit about what your life was like when you were in school, you know, in high school and the teenage years, actually. Were you particularly interested in school, and studying and reading?

1-00:22:51

Michell: I was a very good student.

Redman: Did you particularly enjoy certain subjects more than others, say math and science, or reading and art?

1-00:23:03

Michell: Oh, yeah, I was—I'm still an avid reader. I just read junk.

Redman: So you were into popular movies, on Saturday; were you also into popular books, or—

1-00:23:16

Michell: Well, those movies were oaters. You know, they were all cowboys and Indians.

Redman: Right. Did your change a little bit, I assume, then, when you became a teenager?

1-00:23:29

Michell: Oh, yeah. Well, then we were living on the Army post at that point in time, back in New Jersey.

Redman: Oh. So then your step-father gets transferred—

1-00:23:38

Michell: He got transferred before they got married.

Redman: And your mom followed him out to New Jersey.

Michell: Right.

Redman: What was life like for you, then, in New Jersey?

1-00:23:50

Michell: Oh, fine. We lived on the Army post, and I rode about two and a half miles into Red Bank, New Jersey, the town. We rode, actually, in an Army truck. You know, the back.

Redman: To get to school every day.

1-00:24:12

Michell: Yeah, yeah. And we were all buddies, you know. It was fine.

Redman: I've talked to some kids, who—what's the phrase, "Army brat?"—would travel around, and it would be kind of tough—

1-00:24:34

Michell: Well, yeah. We were there in Red Bank for my second half of eighth grade—they got married just about on my thirteenth birthday. And we were there—I finished my sophomore year in high school. And then we started the trek.

Redman: And the trek involved moving first to Florida—

1-00:24:58

Michell: No, first we moved to Long Island. I went to four different high schools. And we were up on Long Island for one year, but I went to two different high schools because they had moved from one place to another. And then we moved to Florida.

Redman: Was it hard for you to make these moves and meet new kids and start over?

1-00:25:24

Michell: Every time we moved after she married him and stuff, I got sick. And it wasn't until I was like a sophomore at Cal that finally somebody, and me, we worked it out. It was all emotional. It was gastro-intestinal sickness. I didn't have a fever or anything.

Redman: Yes, the stress of moving.

1-00:26:05

Michell: Yes. I mean, it was just before we moved. Not afterwards.

Redman: Can you tell me if you have any recollections about the start of the war? Pearl Harbor being attacked on December 7, 1941?

1-00:26:22

Michell: Oh yes. In fact, before then—I mean, you know, we went through the debacle with Churchill. You know—

Redman: As a high school student were you paying attention to some of these—

1-00:26:35

Michell: Oh, yes. My stepdad was frothing at the mouth all the time. I mean, you know, he was—my mother was really with what was going on, and he was too, though his service. And so I know all about lend-lease, and all this stuff, yes.

Redman: So it would be accurate to describe them as politically conservative. Were they also more isolationists, would you say?

1-00:27:13

Michell: No, not particularly. My father—this is my step-father; I called him my father—but he was, you know, all gung-ho about going over there and killing Hitler. [laughs]

Redman: So he was approving of, then, the entry into war after December 7.

1-00:27:38

Michell: We didn't have much choice.

Redman: So do you remember December 7.

1-00:27:39

Michell:

Oh, yeah. It was really funny because we had gone to the movies. It was a Sunday. And being as we were in Florida, that was the eastern standard time. So the Pearl Harbor attack was early in the morning, but by the time we went to the movie, like one o'clock, we hadn't heard anything. So when we got out of the movie—we had a radio in the car—the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. And I have a cousin that was on a battleship that was at Pearl Harbor, named the *Utah*, and that did not get sunk. The *Arizona*, of course, is still there. I don't know if you've ever been there or not.

Redman:

I haven't, but I've seen photographs of the monument.

1-00:28:40

Michell:

Yeah, you go out to the *Arizona*. They raised it.

Redman:

Now, I'd like to ask—one of the perceptions is that many people in the US had no idea where Pearl Harbor was before the attack. You know, they maybe knew it was in Hawaii. People knew where Hawaii was, maybe. But a lot of people were unaware that Pearl Harbor existed. Your cousin being stationed there, did you have any inkling that he was in Hawaii?

1-00:29:07

Michell:

Oh, yeah. I think so. My mother's brother had four boys, and one was in the Army, and the one that was in the Navy was out there.

Redman:

Was that a pretty scary time for your family?

1-00:29:30

Michell:

Well, yeah. They immediately transferred my father back up—he was a master sergeant, which was the highest enlisted rating—they immediately sent him to OCS [Officer Candidate School], which is in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

Redman:

Can you tell me a little bit about what he was doing during his time in the service by that point?

1-00:29:48

Michell:

Yes. He was setting up early warning systems throughout the southeastern part of the United States. In fact, I've got a little thing over on the table there that I was going to show you.

Redman:

Okay. We can pause the tape. [Pause]

1-00:30:13

Michell:

They would have a big table with a map of the area. And then they would have people hooked up to the phones. And if some Farmer Brown heard an airplane traveling over his farm, he would look up and see this plane, and then he would call in to this station. And then they would have these little pips, and they would set them on the map on where he called from. And where—like

this is like unknown, multi-engine, single-engine, or bi-engine—so, you know—

Redman: So then they could classify where the sighting was—

1-00:31:10

Michell: Yeah! And then, see, it says “high,” that would be way up, and “unidentified,” or “low.” And they would set these up around on the map, so that they, I guess, could figure out, you know—

Redman: I’ve seen pictures where young boys or young girls would be encouraged to sort of volunteer and have their binoculars out to call these early warning—

1-00:31:45

Michell: It could be, yeah. It could be that they were, but mostly the really young kids would be at school.

Redman: And then I’ve also heard that—seeing images of these call centers being operated by young women.

1-00:31:59

Michell: Oh, yes, they were. Mostly women.

Redman: So was your father, then, working with civilians?

1-00:32:08

Michell: Yes.

Redman: Okay, so could you talk a little bit about that? Were you aware of that at the time?

1-00:32:10

Michell: Well, my mother worked there. And then I used to go there after school or stuff. But it was at certain levels; the ones up above were the ones that took the phone calls. And then they would transfer it down, and they’d push—they had like a pool cue but not exactly. More like a hockey stick, you know? And stick these things around on the board. Because they were really big.

