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Virginia Miller

Rosie the Riveter

World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Travis Thompson
in 2012

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Virginia Miller

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Interview 1: April 5, 2012
Begin Audio File 1

Thompson: This is Travis Thompson. I'm speaking with Virginia Miller in Oakland, California, April 5, 2012, interview one, tape one, for the Rosie the Riveter National Home Front Oral History Project. Thank you very much for participating. I'm really looking forward to talking with you this afternoon. Just to get started, can you please tell me your full name, and date of birth, and if you would please give the correct spelling of your first and last name.

`1-00:00:41

Miller: Virginia Laurel Miller, and it is spelled V-I-R-G-I-N-I-A, M-I-L-L-E-R.

Thompson: And where were you born?

`1-00:01:00

Miller: I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Thompson: What is your father's name?

`1-00:01:06

Miller: Charles.

Thompson: Can you give his full name?

`1-00:01:09

Miller: Charles John Piper.

Thompson: Do you by chance know your father's date of birth?

`1-00:01:18

Miller: July 31, 1883.

Thompson: Do you know where your father was born?

`1-00:01:30

Miller: In Wisconsin.

Thompson: Did he grow up in Wisconsin, or did he grow up elsewhere?

`1-00:01:39

Miller: No, he grew up in Wisconsin. A little town called Cameron.

Thompson: Cameron, Wisconsin.

`1-00:01:45

Miller: Uh huh.

Thompson: Can you provide any additional insight into your father's life, and maybe some more about his background.

`1-00:01:56

Miller: Well, let's see. He was in the railroad business, in that it was soliciting freight and things like that; he wasn't working on the trains. He finished eighth grade but never went beyond that, but had beautiful, beautiful handwriting, liked to read and was a very likeable person. very relaxed and lots of fun to be with.

Thompson: That's great. Is there any particular memory that you have about your father that you'd like to share?

`1-00:02:43

Miller: Well, I'd liked to sit on his lap and have him tell me crazy stories that he made up.

Thompson: Do you remember any of those stories?

`1-00:02:50

Miller: No. [laughs]

Thompson: And how about your mother? What is your mother's name?

`1-00:03:00

Miller: Laura Lavinia, if you want her middle name—L-A-V-I-N-I-A. Bachman was her maiden name. No relation to Michelle Bachman [the politician]. Then Piper is the last name—P-I-P-E-R. The German spelling is P-E-I, but my dad dropped that and went to the English spelling.

Thompson: I see, and do you by chance know your mother's date of birth?

`1-00:03:38

Miller: August 11, 1893. They were exactly ten years apart.

Thompson: And where was your mother born?

`1-00:03:54

Miller: She was born in Minnesota.

Thompson: Do you know whereabouts?

`1-00:04:01

Miller: Well, let me think. Young America, she was born in Young America, which is a little-bitty town outside of Minneapolis.

Thompson: Is that where she spent the majority of her childhood, and she grew up there?

`1-00:04:18

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: Like your father, is there any additional insight or background about your mother that you'd like to share?

`1-00:04:28

Miller: Well, she went to normal school as many, many, many young women did in those days to prepare to be a teacher.

Thompson: Normal school?

`1-00:04:38

Miller: They called them normal schools. They were state colleges, but they were all called normal school for some reason or the other.

Thompson: So your mother went through her college years as well?

`1-00:04:49

Miller: Yes, she got her teaching certificate. Then she taught in Virginia, Minnesota, and that's why I was named Virginia, because my parents had me there. My dad was working for the railroad there, and she went there as a teacher, so they decided to name me Virginia. [laughs]

Thompson: Do you know the story—that's such a great story—do you know the story about how they met?

`1-00:05:20

Miller: I'm not sure. I remember she told me once that their first date was going to church.

Thompson: So they met in the church?

`1-00:05:29

Miller: Well, I don't know if it was in the church. I think he asked her to go to church. Or maybe she needed him into going to church, but that was their first date, she said. That is all I know. They were introduced by friends, I know that.

Thompson: By friends?

`1-00:05:50

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: How about siblings? Do you have any siblings, and if so could you give their names and their ages?

`1-00:05:58

Miller: I have—well, they are both deceased. My oldest brother was Charles Piper, Jr. Then there was a baby born after Charles—although we called him Chuck—that died about four weeks after he was born. So then I came along, and then my little brother is—I still call him my little brother—Edward Herman Piper, named after his two grandfathers.

Thompson: Do you know about how your—would have been older brother—passed away at four weeks? Do you know how he died?

`1-00:06:52

Miller: Well they always said it was spinal meningitis.

Thompson: Do you remember—well, you wouldn't have been born then, so—

`1-00:07:04

Miller: No. [laughs] I don't remember it at all.

Thompson: My apologies, and we kind of touched on it, but where did you grow up as a child?

`1-00:07:17

Miller: Well, I lived in Minneapolis until I was eleven. Then we moved to Kansas City for two years. Then my dad was transferred out to San Francisco, and we lived in Oakland.

Thompson: Do you remember what your father did to be transferred out to San Francisco?

`1-00:07:38

Miller: Well, he worked in an office, and he was the general freight agent of the Canadian National Railway—is what his title was, I guess.

Thompson: So it was still in the railroad?

`1-00:07:57

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: Can you tell me a little bit more about your childhood, and what that experience was like, maybe any possible memories that you have?

`1-00:08:10

Miller: Well, I have a lot of memories. [laughs] So what area are you interested in?

Thompson: I would say up to the point of elementary school, and then we'll go ahead and talk about elementary school as well.

`1-00:08:20

Miller: Up to elementary school. Well let's see. We moved once, I remember, and during that time my little brother was born. I can't remember too much about it. I remember I always loved dolls and liked to play outside. Of course, Minneapolis is quite hot in the summer, so we played outside a lot and went swimming down at the nearby lake. I just really had a good time. I have good memories of my childhood.

Thompson: Is there any particular memory that stands out that you really remember?

`1-00:09:08

Miller: I can't think of anything; it all kind of blends together when you get old. [laughs] I remember more after—as I say I started school and then—

Thompson: Like most people.

`1-00:09:26

Miller: Yeah, right.

Thompson: So kind of a fun subject, what was normally served for breakfast, lunch and dinner as a child?

`1-00:09:39

Miller: Oh my. Well, my mother always made sure we had a good healthy meal. I had to eat all my vegetables, and that's why I enjoy Lake Park because I can decide that I'm not going to eat vegetables if I don't want them. [laughs] But we usually had hot cereal.

Thompson: For breakfast?

`1-00:10:02

Miller: For breakfast.

Thompson: Do you remember any names of the cereals?

`1-00:10:04

Miller: Well, oatmeal and cream of wheat and things like that. We weren't into bacon and eggs or all that on weekdays. On Sundays we always had pastries, which was a real treat for us because this was during the Depression. So, my mother would go and buy those. One food I do remember is White Castle hamburgers. Now if you lived in the Midwest you knew what White Castle hamburgers were.

Thompson: The small hamburgers?

`1-00:10:48

Miller: Little bitty hamburgers in little white boxes. On Sunday morning they would have a coupon in the paper, not always, and we'd run to see if that coupon was in there because you get six hamburgers for twenty-five cents or maybe fifty cents. My folks would get two orders of them. That was a real, real treat, eating those White Castle hamburgers.

Thompson: I bet.

`1-00:11:19

Miller: Yeah, that was good.

Thompson: So that would have been on the weekends?

`1-00:11:23

Miller: Yes, this would be on the weekends. That would be Sunday night and we'd have those.

Thompson: What was for a normal lunch? How many meals would you eat during the day, but what was a normal lunch for you?

`1-00:11:36

Miller: A normal lunch would be a sandwich.

Thompson: What type of sandwich?

`1-00:11:42

Miller: Well probably peanut butter at that age—[laughs]—tuna.

Thompson: Did they have jelly?

`1-00:11:51

Miller: Peanut butter and jelly really wasn't known that much when I was really little. That came in later.

Thompson: So a peanut butter sandwich would have been a nice lunch?

`1-00:12:02

Miller: A plain peanut butter, but what I really liked was peanut butter with mayonnaise and lettuce on it. And that was a good sandwich.

Thompson: Are there any other foods that you might have eaten for lunch?

`1-00:12:18

Miller: Maybe soup. We had very simple meals. A glass of milk and—

Thompson: How about dinner?

`1-00:12:32

Miller: Dinner. My mother was of German descent, so she fixed German dishes many times. But always well balanced and good. She wasn't a fancy cook that you see nowadays, but she was a very good cook. Everything was very tasty.

Thompson: Can you give me an example of a dish she might have cooked?

`1-00:12:56

Miller: Well, meatloaf. That was good, Swiss steak. Of course, then we only had turkey once a year, or twice a year. Thanksgiving and Christmas, and that was it. You did see turkey again in soup and hash, and the dressing was always good.

Thompson: Now, kind of a more specific question, how did you get your food, and did that change as you became older?

`1-00:13:30

Miller: How did I get it?

Thompson: How did your family get the food that they ate when you were younger?

`1-00:13:35

Miller: Well, they bought it. [laughs] At the grocery store.

Thompson: Now, was that close to your home, or did you have to travel some ways?

`1-00:13:45

Miller: No, they had to drive to it. We were never that close to a grocery store that they could walk.

Thompson: Now did the grocery store have everything inside of it like today's grocery stores?

`1-00:14:03

Miller: No.

Thompson: No, just food?

`1-00:14:06

Miller: Yeah, just food really, and a butcher in the back. Usually, there was always a butcher; you didn't have packaged meats.

Thompson: I see, so all of your meats were fresh from the butcher?

`1-00:14:18

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: And your vegetables, they were all fresh as well?

`1-00:14:24

Miller: No, because we didn't have access to that. At my grandmother's house in Young America there we would have fresh vegetables because she had a big garden, but we didn't have one at home.

Thompson: So did your family eat a lot of canned vegetables?

`1-00:14:40

Miller: Yeah. That's what you got. [laughs] Beans and peas and beets and things like that.

Thompson: So Young America, was that a more rural area or no?

`1-00:14:55

Miller: Oh yeah. It was a farm area.

Thompson: So you would have more fresh vegetables there.

`1-00:15:00

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: And in Minneapolis you would have more canned vegetables.

`1-00:15:03

Miller: Yeah, and in the winter time of course you weren't getting the fresh vegetables anymore. I remember at Christmas we'd get an orange, and maybe an—well, mostly it was an orange because it was a real, real treat in our stocking. And some nuts to crack open and stuff. But that orange was really special, and you put off eating it as long as you could.

Thompson: So to have a piece of fruit during the winter was something to be treasured?

`1-00:15:39

Miller: Yeah. We didn't have a lot of other things in our stocking; we got other gifts, but there was always an orange.

Thompson: Are there any other particular food memories that you have as a child that you would like to share?

`1-00:15:57

Miller: I can remember what I didn't like. [laughs]

Thompson: Yeah, why don't you talk about that?

`1-00:16:01

Miller: I didn't like broccoli. Still don't. Cauliflower. One thing that my mother loved to cook, and I hated it, was rutabagas. I don't think we even see rutabagas anymore, out here. But on Thanksgiving—she always had rutabagas on Thanksgiving and I always had to take at least one bite. Then I could go on—that's the limit I put on myself; I had to have one bite. I ate that first to get it out of the way, hold my nose real tight so I couldn't taste it.

Thompson: The one bite.

`1-00:16:53

Miller: Yeah, the one bite. Then I'd go on with the rest of the meal, happily.

Thompson: So another fun question, can you describe what you might have worn, or what your attire might have been like as a child?

`1-00:17:11

Miller: Well, in winter I had long underwear and then long stockings over that, and it was kind of a procedure we went through. We wore long underwear and long stockings. Then as spring came, the first thing we'd give up would be the long underwear. Then the next thing would be—I could roll my stockings to my knees to make knee socks out of them. Then the next step would be to go down to ankle socks. Then when fall came on we'd start back up again. Well,

we had ankle socks, mostly bare feet in the summer. Then we'd come back to the knee socks, then we'd get back to the long stockings, then we'd get back to the long underwear, and that was the ritual we went through every year.

Thompson: Now, were these all pants, or were there times for dresses as well?

`1-00:18:16

Miller: Oh, yeah. In the summer we'd wear pants to play in. Or shorts; we wore shorts and long pants. But we always wore dresses, and the boys sometimes wore ties to school.

Thompson: Now how did you get your clothing? How did your family get their clothing when you were younger?

