

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Irene Crosbie Miles

Rosie the Riveter

World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

*This interview series was funded in part by a contract with the
National Park Service, and with the support of individual donors.*

Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2011

Copyright © 2013 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Irene Crosbie Miles dated April 26, 2011. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/cite.html>

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Irene Crosbie Miles, "Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project" conducted by Sam Redman in 2011, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2013



Irene Crosbie Miles

Table of Contents—Irene Crosbie Miles

Interview 1: January 18, 2011

[Audiofile 1]—

1

Born in Little Falls, Minnesota, languages and religion in community, parental work and problems, her schooling in Aberdeen, South Dakota, taking science classes, desire to become a nurse, mother's declining health pushing her to join the workforce early, meeting sailors and making friends in Aberdeen, moving to California with her mother, troubles finding housing in Oakland, finding work at the Bethlehem shipyards, interacting with other male employees, making new friends, clothing styles, and the "Share the Ride" program or carpooling to work.

[Audiofile 2]

21

Impressions of workers from around the country, organizational problems at the Bethlehem Shipyards, nightlife in Oakland, supply problems at the shipyard, men from New York taking over the company, a lack of supplies, leaving the job, incident involving the War Manpower Commission, Japanese internment, attitudes toward the Japanese, rationing of food, recollections of the Port Chicago explosion, thoughts on masculinity and Rosie the Riveter, dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan, life after the war.

Interview 1: January 18, 2011
Begin Audiofile 1

Redman: All right, my name is Sam Redman, and I'm here today with Irene Miles. Today is January 18, 2011, and we're in San Leandro, California. Irene, first did I get your full name correct, and can you tell me the spelling on your last name?

1-00:00:28

Miles: Yes, I wish I could hear better. Yes, that is the correct name, and it is spelled M I L E S.

Redman: Fantastic, and where were you born?

1-00:00:39

Miles: In Little Falls, Minnesota.

Redman: Is that right? You're never going to believe this. That's where my mother was born. I had no idea. That's so funny.

1-00:00:51

Miles: No kidding?

Redman: Yeah, she was born in Little Falls.

1-00:00:53

Miles: Oh, my, what's her name?

Redman: Cindy Redman [maiden name Maynard], but she probably moved away from there in the very early fifties, the very early 1950s.

1-00:01:07

Miles: I moved there when I was only ten years old. All the way back in the thirties.

Redman: In the thirties, okay. So I'm really interested now. Tell me about what Little Falls was like in the 1930s.

1-00:01:19

Miles: Well, being a little girl, and, of course, Minnesota is a very beautiful state with all the lakes and trees. I was born in what one would call a parish. They were all French people who had settled there for the lumber industry. There were only two other foreigners. One was a Scandinavian, and one was a German family.

Redman: So was your family German or Scandinavian?

1-00:01:51

Miles: No, French.

Redman: Oh, you were French, okay. So you were one of the people that were in the French community.

1-00:01:57

Miles: Right. Everybody spoke French.

Redman: Really?

1-00:01:59

Miles: I didn't learn to speak English until the year before I went to school.

Redman: That's amazing. So you were there in the thirties up until you were about ten years old?

1-00:02:12

Miles: Well, when I was ten years old we left there. It would be around 1930.

Redman: So, a little before the start of the Great Depression in—

1-00:02:25

Miles: It was the beginning of it.

Redman: Do you remember, do you have any particularly strong memories from Little Falls other than the different languages and—?

1-00:02:34

Miles: Well, everybody was wonderfully kind. Everybody was very congenial, and it was almost like family. Everybody knew one another because we all went to the same church. Everybody was Catholic, except the Norwegians and the Germans. Oh, no, the German people were Catholic also.

Redman: So there was maybe one Lutheran family, and they were the outsiders.

1-00:03:07

Miles: They were wonderful people, but they just were not Catholic.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:03:11

Miles: But everybody else spoke French.

Redman: Interesting.

1-00:03:14

Miles: It was a French community.

Redman: Do you remember what the house was like that you grew up in?

1-00:03:21

Miles: Oh, do I ever!

Redman: Tell me a little bit about it.

1-00:03:23

Miles: Well, it was a very wonderful home. It was built I think the year I was born or the year after I was born. I don't remember the house across the road. But my family lived there for a couple of years while the house was being built. It was a four bedroom house, and well built as they do build them out there in the cold weather country. They stood storms, which a lot of California homes can't. And kept it cozy warm, but what I do remember are the winter nights when all the frost would gather on the windows and form beautiful pictures. And then, oh, there were a lot of wolves that would howl at night.

Redman: Really?

1-00:04:14

Miles: A lot of wolves, so you'd hear the wolves at night, and you'd hear them howl. Believe it or not, when they howl now in picture films, I get nostalgic. I didn't like the sound then, but I love it now.

Redman: Looking back on it, it may be a little easier to—

1-00:04:33

Miles: Exactly.

Redman: Yeah, so can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

1-00:04:38

Miles: My parents?

Redman: Yeah, what were they like?

1-00:04:41

Miles: My parents were very well liked by everybody. They both were outgoing, very congenial. We had company almost every night. When salesmen came by they never left unless they stayed for dinner. Everybody was visiting one another. Mother played bridge, so she'd have a group come over and play bridge. You'd gather at one of the women's home and then another time gather at another woman's home. So I would say maybe every four weeks they would gather at our house. And I was always very talkative, so before any of the women showed up, mother would say, "Now, we are big people, and you're small people. Children are to be seen, not heard, and don't go talking to the women because they really don't like to be disturbed." And it was murder for me because I wanted to talk so badly.

So one time one lady gave me some attention. I was standing in front of the register, and I couldn't talk to anybody. But she happened to walk by, and she said, "How are you, Irene?" And I said, "I'm fine." But I saw her circumcision, so I said, "Is that where you were circumnavigated?" Because I had just learned about Magellan having circumnavigated the world, and it was

a new word. She responded with a big “Oh” and started laughing. I was in my glory: “she likes talking to me.”

Redman: She was maybe laughing for a different reason, right?

1-00:06:33

Miles: Oh, I thought well, I maybe should not have talked, but the lady liked it. She was very happy with it.

Redman: So what did your father do for work?

1-00:06:44

Miles: My father was working for the County. He graded the roads. Then, let’s see, actually he was a farmer, but he was not a farmer. He didn’t like farming.

Redman: So did he have a plot of land?

1-00:07:04

Miles: A hundred and eighty acres.

Redman: Which sounds large to me, but for a farmer—

1-00:07:12

Miles: Well, that I would say was the average.

Redman: Okay, it was about an average farm.

1-00:07:15

Miles: Right.

Redman: But he didn’t like tending to that. He liked his work with the County more?

1-00:07:21

Miles: When my brother was old enough to do anything, he left everything for my brother to do.

Redman: Did your brother enjoy farming?

1-00:07:28

Miles: Well, what could he do?

Redman: Okay.

1-00:07:31

Miles: I think he enjoyed it. He must have enjoyed it because he stayed with it, and even though he went out of state to other things, he preferred handling the farm.

Redman: Was your brother your only sibling, or did you have other siblings?

1-00:07:50

Miles: My sister was eleven years older, my brother was nine years older, and then along came I, and then I had a little brother two years younger.

Redman: So your mother must have been pretty busy.

1-00:08:04

Miles: Very busy.

Redman: Can you tell me what a typical day was like for her in that era when you were still in Little Falls?

1-00:08:14

Miles: Towards the end she took on a job of caring for a woman. She was busy all day long.

Redman: So she would wake up in the morning and maybe make breakfast and then what were some of her other chores or responsibilities that she did around the house.