Redman: So they had a method for reaching and—

1-00:32:51

Michell: Yeah, and pushing them around. And then I guess what they tried to do was to figure out was, “Who does this plane belong to?”

Redman: And trying to identify it first of all—

1-00:32:59

Michell: Yes. And then sometimes—because then you’d get another call, and basically they’d work out that it was the same plane, and it would be in a, you know, a pattern. And as far as I know we never had any that were bad guys.

Redman: That would be my next question. What if, in that instance—would your father have a chain of command, then, to report up to?

1-00:33:27

Michell: I guess so.

Redman: But it never got to that.

1-00:33:31

Michell: No, fortunately.

Redman: Now, I'm curious, as a young person your mom is working at the station—

1-00:33:46

Michell: Well, as a volunteer, yeah.

Redman: As a volunteer. Was that something that induced a little bit of fear, or was that something that you took for granted, the idea that the coast may be attacked at—

1-00:34:02

Michell: I can't remember being afraid. I guess we always felt that we were protected in the United States because of the oceans.

Redman: That it was so far away that there was less of a danger than, say, in London.

1-00:34:21

Michell: Oh, yes, because London, they bombed the hell out of that.

Redman: Right, right. This was in '41, and then finally you would wrap up high school. Where did you graduate high school?

1-00:34:27

Michell: It was called Plant High School, and it was—they had like three high schools. This was in Tampa, Florida. And Tampa was certainly not like Tampa is today. I mean, I haven't been back there, but now, you know, they've got baseball, they've got football, you know. It's a big-time city. But in those days, the biggest industry—they had tons and tons of Cubans, and they had cigar factories. And mostly women worked in the cigar factories, and they hand-rolled the tobacco into cigars. There were several factories there.

Redman: And they would be boxed up in, I suspect, unique tobacco boxes that would be shipped—

1-00:35:25

Michell: I don't know about that, but that was the big industry, and—I'm trying to describe it—

Redman: So how about the people that you interacted with there? Were they pretty different from the people that you'd met up north in, say, Long Island or—

1-00:35:45

Michell:

Well, except that—I was going to say, they had three or four high schools. The high school I went to was in the upper part of the city, the students, okay? Then they had one in the northern part of the city, and that one was okay. But then they had one across the river, and that one was all black, because everything was segregated.

Redman:

Yeah. Jim Crow South.

1-00:36:13

Michell:

Oh, yeah. I mean, they had separate drinking fountains, separate bathrooms. In the movies they were up in the upper upper balcony.

Redman:

Did that surprise you, or did you kind of take it for granted?

1-00:36:27

Michell:

Well, I was raised with no prejudices. I think I told you on the phone about the incident where we were part of a drill team or something for the high school and that we had gone somewhere on the bus to practice, and when we came out, you know, we had to wait for the bus. And there was a bus stop with a bench, and there was a cleaning woman there. And I went over and sat on the bench. One of my theories is, “Never stand when you can sit; never sit when you can lie down.” [laughs] So that’s probably why I’ve lived so long. But anyway, I went over and sat down, and, you know, it was no big deal. And my two friends,”How could you sit by that Negra?”

Redman:

Really, that was their reaction.

1-00:37:36

Michell:

Oh, yes. I mean, it was just their way of life. They had been raised that way. And it was pretty gross because instead of people having washing machines, like we do, they would have these black help. And they would do the laundry in the back yard. And they would have like a big barrel or some kind of container, and they would have boiling water in there, and they would be putting—yeah, I mean, it was just unreal.

Redman:

Yeah, unreal to see that first hand?

1-00:38:19

Michell:

Oh, yeah, although we had had—well, afterwards, when my mother was doing the radio programs, back when I was a preschooler, we had babysitters, you know, that came in, that cleaned the house while they took care of me. And none of them were Negro as I remember, but I had French and Chinese and Japanese. You know, various and sundry people.

Redman:

So that exposed you in some sense to diversity of backgrounds—

1-00:38:59

Michell:

Of people, yes. But I don’t remember any of these people.

Redman: Kind of as a young and—

1-00:39:05

Michell: Yes. And it wasn't on a daily basis or anything, like maybe once a week or something.

Redman: After you graduate from high school, you make the decision to go back to California—

1-00:39:18

Michell: No. My step-father got transferred back to Forth Monmouth in New Jersey, and my mother decided that we would stay in Tampa until I graduated—because that was like in December or January—that we would stay and I would graduate from that high school, and then we would move back up to New Jersey.

Redman: You have a pin here. Would you show that to me? And hold it like this. If you could hold it back towards you. Perfect. Tell me about what that is.

1-00:40:04

Michell: Well, my mother decided that I was—when I graduated from high school I was just barely seventeen. I was seventeen in March and graduated in May. And she decided I was too young to go off.

Redman: And did you think you were too young?

1-00:40:24

Michell: I agreed, yes. And I knew there was a money problem. By then I was conscious of this. So, anyway, we moved back to New Jersey, and I got a job as a junior clerk typist and worked. And I got like \$120 a month or something, and I think we worked like a forty-eight hour week.

Redman: Was that for a young person a pretty good salary; did that feel like a pretty good—?

1-00:41:06

Michell: Well, yes, and I was living at home, and I didn't get charged room or board, and the understanding was that that money went in the bank so that when I went the next year, when I was a year older, that I would have the money for school.

Redman: To start college.

1-00:41:18

Michell: Yes.

Redman: It seemed like you had in your mind you wanted to continue your studies, but I imagine—

1-00:41:33

Michell:

Oh, yes. I think when we took our tests, and there were like maybe 250 people who graduated in my class, and when we took our comprehensive tests—they weren't SATs or anything in those days, but they were standardized tests—I was second in the high school out of the graduating class. So I had almost all As and Bs.

Redman:

Student earning pretty darn good from the sounds of it—

1-00:42:00

Michell:

Oh, yes.

Redman:

—and you'd wanted to go on. But, now, when you were a clerk for that window of time, for that year—

1-00:42:06

Michell:

Typist.

Redman:

Typist, okay.

1-00:42:17

Michell:

I was working more with adults, yes.