`1-00:18:40

Miller: They just bought it. My mother didn't really sew. As I got older she did do some sewing for me, but as a youngster I got them as gifts because I had quite a few aunts who liked to pick out things like that.

Thompson: How would they buy the clothing? Did they go to a department store?

`1-00:19:06

Miller: Oh yeah, department store.

Thompson: Any catalog ordering ever?

`1-00:19:10

Miller: Oh yes, Sears came out about that time. So people did order from the catalog. I don't remember my mother ever ordering anything from the Sears catalog.

Thompson: A related topic, how did you wash your clothes? How often as well, and did that change when you grew older?

`1-00:19:38

Miller: No. My mother went by the ritual: wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday and clean on Wednesday, whatever the routine was. We were lucky. I remember we always had a washing machine. Now at my grandmother's we didn't have a washing machine. They scrubbed them. But at home we always had a washing machine. No dryer. But you hung stuff outside. Of course, there is nothing like the smell of clothes that have hung out in the sunshine. So that was always kind of a real treat. My mother would ask me to bring in the laundry, and I really liked doing it because it all smelled so good. In the winter, you hung it in the basement on clothes lines down there.

Thompson: So you always had a washing machine, that you can remember?

`1-00:20:50

Miller: Yeah, as far as I can remember.

Thompson: I want to talk a little bit more about what you just said. You said you used to wash clothes on Monday, iron on Tuesday—

`1-00:20:59

Miller: On Tuesday.

Thompson: Can you talk a little bit more about that? What other things did your family designate for certain days during the week?

`1-00:21:07

Miller: Well Friday my mother cleaned upstairs, and Saturday she cleaned downstairs. It depended on who was around. I had a job of dusting every Saturday morning before I could go out. I had to dust the downstairs, the living room and dining room, and for that I was paid a nickel. [laughs] Then I'd go out and spend it immediately. I was about five or six years old. At Friday she was at home, so the upstairs beds got changed—what we would call the upstairs jobs—the bathrooms would get cleaned.

Thompson: So washing—

`1-00:22:09

Miller: That was always on Monday.

Thompson: So Fridays were designated for cleaning, and Saturdays were as well.

`1-00:22:15

Miller: Yes, and baking was usually on Thursday.

Thompson: Why was it on Thursday?

`1-00:22:19

Miller: I don't know. [laughs] It was an empty day.

Thompson: So baking was definitely different from the idea of cooking.

`1-00:22:28

Miller: I think Wednesday was loose. She may have bridge on Wednesday.

Thompson: And how about Sunday? What was Sunday designated for?

`1-00:22:38

Miller: Sunday was go-to-church day, always.

Thompson: What type of church did you attend when you were younger?

`1-00:22:44

Miller: We started at a Congregational church, and then when we moved we went to a Presbyterian church which was just a block away. That was the church I was in when I joined as a member. Then we moved to Kansas City, and went back

to the Congregational Church. Of course I've been there ever since, and I'm the longest active member of the First Congregational Church of Berkeley.

Thompson: You are?

`1-00:23:21

Miller: Second longest. There is another woman who is first, and I'm second. In longevity.

Thompson: I look forward to asking you more about that. Do you have any fond memories of your church experiences as a child?

`1-00:23:41

Miller: Well, I remember going, and I really kind of enjoyed it. We had a minister, and just one event that I particularly remember is that the minister would tell a children story but he always tied it into a toy of some sort, or a prize. He would tell the story, and then put the object away, and then we never knew when it was going to come back again. If you could tell what the moral of the story was you got to get the prize. One time it was a doll, in a little cradle I think it was, and boy I kept saying that over and over in my mind, hoping for the day I would be able to repeat it. You stood up in church, and you gave the message, and then you got to have the prize.

Thompson: That's such a great story.

`1-00:24:50

Miller: Yeah, it was fun.

Thompson: So did you win it?

`1-00:24:52

Miller: I did. I got that doll. It probably cost twenty-five cents.

Thompson: Do they still do that now in the church?

`1-00:25:03

Miller: Oh I don't think so, no.

Thompson: I think that minister had something going, don't you?

`1-00:25:10

Miller: Yeah, I do.

Thompson: So another fun subject, what methods of transportation did you use as a child, and did that change over time?

`1-00:25:22

Miller: Well we had a car. An old Model-T or Model—one of the original Fords—I think there is a picture of it somewhere but it's a [phone rings] I think they called it a Model-T. So we always had that, and then the second car that I

remember was called an Oakland. I remember it had a green stripe around the side under the windows, and I loved to go out and wash the car, and think it looked like a Packard. Packards were my dream cars.

Thompson: So your family always had an automobile?

`1-00:26:20

Miller: They always had a car, yeah.

Thompson: Where did you attend elementary school, and can you describe some of your earliest elementary school experiences and memories?

`1-00:26:33

Miller: Well, yeah, I went to Margaret Fuller, which is no longer standing. It was a red brick school with two stories, which was quite exciting when you were involved in going up and down stairs; that made it a little more exciting. You reached that age where, "I'm in the upstairs." One of my vivid memories of grammar school is when I was in the second grade, I believe it was. We were to go to the blackboard and do some work, all of us; we were all lined up at the blackboards. The teacher said, "Now, the first one who talks is going to have their mouth tied up with a towel." Of course, who is the first one to talk but Virginia Piper? [laughs] So she said, "Who's talking?" I wasn't going to tell, but another girl decided she would tell on me. So I had to sit out in the hall with this towel pinned around my mouth, and then I had to go out to recess like that. Well, there were all these older kids. You can imagine how humiliating it was. Today it wouldn't be tolerated. But, in those days—I never did tell my mother. I was afraid of that one. [laughs]

Thompson: So you didn't tell your mom?

`1-00:28:12

Miller: No I didn't tell her. But that stayed with me all my life.

Thompson: So what grade were you done with elementary school?

`1-00:28:25

Miller: Well we moved to Kansas City, and Kansas City had a rather strange school system in that they had no eighth grade. So they did eighth grade work in the seventh grade, and seventh grade work in the sixth grade and so on. Well when I left Kansas City I was in the seventh grade, and then you went right to high school. They skipped the eighth grade, and you started high school at ninth grade. So I would say I went through the seventh grade, and I think I was thirteen, and then went on to—but I came out here and went to Claremont Junior High. But they had the seventh grade. I went into the seventh grade here.

Thompson: So you had two seventh grades?

`1-00:29:18

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: So you started junior high in California?

`1-00:29:21

Miller: I was one semester into it, I think.

Thompson: Do you remember anything about your junior high experience, or middle school experience?

`1-00:29:34

Miller: Well, I remember I enjoyed it. We learned—that is where I learned to sew. We had a cooking class. That was kind of fun. It was just a good time. At that point, I was talking with some kids one day, and we were talking about our names for some reason or the other, and I said, “Well in German my name is “peeper.” And one of the guys said, “Oh, Peeps!” From then on I was “Peeps” to my friends and some of the teachers even.

Thompson: So “Peeps” was your nickname then.

`1-00:30:20

Miller: “Peeps” was my nickname in junior high, yeah.

Thompson: How about high school? Where did you attend high school?

`1-00:30:27

Miller: University High School.

Thompson: Where was that?

`1-00:30:30

Miller: That was on—it’s still there—it’s redone. It’s on Martin Luther King Jr. Way now. That was Grove Street. It was under the auspices of the University of California as a matter of fact. It was kind of an experimental school, run by a husband and wife; they were professors. It was kind of progressive education, but by today’s standards I wouldn’t consider it extreme at all. But it was a wonderful school to go to. Almost all of the teachers were PhD’s, and you don’t usually see that at a high school level. It was just a fun place to be in school. I really enjoyed that, and I was really active. That’s where I really took off on activities.

Thompson: Yeah, can you explain that a little bit more, and talk about maybe the classes you took as well?

`1-00:31:45

Miller: Well we only had like six classes a day I think. It was just the usual: English, PE, math, a language—the beginning of a language, a science. What it was, they were really preparing you to go to Cal. They took you through the

process of writing a term paper, and boy that has stayed with me all my life. We had three drafts, and we wrote it out in long hand first. Of course, nowadays it would be computers. It was just invaluable when it came to college and everything.

Thompson: So this school was like a University of California, Berkeley Prep High School?

`1-00:32:48

Miller: It was kind of, yeah. The last name of the two professors was Jones. I got really involved in activities. I ended up as Girl's League president.

Thompson: And what was the Girl's League?

`1-00:33:23

Miller: The Girl's League was just an organization of all the girls in the school. [laughs] And we had events, and it was there that I learned how to plan events—lunches and parties of different kinds. It was fun. It was fun to do that.

Thompson: Now was it a public school, or a private school?

`1-00:33:44

Miller: No, it was a public school.

Thompson: So it was free of charge.

`1-00:33:47

Miller: Yeah, but we wore uniforms. We were asked to wear pleated black, or I guess they were navy blue, pleated skirts and white middie blouses, like a Navy blouse with a large collar. Or you could wear a different color middie blouse, but you had to wear a regulation skirt. Except on Friday, I think they gave us day off.

Thompson: What time did you start school and what time did you end, in high school?

`1-00:34:16

Miller: I don't remember what time I started. I remember we ended early. We ended ahead of Berkeley High because we would get out—we'd get out of our school, "Uni," which was about 3:00. Five after 3:00 I think it was as a matter of fact. Then we'd go out and get the street car on Grove Street, and go up and get off right by Berkeley High, then walk through Berkeley High because we had friends there, and meet them and visit with them, then walk up to University and Shattuck and catch the streetcar, and I would come back this way because I lived in Oakland. So I just kind of made a circle, but we would do that after school. Many, many days.

Thompson: So you took the streetcar to and from school?

`1-00:35:15

Miller:

Streetcar, yeah, and we had these wonderful little cards. They were like—well, I would call them like a credit card kind of, with holes that you punch. They cost a dollar, and you got twenty-nine rides for a dollar. But you had to bring a slip of paper from your school in order to get them, and you bought them at Hinks Department Store. They were great, but a lot of kids they wouldn't have any money with them, or they lost their card or run out or something. So we'd hand ours out—we'd go in first—hand ours out the back window, and then they'd take it and run around to the front and come in and use your card. [laughs]

Thompson:

So they would use your card; then they'd give it back to you when they got on the bus—

`1-00:36:14

Miller:

Oh yes. So that was kind of unique, I thought.

Thompson:

I think that still happens now on BART. [laughs]

`1-00:36:20

Miller:

Oh, I'm sure it probably it does.

Thompson:

So whereabouts in Oakland did you live while you were in high school?

`1-00:36:26

Miller:

We lived in the Rockridge area.

Thompson:

You lived in Rockridge. Do you know the address to the house?

`1-00:36:30

Miller:

5701 Keith Avenue. It's right across the street from where the BART station is.

Thompson:

Did you have to take one streetcar, or multiple streetcars?

`1-00:36:45

Miller:

Well the Berkeley High thing, I took two because you had to go around and it was quite a distance. But ordinarily—oh I know, I also rode the Key System, the E train, which was a train that ran down Claremont Avenue and close to the school. That's how I would go to school in the morning, or we'd walk—we'd walk to school, or get a ride with somebody.

Thompson:

So you took the Key System, and then a series of streetcars?

`1-00:37:24

Miller:

Well, yeah, the streetcars—we came home by streetcar usually. We didn't usually walk home.

Thompson:

Now during this time, it sounds like, between high school and junior high, when did you graduate high school?

`1-00:37:38

Miller: I graduated in '43. February of '43.

Thompson: So it seems like it would have been right at the beginning of high school, maybe right before it, the World's Fair?

`1-00:37:53

Miller: Oh yes!

Thompson: Was going on, on Treasure Island. Did you ever go?

`1-00:37:59

Miller: Oh yes.

Thompson: Could you talk about that experience?

`1-00:38:01

Miller: It was 1939 and 1940. It was two years. They closed during the winter, and then opened up in the spring. That was a lot of fun. My friend and I, or whoever I went with, we'd always end up at the telephone exhibit, put on by the telephone company. This man I know that ran it was from Berkeley. He got to know us *very* well because we were always there. You could win free phone calls, long distance calls, and that was done with ping pong balls with numbers on them in a blower. If you had a card with the right number on it then you'd win. I think I won five times because we stayed in that place so long.

Thompson: So it was a game?

`1-00:38:49

Miller: It was a game. Then they had two phones so they could have two people at a time, and you could have a long distance phone call. But everyone would listen in on your phone call. So it was kind of interesting.