1-00:08:49

Miles: She also made lunch and dinner for a family of five. She was a great cook and homemaker. She was also a fabulous seamstress. She made all my clothes, as well as her own. She took care of the house, and then she took care of the chickens. Of course, the laundry and the cooking, of course, would be a time-taking job, taking care of the children. Oh, she planted a garden, and it was a big garden. And, of course, did a lot of canning. Then during the winter months she would spin wool until late. I have the spinning wheel today that was brought from France almost three hundred years ago now because I'm going on ninety-two.

Redman: That's incredible.

1-00:09:33

Miles: That spinning wheel came from France with my ancestors. She would spin the wool to make the threads, and then she would knit them to make socks for my father, my brother, and I don't know if she gave them away as gifts. That I don't know.

Redman: So eventually your siblings were old enough to help take care of some of the chores around the house and the farm or—

1-00:10:08

Miles: It would be my brother, oh, Dad would do some of the work, but not any more than he had to.

Redman: Oh, really, okay, so he wasn't quite as busy as maybe he could have been.

1-00:10:21

Miles: He was busy but occasionally went to the salon drinking beer with his friends.

Redman: He would have a good time.

1-00:10:30

Miles: Right. He was a very outgoing person. That's why everybody liked him.

Redman: So he was pretty popular around—

1-00:10:38

Miles: Very.

Redman: Around town, okay, so then we start to get into the Great Depression there just about when you're at the end of your time in Little Falls, and then presumably you leave Little Falls and moved somewhere, is that right?

1-00:10:54

Miles: Aberdeen, South Dakota.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit about that experience and then maybe the coming of the Great Depression. Do you remember? Did that affect your family?

1-00:11:07

Miles: Shortly after arriving in Aberdeen, Mother got a job with a Catholic hospital, working in the kitchen. Due to the stress and strain of the job, Mother became ill. Then my uncle, who was a chef at a hotel in Aberdeen, offered her a job as salad chef, and she went there. That worked out all right, and life was simple. I went to school every day. But there again Mother got very, very ill. But I still went to school, and she kept up going back and forth to work, although barely able to walk. It turned out it was her teeth that were giving her a bad time. She didn't know it, but when she went to the dentist, she wasn't even able to walk. All she could do is just shuffle. I felt so bad to see my mother suffering so terribly to make a living for me. But after her teeth were pulled, she was her jovial self again, able to walk, and continued working there. Then Uncle Ernie went on to Baker, Montana. Then, of course, after he left there was no job for Mother. She stayed on a while. She took on another job, but that one I don't remember. But Uncle Ernie said, "I need a salad chef at this hotel," because he was a chef at that hotel in Baker, so she went there as all around girl. She was the dish washer, the pie baker, oh she made delicious pies. So she made the pies, washed the dishes, took care of the salads, she was his right-hand man.

Redman: So did you stay in Aberdeen, then, or did you move then—?

1-00:13:35

Miles: I stayed in Aberdeen because Aberdeen at that time was conducting an experiment that anyone who graduated from there could go into college or university in their junior year. Of course, knowing I would not go on to

college or university because my mother wouldn't be able to afford it, I decided to stay on. I studied until three o'clock every morning.

Redman: So this was your opportunity to take college classes.

1-00:14:10

Miles: Right. Whatever they were doing, you had two years of college when you graduated. But I think it was three or six students had nervous breakdowns, so they discontinued it because most of the students could not handle the load.

Redman: So they piled on too much too quickly.

1-00:14:36

Miles: Right. I studied until three in the morning every morning.

Redman: So that was a tough time and quite a bit of sacrifice.

1-00:14:45

Miles: Well, it was, but I didn't mind it because I was enjoying, the teachers were all wonderful to me, and I was getting an education.

Redman: What were you studying at that time?

1-00:14:55

Miles: I took all the sciences.

Redman: Oh, interesting.

1-00:15:00

Miles: In fact, when I was in a chemistry class one day, all of a sudden somebody came in with a note. The teacher said, "Irene, you're wanted in the superintendent's office." All the children went, "Oooo." I got scared because I thought this would be about my mother and father being separated.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:15:23

Miles: In those days, women and men didn't separate or divorce, and I was afraid that if they had known that I was all by myself because my mother was out of town, that I was really on my own, the school administrators would not accept this. I shared an apartment, well, a room. It was a housekeeping room with a girl who was a secretary to the principal of the college. She was a very responsible individual, and she and I were sharing the full apartment, so to speak. So when he called me down I was scared to death that maybe he had found out my mother and father had separated. He was a big man, tall, and impressive looking. When they opened the door, here was the beautiful antique furniture, oriental rugs, and that. I thought, "Oh my, they're going to really murder me." But when he came in, he opened the door for me and gave me a chair. I was feeling so much better. So when he sat down he said,

“You’re carrying a pretty heavy load, do you realize that?” I said, “Not really.” He said the State requires you take only so many units, and I think I was three units over and above. He said, “You know, you don’t have to carry this. You don’t have to do this. You’re also asking to be exonerated of taking trigonometry and the other very difficult math.” He said, “Why are you doing that?” I said, “Well, I’m wanting to be a nurse and in becoming a nurse I’ll never use trigonometry or the other one.” Calculus, yes it was calculus. I said, “I’ll never use either subject. I’m very interested in sciences. I can use that all my life.” I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, but he ended up by saying something like “Young lady, you have a head on your shoulders. If we had more students in this school like you, running a school would be very easy.”

Redman: That’s true. I’m sure that’s very true, yeah. Having the ambitious students who wanted to learn and take the extra classes was a lot easier than disciplining.

1-00:18:22

Miles: And I didn’t go out with the boys.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:18:28

Miles: I never went out with the boys. I was going out with a fellow who was six years older than I. When I would go back to Minnesota on vacation time, then I’d get to see him then.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:18:35

Miles: But during the school year I didn’t go with anyone.

Redman: So tell me why you, you mentioned nursing. Is that what got you interested in the sciences? Or were you were interested in science before realizing you wanted to be a nurse?

1-00:18:55

Miles: I guess during school I found that I was enjoying all the science classes, and junior high, and I think that’s why it opened my mind that this is what I like, and also I wanted to be knowledgeable in them because science, you use it every day. You use it in all, a lot of subject matter when you talk with people, and I wanted to be a person that was all around knowledgeable.

Redman: Did you find that people discouraged you from going into the sciences at all for any reason, or did you feel encouraged?

1-00:19:36

Miles: Nobody really interfered. This is all on my own.

Redman: Great. So tell me about finishing then, so you went through these two years of this program, and then after that, what happened?

1-00:19:51

Miles: It would be three years.

Redman: So you did three years of this program, so you would have graduated from high school with two additional years of college, is that correct?

1-00:20:03

Miles: Right.

Redman: And then what did you do?

1-00:20:08

Miles: Oh, then I went into, I went to go see my mother. That was in Billings, Montana. Oh, what I had done is I had signed up with the United States Government to become a nurse. I signed up that I would travel anywhere in the world to do whatever I had to do. I had to appear in Washington, D.C. that fall on such and such a date I had to be in Washington, D.C.

Well, I hadn't seen my mother for three years, and she was so thin and drawn, it just broke my heart. I thought, "I can't leave her." I just couldn't leave her, so I stayed in Aberdeen and didn't show up for the other. I think I wrote to them and said I wouldn't be there. But then I thought, "How in the world am I going to make a living? How am I going to make a living!" Well, it was the Depression, so I went to the different department stores thinking I could clerk there, and everyone would say, "Have you had any experience?" Well, finally, when I got to the fourth one, I said, "How am I going to get experience unless somebody starts me?" They said, "We'll keep you in mind," like they all said. But, pretty discouraged, I went back to the hotel room where we were staying, and the girl that was sharing the room with my mother before I arrived had to have her hair done, but couldn't get an appointment. I said, "Well, I'll set your hair for you." I definitely had time to comb it out, and she liked it so well, she said, "Why don't you go take up hair styling? You're really good at it." I said, "I don't think I could stand working, having that woman looking at me. Everything I do would be reflected in the mirror. I don't think I could do that." "Well, give it a try." So Mother and I trekked on over to the Marinello School, where I got my training in hair styling and hair cutting. I was into that for, gee, that would have been 1939. I don't have those dates exactly.