Redman:

And what was that like? Did that reassure you that you wanted to go to college, or was that money pretty attractive?

1-00:42:27

Michell:

It was kind of boring, but it was okay. I mean, the people were okay. You know.

Redman:

So then you decided to go to college. Can you tell me about what—?

1-00:42:39

Michell:

Well, I would meet somebody, like one of the women that I met was from the University of Minnesota. And I would say to my mother, "That's where I want to go to school." And then my mother would say, "Hmmm." And then another went to Duke—but the vast majority of the people that I graduated with from high school, they—at that point in time there was the University of Florida at Gainesville, and that was all men, and the Florida State College for Women was at Tallahassee, which is now Florida State? Big football, but then, it was all ladies. And my mother was strongly against non-male-versus-female. She thought they should be integrated. She was strongly against that. So, you know, she kind of put the kibosh on all these things. My mother's sister was single at that point in time, and she lived and had a shop in Los Angeles. So that's why I ended up at UCLA.

Redman:

You had thought about Minnesota or Duke or—

1-00:44:01

Michell: Oh, yes, all these different schools, yes.

Redman:

Tell me what your reaction was when you finally ended up at UCLA, what school was like in your freshman year.

1-00:44:15

Michell:

Well, first of all, I had led a rather sheltered life. I mean my mother did everything for me. I had never washed my own hair, and I never had cooked. I used to dry the dishes and she washed the dishes, you know, but I just was rather sheltered. I had never done any ironing or any of that stuff. My mother did everything. So when I got out there to college, and it was really funny, because you just in those days—you know how hard it is now these days, particularly, to get into Cal; they don't even take 20 percent of the people who apply as an undergraduate, you know—in those days I just walked into the admissions office and said, "Here I am; I want to go to school." And they said, "Well, what's your major?" And I said, "I don't know. But I liked chemistry when I was a senior in high school." So they signed me up as a chemistry major. And it was a very minimal amount of money, something like fifty bucks tuition, I mean, everything was really cheap. And then I found a place to live.

Redman:

In the area? In Westwood?

1-00:45:54

Michell:

Oh, yes. It was actually a sorority that had gone kaput. And it was like twenty-five girls that lived there. But it was, yeah. I don't know if you are familiar with Westwood, but the sororities are all on one road. And the guys are over on the other side of campus. Fraternities.

Redman:

You started to take chemistry classes.

1-00:46:24

Michell:

Yes.

Redman:

Did you find those enjoyable, or particularly difficult compared with what you were used to, or—

1-00:46:26

Michell:

Yes. When I took my first test, and I got a C, I thought my life had come to an end. Because I was used to getting all As, you know.

Redman:

Yeah, you were used to getting all As, and then you were also on your own for the first time, so that—

1-00:46:44

Michell:

That's true.

Redman:

—that must have been a difficult transition.

1-00:46:47

Michell:

But I think where I lived, as I remember—we had two meals a day, breakfast and dinner—and I don't remember about—and of course a housemother.

Redman:

What was a housemother's responsibility? What would they do? Can you explain that?

1-00:47:09

Michell:

Oh, well. Things were much much different in those days. You had a housemother, and they made sure that everybody was where they belonged. And even when I was in Berkeley you had to be in by 10 o'clock at night during the week, and then Saturday and Sunday night, no, Friday and Saturday night, I think it was 2 o'clock. And if you didn't get there on time and missed lockout, you were in deep doo-doo.

Redman:

[laughs] So they maintained order and—

1-00:47:47

Michell:

Oh, yes, right. And, of course, we all sat down at the long table together for dinner. You had no choice of what you got.

Redman:

So you knew who was there and what was going on.

1-00:48:02

Michell:

I know.

Redman:

Did you like the other girls at UCLA?

1-00:48:14

Michell:

My roommate was a really neat gal, and the two that lived across the hall, the four of us kind of got together all the time. We got along very well. But my roommate, Toni, was—she helped design, you know, the card tricks that they do, the automated things that they do during half-time?

Redman:

Oh, the card stunts.

1-00:48:50

Michell:

Yeah, yeah. She was very artistic, and she was working—did that.

Redman:

Oh, for UCLA football games?

1-00:48:58

Michell:

Yes.

Redman:

Did you ever go to games at the Rose Bowl, the UCLA football games?

1-00:49:06

Michell:

I'm sure I did, but I don't remember them being at the Rose Bowl. I remember going to USC. You know, their thing is right there at the—

Redman: Now did you like the living experience of being in LA, compared to—

1-00:49:28

Michell: No. I didn't like it. No, and my aunt expected me to spend every weekend with her. It was an hour by the bus from the campus. She was down near the railroad station.

Redman: So it wasn't a great fit.

1-00:49:48

Michell: No, it was pretty boring. And then my roommates, most of them, had homes. I mean, Toni, my roommate, was from Altadena, and she went home every weekend.

Redman: I see. So it was a pretty lonely—

1-00:50:02

Michell: Yeah, Yeah. It wasn't the best of experiences. That's one of the reasons I wanted to depart.

Redman: And then were there any other reasons that you wanted to leave UCLA?

1-00:50:17

Michell: I just was not particularly into it, and then Berkeley beat UCLA at football [laughs], and I thought they're a much better school. And my father had gone to Berkeley.

Redman: Had he told you a little bit about what that experience was like, or he had encouraged you to go up to Berkeley, or you just sort of—

1-00:50:39

Michell: He just sort of did. I mean, this was the first time I had seen him in like thirteen years or something.

Redman: Tell me a little bit about what that experience was like, seeing him for the first time in a long time.

1-00:50:49

Michell: I didn't really like him.

Redman: Oh, really.

1-00:50:52

Michell: No. I didn't think that he—and he had a new wife. Now, the new wife was very nice. But, I mean, he had basically deserted my mother and me. And he never sent any support money, ever.

Redman: That's a pretty tough situation.

1-00:51:16

Michell: Yes.

Redman: With that, before we get to talk about Berkeley and school up there and your life in the Bay Area, I'm going to put in a new tape.

Begin Audiofile Michell\_jean\_02-12-01-11.wav

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and I am here today with Jean Michell. Today is December 1, 2011, and this is our second tape together. When we left off, you had just finished your freshman year at UCLA, and didn't have a great experience, and decided to transfer up to UC Berkeley. Can you tell me what it was like for you to arrive up in Berkeley?