Thompson: So how did you get there? Did you get there by the Key System as well?

`1-00:39:14

Miller: Yeah, you could get off—I think it stopped there. There may have been buses too.

Thompson: And is this something that you did often, or did you go back once?

`1-00:39:28

Miller: Oh, I went a lot of times. And we sang at it once, our girls chorus. The chorus from—that was probably at junior high when we sang in the chorus over there outside the Palace of the Tower of the Sun I think it was called. It was a lot of fun.

But one thing that did happen was, I remember my friend and I, our boyfriends asked us to go to the fair opening day in 1940. So we did; we went

to opening day, and we saw Eleanor Powell in the Water Escapades, or whatever they called them. We had a little dinner, and we'd do all this—all the rides and exhibits, and we had a wonderful time. Phoebe and I both said, "They must have spent at least *five* dollars a piece." [laughs]

Thompson: On the date?

`1-00:40:47

Miller: Yeah, on the date. [laughs] But you did get a lot for your money. It was probably a dollar to go to the water show and everything.

Thompson: So is it something that you had to pay for each little exhibit that you went to?

`1-00:41:08

Miller: No, most of the exhibits were free. It was just the rides that cost money, and the food cost money, and then the special shows. Sally Rand was at the fair.

Thompson: So you went often.

`1-00:41:27

Miller: Yeah. We did go quite a bit. It was a lot of fun.

Thompson: Now, are there any other memories from high school, or maybe that period in your life that really stand out? Maybe you would like to talk about dating like you just mentioned, or something else?

`1-00:41:46

Miller: Well it was—I don't know—it was just a happy time. Adolescents these days, teenagers seem to have such a terrible time, but in general we had a—really just a fun time. We weren't—you know, into all these other things that are going on now, and we just always had a good time. We had a lot of parties and dances that we went to. I can't think of anything specific. There was so much, it's hard to pull something out.

Thompson: You had mentioned boyfriends; how was that process in high school? How did the process of dating go?

`1-00:42:38

Miller: Well, you didn't really begin to date until you were about sixteen—fifteen, I would say. They had high school dances. They had different clubs that gave dances. I think it was a dollar, maybe a dollar and a half to go, and you would dance bids, and they were always very, very cute, very creative that they made. You danced with the same person over and over, but you still had the bid with all the dance numbers on it, and people just wrote in one name. But mostly we did that. We went to the movies. We went hiking and stuff like that, picnics and just—pretty tame stuff, I'll tell you.

Thompson: Was it a formal process to become somebody's boyfriend? Did they have approach your parents first, or no?

`1-00:43:47

Miller:

No, they didn't have to do that. As opposed to today where—the dances and things, you don't dance with somebody necessarily. It's just a lot of kids dancing by themselves, whereas we had dates that you went on. I know my grandson—they just go in groups. It's a little different.

Thompson:

What type of music would you dance to at the high school dances?

`1-00:44:22

Miller:

The best music that was ever written, and that's good old—all the good old tunes from the forties and thirties. Frank Sinatra—that's where Frank Sinatra got his start in that time period. That music is so good, and so musical.

Thompson:

So Frank Sinatra was one of your favorites?

`1-00:44:45

Miller:

Yeah, I liked Frank Sinatra.

Thompson:

Are there any others that stand out to you?

`1-00:44:50

Miller:

Harry James with his trumpet, and Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller and all the big band people. No, that was a wonderful time.

Thompson:

So that leads me into my next line of questioning, which was, did your family listen to the radio growing up, and if so what types of things would you listen to?

`1-00:45:18

Miller:

We listened to the radio. Sunday night was a program called *One Man's Family*. You've probably heard this before from people, but it was the story of the Barber family, and they lived in Sea Cliff in San Francisco. There were four children, and it was their problems and the things—their activities that we followed faithfully. That was on Sunday night. Then Jack Benny—good, wonderful comedy, wonderful comedy with Jack Benny and Bob Hope and that group of people.

Thompson:

So was the radio something that was on all the time in your household, or was there specific times?

`1-00:46:12

Miller:

No, it wasn't on all the time, no. My dad listened to the news, and we listened to the soap operas weekday mornings. *Ma Perkins*, *My Gal Sal*. I can't remember all of them. They all lasted fifteen minutes each, and you could sit down in the morning and go from one soap opera to the next, and get your fill I'll say that.

Thompson:

So the radio is something you listened to at night, mostly?

`1-00:46:53

Miller:

Yeah. During the summer it was a blessing because it was so hot in Kansas City. Not out here so much, but when I was in Kansas City it was so *hot*. You didn't want to go out and play. We tried to cool the house down during the daytime, closing the windows and such. And then in the evening we'd open all the windows. It was a family affair. We all sat there and listened to the radio together.

Thompson:

We'll talk more of FDR in a moment, but were the Fireside Chats important to your family, and did you listen to all the Fireside Chats?

`1-00:47:42

Miller:

I didn't, and I was probably too young really. We listened to them, but I don't know how much I got out of them.

Thompson:

What other forms of entertainment during your childhood did you enjoy? You mentioned you went to the fair, you listened to the radio programs, were there any other things that you did for entertainment as a family growing up?

`1-00:48:10

Miller:

Well, we visited a lot. On Sundays you kind of went visiting. We'd go up to Young America to visit my grandmother a lot, and I spent a lot of my summers with them—my grandparents. I can't think of anything special. I can remember going ice skating. I liked to go ice skating, and roller skating. But that wasn't as a family. We went to the movies and parks, or just went for rides.

Thompson:

Rides in your car?

`1-00:48:50

Miller:

Yeah. We'd roll down all the windows, and in Kansas City particularly we'd go out after dinner and roll down all the windows and ride around the city. Then we'd end up at this ice cream place and get an ice cream cone and then go home. That was kind of our routine which was fun, you know? My favorite combination of ice cream was butter brickle and orange sherbet. One scoop of each for a nickel.

Thompson:

Do you know about how much a gallon of gasoline was at this time?

`1-00:49:39

Miller:

Oh, I've read it's like fifteen cents or something like that.

Thompson:

I'll go ahead and check the time—doing well. Now a subject that you may or may not know about as it related to your family, but prohibition?

`1-00:50:05

Miller:

Yeah.

Thompson:

Now you were born during the time of Prohibition?

`1-00:50:08

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: So even during Prohibition, was there ever alcohol in the home growing up?

`1-00:50:15

Miller: No.

Thompson: No alcohol whatsoever?

`1-00:50:19

Miller: No way. My parents made home-made root beer each summer.

Thompson: Did you ever know of alcohol that was ever in anyone else's homes growing up?

`1-00:50:24

Miller: No, I really don't. They drank beer.

Thompson: They did.

`1-00:50:28

Miller: You know, they were Germans and they drank beer. But other than that—and that was more on picnics or something. It wasn't necessarily around the home unless it was really hot. Then a nice cold beer tasted really good to them.

Thompson: So they still drank beer during that time?

`1-00:50:47

Miller: Yeah. Wine hadn't made its big splash in the Midwest at that point. Probably out here it did.

Thompson: Do you know about how they got the beer?

`1-00:51:04

Miller: I guess just bought it somewhere; I don't know where they bought it.

Thompson: I see. So you could have bought beer during Prohibition, or during that time?

`1-00:51:12

Miller: I think they must have, yeah. It was probably a low-alcohol content or something. That's just a guess.

Thompson: Prohibition ended in 1933, and I'm curious if you remember how your family reacted, or how the general population reacted to Prohibition ending?

`1-00:51:42

Miller: Well I think people were very glad, but it made no difference in my house. I don't even remember it being discussed. I remember the word. Hearing the word. But I don't remember any real big discussion at all.

Thompson: So it didn't really have a big impact on your family?

`1-00:52:06

Miller: No.

Thompson: Kind of a segue question just because we are talking about the same time period, we're going to step back a little from your high school years. Can you describe generally what life was like during the Great Depression?

`1-00:52:30

Miller: Well, I was aware of it because a lot of my friends' parents were out of work. Fathers were out of work; mothers weren't working really then anyway. It didn't affect me too much because my dad always had a job.

Thompson: For the railroad.

`1-00:52:54

Miller: Yeah, always had a job. My parents were frugal by nature anyway, so—you know we cut—I don't know that they really had to cut back. They managed to save money. They bought a house very soon after they were married. We always had a car; we always had plenty to eat. My mother used to love to say that we never had any needs. We were always taken care of. That's true. But my best friend lived across the street. Her Dad was out of work for a long, long time. I remember that.

Thompson: Was your mother working during this time period?

`1-00:53:46

Miller: No.

Thompson: You say the people across the street, their father had lost his job?

`1-00:53:58

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: Were you aware of how that did, or did not affect their family, and could you describe that?

`1-00:54:04

Miller: I wasn't aware—I found out later how really they were quite poor. But I didn't really know that until many, many years later. They always seemed to have something—he had owned a business; he had inherited a business, then he kind of lost the business. I didn't think in terms of—they were deprived of anything. Well, I remember one time she said her mother told her she could only spend fifty cents on Christmas, and what did Marge want. And she gave her an autograph book, which was a lovely thing to have because she had it for many, many years. It got burned up in a fire when their house burned, but other than that I don't remember that they were deprived of anything.

But I remember very vividly there was a girl who lived down the street from us. There were four children in the family, I think. We used to bring our gym shoes to school on gymnasium day, which was I think maybe Friday or something like that, and we'd carry our gym shoes to school for class. Well, it varied with the classes. Anyway, mine happened to be on Friday, and she would ask me if she could borrow my gym shoes because she had gym on another day. Or at a different time, I don't know how we worked it out, but I lent her the shoes. I don't know if they fit her or not, but she did borrow those. Then I can remember one morning waking up and seeing in the paper that her father had killed all the family. He had stuffed paper around the windows and things so the sound wouldn't be heard as easily, and they found them all dead in the morning. He just couldn't go on anymore. He had no money, nothing, and it was really—that really hit me.

Thompson: It did.

`1-00:56:54

Miller: Yeah, it really, really did.

Thompson: Was that one of many stories?

`1-00:57:01

Miller: No, that would probably be the exception rather than the rule. But I'm sure there were others.

Thompson: And did he end up taking his own life as well?

`1-00:57:08

Miller: Yeah, oh yeah.

Thompson: That's very dramatic.

`1-00:57:12

Miller: Yeah, it was. Especially because I was in grammar school at that time. You can imagine what an impact that would make on you.

Thompson: Absolutely. Were there any other specific memories that you would like to take about the Great Depression and this period of time you lived through as a child?

`1-00:57:37

Miller: No, I can't really think of anything. I wasn't really that affected by it. As I say, I would have liked to have gotten a larger allowance [laughs]. It did finally go up to thirty five cents. I remember that.

Thompson: But could you see maybe how, within your particular town, how other people affected? Was that visual?

1-00:58:10

Miller: No—you know what? What we had were the door-to-door people.

Thompson: You did?

1-00:58:15

Miller: Yeah. Those who were unemployed, and they'd come to the back door and they'd ask for a meal. A lot of us remember that; we were talking about it one day. My mother never turned anyone away. In the nice weather they'd sit out on the back step and eat their dinner, and were always *very* grateful. Sometimes they'd do a little job to earn it or something. I'll never forget that. One year a woman came around door to door selling doll clothes, and they were just beautifully made, and I had a very special doll that I just loved. The next Christmas, there appeared, under the tree, some of the things this woman had been selling—the doll clothes. I still have them here.

Thompson: Well with that I'm going to go ahead and end our first tape.

[Begin Audio File 2]

Thompson: We're starting tape 2, interview 1, with Virginia Miller. We were just talking about one of the places where Virginia lived and went to a lot as a child, Young America, Minnesota, correct? I was wondering if you tell me more about your experiences there.

2-00:00:26

Miller: Well, Young America was a very little—talk about a one horse town. That's what it was. I was fortunate enough to have had the experience of a small town. I just loved it. I would go up there, even when I was very young, I noted in my baby book—my mother wrote that I had gone and spent three weeks in Young America. I think it was when my brother was very little. I went for long periods of time, and never got homesick because I just enjoyed being up there so much, and my grandparents were really very good to me. It was just interesting to have had that experience of outhouses and everybody knowing you in town, never bothering to wear shoes. Relaxed, and just a really fun small town experience; it was really a lot of fun.

