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Bonnie Overton

Rosie the Riveter

World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by  
David Dunham  
in 2011

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Bonnie Overton

## Table of Contents—Bonnie Overton

Interview 1: August 9, 2011

Tape 1	1
<p>Family background—Father’s career after WWI and in WWII—Dust Bowl and Great Depression—Racial and cultural diversity in Newton, Kansas—All black high school basketball team—German Mennonites—Pearl Harbor—Older sister’s experiences as a woman enlisted in the Army—Healthcare—Moving to California—Huntington Park Shipyards—Attending Long Beach City College—Returning to Kansas on the Santa Fe</p>	
Tape 2	18
<p>Returning to California—Working at Douglas—Camouflage covering at Douglas—Learning to rivet at Compton Community College—Transferring departments at Douglas—Meeting her husband—Returning to Douglas—On the social life at Douglas—Gender roles in the workplace—Installing jigs on Norden bombsights—1951 Union Strike—Wartime working conditions</p>	
Tape 3	31
<p>On the working conditions at Douglas—Diversity in the workplace—Buying bonds—The Hollywood Canteen—V-J Day—Worked on every plane model to come through Douglas—Recalling her husband’s retirement—Retiring—Involvement with PEO—Commenting on the current educational system</p>	

Interview 1: August 9, 2011  
Begin Audiofile 1 08-09-2011.mp3

Dunham: My name is David Dunham, with the Rosie the Riveter, World War II, American Home Front Oral History Project, and I'm here with Bonnie Lee Overton. I'm really looking forward to hearing her stories about her World War II home front experiences, as well as before and after. We usually just start at the beginning, and if you can tell your full name and your date of birth?

01-00:00:28

Overton: I'm Bonnie Lee G-for-Griswold Overton. I was born May 5, 1924.

Dunham: Where were you born?

01-00:00:42

Overton: Newton, Kansas.

Dunham: Can you tell me a little about your grandparents, where they came from, lived, worked?

01-00:00:51

Overton: Well, they tell me that I am, on my dad's side, English and Irish, and on my mother's side, there's Holland Dutch and Irish, probably a little bit of German. I can't verify that. I'm a good old Duke-mixture American.

Dunham: Did you know your grandparents?

01-00:01:24

Overton: Yes.

Dunham: In Kansas, on both sides?

01-00:01:27

Overton: Yes. I didn't know my father's family as much. His grandmother, or his mother, ended up in Kansas, but he was born and raised in Iowa. Mother, of course, was born in Kansas. The early history, basically, my grandfather, his father—or maybe his grandfather, I'm not sure at this point—was a Methodist minister. They came to Kansas in a covered wagon, and he rode a horse to make his rounds. I don't know the section of Kansas that he covered, but eventually his people raised enough money; they bought him a horse and carriage. But they were pioneers in the state.

Dunham: Were you raised a Methodist?

01-00:02:40

Overton: No. I was raised in the Christian church, as it was called. It has a more resounding name, but in a small town, it was the Christian church.

Dunham: What about your parents, your mother and father? Tell me a little about their background and what they did.

01-00:03:03

Overton: Well, Mother was a homemaker, and she was a marvelous cook. My children still remember, and lament the fact, that I didn't learn how to make cinnamon rolls like Grandma did. When she'd go back to Kansas to visit relatives back there, the kids would say, "Well, isn't it about time for Grandma to get back?" Because she would bake ahead, and I would put it in the freezer. When the supply was gone, it was time for Grandma to come home.

Dunham: [chuckles] What was your mom's name?

01-00:03:37

Overton: Josephine.

Dunham: Josephine. You said she lived to be how old?

01-00:03:41

Overton: I think a hundred and one.

Dunham: Wow.

01-00:03:46

Overton: My oldest sister and I disagree on that. She says a hundred and two, and I say a hundred and one. So somewhere around there.

Dunham: And how many siblings?

01-00:04:00

Overton: Virginia's the oldest, and twenty years later little sister arrived. That is Linda Lou. Well, she'd be in her sixties now. It makes me that much older. [laughs]

Dunham: How about your father? He worked for the Santa Fe—

01-00:04:25

Overton: He came home from World War I, and he hired out as what they called the road engineer, going from town to town. But he was a slender man, and that was back in the days when they shoveled coal. I guess after his first run, the engineer—he hired, of course, starting out as a fireman and then you worked up to an engineer—the engineer told him that he would never make it in the road service, for him to ask immediately for a transfer to yard service, where he would switch the trains that came in and take care of the local trade. That was what he did all these many years.