2-00:00:31

Michell: Well, there again, I just sort of came. I didn't warn anybody [laughs], but I was lucky enough to get housing in a three-storey building that is now part of the UC system; they have something in there. And the bottom floor was the kitchen, and—not the cafeteria, but the dining room. And it had a housemother, an assistant housemother, and one of the cooks lived in, and so on, on the first floor.

Redman: Was it all women?

2-00:01:19

Michell: Oh, yes. And then the second and third storeys were for the inhabitants. It was all two to a room, and the community bathroom was—

Redman: Down the hall.

2-00:01:34

Michell: Yeah, right. And we had seventy girls. It was a large group.

Redman: Did you find the girls to be different at Berkeley than at UCLA, or was it pretty similar?

2-00:01:51

Michell: Oh, it's always a mix. You know. And you get to be really good friends with some of the girls, and some of the girls you hardly ever see. And it was funny because mostly the second-floor girls hung out, and the third-floor girls hung out, mostly because they were there. And you buzzed somebody's room across the hall or something. You usually don't wander up the stairs.

Redman: How about life on campus? By that time, by '43, '44 —

2-00:02:31

Michell: '44, yeah.

Redman:

—By 1944, I understand there would have been a lot of students on campus who were, maybe, civilians but would be taking language programs, or military personnel—

2-00:02:42

Michell:

No. The vast male population there were a few Army people—that was called the ASTP and I don't; there weren't very many of them—and then there were two types of Navy personnel, the ones that wore the regular—they were called V-12s, and they wore regular Navy, you know, those little Navy blue. And then the Naval ROTC. And they all lived together in what is now I-House, International House, and it was called Callaghan Hall at that point in time. And I guess Callaghan was a famous Navy officer at some time or other. But anyway, they all lived at Callaghan Hall. And there were thousands. You know, a couple thousand of the Navy.

Redman:

I guess that that transition for the I-House had just happened in '42 or '43—

2-00:03:53

Michell:

I guess. I don't know.

Redman:

Did anybody talk about how it was a site for international students beforehand versus now it was a temporary site—?

2-00:04:10

Michell:

No. No. It just was the Navy place, when I got there anyway. Now I had in my physics class, I had a couple of Latino males that—one was from Ecuador, and I can't remember where the other one was from—but there were a few students, foreign students on campus.

Redman:

Now, regarding students of Japanese ancestry, a lot of them, of course, had been moved—

2-00:04:42

Michell:

They were all shipped out.

Redman:

—to the war relocation camps.

2-00:04:48

Michell:

Yeah, right.

Redman:

So you didn't encounter any students of Japanese background.

2-00:04:51

Michell:

No.

Redman:

Did rationing affect these houses?

2-00:04:59

Michell: Oh, yes. [laughs] We had pretty dreadful food. At that point in time there were different types of rationing. One was sugar. One was gasoline. And I guess there must have been for other things too. But you had to turn over your food stamps, up to the house.

Redman: Oh, so your ration booklet just went straight to the housemother.

2-00:05:32

Michell: Yeah, right. And the name of the facility where I was was called Epworth Hall, and it was run by the Methodist Church. And they had very strict rules. The Methodists don't believe in smoking, drinking. Even card-playing and dancing are evils. So, in fact, it was really kind of funny because the nickname of the house where I lived was Virgin Hall That was the nickname on campus.

Redman: Were any of the girls in your house or students on campus politically active at that time.

2-00:06:25

Michell: No.

Redman: So there wasn't much of that, but was there a lot of volunteerism, then, towards the war effort?

2-00:06:34

Michell: Yes, I was a member of what they called the War Board. And I used to go once a week up to Callaghan Hall with another girl, and they set up a table, and we sold—they had stamps that you could turn into—keep in a booklet until you had enough to get a war bond. So we sold those up there. And then we organized blood drives. So I ended up giving, not all at once, a gallon of blood over the war era.

Redman: And that was a pretty popular activity, for young college students to get together and organize a blood drive, is that correct?

2-00:07:27

Michell: Yes.

Redman: And those were pretty successful usually?

2-00:07:29

Michell: I think so, yeah. And then we had—each class had their own president, vice president, secretary, and so on. And then there were people on the committee, for—you know, in addition to the officers, the clubs that ran the activities for the certain clubs.

Redman: Would you say a lot of the clubs' focus became these patriotic efforts?

2-00:08:09  
Michell: No. I don't think so.

Redman: So not every group or organization was so active in doing blood—

2-00:08:12  
Michell: No.

Redman: —drives or selling war bonds?

2-00:08:17  
Michell: They had various and sundry different clubs on campus.

Redman: Was there any dissent against the war on campus?

2-00:08:25  
Michell: No. Oh, no. No, that came later. You know, with Vietnam. Because everybody was gung-ho.

Redman: Everybody wanted to be in the war and see it come to an end.

2-00:08:39  
Michell: Yeah.

Redman: You had a lot of family that were in the Navy.

2-00:08:43  
Michell: Not in the Navy. I had the one cousin.

Redman: One cousin in the Navy and then two cousins in the Army, and then your father. It's quite a roster of family members.

2-00:08:57  
Michell: The four boys that were my uncle's kids: one was the Army, then the Navy, and then the Marine Corps, and he was overseas with the Marines. And he was the same age as I was, six weeks younger. And then the younger one was too young, of that family. And then my aunt had no children, and I was an only child.

Redman: Did you correspond with and of these family members during the war?

2-00:09:26  
Michell: Yes, I think so. Not a whole lot. They had what they call APOs.

Redman: Could you explain that?

2-00:09:35  
Michell: And they also had V-mail?

Redman: So these are the mail systems that you could send to and from different locations to people who were stationed either in the country or overseas.

2-00:09:49

Michell: Right.

Redman: And the mail was censored, I understand.

2-00:09:58

Michell: Probably.

Redman: Did you think often of your family members who were overseas, or was that something that on a day-to-day basis was hard to keep in mind?

2-00:10:14

Michell: Yeah, there was just too much going on, with studying and—

Redman: Now, the Bay area would have experienced a pretty huge transition during that time. By the time you'd come back, the Golden Gate Bridge would have been completed, as would the Bay Bridge.