My grandfather owned the drug store in Young America, so the minute we got there we'd ask, "Grandpa can we have a popsicle." or "Can we have an ice cream?" Something or other—"Oh yeah, go take it out of the case" that they were in. So that was always kind of a special treat. Of course, the popsicles and the fudgesicles, and those other ice creams had sticks in them, and some of them had "free" written on them. So if you got one that said free, then you got another one. I don't know how that went over, but anyway, they never denied our free one after we'd already gotten a free one. That was always very exciting to do.

One thing they did have was the Saturday night concert, band concert. They had it on the main street, not in the park. It was a portable bandstand, and the days that they had it—it was always on Saturday—the men in the town would get out there and move that bandstand down the street right across from my grandfather's drug store. In the evening, the band would play and the people—the farmers would come in from the outskirts and do their shopping and sometimes just stroll up and down the streets and have ice cream. It was just so much fun. It was just a unique experience. I really loved it.

Thompson: I might have asked you this, and you did touch on the outhouse portion real quick—

2-00:04:00

Miller: Oh, yes.

Thompson: —could you talk a little bit about how often you bathed as a child, and how you did that? How did you use the restroom? Could you talk about the differences?

2-00:04:14

Miller: Well, we took a bath once a week, and that was pretty routine when we were really little. But my brothers and I, we all had a bath one after the other. Of course, as we got older that ended. But, at my grandmother's house in Young America, they put a big metal tub in the kitchen, heated the water, then grandpa got the first bath. Then we kids went one by one. Everybody got a bath and clean pajamas and things.

Then the outhouse was of course a unique experience. They had one-holers, two-holers, and I think three-holers. It was kind of a community affair. In the winter you didn't really use the outhouse that much unless you were in dire need because it was just so darn cold. We had pots, porcelain pots that you had under the bed, and that's what you used in the winter time. But maybe in the daytime you would use the outhouse, even then, but not in the winter at night. It was just too cold to come out. So that's how we managed to take care of the things that needed to be taken care of.

Thompson: What would you do after you used the porcelain pots? What would you do with them?

2-00:06:14

Miller: Oh, someone would empty them. That was somebody's job. [laughs]

Thompson: Where would you empty them?

2-00:06:20

Miller: I think there was kind of a sewer thing where they emptied them. Or in the outhouse.

Thompson: How long did you do this? Up to what point did you first start using a toilet?

2-00:06:33

Miller: In Minneapolis we always had a bathtub and a toilet and a whole bathroom. It was in Young America where they had the outhouses and that. We moved away, so I don't know what period the change came about. They didn't have running water; they had a pump. There was a pump outside.

Thompson: It was from a well?

2-00:07:05

Miller: Yeah. Then they had little pumps on the kitchen sink and pantry, and you'd pump the water from there. But they also had—you pumped a bucket of water—a big pail of water at the big pump and you brought it in. There was a ladle and you would come in and get a drink if you wanted water. That was how you did that. With the outdoor pump, you had to carry it in and dump it into the other one in the kitchen that they used for cooking. That was kind of interesting because there was a town pump. There was a cup that hung on it with a rope, or a string, or a heavy cord or something, and everybody would drink out of that cup. Everybody who came to town would go out there and drink from that tin cup. You'd often wonder how they all lived as long as they did because it was certainly not the most sanitary thing in the world. But was exciting to me, I thought that was great fun. [laughs]

Thompson: So when you were a child you took a bath once a week?

2-00:08:52

Miller: Yeah, once a week.

Thompson: Did that every change as you grew older?

2-00:08:57

Miller: Oh, yeah. As soon as you hit junior high or high school—then you bathed every night.

Thompson: It was every night?

2-00:09:07

Miller: Yeah, then you moved into the every-night cycle.

Thompson: We're going to switch gears here for a second, and we're going to talk about, just briefly—did your parents ever speak about Herbert Hoover, and if so, what were their feelings toward Herbert Hoover at the time?

2-00:09:27

Miller: Well I think they admired him. They were staunch Republicans. We had very little political discussion in the home. I think that I had an uncle who was a very staunch Democrat, and when they got together he would bring things up. But there was never any real heated discussion or anything that I can

remember. It wasn't that important. I do remember my dad talking about Roosevelt.

Thompson: What types of things did he say about Roosevelt?

2-00:10:09

Miller: Well they were—of course, they were criticizing things that he did. Things don't change do they? Just things like that. I think actually he admired him, but he still was a Republican, and sometimes you get caught up in these things and you—because your father was that, then you become that, and so on and so forth. In those days that was it. You did never change.

Thompson: So when Roosevelt took office your family, still staunch Republican as you say, but stayed Republican?

2-00:10:59

Miller: Oh, yes.

Thompson: Even when Roosevelt took office, I see. Did you or any of your family members take advantage—or anybody that you might have known, take advantage of any of the New Deal programs that were initiated by the FDR administration?

2-00:11:16

Miller: Well, of course Social Security entered, I believe, during that period of time. Of course we all have enjoyed many, many, many WPA projects.

Thompson: Could you talk a little bit more about that?

2-00:11:33

Miller: Well they were projects built by the government to give jobs. The Hoover Dam, I think, was one later on. Buildings, all kinds of buildings, they're historical now. They were done by the WPA. We're still enjoying them.

Thompson: Do you know anybody that worked for the WPA, or the CCC, or the National Youth Administration?

2-00:12:00

Miller: The father of my first boyfriend worked for the CCC.

Thompson: Did he ever talk about those experiences?

2-00:12:05

Miller: I didn't see him that much. I just knew that he worked for it.

Thompson: Well, let's go ahead and switch gears one more time to something that both is very near and dear to our hearts, but I would like to talk about you going to college.

2-00:12:26

Miller: Okay.

Thompson: You went to the University of California, Berkeley.

2-00:12:31

Miller: Right.

Thompson: After high school.

2-00:12:33

Miller: Right.

Thompson: What year did you start Berkeley?

2-00:12:37

Miller: I started in February of 1943.

Thompson: What year did you graduate?

2-00:12:48

Miller: June of '46.

Thompson: What was your major, or what did you study at Berkeley when you were there?

2-00:13:00

Miller: I was a social welfare major.

Thompson: Social welfare. Why did you decide to become a social welfare major?

2-00:13:08

Miller: Oh, I don't know. It was just something that I was interested in. I didn't want to be a teacher, and I think I choices were limited. Also, I took one semester of typing and was so miserable that I decided I would never make a secretary. [laughs] So I just went that direction.

Thompson: Was going to college something that was always going to happen in your life, or, an easier question is, why did you decide to go to college?

2-00:13:55

Miller: Well, I just assumed I would go to college. My mother really wanted me to go to secretarial school. But all my friends were going to college, and there was no way I was going to be left behind. So I decided to go.

Thompson: Why did your mother want you to go to secretarial school?

2-00:14:16

Miller: I don't know. I don't know why. I guess she just thought I'd be a good secretary, which I wouldn't have been.

Thompson: So one of the primary reasons was because a lot of your friends from the high school were—

2-00:14:32

Miller: Well, we were being groomed for that at the high-school level. For instance, they brought in—there was only one test we had to pass to get into Cal, and that was the Subject A. It was an English class. Before you could graduate from college you had to have passed that exam. So they brought in sample examinations, and we were able to do them in class as part of it to train us how to answer the questions, and how to write an essay and all that. It was so helpful.

Thompson: So the test was called the Subject A test?

2-00:15:33

Miller: Subject A Exam, yeah. You also had to have a B average.

Thompson: And the Subject A Exam is something that you prepped for while you were in high school?

2-00:15:40

Miller: Yeah. We did do that, and it was just pass or fail. If you failed you kept going, and I passed. No one could believe it. [laughs] But I did. The reason for that was, I'm sure, not because I was terribly brilliant. I never did well on true or false, or multiple choice, but I could write, and I could take an assigned subject and write quite a bit about it. Just not saying very much, but still writing about it, and I think that's what got me through that one. So I didn't have to take that as part of my college courses.

Thompson: I see. Now, can you describe briefly what a Social Welfare class might have been like at Berkeley in the early forties?

2-00:16:46

Miller: Well, we had—

Thompson: And what type of things they spoke of and really stuck with you?

2-00:16:55

Miller: We studied housing, you know, different programs for people. I can't remember everything. I remember one of the teachers I had a lot was Mr. Friedlander. That I can remember. And he always knew when you were late. [laughs] He'd say, "Miss Piper, you are late." But it was interesting; it was more like a general curriculum course but with extra courses focusing on the needs of people in the welfare world. And we went out and visited a lot of agencies. Like we went over to Laguna Honda Home. We went to different nursery schools. A lot of these were sponsored by the WPA also. That type of program. It was really a very, very interesting major to have.

Thompson: One of the questions I'll ask you about college, and I forgot to ask you about high school, but maybe you can talk a little bit about—we're going to step back and talk about the ethnic makeup of the student population at your high school real quick?

2-00:18:23

Miller: My high school. Well, we were an integrated high school, but very limited integration. There just weren't that many minorities at that time in the school. This was an experimental school. Many students came from North Berkeley clear down to Oakland, the children of professors from Cal. And so on. Did I say twenty year experiment? And they came by streetcar. After I graduated, the experiment period and the whole makeup of the school changed because of where it was located for one thing. I think they must have had certain limits about the kids coming in. I wasn't aware of that at the time for some balance. But we had the Asian students, and we had Black students, and they were active in activities, which was interesting.

Thompson: They participated like every student?

2-00:19:48

Miller: Yeah, yeah.

Thompson: As far as—for instance like a water fountain or a bathroom, it was an integrated high school but were children of different ethnic backgrounds allowed to use those.

2-00:20:00

Miller: Oh, of course. There was no problem there.

Thompson: No segregation whatsoever?

2-00:20:07

Miller: No, no.

Thompson: So when you were at Berkeley, you attended Cal during World War II. One of the things I'm very interested about, and I'm hoping that you can shed some light on, is just the campus environment during the war, and what really stood out to you while you were there?

2-00:20:33

Miller: Well, let's see.

Thompson: Just in general, the campus environment.

2-00:20:38

Miller: Well, there weren't very many men. [laughs] If there were men they were in uniform. We had a V-12 program. A strong V-12 program. So we had a lot of Navy and Marines, I believe. Also the ASTP, which was Army. I can't remember if that's the official title; those are the letters that go with it. But I

think that was it. I'm guessing it was a special training program. My husband was in one at Ohio State for those in "intelligence."

Thompson: So you were very much aware of the military personnel that was on—

2-00:21:13

Miller: Very definitely. There was a lot of military on the campus.

Thompson: How was the integration between the military, and say the civilian students at the time? How was that?

2-00:21:26

Miller: There was no problem there. They were living in the fraternity houses, and they had parties. They invited people who weren't in the military. They ran for office.

Thompson: Now they might not necessarily have been enrolled, but they could still—?

2-00:22:03

Miller: Yeah. They were getting school credit for this, but they could run for office and be part of the student body. They always wore uniforms.

Thompson: So they weren't necessarily taking classes, but they were getting credit for being in the military?

2-00:22:21

Miller: No, no. They were taking classes.

Thompson: Oh, they were.

2-00:22:23

Miller: Oh yes.

Thompson: Okay, so they were in the military, and they were at Cal taking classes simultaneously?

2-00:22:29

Miller: Yeah, yes.

Thompson: What other experiences or just the overall environment stood out in your mind other than the military—there not being many men—what else stood out to you?

2-00:22:43

Miller: [laughs] See where my mind was. On the campus, well of course there were shortages along with everything else. There were very few cars. Nobody had cars to bring them to and fro. We all rode public transportation.

Thompson: You did all ride public transit?

2-00:23:10

Miller: Pretty much, yeah.

Thompson: And this would have been the same street cars, and the Key System you usually used?

2-00:23:16

Miller: Yeah. I belonged to a sorority and there was one car out of fifty-five girls or so that had a car. It was a little old Model T or Model A named Fritzie Ford.

Thompson: What sorority did you belong to?

2-00:23:31

Miller: Sigma Kappa. There were black outs that we had, and the siren would go off and you'd pull the blackout curtains and/or turn out the lights. Members were always selling war bonds.

Thompson: On campus?

2-00:23:54

Miller: In Sproul Hall Plaza.

Thompson: Who was selling the war bonds?

2-00:23:59

Miller: Different sororities and fraternities would take turns selling them, and maybe someone from outside would come in and sell them. But mainly, as I recall, it was the living groups that did it, and they would compete against each other as to the amount that they would sell. They would have a week or two weeks assigned to them, or volunteer to do it. Then they'd try to beat another living group in the amount of money they would take in for the war bonds.

Thompson: So it was like a competition?