Redman: That's fine, but for a couple of years then—

1-00:23:07

Miles: Yes, until '43, when I came here to California.

Redman: That's the first time you'd cut anyone's hair or done anything with anyone's hair, and then you found this career path. That's a great story.

1-00:23:26

Miles: That's just how things happen.

Redman: Yeah, that's so funny. So, all right, let's talk about in December 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Do you remember that day?

1-00:23:39

Miles: Very well. I was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room when President Roosevelt said, "This is the day of infamy."

Redman: So you were listening on the radio.

1-00:23:51

Miles: Right.

Redman: Can you tell me, do you remember at all any of the things you were feeling at that time, or—?

1-00:23:55

Miles: Well, it just seemed like everything kind of goes down, you don't know what happens, but, yeah, the dreadful feeling, the United States in war. Can't believe it. Can't believe it. Then, of course, the thought comes to you, those dirty Japs, that's the feeling that you get. Why did they do this to our wonderful country?

Redman: So there was some anger there.

1-00:24:23

Miles: Yes.

Redman: Go on. Tell me a little bit more about that.

1-00:24:36

Miles: Well, by that time I'm well into hair styling, and so the days become regular days. I went out with Navy personnel, Navy men, on dates because Billings was between the East and the West on railroad trains as well as all airlines.

Redman: So people would come through.

1-00:25:07

Miles: Right.

Redman: Was there a USO office where there would be dances or a dance hall or anything?

1-00:25:11

Miles: No, but, there was this woman whose hair I was doing who was running a very exclusive night club. Then there was what one would call a mediocre night club. She also had a speakeasy. So she was very well known. Well, she

and her husband got in a squabble and she was very lonely, and so I said, "Come and stay with Mother and me." Because he took a shot at her.

Redman: Oh, wow.

1-00:25:55

Miles: So I said, "Don't go back to the house. Stay with Mother and me until he cools down." I guess that meant a great deal to her. After that everything kind of subdued, and she went back home. Then, she took a while off and visited the other night clubs to give them her business. She spent a lot of money buying my dinners, and drinks for those she saw as good sponsors of her club.

Redman: Wow.

1-00:26:37

Miles: Because she was very well known, and she was a sophisticated woman, and I was very grown up for my age, somehow we got along very well, but she was a real good person, a very nice person religiously brought up, by the way. Of all the women I've met to this day, she would be what I would say, a genuinely wonderful person.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:27:09

Miles: Not petty, not any of those things. She was qualified, she was a working woman, she knew when it was right to keep your mouth shut and not say things that one shouldn't say. Actually, she was the beginning of my learning to laugh and enjoy myself.

Redman: Oh, wow, okay.

1-00:27:30

Miles: Because I was always very, very serious because life was very serious to me, and I had to be serious.

Redman: You had a lot of responsibility pretty early on.

1-00:27:39

Miles: Right, exactly. So when I went out with her, she made me laugh, and I kind of enjoyed laughing. Where am I going from here?

Redman: From night clubs?

Miles: Yes, night clubs, and then—

Redman: Meeting some of these sailors you had mentioned.

1-00:28:02

Miles: Right, but then by that time, we decided that we were going to come to California.

Redman: So this is in 1943, is that correct?

1-00:28:16

Miles: Right.

Redman: So the two of you, you and your friend, decided to come to California.

1-00:28:20

Miles: Mother and I.

Redman: Your mother and you, okay.

1-00:28:24

Miles: Right.

Redman: Did you decide to come to the Bay Area, or—?

1-00:28:26

Miles: I was heading for Santa Barbara.

Redman: You were heading for Santa Barbara, okay.

1-00:28:29

Miles: We did a stopover in Oakland to see my sister, her husband, and a two-year-old baby. It was so wonderful seeing my sister, and I fell in love with that two-year-old baby, and he fell in love with me.

Redman: You were the favorite aunt, right?

1-00:28:47

Miles: We couldn't go. We just couldn't leave. So we stayed. I didn't quite know what to do. I didn't want to go back into cosmetology where you work from nine to nine, and I thought if I could get into another kind of work for a while it would be a change of pace, and I could make just as much money, maybe more.

So my brother-in-law said, "Why don't you go to the shipyards?" I said, "Shipyards?" He said, "They make big money there. You could find yourself a job somehow." So I went and applied. There was an opening for a tool room manager, and I took it.

Redman: So this was Bethlehem Shipyards?

1-00:29:43

Miles: It was when I first went there. As I remember, Bethlehem is in my mind, but whether it stayed Bethlehem when these people from New York bought it, I don't know.

Redman: So let's talk about Santa Barbara, 1943, when you arrive. What were your impressions of California, having coming from Montana and South Dakota and Little Falls, Minnesota, what was it like to come to California?

1-00:30:18

Miles: Seeing my sister was very important. Then they got an apartment for Mother and me. We had one room on Webster Street, which was just a couple of blocks from my sister, just off Broadway. You're familiar with Oakland?

Redman: Yes.

1-00:30:37

Miles: Okay. She lived on Grand Avenue where the big, well, you remember where the Ali Baba used to be?

Redman: Sure.

1-00:30:46

Miles: Okay. The Ali Baba was here, then there was an apartment house. Then a big opening and another apartment house. This big opening, it was all bare and you could park in there. Nobody parked in there because it was privately owned by the apartment. In the back of the large area was an upholstery shop where my sister worked. So what am I leading to now? Oh, because the room had no cooking facilities, my mother and I would go and eat at my sister's apartment. That was for a week's duration. Then they happened to know this man in this apartment house off Lake Merritt on just on Athol Avenue, who had an apartment for Mother and me, and we moved over there.

Redman: So then you were living in Oakland.

1-00:31:45

Miles: In Oakland, right.

Redman: So what was your, so that was in '43, is that correct?

1-00:31:50

Miles: All in '43.

Redman: So tell me about what Oakland was like because I'm really interested in what the town was like in 1943.

1-00:31:55

Miles: It was like an old, are you familiar with Portland at all?

Redman: Oh, yeah, a little familiar with Portland.

1-00:32:02

Miles:

It's that old laid back way. I could walk the streets at 10:00 o'clock at night, and nobody would bother, except that when the war was, on one night I was walking because you were never afraid. In those days if a man even came and talked to you, and you showed that you didn't want to be talked to, there were other men that'd say, "Get along, young man." But one night two sailors grabbed me, one on each arm. It appeared they were teasing me, so I went with them. But when it came to where I was going, I said, "I have to go over here." They said, "No, we want you to go;" I got a little scared and said, "Now listen, I don't want to go any farther." And they let me go.

Redman:

So there were boundaries.

1-00:32:51

Miles:

Yes, and they were gentlemen. But you didn't have to worry as a female walking alone late at night if there were people around, you would be protected. If you walked in dark areas, anything could go because there'd be nobody to protect you.

Redman:

Now in that period there were a lot of people coming to Oakland and the Bay Area in general from all over the country.

1-00:33:20

Miles:

Right.

Redman:

So people from Arkansas and Oklahoma and a lot of African Americans from the South. Being from Little Falls where there was almost exclusively French Catholics, this must have been kind of a new world.

1-00:33:40

Miles:

Well, there are a lot of years between that, see by that time this is '43. When I left Little Falls I was ten years old.

Redman:

Okay.