2-00:10:34

Michell: Yes.

Redman: I'd like to go back to the Bay Bridge just for a moment. Now that you're on the Berkeley side of the Bay Area, and the Bay Bridge had been completed, what difference do you think that made for the area, the Bay Bridge?

2-00:10:50

Michell: I don't know, but we didn't ride—I didn't drive, and I didn't know anybody that had a car. We all rode the train. They had what's called the Key System, and the bottom of the Bay Bridge, where you go this way and that way, it was the trains. They were the electric trains. And one of them ended up at Claremont. That was the end destination. And they had letters. And one of them ended up almost at Sather Gate, on Telegraph Avenue.

Redman: So it was pretty easy to get into San Francisco, it sounds like, using the Key System.

2-00:11:47

Michell: Right.

Redman: Did you and your friends on occasion take that trip into San Francisco?

2-00:11:54

Michell: Yeah, That's the big deal, to go on dates.

Redman: To go on dates with young men.

2-00:12:02  
Michell: Yes. Mostly the Navy guys. [laughs]

Redman: Can you tell me what that was like?

2-00:12:13  
Michell: We drank a lot.

Redman: So you'd go to a saloon or a bar?

2-00:12:17  
Michell: A bar, yeah. Or sometimes certain hotels would have places where if you bought some drinks, they had music, you could dance.

Redman: And would these guys show you a good time?

2-00:12:31  
Michell: Well, none of us had much money. I mean if they were part of the Naval ROTC they got something, but not a lot. Of course, everything was cheap then.

Redman: How much would it have cost to take the Key System all the way from Berkeley into San Francisco?

2-00:12:56  
Michell: I have no idea.

Redman: Just a few cents, probably.

2-00:12:59  
Michell: Probably a quarter or something. I have no idea. I don't remember at all. I remember riding the subway in New York City for a nickel or a dime.

Redman: It's really great the stuff you've told me about the Key System because it's gone now. Do you have any other memories about taking that trip across the Bay Bridge?

2-00:13:20  
Michell: I know that before we moved to New Jersey we were up in San Francisco, and I remember walking across the Golden Gate Bridge when it was first open.

Redman: What was that like as a young girl?

2-00:13:40  
Michell: Well, it was fun, yeah. I was about eleven.

Redman: People got all dressed up for it.

2-00:13:49  
Michell: I don't remember that part. [laughs]

Redman: Do remember a sea of people at that event?

2-00:13:58

Michell: I think so, but I just kind of remember doing it. I can remember climbing to the top of Mt. Lassen.

Redman: Vague childhood memories, right?

2-00:14:08

Michell: Yeah.

Redman: Going back to San Francisco for a moment, can you describe for me during the war if you were to go out in San Francisco and there might be music or bars or clubs, what was the nightlife like there in the evenings to the degree you remember it?

2-00:14:27

Michell: Well, one of the places that was really very daring to go, they had a place called Finocchio's. Have you ever heard of it?

Redman: No, I haven't.

2-00:14:39

Michell: Okay. The enterentainers were all gay. And some of them dressed like females. And they were very talented people. And I can remember, it was really funny because my mother came out to visit, so the fellow that I was going with—steady at that point in my life—he and I decided that we would take my mother to Finocchio's to see what her reaction was. This was hysterical. She knew the piano player from back when she was singing in San Francisco. [laughs] So instead of being shocked, she knew the piano player.

Redman: That is so funny.

2-00:15:35

Michell: And then they had a female club, too. That was also of the other—lesbian, I can't remember the name of that. Now, we would go to some of the—not the real expensive hotels like the Mark [Hopkins], the Top of the Mark; that would have been expensive—the Fairmont was fairly inexpensive. And some of them would have, like I say, if you had a few drinks, they would have dancing and live music. And the Claremont. They had a band, a good band.

Redman: So these were the types of things you would do on occasion with young men.

2-00:16:26

Michell: Oh, yeah. And lots of dancing. But it was ballroom dancing. They did the Lindy. You've heard of the Lindy.

Redman: Yes. I've heard of the Lindy.

2-00:16:38

Michell: That's jitterbugging.

Redman: Were there still a few big bands?

2-00:16:45

Michell: Oh, yeah. I think it was my junior prom; we had Harry James. And of course when I was down in the LA area, they had tons of them. Down at the beach. They had a boardwalk, and I saw both Dorseys, Jimmy and Tommy. I saw almost all of the big bands at one place or the other.

Redman: Would you classify that as one of your favorite activities, going and seeing these different bands in the evenings?

2-00:17:28

Michell: Yeah. And dancing. And they used to have dances, like at the Y. And then they had—what the heck did they call it?—at the clubrooms. Now these places are all gone. Stephens Hall used to be across from the Campanile, down to the courtyard where they had the pelican, and the *Daily Cal*, they would hand them out down there—

Redman: Yeah, I know exactly where you mean.

2-00:18:07

Michell: But they had clubrooms. We used to go and play bridge in the men's clubrooms because they relaxed the gender during the war. But they used to have—I hate to call it a Pony Express; I can't really remember—but it was like from four to six in the afternoon; they would have dancing once a week.

Redman: So there were lots of different activities to do on campus, it sounds like.

2-00:18:35

Michell: Oh, yeah.

Redman: And if you weren't satisfied on campus, you could go cause trouble in San Francisco.

2-00:18:39

Michell: [laughs] Yeah. I laugh. I often say that I drank more before I was twenty-one than I have in the whole rest of the whole years afterwards. And I tried very hard to drink beer. But I cannot stand the taste. And I don't like wine. I don't like the taste of the alcohol. So the only drinks I drank were things like daiquiris or piña coladas—which they didn't have then, but a similar drink—and screwdrivers with lots of orange juice. Anything that disguised the taste.

Redman: Just one moment. I'm going to fix your audio. [Pause]

2-00:19:30

Michell: There was a contingent of Marines on campus.

Redman: Navy and Marines were both at Callaghan Hall.

1-00:19:43

Michell: Yeah. In fact, the President of the ASUC {Associated Students of the University of California} was a Marine when I was a senior.