2-00:24:44

Miller: Yes, it was. We still had football. It was very skimpy because there were no men. [laughs] Cal didn't win much!

Thompson: Do you know who played on the football team at the time? Just people who weren't enrolled in the military?

2-00:25:00

Miller: I think even some—

Thompson: Or on active duty?

2-00:25:03

Miller: I'm not sure that the military were playing football. I don't think so, but they might have been. They might have been.

Thompson: Did you attend football games often?

2-00:25:13

Miller: All the time, yes. All the time.

Thompson: Can you talk about that experience, attending football games during this time?

2-00:25:19

Miller: Oh, well, of course Cal started the card stunts. That was born at Cal. Those were fun because you sat in certain seats and then you flipped cards for different colors. Someone had to design them, and they had to go up the day of the game and tack them on to the seats and everything. So that was really a lot of fun.

Thompson: Did they throw them afterwards like they do now?

2-00:25:50

Miller: No, no. Oh no. I don't think so. We were all pretty well behaved. Like a bunch of sheep. [laughs]

They had rallies. They had the big game rally always.

Thompson: Do you remember the Big Games that you attended versus Stanford?

2-00:26:13

Miller: Yeah, oh yeah, and they had a big fire in the Greek Theater. It was all this wood and stuff that they would collect for weeks, and they would have it in there between the seats and stage. People came, and the night before the game, the Big Game—then they had parades. They had a Big Game parade which was fun. The floats—the sororities and the living groups had floats. They had a princess, and a queen, and a king, and everything. It was pretty—it was the fringe of the war, trying to keep things a little normal, and keep traditions going in spite of everything.

Thompson: Now, did you ever attend any other sporting events when you were there?

2-00:27:44

Miller: Oh yes, I went to the baseball games, and I went to the track meets.

Thompson: I see. So going to sporting events is something that Cal students did often.

2-00:27:55

Miller: Yeah, they were pretty good at that, and I remember the year they won the basketball championship. I don't know if they have since, and they went to Kansas City, and they went on a bus, and we were all down there to wish them well, and off they went.

Thompson: Now, dating, because there weren't very men on campus, how did dating change? What was dating like for college students at this time? Was it very similar to high school, or was it different?

2-00:28:36

Miller: Well, you had dates. But they had a lot of dances at the different—you know, houses—life kind of centered around certain groups. The Y, or the sororities, the fraternities, the other living areas. Campus was so much smaller. I think one summer when I went—incidentally we went—we had three semesters a year during that period. You had a semester, and then you had a week of finals, and then you had a week off, and at the end of that week you re-registered and you were into another semester. So it was pretty hectic. There was a semblance of normalcy that they tried to keep I think that was—people were always conscious of it.

Thompson: At this time Berkeley was only three years to get your degree, correct?

2-00:29:49

Miller: See that was—I went nine semesters in three and a half years. Or it used to be you went four years and did eight semesters, two a year.

Thompson: Can you describe the relationships between Caucasian students on campus and minority students during the time you were at Cal, and did you ever experience or ever see any type of racism, or was it ever evident during that time?

2-00:30:35

Miller: I was never really aware of any, although there probably was some going on.

Thompson: Never?

2-00:30:35

Miller: No.

Thompson: Could you describe the relationships between different minority groups and Caucasian students during the time?

2-00:30:42

Miller: You know, there were so few to begin with that it just wasn't a big deal, as I recall.

Thompson: So students interacted with one another, went to school with one another.

2-00:30:56

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: And seemed relatively okay with being Cal students together.

`2-00:31:01

Miller: From what I can remember, yes. As I say, it was very limited in the number because it was so much smaller.

Thompson: Now, like your high school was everything integrated? There was no segregation for bath rooms or anything of that nature?

`2-00:31:16

Miller: No, no, no.

Thompson: So overall, minorities would have been generally accepted at Cal.

`2-00:31:27

Miller: I would say so, yes. I was never aware of anything. There were individuals if you talked to them who were very prejudiced. But there was never any action. I mean there may have been some subtle stuff going on, but as far as any protests or things like that. No, it was very peaceful.

Thompson: But there were definitely individuals who had racial prejudice.

`2-00:32:03

Miller: Oh, yeah. I'm sure there were.

Thompson: Did you yourself ever speak with any of those people?

`2-00:32:09

Miller: Yes, but situations just weren't obvious.

Thompson: Were you ever friends with any Cal students of different ethnic backgrounds during that time while you were there?

`2-00:32:20

Miller: I wasn't a friend really. I didn't know that many. There were a couple at high school that were quite talented people, and you got to know them, but you weren't real close. I remember Cleodel Johnson. She was on our student council. She ran for or was appointed to an office or something. And everybody, you know, welcomed her. There was a guy named Bill Orme; he was the same way, nice sweet gentle guy. He walked with crutches, I remember that. I just don't remember any outward show of—and other than that I didn't—I knew Cleodel, but I wouldn't call her a friend. We got along. There was a black girl who had a beautiful singing voice who was well-liked and sang in many school programs.

Thompson: Now that was the environment at Cal.

`2-00:33:36

Miller: Yeah.

Thompson: Can you remember any time during your life in the Midwest where you may have seen open displays of racism growing up?

`2-00:33:48

Miller: I don't think so. Maybe there was in Kansas City but I wasn't aware of it. I mean, that would be a more logical place.

Thompson: How were gender relations—not specifically dating, but how were gender relations between males and females at Cal during the time? Did you ever experience or hear of any type of gender discrimination that occurred on campus, and if so would you talk about those experiences?

`2-00:34:26

Miller: You mean, “Oh, she’s a girl, she can’t do it.” That kind of thing?

Thompson: Yeah, along those lines. Maybe you could describe where male students may have benefited differently, or more, than female students during that time, if there was any.

`2-00:34:42

Miller: I can't think of anything. You know all of this has come about over the last thirty or forty years. But, in the sixties—so much of that began in the sixties, and up until then, oh I can't remember anything like that.

Thompson: So as a female student at Cal during that time you never felt any type of—

`2-00:35:10

Miller: I didn't feel that—

Thompson: —gender discrimination, whatsoever?

`2-00:35:12

Miller: No, no. I know I was impressed because one of the girls in my sorority was an engineering major. Probably the only one in the class, but she was accepted, and I don't think she had problems getting in.

Thompson: What are the types of majors that women would, other than engineering, what would they primarily take on as a major at Cal during that time?

`2-00:35:42

Miller: Well, I think there were some who were interested in architecture. Of course we have Julia Morgan in Berkeley as a role model, and most people knew about her. I can't think of anything special. It was that kind of—it was the physics, probably the science end of it is where you didn't see many woman.

Thompson: So more along the lines of humanities?

`2-00:36:16

Miller: Yeah, oh yeah. Teaching and stuff like that. There was always the joke around that finding a man was *primary*.

Thompson: Were you aware of any students that might have been homosexual or belonged to the gay community during that time?

`2-00:36:37

Miller: No.

Thompson: Were there any perceptions toward that, going to school there? Or was it ever talked about?

`2-00:36:46

Miller: Well. I remember someone said that in the sorority that one of the girls was a lesbian, but she wasn't there when I was there. She had gone, and she left her formals behind, and those became the house formals, and if you wanted to wear one to a dance you signed up for it. These formals would get moved around to all the different gals, you know. [laughs] "I have dibs on the one for such and such a dance," or something like that.

Thompson: Because the formals would be left over.

`2-00:37:22

Miller: Yeah, she left her formals behind. Other than that I do remember a very casual reference to this particular woman.

Thompson: As being a lesbian?

`2-00:37:34

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: So no gay male conversation whatsoever, or gay female conversations?

`2-00:37:43

Miller: Nope, I can't think of any.

Thompson: So you would have been at Cal up to the point where the war had ended, and then you might have been at Cal just a little after—

`2-00:37:59

Miller: I was.

Thompson: —the war had ended. Was there a change, and what was that change like after the war, briefly?

`2-00:38:10

Miller: Well, there wasn't the great influx of men in the beginning. That came the fall of '46 when they all came back. There wasn't that much going on. I don't know that there were that many changes. Gradually more people were there. Of course the gas rationing ended, so you didn't have to worry about that. Of course that wasn't a campus concern completely. I can't think of anything except that pre-war activities began to return.

My only experience was, my boyfriend at that point was in the Navy, and he was in the Naval Air Force, or whatever they called it. On December 5, 1945, five planes had disappeared, and he went out on a plane rescue mission to

look for them. His plane exploded and went into the ocean in what is now the Bermuda Triangle. It wasn't called that at the time. All six planes disappeared, and no remains have ever been found. It's been documented on television, loads of times, as to what really happened; you know what happens in the Bermuda Triangle.

Well, one of the theories is that the lead plane was disoriented, and the pilot went down into the water and the others followed him. Just by instinct they followed the leader, and down they went. Jim's plane was out there looking for them, and they will never know what caused the explosion.

Thompson: So your boyfriend at the time, who was in the Navy, was on the search and rescue plane that looked after these planes.

`2-00:40:35

Miller: Yes, and that was December 5, 1945. It was after the—right after the—the war ended in August.

Thompson: Now did he attend Cal as well?

`2-00:40:48

Miller: Yeah, he was at Cal.

Thompson: And how did you guys meet?

`2-00:40:53

Miller: We met in high school. The end of that story, but that was—and that was after the war, so—

Thompson: Now, did he enter the Navy when he was at Cal?

`2-00:41:14

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: How was that experience, seeing him go off to the war effort?

`2-00:41:21

Miller: Well, of course it's the way—with all the young men it's always sad to see them go. In fact I had one whole section in one of my scrapbooks of just letters from guys that were in the service, and there were newspaper clippings about them and everything. You wanted everybody back again.

Thompson: So you followed people that you knew were in the war—

`2-00:41:48

Miller: Oh yeah.

Thompson: —and you were very much aware of where they were, and what they were doing?

`2-00:41:53

Miller: Kind of. Whatever they could say sometimes. They would write, but they would be censored also. The mail would be censored.

Thompson: Did he eventually come home?

`2-00:42:09

Miller: No, no. The plane exploded and everybody was lost.

Thompson: So you never ended up seeing him again.

`2-00:42:19

Miller: No, that's right.

Thompson: So would you like to talk about that experience and what you went through?

`2-00:42:25

Miller: Well, you know, you just—well, it was a shock. He was very much of an alive kind of person, very, very much so. I couldn't believe it at first, and I kept thinking they'd find somebody on a shore somewhere, but it was out in the Atlantic. You get over it, and yet you don't. It's just one of those tragedies of war.

Thompson: What was his name?

`2-00:43:03

Miller: Jim Jordan.

Thompson: And how did you initially hear about his plane going down?

`2-00:43:10

Miller: I was getting ready for school, for college, and the phone rang. My mother answered the phone, and she called up to me and she said, "That was Mr. Jordan, and he said they have a telegram that said Jim is lost on a missing plane." It had been noted in the morning paper.

Thompson: So he was MIA.

`2-00:43:32

Miller: Yes. For about two weeks, and that was about it, and then they gave up all hope of finding anything. I have a whole section in there on that. The part I had to laugh at though was—because in the paper it said: "Track Star Missing"—in huge letters. I thought, "Oh, he would've loved that, to see his picture and this big headline in the paper, when he was missing."

Thompson: So he ran track at Cal?

`2-00:44:10

Miller: Yes. He got his sweaters, two sweaters. You got one that had eleven stripes on each sleeve. Is it eleven? No, it was more than that. They're navy blue and

gold, of course, and I found out the stripes represent the number of events in a track meet. Basketball sweater has five stripes, the number of players on a team. Eleven stripes is football, for the number of players, which is kind of intriguing.

Thompson: Yeah, very much so.

`2-00:44:58

Miller: Then they get a plain one. Well you buy them, I guess. You are entitled to wear just a navy blue one with a big yellow C on it.

Thompson: Having this happen during your time at Cal, did it affect your studies much?

`2-00:45:18

Miller: Well, I missed a final that day, I remember. But, I talked to the professor about it, and he said just go ahead and take the test.

Thompson: Take it after?

`2-00:45:33

Miller: No, I didn't miss it, I just—

Thompson: You took it.

`2-00:45:35

Miller: Yeah. It was right at the end of the semester, it was in December. So the semester was about to end anyway, so

Thompson: I'm going to step back just a little bit because it's more of a topic that I'd like to speak of. Can you describe the day you learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

`2-00:46:05

Miller: Well, I can't remember too much. We'd gone to church. We came home from church, and the phone was ringing, and it was my boyfriend from church who called and said they had just bombed Pearl Harbor. I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was at that point.