1-00:33:44

Miles:

So I'd been in Aberdeen for a good share of that time, and then Billings, Montana. So actually, I guess when you're young everything is exciting, everything is new, and so you take the background with it, I would say, that everything was very different, but somehow you adjust to it.

Redman:

Okay.

1-00:34:10

Miles:

But there, on the side of the bad part, I never did go to Santa Barbara. I stayed in Oakland. All right, from there on then—

Redman:

So then, how did you end up, your brother-in-law suggested that you should go to the shipyards.

1-00:34:32

Miles: Although this type of work did not appeal to me, I went to apply. They had this job open for a tool room manager. I went there and I must have been interviewed by somebody within Bethlehem to be accepted.

Redman: Can I step back? I missed one question. I wanted to ask, you mentioned you got an apartment in Oakland.

1-00:34:58

Miles: Right.

Redman: Was it hard to find an apartment?

1-00:35:02

Miles: Very.

Redman: Tell me about that. That's interesting.

1-00:35:04

Miles: You couldn't get one. That's why you had to know somebody that knew somebody.

Redman: And was that your case? Okay, how did that end up working?

1-00:35:15

Miles: It worked up real well, except there was a woman there who said, "If this woman has a young girl, we're going to have a lot of young boys around here." Anyway, when I entered she never complained again, so I guess I was satisfactory.

Redman: So my impression is that landlords at that time— There were so many people coming in that they could kind of pick and choose whoever they wanted, and they could ask any sort of question they wanted about you or who you were, or—

1-00:35:52

Miles: Right, exactly, that's why when this woman complained there's going to be too many boys around here, I guess they said she's not the kind of girl that goes chasing around or whatever they said, and so I was accepted and never talked against by anyone after then.

Redman: This is a funny questions maybe, but there was sort of the perception that some of these young girls might bring young boys home, do you think that was sort of imagined by your landlord, or do you think there was some hanky panky going on with some of the young people?

1-00:36:38

Miles: Well, there was a tenant that had to be removed for that reason.

Redman: So she didn't want her apartment complex to be that sort of a scene.

1-00:36:54

Miles: Right.

Redman: Okay, I see. So now let's get back to Bethlehem Shipyards. So you maybe showed up, and you said, "Hey, I'm interested in getting a job," and they told you, "We have a position open for a tool room—"

1-00:37:09

Miles: I don't recall how that began. I must have been interviewed by somebody in the office over there, but all I can remember is I was brought to the tool room, and that was what I was going to handle. Now if you think this is not an important position, it is, because we're losing a lot of machinery because when the men get off work, they take it home with them.

Redman: So there was a problem with people taking some of the machinery home and then maybe reselling it?

1-00:37:46

Miles: Who knows?

Redman: Okay. So you were doing some inventory then, to make sure that the equipment stayed—

1-00:37:54

Miles: The men that were assigned to that company doing their work had their own type of machinery. Now whether it was supplied by the company or whether it's their own. I think it was supplied, it had to be supplied by the company, I would say, wouldn't you?

Redman: Yes.

Other Man: The tool room checked out equipment at the beginning and the end of the day.

Redman: So it was sort of a library for the equipment that they would use that day.

1-00:38:32

Miles: Right. So when the men would come in to work, they'd come to that little cubicle and say, "I want that machinery over there." So the first day I started, the men would say "Oh don't go there, you'll get your hands all dirty." So they came and took it out, and then when it came to looking for the serial number, they said, "I'll read the number to you because you'll get all greasy."

Redman: So they were worried about you.

1-00:39:09

Miles: They were darling, absolutely darling.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:39:11

Miles: So then I'd write the numbers down, and then, of course, they had to sign their name. So then he'd go off with his piece of machinery and the next man would come in, and he'd let me know what machinery was his, and then he'd come in and get it, "Don't touch it now, don't get your hands dirty." So that's the way it was. When everybody had their own machinery and were gone, I didn't have anything to do.

Redman: So my impression was that most of these shipyards during the war ran say three shifts, a morning, an evening, and then an all night shift, or maybe two shifts, and then people would come in and maybe get their equipment, so you'd maybe be busy at a certain start of the shift, and then it would slow down, or—?

1-00:40:00

Miles: You just brought up something that was going on in some places, but not this one.

Redman: Okay. So you were doing just one shift.

1-00:40:10

Miles: One shift. It was closed up because we had to wait until they unlocked it to get in.

Redman: Do you recall was it in the morning like a regular work day that it would start?

1-00:40:21

Miles: Oh, we had to start at a certain time, and we all left at the same time.

Redman: I see.

1-00:40:25

Miles: Then when they brought everything at night, they'd bring it in, and I'd look at it. I knew which one belonged to because I got to know their names, and then I'd check them off showing that they had brought the machinery back and they were free to go. That was all okay until the next morning.

Redman: By the time you had been working there a little while, you got to know the men and women who were working—

1-00:40:57

Miles: Mostly men.

Redman: Mostly men.

1-00:41:00

Miles: Mostly men. I'm trying to think, it seems to me I saw one woman towards the end, but I'm not too sure. There were two of them, but I don't think they went through me. I don't think they needed what I was doing. Though they went

through and worked there, they didn't have to use what was being stored in the tool room.

Redman: Would you say there was a pretty diverse group of men, or were they mostly white—

1-00:41:32

Miles: You mean culturally?

Redman: Culturally and racially. Were they—?

1-00:41:35

Miles: Oh, no Negroes here, but they were all around us.

Redman: So it was a segregated—

1-00:41:42

Miles: I wouldn't say that. You just didn't see them. They were all there in the shipyard. I think they didn't like our type of work. They were in all the other shops

Redman: Okay. But they weren't at Bethlehem, your impression was that—

1-00:41:51

Miles: They just weren't, there was one. In my background, in my memory, it seems to me I see one, but they were not prominent.

Redman: Okay. Was there, so were most of them would you say from California, or were there some people from Arkansas and Oklahoma, or were there people like you from the upper Midwest, or—?

1-00:42:16

Miles: I wouldn't know that.

Redman: Okay. Tell me about your pay.

1-00:42:23

Miles: Very good.

Redman: It was very good, okay.

1-00:42:25

Miles: But I couldn't tell you how much I made. I know that when I got the check, "Whoo."

Redman: So tell me about that. So you were making a little bit of money, and what did you do with your money?

1-00:42:39

Miles: Well, I was a saver. I'm a saver. I bought beautiful clothes. I was always top model.

Redman: Did you and your friends, I'm curious if you met some other young women, and did you spend any time out on the town then?

1-00:42:59

Miles: Oh, yes. I met a couple women. In fact, I stayed overnight with one of them. I don't know where their husbands were, but there were a couple of girls I became friendly with.

Redman: So I want to ask a question that seems right up your alley. I want to ask a question about clothing. I was recently told by someone who lived in San Francisco during the war that the style of clothing people wore in the city changed during the war, and by that I mean the style of clothing people wore in public. So many people had started new jobs in defense that they started wearing overalls out in public sometimes to and from work. People were wearing jeans for the first time and hard hats around the town. Did you notice that at all, or did you see people wearing different kinds of clothing?

1-00:44:02

Miles: If they were going from San Francisco to Oakland, Oakland to San Francisco, I wouldn't be aware of that because somebody was picking me up at my home, and we went directly to the shipyards. There were about four of us riding in one car. So I would not be aware of the clothing that women wore, because I was new to California.

Redman: I know there was a "share the ride" program that people—

1-00:44:44

Miles: There was a what?

Redman: A "share the ride" program?

1-00:44:46

Miles: Oh, yes, right.

Redman: And people were encouraged to carpool like that and all go together. So was it your impression that a lot of people carpooled to the shipyard?

1-00:44:57

Miles: Very much so.