Redman: Part of the unique aspect of your time at Cal was that the classes were condensed. The war alumni classes went through this experience together where they took classes, I understand, over the summer—

2-00:20:06

Michell: Yes. It was a semester. They had three full semesters. It was not summer school.

Redman: So you didn't have breaks.

2-00:20:20

Michell: No, unless you took one. Like I took a whole four months off between my sophomore and junior year.

Redman: You did that to work?

2-00:20:36

Michell: To just relax. I went back to New York, where my stepfather was stationed at that point in time.

Redman: Was he still pretty supportive of your continuing on at Berkeley?

2-00:20:47

Michell: Oh, yeah. I really liked it. You can tell. [laughs] I'm a big bear fan. It's just the last couple years that I haven't gone.

Redman: What about going to games at Memorial Stadium in the forties? Do you recall what that experience was like for you, being at Strawberry Canyon?

2-00:21:20

Michell: Oh, yeah. I went to everything. I'm a jock at heart. I went to the basketball games, the football games. I went to the track meets; I went to the baseball games.

Redman: So there was a lot to do on campus.

2-00:21:40

Michell: Oh, yeah. Stanford did not have intercollegiate games during the war. They didn't have enough men. And we had a ton of men on our teams that were Stanford students who had gone into the V-12 or the ROTC or something. Our players were, you know, in the service.

Redman: What did you end up majoring in?

2-00:22:29

Michell:

I was a chemistry major until I finished the first half of my junior year. And at that point in time I had taken twenty-five units of chemistry, eleven units of German, which I hated—it's a very difficult language; I don't know if you've studied it. I have had Spanish, French; I took French before I went to Florida. And they say, French, Smench, everybody speaks Spanish." [laughs] Then German in college. And then after college, before we went to Japan, I had a class at the University in Japanese. So I've got all of those dumb languages, a smattering of each. But I hated German.

Redman:

That's a tough language to learn.

2-00:23:28

Michell:

Yeah. And particularly it was scientific German. I was studying about oxygen and hydrogen and all of that stuff in German. Anyway, that was bad enough. But then I hit what they called Solid Analytical Geometry. I'd already finished differential calculus and integral calculus. And then I hit this Solid Analytical Geometry, and [makes whistling noise]

Redman:

Over your head.

2-00:23:57

Michell:

And P-Chem. [another whistling noise] And it was a bad book. It was more of a syllabus than a textbook; and you couldn't look something up. So in the meantime my counselors were very negative. What was a woman doing in chemistry? See, I thought I was going to be another Madame Curie. I had studied about her, and I was all gung-ho about becoming a chemistry major. But I didn't get any encouragement; let's put it that way. So in the meantime, the head of the War Board was a German Jew who had got out—his name was Steve Kauffman—and he was very fluent in German, so when I had to do all of this translating, guess who helped? [laughs] And he said, "Why are you messing around with this?" He says, "Come over to the Bus. Ad. Department." He says, "You'll love it, and it's easy." So I decided to transfer to Business Administration. You have a major within, and I was a Personnel major. They had an animal called Business Math. Well, since I'd had all this calculus, they decided I didn't really need that. But I had to take statistics and six units of accounting. And the rest of it was all the horrible theoretical economics. The Keynesian Doctrine and so on. They're big for answering Jeopardy questions. [laughs]

Redman:

How did you like your professors?

2-00:26:15

Michell:

My favorite professor was Clark Kerr. And he had just come there. And during the war he had been busy doing arbitration between the unions and—he had wonderful experiences. Plus, he would bring people in, from both sides. And we had all these people. Most of the professors were good.

Redman: So Clark Kerr would bring in guest speakers from different sides of an issue.

2-00:26:51

Michell: Oh, yeah. I mean, he was really good. And then when I came back from Japan and needed a job, I went to see him, and he was in the Department. He helped me get a job.

Redman: Is that right?

2-00:27:11

Michell: Yeah. He pointed me in a direction. A lot of people hated him when he was President of the University. He had just come. But most of the professors were good. Depended on what you were taking. I mean, a lot of the economic stuff that were not in the Department—Pause]—we were in old South Hall. Is South Hall still there?

Redman: Yes, well, wait.

2-00:27:56

Michell: I think it's still there.

Redman: Yes, it's next to Stephens and the Campanile.

Michell: Yeah. The Econ Department was on one side of the hall and the Business Ad—this was before they had their own building. You know, the Haas Building is out of this world.

Redman: It's brand new and great.

2-00:28:24

Michell: Oh, yeah.

Redman: Let's talk about the end of the war.

2-00:28:29

Michell: One thing that I experienced while I was at school was when they had the explosion at Port Chicago, and that shook the building.

Redman: Can you tell me about what that was like?

2-00:28:43

Michell: Well, it was scary. I mean, we had no idea. All of a sudden, "Bang," and the building was shaking.

Redman: So you were at your—

2-00:28:51

Michell: The dorm.

Redman: And the entire building shook.

2-00:28:55

Michell: Yeah. It was like an earthquake.

Redman: Is that what it felt like? Did it feel like an earthquake, a sudden jolt?

2-00:29:03

Michell: Yeah.

Redman: Did the windows break in your building?

2-00:29:03

Michell: No.

Redman: But there was damage here and there around Berkeley, it sounds like.

2-00:29:08

Michell: Oh, yeah. It was terrible. A whole bunch of men got killed.

Redman: That's right. And many of them, of course, African American sailors—

2-00:29:18

Michell: Yes.

Redman: —and there was a big mutiny trial. I'm curious, though, if that day, the day that Port Chicago happened—of course, it happened on a military base, so there probably wasn't a whole lot of news that got out about it right away—was that confusing? Did you just think it was an earthquake, and then only later you found out that it was an explosion?

2-00:29:42

Michell: It seems to me we found out fairly quickly, but not about who was killed or anything.

Redman: So that you knew fairly soon after that there was an explosion at a military base, a naval base, but the details came—

2-00:29:53

Michell: Well, it wasn't even like a real base. It was, I don't know. They kept all kinds of—

Redman: Munitions there that they were loading onto the ships.

2-00:30:06

Michell: Yeah, yeah. And I remember V-J Day very well.

Redman: So the dropping of the atomic bombs, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, do you remember your reaction to hearing that news, by any chance?