Thompson: That was actually my next question.

`2-00:46:30

Miller: I had never heard of Pearl Harbor. Of course, we were just stunned, and I think—what I thought interesting is the number of high school kids I knew who got married that weekend because the guy wanted to enlist right away, and that to me was really surprising.

Thompson: Did you know anybody that got married, just right off the bat?

2-00:47:10

Miller: Oh yeah. The rest of the day I don't really remember other than we sat listening to the radio.

Thompson: So after it happened you listened to the radio often.

2-00:47:31

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: Can you talk a little bit about how it altered your world, and your life, after you heard about it, how your life changed, if it did any?

2-00:47:44

Miller: Well, I don't think it really did because actually we were living in a little cocoon-type existence. My brothers were both at home, except for my older brother, he went into the Army, and sooner or later he left the area. My younger brother joined the Merchant Marine, and he wasn't even out of high school. That was young—all these kids were so darned young.

Thompson: But he still joined the Merchant Marines?

2-00:48:22

Miller: Yes.

Thompson: Do you know where they went off to war?

2-00:48:26

Miller: I just know that he went to New Guinea. That's the one that sticks with me.

Thompson: Where did your older brother go?

2-00:48:34

Miller: He went to Europe someplace. I didn't really follow it too much. He did a lot of entertaining. He was a singer, but he was in the medical thing. I think he worked in the medical end of it.

Thompson: We've talked about how life was, but how was your life different during World War II?

2-00:49:13

Miller: Everyone went through the same thing. It was more material things, and then the tragedy of losing friends. There were several friends that were killed that I knew, that I was pretty close to, and it was hard. But it was gas rationing, food rationing, shoes, clothes, all hard to get.

Thompson: Could you talk about rationing briefly?

2-00:49:49

Miller: Well, for gas you had stamps and it depended on what your job was, what you needed your car for, and then you got maybe a 1-A stamp, which entitled you

to maybe five gallons of gas or something like that. There were just different colored stamps that you could get for different amounts of gas, and then you'd buy your gas with those stamps. The food rationing was—meat, you could only get meat every so often.

Thompson: How many times a week could you get meat?

2-00:50:34

Miller: Oh, I can't remember that, or maybe you had stamps for that too? I just can't remember, but I remember you couldn't get meat all the time. It was definitely rationed.

Thompson: What other things were rationed?

2-00:50:57

Miller: Well, let's see. I can't think of anything off hand. There were a lot of things that we were used to that we couldn't get. We all wore Spaulding shoes, for one thing. Either saddle shoes or white bucks. They always had red soles, kind of a reddish sole. Well the war—no more reddish soles. You had black ones, and we were all just horrified that these black soles were on these shoes. Yet, when you stop and think about it that was a very insignificant thing—kind of dumb for us to be worrying about that. But we were, and that was just kind of typical. Some clothing was—

Thompson: Could you talk about that? How else did the war alter what you wore?

2-00:52:03

Miller: Well, we couldn't get navy blue because everything navy blue was going to the Navy. So that was hard to get. I mean you got limited. You could get maybe a limited amount. Nylons were not in existence. It was these awful, terrible, rayon stockings which slid down and ended in folds around your ankles. Then at the very end, silk stockings came out, and then the nylons not too long after that, and that changed our lives completely. Women went stockingless and wore leg makeup and drew a seam line up the back of their legs to give the impression of stockings.

We were just limited—the supplies. I remember I worked at Roos Brothers, which was a big men's department store—not department store; it was really more of a clothing store—for the Christmas season, and I was in men's furnishings. But there was nothing to sell. Everything was limited. There were a few ties. I learned how to—show them how to look at a tie, and there were just limited shirts and limited everything. You couldn't get anything. You couldn't buy anything. It was just so skimpy. When you think of today in the stores just piled high with all that merchandise. But you couldn't get.

Thompson: Now did you work while you were in school?

`2-00:53:41

Miller: Yeah, I worked.

Thompson: Was that the only job you had while you were in college?

`2-00:53:46

Miller: No, I worked down at the Army Post Office, which was down at the Army Depot in Oakland. That was an experience that I really enjoyed. It turned out that when I was hired we had a little training session, and I was the only white person in the class of about fifty. With my blond hair I really stood out. They had the chairs all set up at the end of a hall and probably around ten chairs across, quite far back, and there I was. And my friend who was working down there—she had the job first—came out and she looked at me, and she started to laugh because here I was blond as all get out. It was all these black people on all sides of me. It was really pretty funny.

We did mail sorting in the different boxes, and of course I was sorting very fast. The woman I worked with would sort a letter, and then they'd go and talk, and then another letter, and they'd talk. But they were so much fun. I just had the best time with those people, and that was my first experience of actually working with someone—with a minority person. I will never forget it. It was a great experience for me.

Thompson: Why do you think there were primarily minorities working at the Post Office during the time?

`2-00:55:34

Miller: I don't know, unless it was a lot of the men that used to be in there were probably at war.

Thompson: So was it both male and female?

`2-00:55:45

Miller: No, mostly female.

Thompson: And no other ethnic backgrounds? Just white and black?

`2-00:55:54

Miller: Yeah, I don't remember Asian or Hispanic. Of course Japanese were not around that much once the war was started because of the prejudice against them. But it was a riot. I had an awfully good time with that group.

Thompson: So that was another job you had during—

`2-00:56:17

Miller: Yeah, and I did child care. I worked at a child care agency. They were the children whose parents were either in the service or in the shipyards. The mothers were in the shipyards.

Thompson: Where was that located?

`2-00:56:36

Miller: Well, in different locations in schools they'd set up child care centers. I never knew quite where I was going to go. They'd call you and tell you you'd go to such and such a school. All this on public transportation, and sometimes you'd start out six o'clock in the morning to get there. It was street cars; there weren't any buses there.

Thompson: Now how did that work out with your classes you were taking? How were able to work and go to school at the same time?

`2-00:57:17

Miller: I did that the semester I took off. I took one semester off. So that is what I did during that semester, and then once I went back to school again I did it on weekends. I did it on Saturday I think. The Army Post Office was open twenty-four hours, and that was the neat job because you could go any time, day or night. There was a Key System train that took you over the bridge but would make a stop. You'd get off there—there was a shuttle bus to take you to the big old warehouse. You could go in the middle of the night. You could go in the morning, anytime.

Thompson: So you didn't have a set schedule at the Post Office?

`2-00:58:07

Miller: No, no. So I could work it around all my classes, or anything else I had to do. It was a wonderful job for that.

Thompson: Do you remember what type of pay there was for these jobs that had?

`2-00:58:23

Miller: Practically nothing I guess. I don't remember. I know I didn't make a fortune. Later on my husband—he was in the Army Reserve—he went back to that same building I had been in, the Post Office. But I did mostly volunteer work; I did a lot of volunteer work in college.

Thompson: You did?

`2-00:58:50

Miller: Yeah. Over four hundred hours I think.

Thompson: Would you care to talk about that experience, and where you volunteered?

`2-00:59:00

Miller: I volunteered at mostly—one place I volunteered at was called the DeFremery Home. They called it the Ladies Relief. It was for kids whose parents maybe had separated; I don't know what qualified them, but it was a live-in—almost like an orphanage I would say. But I would go down there once a week, and read to them, and play games with them and everything. I also got the mumps

from them. [laughs] When I got down there one day they said, “The children all have the mumps”. I said, “I never get sick; I’ll read to them.” Well, two weeks later, on my way home on a Sunday, I had these sore jaws, and I thought, “Uh oh, mumps.”

One job that I thought was quite unique was in downtown Oakland, upstairs at Capwells. It’s Sears now. It’s up on the corner of Broadway and 20th. We went upstairs, and my friend and I—she got the call about it, and we went in and we filled boxes with No Dose pills. [laughs]

Thompson: And you volunteered to do that?

2-01:00:36

Miller: No, that we got paid for. That was a paid job. I don’t know how much we got paid for that, but I think we worked until about midnight too. But you know the one interesting thing is, in all of this, I was never afraid to walk the streets. If we worked until midnight, that was fine, I’d just come out and get on the train and go home. You never worried, you just didn’t worry.

Begin Audio File 3 miller_virginia_03_04-05-12.mp3

03-00:00:04

Thompson: We’re beginning tape three of interview one with Virginia Miller in Oakland, California, April 5, 2012. We just got done speaking about how there was no fear in traveling at night while Virginia was working during the early 1940s, mid-1940s, while attending Cal and working in Oakland. I was wondering if you had anything else that you’d like to speak of with regards to your work experience or volunteer experience at Cal or during the war.

03-00:00:41

Miller: Well, I enjoyed the jobs, both volunteer and pay. Particularly the volunteer work, and that certainly influenced the whole remainder of my life, because that’s all I have done, really, except for a very short time when I did work, for eleven years, actually. But all the rest of the time I’ve spent has been doing volunteer work. I do it in long periods of time. I don’t know. Once I get started on a job, I seem to want to stay with it. I taught Sunday school close to fifty years. I was a Camp Fire leader for twenty-five years. I did a lot of volunteer work at the opera house, San Francisco. Twenty-five years I coordinator of the backstage tours at the opera house, and I worked with the matinee monitors who were there to keep the kids in line at the student matinees, various jobs like that. I just enjoyed everything so much. I really feel blessed to have had the opportunity to do all those things, but they all started way back when I was in high school and college. Work experience, of course, was limited, but okay.

03-00:02:33

Thompson: I want to step back just quickly and talk about a day that seems to be on people who lived during this time’s minds. That’s the death of President

Roosevelt. Could you talk about what you felt that day and the experience of hearing about President Roosevelt's death?

03-00:02:54

Miller:

I was on a bus going to one of my volunteer jobs down in south Berkeley. I looked over and I saw the newspaper, the headline. Of course, it was a tremendous shock to see that. You feel a great loss, I guess, whether you liked him or disliked him. There's always a loss when someone that prominent is taken. I guess that's the way I felt. He wasn't a real young man, so you couldn't worry about that. My whole feeling was that presidents don't die. It was the same way like when Nixon left his job, and John Kennedy was shot. Presidents aren't shot. It was just that whole shock reaction that I had. But I didn't dwell on it. Certainly it was of interest, listening to about it on the radio and everything.

03-00:04:28

Thompson:

Could you see how the Bay Area or the environment around you might have been affected in any way by his passing?

03-00:04:36

Miller:

I don't think so, no. I can't think of anything. His career kind of opened the door to a lot of other things, but nothing that—actually more the idea of programs and things like that more than anything else.

03-00:05:06

Thompson:

What were the perceptions of Eleanor Roosevelt while FDR was President?

03-00:05:14

Miller:

Oh, they made fun of old Eleanor, and yet she was a woman who was so far ahead of her time that it was amazing.

03-00:05:23

Thompson:

Could you talk about that for a bit?

03-00:05:25

Miller:

Well, I'm not all that familiar with her. Now she's quoted many, many times, and has such words of wisdom. She did tackle the problems in the area of humanities, kind of. The Marian Anderson story. Marian Anderson had been told she could not sing at the—I forgot what hall it is. Eleanor wrote her letter of resignation, and Marian sang. That was the end of that. It never happened again. She's a very, very, very strong person.

03-00:06:28

Thompson:

Now, did you think that while she was the first lady, or is that perception—?

03-00:06:37

Miller:

I admired her, yeah. I admired her. I thought it was terrible the way many people kind of ridiculed her.

03-00:06:47

Thompson: What would they say?

03-00:06:48

Miller: Well, she just wasn't attractive, for one thing. I can't remember everything, but they would just make snide remarks about her, or make jokes about her or something. Yet she was so bright, so brilliant, and so kind. I don't know. I used to get mad at people when they said things about her.

03-00:07:27

Thompson: Did you know much about President Truman before he took office?

03-00:07:32

Miller: No, not really. No.

03-00:07:41

Thompson: I'm going to backtrack before my next question, because you did attend Cal and Berkeley. Was there ever a sense of—not just with personnel, but with University administration or with certain departments—being involved in the war effort during the time?

03-00:08:08

Miller: I can't remember. Well, of course, we had our bombs and things going on, but I can't remember any great involvement at that time.

03-00:08:24

Thompson: So the sense on campus was pretty compartmentalized? You didn't really know of anything that was going on between—

03-00:08:35

Miller: No. No.

03-00:08:37

Thompson: —University administration or certain departments and the war effort, or even the bomb?