Redman: And who were you carpooling with to work?

1-00:44:59

Miles: I don't recall the man. He must have lived near where I lived. Are you running out of tape?

Redman: I think I'm going to change tapes here in a second, but you can go ahead and answer this question about carpooling.

1-00:45:11

Miles: Well, the carpooling— I know that every car that left the shipyard was filled with four or five.

Redman: Okay. So this, did you get the impression that that was due to a little bit of rationing on tires, on gas—

1-00:45:24

Miles: Definitely.

Redman: So would people chip in and contribute to then the person that you carpooled with, or how did that work?

1-00:45:32

Miles: Well, I think if they lived close together and there were several men in the group, one man would drive maybe one week or two days, and then the other man would drive two days, and then the other man would do it two days.

Redman: So they maybe had their own cars, but they just cycled through and—

1-00:45:50

Miles: Right.

Redman: I see, okay. Did you get the impression most people were living in Oakland at that time and working at the shipyard?

1-00:46:01

Miles: That they were coming from Oakland to go to Alameda?

Redman: To Bethlehem Shipyard, yeah.

1-00:46:09

Miles: I would say so.

Redman: Okay, maybe a few from San Francisco or from elsewhere?

1-00:46:16

Miles: No, that would be very rare.

Redman: Okay.

1-00:46:17

Miles: And if it were Richmond, I think they were mostly from Oakland.

Redman: Okay. Fantastic. Well, I'm going to change tapes here.

Begin Audiofile 2

Redman: So, Irene, the next question I was going to ask you was how the different workers interacted at the shipyards because my impression from some of the other people I've spoken to is that some groups of shipyard workers maybe didn't get along, or there would be new influxes of people from different places, and they maybe didn't get along very well, or the impression—

2-00:01:26

Miles: People from Arkansas, Oklahoma—

Redman: Yeah, so can you tell me about—

2-00:01:31

Miles: I heard about them, but it didn't go on in where I worked.

Redman: So tell me about what were sort of some of the rumors floating around, or what did people say, even if you didn't like what some of the people said?

2-00:01:45

Miles: Well, of course, they said those Okies and those Arkies, they don't understand anything.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:01:49

Miles: It's so hard to make them understand.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:01:54

Miles: Remarks like that.

Redman: So people would make cracks about them maybe being uneducated or—

2-00:01:59

Miles: Right.

Redman: Was there a union at Bethlehem Shipyard that you were aware of?

2-00:02:13

Miles: I would think they would have asked me to join the union if there were.

Redman: Okay, and that never happened?

2-00:02:16

Miles: No.

Redman: Okay. So were people that you knew of active in different groups or community organizations?

2-00:02:29

Miles: I didn't mingle with any of them. It was strictly business in the morning when they checked in, and when they checked out. As soon as they came to the window they came for their machinery, and they were gone.

Redman: So it was very friendly at work, but then it didn't go beyond that really, you didn't see them.

2-00:02:50

Miles: Right, no more.

Redman: Okay. So then tell me about, did you think about at all the other, because there were a lot of job opportunities in this area at the time, say at Kaiser and Bethlehem and all over the place.

2-00:03:06

Miles: Right, I had no desire to go to the other places.

Redman: You sound like you were pretty happy where you were and pretty happy with the money you were making, so you have—

2-00:03:13

Miles: I was very satisfied until this new company came in. I heard this new company had bought out the one we were working for. Several of the men left. I don't know the reasons why. Presumably they were let go, or maybe the men didn't like. I have no idea, but I know a few of the men left as soon as the new company came in.

Redman: These were people from New York?

2-00:03:50

Miles: They were from New York. I was doing okay. I sometimes had hangovers.

Redman: So you'd maybe been out a little bit the night before.

2-00:04:08

Miles: Well, no, I don't know. I don't get a hangover now if I have two drinks or three drinks, but in those days all I had to have was two or three drinks—

Redman: Yeah, the next day—

2-00:04:20

Miles: But I think I worried. I worried so much. I didn't want to lose control. I always wanted to be in control, and I didn't want to ever be anything but a lady at all times under all circumstances. I didn't want any man to think that I was going to fall on the floor, just by being a little bit inebriated. I didn't want to ever be inebriated.

Redman: So tell me, we'll get just back to your opportunity maybe at going to another location, another company, but I just want to ask quickly about social life in

Oakland at that time because we talked about that a little bit. That people would go out and have a good time, and you were making a little money and independent, and you had these nice friends. Tell me a little bit about what life was like at night, then, what social life was like in Oakland.

2-00:05:19

Miles: Fantastic.

Redman: Do you remember some of the places that you would go or your favorite—

2-00:05:24

Miles: Oh, I was always going to the Mark Hopkins or the, what's the one next to Union Square, oh, what is, it's well known. Union Square, the hotel over here, the Fairmont?

Redman: The Claremont?

2-00:05:44

Miles: No, the Claremont's here in Berkeley. Oh, it's so well known, it's a very famous hotel, I went there, and that was mainly where we went. Or else there was, for an eating place, we'd go down maybe to the South Bay, not San Francisco, but beyond that. There was like an Aunt Jemima, and she had a restaurant, and also it was a dance pavilion, and she had great entertainment. So we'd go there. It was like a night club.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:06:32

Miles: And we'd go there, but we always went to beautiful places, the fellows I went with took me to beautiful restaurants, and the hotels.

Redman: How would you meet these people, through other friends, or—?

2-00:06:42

Miles: Through other friends.

Redman: So would you say by that point, you explained to me that you were young, and these new experiences you sort of rolled with it and just kind of went along with it? Was that the case then? You were going out and trying these new places and seeing these new people, and it was just kind of easy to—

2-00:07:06

Miles: Well, I guess because of my personality, because the people I met and the young men I would meet, it was wonderful, fantastic.

Redman: It was a good time. Tell me about having a little bit of money then, did that, I mean, growing up on the farm versus then, having a little bit of opportunity to go out and buy new clothes, you'd mentioned.

2-00:07:33
Miles: But there again, see that's two different ways. I was a child.

Redman: Yeah.

2-00:07:36
Miles: Now I'm a young lady.

Redman: Yeah.

2-00:07:40
Miles: So that would not interfere in that at all.

Redman: So you were living a new life.

2-00:07:46
Miles: Well, my life was getting— I was becoming myself. I was becoming an individual, and so as an individual, life was just giving me opportunities.

Redman: Now along that regard, let's talk about— I asked you if you were happy at work and with your pay and salary, and you said that everything was great until these gentlemen from New York purchased the company.

2-00:08:18
Miles: So they came in, and they were totally, we have to keep you busy, and we're needing some quarter inch screws, so we're going to ask you to take half inch screws and saw them into quarter inch screws. Well, already they held up all the men one half day because the half inch screws had not come in from New York. I remembered that, and I heard the rumblings among the men that they were wondering if they were going to get their half inch screws that day. So they bring in the vise, and, of course, I'm a lady. I don't work with those things, a saw and a tin can pail.

Redman: Sounding absolutely medieval by the way you're describing it.

2-00:09:25
Miles: Well, here's a saw that I had to stand up over here to put in the screw. Then I had to take this vice and wind it to get the vise to close in on the screw. So then I took my saw gain and came over here and the screw would move. So then I had to take the whole thing apart again and go through the whole process to tighten it some more. Well, it took me three or four times each time to put that screw in. Then when you'd go up with the saw, ohhhhh, it's just like taking your hands and scratching downs the blackboard.

Redman: So you didn't like the sound of it or anything.

2-00:10:03
Miles: Also this whole building was all galvanized, you know that type of metal that goes up and down.

Redman: Okay, sure.

2-00:10:11

Miles: What do you call that?

Redman: Sheet metal?

John Miles: Corrugated.