2-00:30:24

Michell:

I think at that point of time we were all relieved that it was finally over. Of course, the war in Europe ended before that. But the Japanese, I compare them to the crazy suicide bombers that we have now that go into a crowded restaurant and blow themselves up with as many people as they can. I mean, they're nuts. I mean, there's a screw loose somewhere. And the Japanese were the same, you know. For the Emperor. I mean, can you imagine, in an airplane, and flying yourself into the middle of a ship? I mean, it's nuts, the kamikaze guys. We knew about them, you know. And I can remember going out and meeting guys—they had a pre-flight at St. Mary's College [Moraga, California] for people that wanted to go into the Navy Air Corps—and dating some guys from over there. And this one fellow had been in the Marines, or was still in the Marines, and he'd been on Guadalcanal. And I guess that was dreadful. You're sort of fighting up this beach, man-to-man, and like this one fellow saying this, "There's two ends to the bayonet. One you keep next to your stomach, and the one that you ram into somebody." I mean, war is so different now. It's worse.

Redman:

When you heard that news, it was sort of a sense of relief, but then did you also think of your family in particular, or was it all of it together?

2-00:32:38

Michell:

Yeah, just a relief that the war was finally over.

Redman:

What about when FDR died, and Harry Truman took over. I'm curious to learn a little bit about your reaction. Did you have a different viewpoint by that time—?

2-00:32:45

Michell:

[laughs]

Redman:

—from your parents, or did you feel similarly to how their politics had evolved.

2-00:33:04

Michell:

What's the old joke about, "Everybody loves Eleanor"? Well, my own feeling is that anyone that wants to be President—it's a thankless job but you have to be a complete egomaniac. That man was sick. I mean he was really sick; he was in a wheelchair for years and years and years toward the end before he died. And he should not have been making all these decisions and stuff.

Redman:

And then Harry Truman comes along.

2-00:33:55

Michell:

Yeah. But I was more concerned with Jean. You know what I'm trying to say? I was a young adult. I was more concerned with graduating and passing finals.

Redman:

The Bay Area, I understand, changes a lot in this time. There's a huge influx of not only Naval and Army personnel, but there's also a lot of people coming

here for jobs at places like the Kaiser Shipyards. Can you talk about that for a moment?

2-00:34:28

Michell: Well, we didn't deal with them. We didn't see them, you know. Richmond was a separate place.

Redman: So it felt like a world away.

2-00:34:38

Michell: Yeah. There was no interaction, in other words. Berkeley is kind of a—you don't even deal with the people down on Shattuck Avenue.

Redman: Kind of a country of its own.

2-00:34:53

Michell: Yeah. It is. It's kind of a sealed community.

Redman: So the perception of post-war American life is that all of these young men came back and have their GI Bill, and many of them enroll—

2-00:35:08

Michell: Of course I was out of there by then.

Redman: Yeah, but your own life is that you graduate then in '46. But, then, many people don't use their G.I. Bill to go to school or in tandem. Many people use it to buy houses.

2-00:35:23

Michell: Well, that was different. That was a G.I. Loan. That was nothing to do with the education.

Redman: Right. And then there were FHA programs, and all sorts of programs for people to buy houses. And move to the suburbs is the perception of the growth.

2-00:35:45

Michell: Right. Well, they built like 1,500 houses out there at Gregory Gardens. You probably don't know where that is. You know where Sun Valley is, the shopping center? Well, it's kind of toward Walnut Creek from there. But that whole area—they built 1,500 homes out there, and they were all three-bedroom, one-bath homes, and they sold for \$10,500. And they all had slab floors, not hardwood floors, and the heating was under the floor.

Redman: What did you think of that? Did you think that that was just the natural next step of American life? Your having grown up in the Depression, I'm curious if—

Michell: Well, see, I graduated in '46, and I worked at the campus for about six months after that. I worked in the admissions office as the mail clerk. And then I got a job through my accounting professor. He took a sabbatical and he worked at Kaiser Industries, not Kaiser the medical part, but Kaiser had all kinds of stuff. They built automobiles, they had steel, aluminum. He took a sabbatical and was doing some kind of consulting work at Kaiser Aluminum. And he hired me as his secretary because he knew that I had access to the library, and I could do research at the University and so on. So I worked for him. And in the meantime my dad went to Japan; in '46 he went over there. But my mother and I couldn't go until he made brownie points because they had a certain amount of living places for dependents. So we left in '47 and went to Japan, and I lived there until the early part of '49 and came back to the United States. So I was kind of out of it, you know?

Redman: Right. In that period when you were working for Kaiser and also doing a little bit of work on campus, was that a time of any big changes, or were you more concerned with—

2-00:38:35

Michell: What I was doing.

Redman: Yeah. So then you were anticipating this move to Japan, and that must have been a pretty big—

2-00:38:43

Michell: That's when I went and took Japanese. [laughs] And it was so funny because that's when I learned that when you take a language, the beginning vocabulary is pretty basic. I could say, "The wall is brown. The pencil is yellow." But I didn't know how to ask where the bathroom was. [laughs] The important part of conversation.

Redman: Yeah. That part, of course, is never until the second semester, it seems.

2-00:39:13

Michell: But also, with Japanese the hard part is learning the kanji. You know, they have all these characters; they stole them from the Chinese. No, seriously, the Chinese had these characters first.

Redman: Now, what was that experience like, then, arriving in Japan and being on— were you living on the military base for most of your entire time there?

2-00:39:46

Michell: When we first got there, they didn't have housing for us. He was in Yokohama, and he was part of the Minor War Crimes Commission. Now he didn't deal with Tojo and the really bad guys, but he dealt with the minor guys. And they were really gross, like they would make a lampshade out of human skin. I mean, they did really terrible things.

Redman: Was that hard for your father, you think, to be a part of that?

2-00:40:30

Michell: Oh, yeah, I think it was. But anyway, we were at a hotel up in the mountains, called Akakura, which is very near where they had the Olympics in Nakano. You know, the Winter Olympics several years ago over there? Anyway, we were up there for like three months, and then we got a place in Yokohama, and that was all American housing. The Army built places for dependent housing.

Redman: Was there a little bit of culture shock for you going over to Japan?