03-00:08:43

Miller: Yeah. Of course, once the bomb was dropped, things changed then. I think it really hit home when that happened.

03-00:08:58

Thompson: Please talk about the experience of learning about Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and then explain to me what you mean by, "It really hit home."

03-00:09:09

Miller: Well, I think up until then, people were kind of complacent in many ways. Then when this happened, they realized, this is for real. We're not messing around here. We're getting rid of these guys and so on. There was just a change, kind of, in that way and the hope that the war would be over.

03-00:09:33

Thompson: So there was definitely a change in perception toward the war after the bomb dropped?

03-00:09:39

Miller: I think toward the war, because I think that people—it was a big discussion, because some people thought the idea was that you dropped this to save many other lives that would be part of the war, and some people resented that, and other people thought it was a good idea.

03-00:10:06

Thompson: Was that a topic that was talked about often right after—?

03-00:10:10

Miller: I would say that there was quite a bit of discussion. I wasn't ever terribly involved in it, but I think that there was a lot of discussion about it, yeah.

03-00:10:20

Thompson: How did you first learn of the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan?

03-00:10:29

Miller: I've been trying to think of that. I don't remember, to tell you the truth. We used to have the paperboys going up and down the streets, yelling a headline, and they'd sell the papers in the middle of the street. People would come out of their houses and buy them. I think maybe that might have happened. "Paper, paper!" they would yell. "Paper, paper!" Then there would be some big tragedy or some big event that they wanted to sell papers about. I just have a feeling that maybe that's how I heard about it. The paperboys would walk up the middle of the street in residential areas, and they would yell, "Extra, extra," and the headline news. These would be special times. It wasn't part of their regular delivery. It was like a break-in on a television station where some news has happened. "We'll get back to it later, but this is what's happened." It was an emergency kind of thing. It was almost kind of scary to me to hear them. What's happened now? I can particularly remember the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby.

03-00:12:13

Thompson: Can you talk more about that?

03-00:12:15

Miller: I just remember the guy yelling, going up the street, and finding out what it was. Of course, it scared me to death because I was sure that I was going to be kidnapped. My mother said, "We don't have any money. Don't worry. You won't be kidnapped."

03-00:12:42

Thompson: Can you describe your whereabouts, how you heard about the end of the war, Victory in Europe Day, in the Bay Area? And even Victory over Japan Day, and what that experience was like?

03-00:13:00

Miller: V-E Day is the Europe day.

03-00:13:02

Thompson: V-Day and V-J Day. Can you talk about what that experience was like here in the Bay Area?

03-00:13:09

Miller: It was very exciting. I remember I was—gosh. How did I hear about that? Oh, I was at a movie. They stopped the movie to say that V-E Day had taken place. Everyone was clapping and applauding. It was very exciting, I remember that.

03-00:13:42

Thompson: So they actually stopped the movie?

03-00:13:44

Miller: Yeah, they did. And made the announcement. They may have said, “More news later” or something.

03-00:13:57

Thompson: Did a person make the announcement or did a reel make the announcement? Do you remember?

03-00:14:04

Miller: I think someone got up on the stage, maybe, or something. I’m not positive of that. I just remember I was in the theater. It may have come over on the screen itself. I can just remember being in the theater. It was the Chimes Theater, which is no longer. Then V-J Day. Oh, boy. I remember that ending. Oh, of course I remember. I have to focus here. On V-J Day my friend and I were working up at Kensington School by Berkeley. We had a job there. We were working on the playground. The end was imminent. This was not a surprise. We knew that it was coming; we just didn’t know when it was going to actually be official.

03-00:15:17

Thompson: Why did you know that it was coming?

03-00:15:19

Miller: It had been talked about enough so that we knew that—they were in negotiations or whatever they were doing. Jackie and I went up there and we told the kids on the playground. We said, “Okay, if the war ends, we’re leaving, kids.” It was at Kensington School, and it was up on a high hill. We had a radio there. We plugged in a radio. I guess Jackie must have brought one. We were listening to the radio and the word finally came through. We told the kids, “Okay, kids, go on home.” We packed up whatever stuff we had gotten out, and we ran down that hill. There was a path where kids had climbed for years. We ran down that hill lickety-split, and ran down to the end of Arlington Avenue, and got on streetcar, and then later on we transferred to

the Key System train. We went over to San Francisco. Of course, San Francisco was just absolutely wild.

03-00:16:43

Thompson: Talk about that.

03-00:16:44

Miller: Just wild. It was just a mass of people. We wanted to use the bathroom, so we went into the Palace Hotel, along with many hundred other people, and took our turn at the Palace Hotel. And then went out on the streets, and then blew horns. Celebrated that way. Then we got back on the Key System to go back. Our church was going to have a church service. It had been planned ahead of time. We got on the Key System, went back to Berkeley. The whole car of the train sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." That I do remember very clearly. I ended up going to church, and have the program from that church service in my scrapbook. As part of each regular rehearsal, they took maybe fifteen minutes to rehearse what would happen. They said, "If the war ends, you can come here when it comes, and we will have the service." So the choir was all ready to go. I remember singing the glorious "Land of Hope and Glory." It was really a very exciting thing to happen.

03-00:18:33

Thompson: I want to switch hats real quick because it's very important to the history of the Bay Area. You, being at Berkeley at the time, I want to talk about the shipyards in Richmond. I want to ask you if you recollect the increased population in Richmond during World War II because of the shipyards, and if so what were your initial feelings toward the population increase, and even the shipyards? How did you see it changing the Bay Area? If you'd like to just talk about that for a moment.

03-00:19:18

Miller: Well, boy, there was an influx of people to work in the shipyards. There's no doubt about that. I know I was very aware of it with these children that I worked with in child care.

03-00:19:35

Thompson: Can you describe that as well?

03-00:19:41

Miller: It was all the mothers that were working. Maybe a dad or two, but in general, it was all the mothers. I remember one little boy, he was so cute. Oh, I just loved him. His name was Dickie Peterson, and his dad was killed at Pearl Harbor. He had this lovely, lovely mother, and she'd come and pick him up and take him and bring him every day. He always left an impression on me, because I felt he was a great part of what had happened. This little kid would never know his dad or anything, and that was kind of sad, but anyway—

03-00:20:24

Thompson: And his mother ended up working in the shipyards?

03-00:20:26

Miller: Yeah, she was working in the shipyards.

03-00:20:29

Thompson: Did they ever talk about the shipyards when they came and picked up their children, or did you ever have any—?

03-00:20:34

Miller: No, they were all so darn tired. All they wanted to do was go home. They would grab these kids and out of there. They didn't linger, I'll tell you.

03-00:20:45

Thompson: It was visible that they were tired.

03-00:20:47

Miller: Oh, yeah.

03-00:20:51

Thompson: Can you describe seeing them after work? Were they dirty?

03-00:20:58

Miller: Probably not.

03-00:20:58

Thompson: Did they smell?

03-00:20:59

Miller: Not the freshest in the world. They weren't really dirty. I don't recall them being dirty at all. All the Okies and the Arkies and the Texans arrived. That was kind of funny, because we weren't used to that, to having those people in this area here. If you were an Okie, then you were branded. I married an Okie. There was that big change of people coming in. There's no doubt about it.

03-00:21:52

Thompson: How did that affect the Bay Area as a whole, do you feel, just based off what you experienced with—?

03-00:22:00

Miller: Well, it just changed the whole population, I think. We got a lot more black people. I don't remember an influx of Mexicans. They seem to have stayed in Mexico. They didn't come. There was still a diversity there that we hadn't had before. Housing became a problem.

03-00:22:51

Thompson: Did you see rents increase in the area, or do you remember people talking about that? As housing became less available.

03-00:22:57

Miller: I don't think so. Of course, rents were always high during the war. They just probably didn't go down that rapidly. The big building thing, that didn't—well, it began toward the end of the forties, was when they began to really go

crazy building houses and weed people out of—double families living in apartments and things like that. There was more room, and they were nice houses. People were happy to be able to buy a house, and they weren't terribly expensive.

03-00:23:45

Thompson: Were you aware of any conflicts between people from the Bay Area originally and those that came in to work at the shipyards?

03-00:23:58

Miller: I wasn't aware of them. There probably were some, but I wasn't aware of them.

03-00:24:03

Thompson: What were your initial perceptions of people from different parts of the United States, black or white, coming into the Bay Area to work? Your initial perceptions of that.

03-00:24:17

Miller: Well, I don't know. I just was aware that they were needed, and it was important to get those ships built. I welcomed them. I thought it was something we had to have. I had no problem with it at all. I know some people did.

03-00:24:44

Thompson: They did?

03-00:24:45

Miller: Oh, yeah. There are always some people who object to anything like that. With most of the people I knew it wasn't a big thing. We needed them. There just weren't enough people here at the time.

03-00:25:10

Thompson: So it made sense that more people came?

03-00:25:13

Miller: Oh, yeah. Made a great deal of sense. It was great to give people a chance to earn some money. Probably a lot of them were Dust Bowl people during those terrible dust storms of the early forties, late thirties, were probably out of—didn't have much in the way of money, and this gave them a chance to really get an education, and the GI Bill for servicemen. That was a great thing.

03-00:26:00

Thompson: Just want to be careful of the mic.

03-00:26:02

Miller: Ooh, I'm sorry.

03-00:26:03

Thompson: No, that's okay. You're leaning on it. That's okay.

03-00:26:09

Miller: I just wasn't aware of any—I'm sure there were comments, always, always, but.

03-00:26:18

Thompson: Now, El Cerrito during this time took a little bit of a change as well. I heard that El Cerrito was more of a saloon environment, where you could go and either bet on dogs or maybe go to a bar.

03-00:26:34

Miller: That's right.

03-00:26:36

Thompson: Can you talk about that?

03-00:26:37

Miller: No, I wasn't—

03-00:26:38

Thompson: Do you know anything about El Cerrito?

03-00:26:40

Miller: I didn't know El Cerrito that well. They had an outdoor movie, I remember that.

03-00:26:49

Thompson: Did you ever attend that?

03-00:26:50

Miller: Oh, yeah. One of those where you sat in your car and looked at the movie. That was fun. That was something new.

03-00:27:04

Thompson: To switch hats now, in July of 1944, there was a large explosion at Port Chicago munitions depot. Do you remember hearing about the incident, and did you feel or hear the explosion—

03-00:27:19

Miller: Oh, yeah.

03-00:27:19

Thompson: Can you talk about that?

03-00:27:21

Miller: Oh, yeah, I did. My friend and I had gone to the movie, and we came back. We were out in the kitchen, and we turned the radio on and we were listening. We were dancing. We thought we were being really cute, and we were dancing around the kitchen. All of a sudden, the house, it shook. This was Rockridge area in Oakland, remember, so it was a long way away from Port Chicago. We thought, my God, they're bombing us. We're being bombed. We had the radio on anyway, so immediately a message came on that there was an

explosion at Port Chicago, and would all available medical personnel please report, who are available for it. Then I remember the doctor next door, I think I called him. I don't know how much he appreciated it.

03-00:28:33

Thompson: Because this would have been in the middle of the night.

03-00:28:35

Miller: Yeah, it was. Yeah. Yeah.

03-00:28:38

Thompson: So you felt the explosion?

03-00:28:40

Miller: Oh, yeah, definitely.

03-00:28:41

Thompson: You didn't really hear anything?

03-00:28:43

Miller: Oh, you could hear it, too.

03-00:28:45

Thompson: And you had the radio on at the time as well.

03-00:28:47

Miller: Yeah.

03-00:28:49

Thompson: Dancing.

03-00:28:50

Miller: Dancing.

03-00:28:52

Thompson: And your immediate reaction was, "We're being bombed."

03-00:28:56

Miller: Yeah. We didn't have any idea what it was. Just a huge boom. Wow, that was—we were just, like, paralyzed, practically.

03-00:29:11

Thompson: So the radio message calmed—

03-00:29:13

Miller: It came through very fast.

03-00:29:17

Thompson: And it kind of calmed your initial perception—

03-00:29:18

Miller: Yeah. But I didn't know where Port Chicago was.