Redman: Corrugated metal?

John Miles: Yeah.

2-00:10:15

Miles: Whatever it is. The whole roof was made of that. I think the walls were the same. The reason I remember this is because when I finally succeeded on the fourth time, that quarter inch screw would fell in the pail and went PINGGGG throughout the building.

Redman: This made it terrible to—

2-00:10:37

Miles: Oh, it was awful because it reverberated against all that metal. Well, I got to the third, and the fourth, screw, and I thought, “this can’t go on” because I saw that quarter inch screw, and I thought, “it’s good for nothing, it’s for throwing away,” and I saw this horrible looking thing in my hand that had pieces of metal flying in the wind that didn’t saw through. Or the screw fell off before being completely sawed off, just like a branch on a tree after falling off. They couldn’t use that one either.

Redman: Right.

2-00:11:09

Miles: I thought, “This is an absolute waste, just an absolute waste. And these boys are giving up their life waiting for these boats.” When I got to about the fifth screw, “I had to go in and tell them, ‘I just can’t do this. I cannot do it any more.’” This is not fair. It’s just not fair. I don’t remember how I told them, but they must have given me an ultimatum of some kind because I said, “I will work until tonight, but I’m not returning tomorrow.” That was it.

So I get, oh, I get home. Prior to all of this, my brother-in-law had always thrown the newspaper in front of me. This day, in big black letters across the newspaper, it said “Manpower Commission.” Well, when you saw Manpower Commission, you read the rest of the story. Some man had walked off on his job or something, and he went to jail. So when I got home that night my brother-in-law says, “Oh oh, the Manpower Commission is coming after you.” [laughter of man in background] [Miles laughs too.] He’s laughing because he knows how my brother-in-law used to tease me.

Redman: So he was pulling your leg pretty hard there.

2-00:12:35

Miles: Oh, of course. But then on another occasion he said, "You know when I married your sister, I never thought I'd marry into a family that would have a jailbird.

Redman: So he then would tease you that you were some sort of criminal.

2-00:12:51

Miles: Right.

Redman: Oh, that's funny.

2-00:12:53

Miles: Well, anyway, I went home.

Redman: Do you recall, was this '44, '45?

2-00:12:59

Miles: I only worked there I think about six months.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:13:03

Miles: I don't think it was much longer than that.

Redman: All right.

2-00:13:04

Miles: It might have been eight. But it wasn't a full year. So he said "You're going to hear from the Manpower Commission." That was horrible. I thought I did the right thing. I know I did the right thing, and I didn't walk off the job. I told them why I was leaving. If they want to readjust what I was doing, I would have stayed on. Anyway, first thing you know here comes this letter, and it had a particularly kind of look, I guess it was the return address. Manpower Commission.

Redman: So your worst fear is you thought were coming to fruition.

2-00:13:48

Miles: Oh, it was awful.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:13:50

Miles: I might as well have been going to jail, I wouldn't have felt any worse. Here am I, a girl that was trained to be a lady and to never do anything wrong. Suddenly I'm what you call abandoned or something.

Redman: Right.

2-00:14:11
Miles: So I opened the letter, and I had to give testimony—

Redman: Testimony?

2-00:14:16
Miles: Is that what they call it?

Redman: Sure.

2-00:14:20
Miles: So I did.

Redman: So do you recall where the Manpower Commission offices were? Or did you write it, or did you go and see someone about this, or—

2-00:14:29
Miles: Oh, they must have reported me.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:14:33
Miles: I didn't do anything about it. I just dreaded to hear the words.

Redman: So when you got this letter, so then did you write your testimony, or did you go—?

2-00:14:42
Miles: I evidently called them.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:14:44
Miles: Or wrote to them. I don't know what I did.

Redman: And what did you tell them? You sort of recounted the story and—

2-00:14:51
Miles: Well, at that point they set up a date for the trial.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:14:58
Miles: So I appeared for the day of the trial, and I wore my prettiest Lilli Ann suit. It looked beautiful, and high heels, and I thought well, maybe if I'm pretty enough maybe they'll have a little more sympathy.

Redman: You must have looked like a criminal, huh?

2-00:15:16

Miles: [laughs]

Redman: Not really.

2-00:15:17

Miles: Well, I walked into the room, and I have never seen a table as beautiful as this. It was about four inch thick mahogany, and I would say it was a five maybe by eight or ten foot table. There were three on that side, three on this side, two on the end, two here. Everyone had a book one half inch thick, a little booklet at all the places except mine. So when the men walked in, they all walked in very somberly, all sat down, and then I was asked to walk in. I sat there curling my toes and just, oh, suffering. When a man would be looking at me as I happened to look up, he would immediately look the other way. I thought, "Why don't they look at me? Are they going to hang me or something?" I didn't want to think they didn't want to be responsible for hanging a girl? It was all horrible. Then finally the two men at the end came in. One was very, very impressive. This man sat down beside me and said hello. He said we just had to wait for the secretary. So we did. It was a hundred years.

Redman: It felt like forever.

2-00:16:59

Miles: Finally the man at the end directly across from me said, "Well, we're ready to begin, young lady. The man next to you is your attorney." And he said, "All the rest of you men can follow this case by opening your books." So they went to all the expense, I guess they took my testimony and whatever the opposition had to say. What all they said, I don't know. But it was in all of those thick books.

Redman: Interesting.

2-00:17:41

Miles: Well, anyway, he said, "Young lady, go ahead and tell us why you're here." So I went ahead and told them what I told you about the half inch screws and feeling sad for the boys having to wait for this. To me it was a waste of material. After listening to me, he put his hands together, put his head down, then put his head up, and said, "I think this girl is to be commended." He said, "I think she was very brave and in what she did, I think she is to be commended." He turned his head to all the men and said, "How do you men feel?" They all said, "Same."

Redman: Wow.

2-00:18:28

Miles: Then he said, "Young lady, you're free."

Redman: So they didn't put you in any sort of orange jumpsuit or striped jail jumpsuit.

2-00:18:39

Miles: They praised me.

Redman: That's fantastic. Okay. So it must have been a huge relief off of your shoulders.

2-00:18:50

Miles: I just felt as though I was nothing. I was carrying such a load, and I just knew I was doomed. I felt like this terrible person in the family that had done the wrong thing, but how could it be wrong when it was right?

Redman: Um hm.

2-00:19:03

Miles: I did it because it was right.

Redman: So it was pretty easy to give your testimony and eventually to say I thought I was doing the right thing here and taking the right action.

2-00:19:14

Miles: Right, exactly, and that's the way they took it. Anyhow, when I walked out, I couldn't feel anything, I think I felt like a feather.

Redman: Just kind of floated out. Yeah. So tell me about did people working at the shipyards, or did you yourself when working at the shipyard, do you think most people were signing up for steady work, or do you think they were signing up because they felt like they had a patriotic duty to help out, or do you think it was a little bit of both?

2-00:19:46

Miles: I'd say it was a little bit of both because there was not much, there was a lot of unemployment, and so I think a lot of men went to this, and the pay was good. The pay was very good.

Redman: Certainly you were happy to have a job and good pay and steady work.

2-00:20:09

Miles: Right. I had another job, but I didn't want to work from nine to nine. I thought that since my brother-in-law said, "Try it." I said, "Shipyards?" I couldn't see myself connected with a shipyard. So he said, "Well, there are other jobs you could do. They have all sorts of other things, go try it and see what they have. The pay is good." "Okay."

Redman: Tell me about then since it was a little bit of both, the pay and the steady work and also the patriotic feeling. Did you feel like you were contributing to the war effort working at the shipyards?

2-00:20:50

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: Tell me a little bit about that.