2-00:41:00

Michell: It was interesting because I was very active on campus, and I was in part of what they called the class clubs. And at that point in time there was a man named Robert Sibley, who was head of the Alumni Association. He had been there for a thousand years. And he used to have, once a year, a breakfast, and he would invite the people in these class clubs at his home. So when they knew I was going to Japan, they had a nucleus of people who had been active in the Alumni Association before the war. But, of course, they had to go underground and pretend that they had never been to the American university during the war.

Redman: These were Japanese—

2-00:41:58

Michell: Japanese alums. And they had had a bunch of them before the war. So they gave me the names of people. The ichiban, number one guy, was this Mr. Togasaki, and he was the publisher of the *Nippon Times*, which was the only English printed newspaper in Tokyo. Now, they decided to democratize Japan, right? So they took—this was another Jeopardy answer that I knew that nobody on the panel knew—Akihito, who was the Emperor's son; they decided that he shouldn't just have a private tutor, but they would have three of his peers come in with his classes. And Mr. Togasaki's teen-age son went to school with Akihito. So he was the number one person. And there was a man, he was American, who was a sales director or something of Pan Am Airways in Japan. He was the head of the office there. And then there were a couple of other names. But, anyway, they wanted me to reactivate a Cal Alumni club in Tokyo. So I had access to people that I would normally not have access to. It was interesting.

Redman: Did they share any of their experiences from their time in the war relocation camps?

2-00:43:49

Michell: They never were in the location camps; they were in Japan during the war. They were Japanese. They had come over to go to school, but then they go back home.

Redman: Tell me what that experience was like in Tokyo tracking down some of these Cal alums.

2-00:44:08

Michell: It was pretty easy to find them. I remember I went to a party with this Pat, this Pan Am guy, and we went to some kind of a big function at the US embassy, which as a normal person I never would have gotten to.

Redman: Was that a pretty impressive experience?

2-00:44:32

Michell: Oh, yeah. It was pretty exciting.

Redman: And were the Cal alums pretty receptive to—

2-00:44:41

Michell: The people who were in Japan? Oh, yeah. [laughs] The Japanese are not quite as bad, but in those days, you didn't go to anybody's house. They entertained at restaurants or clubs.

Redman: And how about the experience of being an American there? Did you sense any feelings of resentment, or do you think that people were simply relieved?

2-00:45:16

Michell: No, except that I felt that the Japanese people as a whole—they had nothing. I mean, after the war. It was really pretty bad. They didn't have heat for the house. They would have like a little hibachi. a little tiny charcoal thing. And that would be it, you know. And they didn't have good food. And we weren't allowed to eat any Japanese food because they used the honey buckets. Have you heard of the honey buckets? Well, they used human excrement for their fertilizer, and they transported them with oxen, and they hung these things full of you know what on the side of the oxen.

Redman: So the conditions were pretty bad.

2-00:46:14

Michell: Well, because if you ate stuff had been fertilized with human excrement, whatever they had, you were going to get. Just like drinking water with typhoid. So it was pretty grim for the people who were there.

Redman: Was there hope, do you feel like, at that time, or did it seem pretty devastating for a lot—

2-00:46:41

Michell: Well, we lived in Yokohama, which is a stone's throw from Tokyo, and the whole area between Yokohama and Tokyo—because we could ride a train for free; everything was free for the Americans—it was all bombed out. Years later, I guess in the eighties, I went on a cruise, and one of the stops was the Hiroshima. And they, of course, have the war memorial to the bomb.

Redman: How did that make you feel?

2-00:47:24

Michell: I wouldn't go.

Redman: It was a pretty tough thing?

2-00:47:26

Michell: Oh, yeah, to visualize. It's really bad.

Redman: Now, coming back to the United States, the way that the campus changed and life changed through the Civil Rights Movement—

2-00:47:49

Michell: That didn't come till later, did it?

Redman: Yeah, and the Korean War, and Vietnam. I mean, a lot changed over the ensuing thirty or forty years. What's been your perception of Berkeley as it changed all the way from World War II to the present? You mentioned Clark Kerr's time. Obviously a lot happened. Was there anything in particular that you connected with that stood out to you?

2-00:48:08

Michell: I went to a reunion at the house where I had lived. Now it's part of the UC. I forget what's in there. They let us have a room in the downstairs—what used to be our living room—to have this reunion and everything. I took BART, and then they had golf carts that were propelling people around from the west entrance to the campus. This was one of the days when they had one of the open houses. I rode up and got off at Sather Gate and walked three blocks down Telegraph Avenue. It is terrible. I mean, it smells like urine. And there's always crummy people.

Redman: And how about campus? What's your impression of how campus has changed?

2-00:49:25

Michell: Well, they've added a lot. Like where that Clark Kerr—I guess where people live?

Redman: Right. The Clark Kerr Campus?

2-00:49:37

Michell: Yeah. That used to be the School for the Blind. That was years and years ago. There's a lot of new buildings.

Redman: Let me go back, then, to the war, to conclude here, to think back to the war and the place of your life in the place of your life story and the place of your own history. What do you think the war means to you now, looking back on it?

2-00:50:13

Michell:

Well, everybody was in favor. There was no protest against. There were some isolationists, like there was a guy named Borah, who had been in the Senate for a thousand years; I think he was from Idaho. He was the one person who voted against—because Congress has to declare war. The President requests it, but they have to make the declaration, and he was the only one that voted against getting into after Pearl Harbor. But the other wars since then—well, the Korean War, I think everybody was more or less in favor of that too. But Vietnam, you know, there was this huge influx to Canada, and so on.

Redman:

And a lot of resistance and protests. So your sense of your life during World War II really revolves around that unity, that people were behind the war? That's your recollection of it?

2-00:51:37

Michell:

Oh, yeah. Like I say, almost all the men on campus were in the service.

Redman:

Should we leave off with any favorite any memories from San Francisco? It sounds like that was some of your favorite times, being able to go over to the City on occasion.

2-00:52:00

Michell:

The Big City, right. No, except that I actually was born in San Francisco. [laughs]

Redman:

So there's a sentiment there, a close tie. All right, with that I'd like to say thank you so much for sitting down and talking with me today.

2-00:52:17

Michell:

I'm a jabberer. [laughs]

Redman:

That's good. That's what we like in oral history.

[End of Interview]