- 03-00:29:25
Thompson: All these places that are—
- 03-00:29:28
Miller: Suddenly became a part of your life.
- 03-00:29:31
Thompson: That's very interesting. Did the doctor next door to you end up going? Do you remember?
- 03-00:29:38
Miller: I don't remember, but I doubt it. He was kind of a character.
- 03-00:29:44
Thompson: Do you know of anyone who went to Port Chicago, and did they ever speak about it?
- 03-00:29:48
Miller: No, I didn't.
- 03-00:29:55
Thompson: I'd like to talk about Japanese internment. Being a member of the First Congregational, which was very important during Japanese needing to register at civil patrol centers, I want to know how you first learned of Japanese internment, or the President's order for Japanese to evacuate, and whether or not you had any Japanese friends at the time. But we'll just start with your initial learning of—
- 03-00:30:39
Miller: I just remember that it was in the paper a lot that there was this possibility, and then it came through very rapidly, that they should all be sent into internment camps.
- 03-00:30:56
Thompson: That order was given by President Roosevelt.
- 03-00:30:59
Miller: Right.
- 03-00:31:01
Thompson: In '42. February. Executive Order 9066. What were your initial perceptions of it? How did you feel about what President Roosevelt was telling the Japanese to do?
- 03-00:31:18
Miller: Oh, I thought it was terrible. It seemed to me kind of senseless. That was my feeling.
- 03-00:31:32
Thompson: Were you present on campus during—?

03-00:31:36

Miller: Yes.

03-00:31:37

Thompson: You were? Could you describe that experience of seeing the Japanese attending the—or signing up at the church?

03-00:31:44

Miller: There weren't that many to start with. You didn't notice a real drop in attendance, because there weren't that many to begin with. But I remember going down to church for something else and seeing them loading in the buses and so on, and that just kind of breaks your heart, because so many were crying, and little children and everything. That was really a heartbreaker.

03-00:32:16

Thompson: Now, you were very used to military personnel being in Berkeley at that time. Can you talk about whether or not you saw military personnel that day?

03-00:32:27

Miller: Oh, boy. I can't remember.

03-00:32:28

Thompson: And whether or not they had—the term “fixed bayonets” has often been used, but do you remember military personnel that day?

03-00:32:40

Miller: They were on guard here and there. They were in the building.

03-00:32:44

Thompson: They were?

03-00:32:45

Miller: There were some, yeah.

03-00:32:46

Thompson: In the church?

03-00:32:47

Miller: Not in the church sanctuary, but around where they were doing the signing up and all the stuff that dealt with the Japanese, there were some.

03-00:33:03

Thompson: So being there, present, during them signing up to then go to assembly centers, could you describe a little bit more about how that day was? How the Japanese were acting or what it looked like they were feeling? I'm not asking you to describe their feelings, just maybe what your perception was of how they were doing.

03-00:33:28

Miller: I really can't, because if you were down there in the midst of a group of them, you would probably get more of a feeling than just reading about it in the

paper. Of course, they were pretty well silenced. They weren't talking much. They just did what they were told.

03-00:33:57

Thompson: Was there ever any animosity—? [phone rings]

03-00:34:01

Miller: Sorry.

03-00:34:05

Thompson: Was there ever any animosity toward President Roosevelt during this time because he had ordered the Japanese to evacuate to assembly centers? And did you ever make a connection between President Roosevelt's order and Japanese—?

03-00:34:28

Miller: I knew that he had done it, and they were gone. There were people, I know, and of course, as of today, conservatives said, "It's good to have them out of here. You can't trust them." The others thought it was terrible. That's the way it was.

03-00:34:56

Thompson: I see. So there were definitely people speaking about it during the time.

03-00:35:02

Miller: Oh, yeah. It was a topic of conversation.

03-00:35:06

Thompson: And it was social debate.

03-00:35:08

Miller: Yeah.

03-00:35:09

Thompson: Did you see it change in the church environment after it opened its doors to becoming the civil control center? Had you seen maybe the church being one thing before this event, and then changing afterward?

03-00:35:30

Miller: I don't remember it changing.

03-00:35:37

Thompson: I just had a couple more questions relating to the end of the war. We've already talked about the end of the war, but I'd just like to ask you what your life was like after World War II? You had graduated from Cal in 1946, so you had graduated after the war had ended. But what was your life like after that?

03-00:36:03

Miller: First, I went on a little trip back to Minneapolis to visit relatives and friends. Then I went job hunting, and I went to work at California Packing

Corporation, which is Del Monte Foods, as a file clerk. That's where I met my husband.

03-00:36:23

Thompson: You met your husband at Del Monte Foods?

03-00:36:25

Miller: Yeah, and then we were married seven months later.

03-00:36:30

Thompson: What year were you married?

03-00:36:31

Miller: We were married in '47.

03-00:36:33

Thompson: What was your husband's name?

03-00:36:35

Miller: Ralph. We had our first date in February. We were engaged in March, on the Ides of March, and married in July and then moved to Fresno for one year. Then we came back to this area and lived here forever after.

03-00:36:58

Thompson: What did your husband do at Del Monte?

03-00:37:02

Miller: He was in the sample room. The sample room was an experience. It was like a lab up there. What they did was they cut open cans, and they put them in all these flat pans, kind of. Then they would test them for sugar content and salt content and so on. Then all the bigwigs would come up. The president and his entourage would arrive, and they would stand around and talk about all these things. I don't know what they talked about. Then they would disappear. That was what he did. He was testing these things. But the thing is, he wanted to go into advertising. Every place he went, they'd say, "Have you had any experience with a product? Product sales or anything?" He had to admit he didn't, and so they said, "The best thing to do is to go out and get some experience." That's why he went to work for Del Monte.

Then he left Del Monte after about two years, I guess. Because he found that, in order to get a job in advertising, you have to be available. You can't have a two weeks' notice to give your company and then expect to be hired. They want you right then and there. So he quit his job and then just went job hunting. Then he went to work for Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne [BBDO], which is a big advertising agency. It was one of the biggest in the world at that time. We had been in Fresno at that point, and he found he couldn't be in Fresno and look for a job up here at the same time.

03-00:39:14

Thompson: So he worked for this giant advertising firm here in the Bay Area?

03-00:39:20

Miller: Yeah.

03-00:39:22

Thompson: Did he ever speak about the experience of working there during this time? When would this time period have been?

03-00:39:29

Miller: He went to work there in 1848. Laurie was born in '49. The advertising business was *the* hot business at that point. There was a book that had come out, and a movie, called *The Huckster*. Everybody latched onto this book, because it was the—well, I mean, a lot of interest in it because of—it was a creative thing, and these guys were back from the war, and they were interested in this kind of stuff, advertising. He had accounts. He ended up as an account executive, but he had Standard Oil, AT&T—or Pacific Bell, rather—PG&E, a couple of other things that he worked on. Then BBDO closed their doors here. They lost a couple of big accounts, and in advertising you can't lose big accounts, because they're so darn big and they bring in so much money. They closed their doors here and focused on the Los Angeles area. He, at that time, was vice president and account executive on the PG&E account. So the guy who was head of the PG&E account at PG&E said, "Come over here." So he moved from one job to another, which we were very, very lucky.

03-00:41:34

Thompson: So BBDO closed its doors in San Francisco.

03-00:41:37

Miller: In San Francisco, yeah.

03-00:41:38

Thompson: And he moved to work directly for PG&E?

03-00:41:41

Miller: That's right, yeah.

03-00:41:42

Thompson: So then he went to work in the advertising department?

03-00:41:45

Miller: Yeah, and he was advertising manager at PG&E.

03-00:41:50

Thompson: I see. How long did he end up doing that?

03-00:41:52

Miller: I think it was only nine years. Maybe eleven. I don't know. I worked eleven years, so maybe I've got them mixed up. But then he was very active in community theater. As soon as he retired, he was chomping at the bit to try his hand at professional stuff, so he had an agent, and he did movies. He did *Nash Bridges*. Did you ever see *Nash Bridges*? He did three episodes of that. He did

a lot of stuff. Lots of stuff. I got a residual check the other day for eleven dollars, I think.

03-00:42:45

Thompson: What did he do in the show?

03-00:42:46

Miller: Acting.

03-00:42:47

Thompson: He acted?

03-00:42:48

Miller: Yes, he acted. That's what he ended up doing. He really, really enjoyed that. Had a wonderful time.

03-00:43:00

Thompson: His acting name would have been Ralph Miller?

03-00:43:02

Miller: Yeah, yeah. He did a movie with Christopher Reeve. He had one line with Christopher Reeve.

03-00:43:10

Thompson: Do you remember what movie it was?

03-00:43:11

Miller: It was called *Village of the Damned*. That's what I just got the residual check for. It was showing in Europe someplace. But his line was, "There's trouble up at the barn, doc!" We all got a big kick out of different things that he did. He made a movie. It was really a pretty good movie, but they never showed it. It was dead. They even brought a language person in to teach him how to speak mafia.

03-00:43:50

Thompson: Now, during this time, you were working as well? Were you still at Del Monte?

03-00:43:55

Miller: No, no, no. I quit after I married, because I had four kids after that.

03-00:44:00

Thompson: So you had four children, and when did you start having children, and then when were they born?

03-00:44:10

Miller: The oldest was born in '49, then '51, '54, and '57.

03-00:44:18

Thompson: So while he was working, you stayed home and raised—

03-00:44:21

Miller: Yeah.

03-00:44:22

Thompson: I want to talk about something you kind of hinted at after you graduated, which was, "I became a file clerk." Can you talk about the opportunities for women after World War II, or lack thereof, and as a woman, how you felt about that, having a degree from a prestigious university?

03-00:44:51

Miller: The thing is, we were all having these big families. There were people who wanted careers, but there were a lot of people where they just wanted to stay home with their kids. The people I knew, we all stayed home. Nobody worked.

03-00:45:11

Thompson: So having a family definitely changed your perception of you working or—

03-00:45:19

Miller: Yeah.

03-00:45:21

Thompson: More specifically, you weren't as, I guess, upset about—

03-00:45:28

Miller: Oh, no, no.

03-00:45:29

Thompson: —the opportunities for women because—

03-00:45:30

Miller: No, not at all. My mother—she worked during the war, doing substitute teaching, but she never worked. Me, I came from a generation where the women didn't work, really, unless they absolutely had to. I didn't know anybody whose mother worked, really. We all had the kids, and so you were busy enough with them so as to not work. Sometimes it was hard scrimping by, but you still didn't work. I did go to work, finally, when, let's see, Jim was in the sixth grade. He was our youngest one. When he was in the sixth grade, I went to work for the Camp Fire Girls, because I had had a lot of experience there. I loved it, every minute of it. Every single minute. I just really enjoyed it. If anybody worked, they waited until their kids were grown, or at least pretty well grown, and then maybe took a part-time job or a full job. But that career, that extreme focus on being a career girl, didn't really hit until after that period. I would say in the fifties is when people began to—or sixties—when they really began to want to be a career girl. Here I am with all this talent, and it's going to waste staying home with kids. I'm not going to do that. Everybody began to go to work.

03-00:47:34

Thompson:

I see. With your husband working during this time, and you raising a family, was there ever any hardship in the relationship because you had the primary job of raising children? Or was it just something that was to be expected?

03-00:48:01

Miller:

Oh, well, yeah. He enjoyed his job, and I enjoyed being with the kids, and I was doing a lot of volunteer work at that point. He was coaching softball, and I was on the board of directors of the softball league. No, the only time our marriage shook a little was when Jim was on the drugs, and Ralph was quite an enabler, I'm afraid. That was hard. Because I could say no, but Ralph couldn't. That was shaky. But we survived because we did have these other interests. If you want to get into a situation like we were in, and then you sit around and just think about it, you could really—I don't know. You're just going to destroy yourself, actually. I know of parents who have. They just couldn't accept this, whereas Ralph had his theater and I had the opera. We each had our own thing that we volunteered a lot and worked for. Then we had things that we liked to do together. We liked to go to the opera together, fortunately. We both liked that.

03-00:49:46

Thompson:

Final thoughts. It has to do with World War II. What do you think the impact of World War II had on your life?

03-00:50:10

Miller:

Well, let's see. World War II. Oh, I don't know. Now that you mention it, I think it made me more self-sufficient. The things I had to do as a result of it gave me more confidence in myself and what I could do. I met a lot of interesting people. That was a big impact. Ralph's Army friends were people I would not have known otherwise. Then, of course, it changed the whole world, really. You just kind of learned to accept those changes, for better or worse.

03-00:51:29

Thompson:

Is there anything that you would like to end with today after you've just told me about your life?

03-00:51:36

Miller:

I can't think of anything. I've really unloaded a lot on you. No, I've had a really good life. I really have. I've enjoyed a nice existence. I really don't have any regrets.

03-00:52:05

Thompson:

Well, with that, Virginia, I want to say thank you very much for participating in this oral history, and with that, we're going to end.

[End of Interview]