2-00:20:52

Miles: Well, the reason I felt that way is because I saw those two gals that I became fairly close to and discussed things with the women— I saw them going by, and heard them talking, saying they felt pretty good, felt that they were helping the boys.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:21:17

Miles: That was the remark, “We’re helping the boys.”

Redman: So that was something that was always sort of in the back of your minds, even if you weren’t talking about it all the time, or do you think people talked about it a lot?

2-00:21:26

Miles: It was commented quite often. Like one girl was telling about how she was riveting upside down, and all that stuff falling back, but she said, “I’m doing it for the boys.”

Redman: Okay.

2-00:21:40

Miles: That remark would come up in various ways after— whatever, for good or for bad, whatever happened.

Redman: Now another thing that we’d mentioned earlier was following the bombing of Pearl Harbor some of the anger at the Japanese.

2-00:22:00

Miles: There was a lot of that.

Redman: So then particularly along the West Coast, we had internment of the Japanese. Do you remember hearing about any of that in this area at the time, or—

2-00:22:14

Miles: Yes, of course. Before one of the men left the shipyard, he said, “Irene, if and when you leave here, look me up. “I have a salon, and I’d like you to be a part of it.” So, when I left I called him, and I got a job over there. I got back into hairstyling, cutting, permanents and all that goes with it.

One of my customers came in one morning and said this had happened to her and another friend. I don’t remember all the details, but she had a Japanese maid. This maid came to her one morning and hadn’t done the laundry and something else that she usually did. My customer, whose name I’ll remember until the day I die, she was such a lovely lady, asked, “How come the laundry isn’t done?” The Japanese girl left, and then returned with the basket of

unwashed and threw it on the floor in front of this lovely woman. She said, “You’ll be doing this for me pretty soon.” So that raised a little bit of animosity toward the Japanese people. It happened to the other women. I would say I’d heard it from maybe one or two others, but I don’t remember their stories. This lady and I had a lot of close conversations, and I think that’s why I remember hers.

Redman: So there was some negative feeling and some anger you think going both ways at the time?

2-00:24:05

Miles: Right.

Redman: Okay, interesting. So you did hear a little bit about internment then, that the Japanese had been brought to camps from this area, or what?

2-00:24:15

Miles: I don’t think I remember— Oh, yes, I did hear of some things. This one Japanese man had a large horticultural area, and he was just taken away. They didn’t ask questions, didn’t leave him there to clear up his finances or put somebody else in to take care of things while he was gone. I heard about that.

Redman: Did you feel that it was necessary, or did you feel, did you have some mixed feelings about that at the time, or did it not really bother you, or how did you feel about that?

2-00:24:52

Miles: Well, no matter what goes on, innocent people even though they’re the same nationality of the people who did the harm, they didn’t do it. So they should be treated with respect. Everybody should be treated with respect. Of course, that’s the way I would feel, I didn’t think it was right to do that to that Japanese man because the Japanese had done what they did. That doesn’t necessarily mean that he did wrong.

Redman: Right.

2-00:25:21

Miles: But then, there again, there was one woman— [telephone rings]

2-00:25:36

Miles: This other friend of mine worked with a Japanese woman who told her, “You people were wondering why we Japanese people were going around with their cameras and photographing everything.” All Japanese had cameras, and wherever they went, they photographed and photographed and photographed. Of course, the American people were wondering why that was. This conversation came up in the office, and the Japanese lady said “You folks thought we were spying on you.” Well, some of us were. Oh, that was when they were giving \$25,000 to every Japanese that had been interned.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:26:29

Miles: That was about twenty years ago.

Redman: Yeah, in the eighties, right. Okay, interesting. So all right, a few more questions. I want to talk about food for a minute. I've been told a lot of about rationing.

2-00:26:51

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: Canning, victory gardens and refrigeration lockers. Do you have any wartime memories of these things?

2-00:26:58

Miles: Oh, yes. Mother was very, very careful how to work the coupons so that we could have enough meat. Then you couldn't get butter. You had to get this white stuff, margarine, and a pill that you broke to make it yellow, like butter.

Redman: Do you know what? I've heard another coincidence. Today is the sixty-eighth anniversary, today, is the sixty-eighth anniversary of the start of rationing in 1943.

2-00:27:32

Miles: Of the start of rationing?

Redman: Yeah, today. Today is the anniversary.

2-00:27:34

Miles: January 18. No kidding?

Redman: Yeah, so meat in particular you remember, and I've heard from a lot of people about the margarine, and that it didn't taste very good.

2-00:27:48

Miles: Well, it didn't taste like butter.

Redman: I've also heard that pies, people had to cut down on sugar.

2-00:27:57

Miles: Oh, sugar was one of the rationed products.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:28:00

Miles: I don't know how much we were allowed. When you had this coupon, that's what was allotted to you.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:28:11
Miles: I think that was for the month.

Redman: Your mother would take care of that.

2-00:28:14
Miles: Right.

Redman: So she would go shopping.

2-00:28:18
Miles: Right.

Redman: Did she do other work while she was in Oakland with you?

2-00:28:24
Miles: Yes, she was in upholstery. She sewed slip covers.

Redman: So she worked during the day as well.

2-00:28:32
Miles: Right at home.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:28:34
Miles: They brought the work to her.

Redman: So did you guys, I know you did canning back in Montana and South Dakota, but did you do any canning, okay, and victory gardens, maybe not in such an urban area.

2-00:28:53
Miles: Well, we lived in an apartment.

Redman: Okay, yeah. Now what about refrigeration lockers? Did you know anyone who had a refrigeration locker?

2-00:29:00
Miles: The name kind of conjured my having heard the word, but we were not connected with that.

Redman: I had just heard and read somewhere that a lot of people in the Bay Area would keep their meat and then put it in a refrigeration locker to preserve it for later on, but—

2-00:29:22
Miles: Gee, I don't know because they would never get enough to refrigerate.

Redman: How about, there was a disaster in the Bay Area around, the second half of the war at Port Chicago?

2-00:29:34

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: Do you recall this event? What do you recall about that?

2-00:29:38

Miles: I just recall that there was a big explosion and a lot of men were killed. I thought what a horrible way to die, and then I don't know if I knew that it was all Negroes that were involved. I think I knew, but had forgotten about it, and later I heard about it, so maybe I felt real bad because they were the ones that were all involved, to work so hard and then to die so violently.

Redman: Do you remember the actual explosion, because I've been told by some people that they could hear it as far away as Berkeley and Oakland.

2-00:30:31

Miles: Yes, I vaguely remember hearing it.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:30:33

Miles: But I can't say I, oh oh. [accidentally touches microphone]

Redman: No, that's fine, don't worry.

2-00:30:35

Miles: I can't say yes I did, but in the back of my mind, I think we did hear the explosion, but didn't know what it was until we read it in the paper.

Redman: Okay. Yeah, I've also been told by some people that they went and turned on the radio immediately, but didn't hear about it until maybe a few days later.

2-00:30:57

Miles: I wouldn't have had a radio then.

Redman: Okay. All right. So I want to show you an image of just the Rosie the Riveter poster. The "We can do it," the Rosie the Riveter poster.

2-00:31:13

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: I want to ask you, you're obviously familiar with this poster.

2-00:31:18

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: What are some of the things that it makes you think of, or sort of reflecting on this experience of working in the shipyards?

2-00:31:28

Miles: Well, this is the very thing, I didn't want to go to work in the shipyards and get muscles like a man.

Redman: So that maybe didn't appeal to you.

2-00:31:38

Miles: No.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:31:40

Miles: No. I wanted to be a lady. I wanted to be a girl.

Redman: But were you inspired by the idea of contributing to the war effort and that sort of notion?

2-00:31:51

Miles: Oh, yes.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:31:53

Miles: I wanted to do what I could do.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:31:56

Miles: But I didn't want to do, I didn't want to be a what you call it, a riveter.

Redman: So you knew some people who enjoyed that, but that wasn't—

2-00:32:07

Miles: Evidently, but that would have made me kind of sad.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:32:13

Miles: I'll do some things, but I don't want to do riveting. It seemed unladylike. It just, there were plenty of other things I could to help without having to rivet, work with a drill and a rivet.

Redman: Right. So let's talk about the end of the war. I can just take that. So at the end of the war a couple of major events happened obviously, there's the dropping of the atomic bombs.

2-00:32:44

Miles: Oh, yeah.

Redman: I'm sure you recall hearing about that at the time, but then also a lot of people who you may have worked with at the shipyards; obviously you had moved on by this point.

2-00:32:55

Miles: Oh, yes, I was out of there.

Redman: But a lot of friends then maybe lost their jobs in defense or shipbuilding, and I wanted to ask about those two things. The end of the war and the dropping of the bomb, and then people maybe losing their jobs in defense in the area.

2-00:33:14

Miles: The only thing that I recall on that is when I went to work for Mr. Sutter, the salon owner. I said, "How is everything at the shipyard?" He said, "Oh, they left, they're gone." He said "Right after your situation, nobody heard from them. Nobody knows what happened."

Redman: So they just shut down the—

2-00:33:38

Miles: Well, as I say in my letter, could it be they were told to leave?

Redman: Oh, interesting.

2-00:33:45

Miles: Mr. Sutter continued to carry on conversations with some of the men at the shipyards. Evidently they don't know why the New York group left.

Redman: But you got the impression while you were there that they didn't have enough material, that the men didn't have enough material to even continue their projects, right?

2-00:34:11

Miles: They were waiting for their shipment from New York. They definitely were waiting one whole morning, at least a couple of hours that morning because I can remember their walking around and by the time they came in, then they were able to go on the ship. Then I remembered hearing them on a couple of occasions say, "I wonder if our equipment is going to come in time today."

Redman: Right.

2-00:34:37

Miles: So they were concerned about getting the equipment in.

Redman: So they had problems.

2-00:34:40
Miles: Yeah.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:34:44
Miles: I don't know if it was due to shipments, or maybe lack of materials to make whatever they were waiting for, that I don't know.

Redman: Okay, but there were major organizational problems.

2-00:34:56
Miles: Right.

Redman: So then tell me a little bit about the dropping of the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

2-00:35:06
Miles: That was not so much of a surprise to me because one of my customers told me, "My son told me that they have something that will wipe out a whole city at a time."

Redman: Really, before the dropping of the bombs you heard that.

2-00:35:25
Miles: Before the dropping of the bomb. Those are not the actual words, but it was regarding obliterating a large area. So when it fell I thought I bet you that's what he was talking about.

Redman: Do you know how her son was connected to the—

2-00:35:45
Miles: I think he was working, doing some work with it.

Redman: Okay, some work with the development of the atomic bomb.

2-00:35:57
Miles: Oh, she did say he said, "However, Mom, this is not to be discussed with anyone."

Redman: But she trusted her hairstylist enough to—

2-00:36:08
Miles: A secret that is known, let's see, the phrase that goes, "A secret is known," I forgot, "not just by one."

Redman: Right, yeah. So, well, I'm sure as a hairstylist you're sort of a counselor and mentor and a friend and all of those things that—

2-00:36:26

Miles: You hear many stories.

Redman: Many stories. So just to conclude I want to ask just about your life after the war, at the end of the war. How did your life change, and how did you meet your husband, and—

2-00:36:41

Miles: Well—

Redman: I know that's a big chunk of time to ask about, but I'm just curious what the end of the war brought on.

2-00:36:41

Miles: I was going out, quite a few fellows. I'd meet them somehow; I don't know how I met them all, now that you're asking me. But I met them legitimately. In other words, somebody introduced them, called up on the telephone and said, "Hey, I met you the other night. How about going to dinner?" That type of thing. Anyway, on this particular occasion I knew the host, and there was a group who associated together. I was invited to be with them at one of his parties. He asked if I was involved with anyone.

Redman: Do you know what year this was, about, approximately?

2-00:37:37

Miles: Let's see, I was married in '47. This would have been maybe early '46.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:37:45

Miles: Before the group arrived, the host came to me and said, "Oh, by the way, I know a person, he's an intellectual. In fact, he's a chemist by profession." And he said, "I think that you would never tire of him." I went with a boy maybe three times, and I couldn't stand him any more.

Redman: You'd get bored.

2-00:38:19

Miles: Occasionally, I'd come home telling Mother would say, I'd come home, I'd say, "Mother, I saw someone and, oh, if I ever have a date with him, I'd be the happiest girl in the world." Sure enough, I'd get a call from him. So when I'd come home from my date Mother would say, "How was he?" I'd say, "He was fantastic. Wonderful." The second time I went with him, she'd say, "How is he?" Oh, I'd say, "He'll do." The third time I'd go with him, she'd say, "How is he?" because she knew what my answer would be. I'd say, "I never want to see him again, ever." I guess Casey knew this, and that's why he said "I don't think you'll tire of this man." Well, I went with him. I eventually married him.

Redman: So it worked.

2-00:39:19

Miles: No, it didn't work. He was a very wonderful person, but he liked alcohol, and he became very, very verbally very un-nice.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:39:37

Miles: I guess one would say he was a schizo. So that was sad, but he's made up for it.

Redman: How did you meet your current husband?

2-00:39:53

Miles: Well, we worked for the same company, what is it, fifty years ago, sixty years ago. Then I left after ten years.

Redman: So what company was this?

2-00:40:02

Miles: That was the Borden Company.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:40:05

Miles: That was milk and ice cream.

Redman: When was this?

2-00:40:07

Miles: That was in '55, '55 to '65.

Redman: Okay.

2-00:40:14

Miles: So then, oh, the company no longer made ice cream and milk, so they asked me to go to the cheese division, which would have been in San Francisco.

Redman: All right.

2-00:40:30

Miles: If I'd gone there, I'd have had to go through three different forms of transportation, morning and night.

Redman: So, car, bus and ferry?

2-00:40:41

Miles: It was the A train, and then there was the bus. It would have been two busses and then the A train, and I didn't want to go through all that. So I went out and looked for a job on my own. But every time there was a funeral, the sales department would notify me, and I'd get to see everyone in Sales and

Refrigeration. But people don't die every day, maybe one three or four, five years, so all of sudden I don't get to see any of the Borden Company for several years. One day while taking my daily walk down Solano Avenue, Berkeley (I lived in Berkeley), I heard somebody say, "What are you doing down here?" I looked up and there was John, and I said, "I happen to live here if you remember. What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I happen to still be working." Then, that's history.

Redman: The rest is history.

2-00:41:51

Miles: Right.

Redman: That's so funny. So you were living in Berkeley.

2-00:41:59

Miles: I lived in the Thousand Oaks district.

Redman: Great. Well, I'd like to ask just one final question. If you could reflect on the Second World War and your work at the shipyards and moving, and all of the things that we have talked about today, I know we've covered a lot of ground. But are there any sorts of things that you'd like to tell me or things this made you think of? Or what sort of memories stand out in your mind most, or—

2-00:42:35

Miles: Well, I don't know how to handle this other than each thing as a child, as a teenager, and as a young woman, and the different episodes of life that you undergo and you adjust to, really makes you grow up. But then you also realize at the end, ninety-two years in March, I look back and it just seems as though the time was so short. Where did it all go? But it was a beautiful trip.

Redman: Well, I'd like to say thank you for sitting down with me today. This was really wonderful.

2-00:43:23

Miles: Well, I'm glad to hear that.

Redman: Great, thank you.

2-00:43:28

Miles: I'm glad to hear that.

[End of Interview]