Then how a Kansas girl got to California: During World War II, at the start of World War II, the Santa Fe Railroad asked for twenty-five engineers, from the middle division, to come to the West Coast and to switch, to get the cargo out of the harbor onto the ships. Since my mother had inherited property here in

California and it was taking a while to get it all settled, why, he asked her if she would like to go to California and wind that up. She agreed that that was a good idea. Well, my oldest sister was at Kansas University, and I was enrolled to start that September. But I had had rheumatic fever that summer, and when it came right down to it the family doctor said, “You go with your parents. You don’t stay back.” So I came to California. Well, I was too late to enroll at UCLA, so it was suggested that I try to get into Douglas. They were just hiring, in Long Beach.

Dunham: Let me back up just a little bit just because I want to hear a little bit more about maybe the Kansas years. But also, when the doctor recommended that was it because of the climate at all or just to make sure your parents kind of took care of you, when you’d had the rheumatoid fever?

01-00:07:09

Overton: Well, at that time, they didn’t know as much about rheumatic fever, and the way they handled you, they put you to bed. So I spent that summer in bed. It ended up that when I finally got back to Kansas University the following year, it was a case that the first six weeks I did spend in the hospital, the University hospital. So he was well founded in his theory.

Dunham: We’ll talk about that more, but let me first ask you maybe a little more about some of your early years in Kansas and also about your father. Do you know how he got started at the Santa Fe originally? What about in World War I? Just briefly, I guess, what were his—?

01-00:07:57

Overton: Well, he was an infantryman. I would imagine now, he would be what would have been the Signal Corps, because he was a runner. He would run through the trenches. To deliver messages.

Dunham: Where did he do that?

01-00:08:30

Overton: In France. He would tell the story of the Armistice. They were in the trenches. They had pulled back for rest, and they were to go back up to the front line trenches the next day. And here come this little ragtag French band, playing *Dixie*, and they knew that the Armistice had been signed. As a further note on that, at his funeral I asked them to play *Dixie*, and they did. He didn’t talk too much about the war with his immediate family, but as a child—. He was in the Thirty-fifth Division, and they would have a reunion every four or five years. And I would sit at his feet, just spellbound, while he was reminiscing with buddies. I wish now that I had gotten more of that history down.

Dunham: That’s great that he let you share in that and that you were able to at least hear some of it. A little more about just growing up in Kansas and what that was like, what kind of home, where you lived and—

01-00:10:07

Overton:

Well, seeing my grandchildren grow up out here, I am amazed. Newton was a little town of about 11,000. It was a division point for the Santa Fe Railroad. I don't think anybody ever locked their doors. When I was in sixth grade, we moved to the edge of town. We were half a block inside the city limits. We had seven acres of land, and the house dated back to the Civil War. I think it was thirteen rooms. The plumbing had been put in much later and left a lot to be desired. [chuckles]

But it was a wonderful house to grow up in. It had a porch that went around three sides, and my dad would paint it every spring. We were headquarters for the gang of kids. We had more yard than we knew what to do with. We couldn't keep the kids that would normally go around the lawn. We had too much lawn; nobody wanted it. So he made us a croquet court at one side, and we took an extension cord from, oh, I suppose a 250-watt bulb, hanging over an elm tree, so we'd have lights at night. So that was one of the reasons we had so many of the kids. We were one mile from Main Street. So it was walkable.

Dunham:

What was Main Street like then?

01-00:12:04

Overton:

Well, I assume we had a street light or traffic signals. I don't remember them, particularly. But they weren't at every corner; I'm well aware of that. But it was the local drugstore, Dillon's grocery store, and then I guess eventually a Safeway store. Then of course, there were the neighborhood, locally-owned grocery stores throughout the area. It was very relaxed. I know in about fifth or sixth grade—well, right after we had moved out to West Broadway, as we called the house—I'd pack a lunch, and I'd get on my bicycle, and I would ride into town to one of my girlfriend's. She'd get on her bicycle, and we'd go out into the countryside. We'd follow a creek. It was called Sand Creek. We'd picnic lunch along the riverbank and visit with farmers in the field. We always came home by the same route, to go by the veterinary hospital, to see who were the new patients out there. I shudder at the fact that I can't see me doing that now, the world situation as it is. You don't let your kids out of your sight.

Dunham:

What about the Dust Bowl and the Depression? Did that have an impact on your family and neighbors?

01-00:13:50

Overton:

Yes. I remember my dad coming to the grade school. They were dismissing school, and he had towels that mother had wrung out with water. He picked us kids up, and he wrapped towels around our head, for us to breathe, and took us home. I don't remember whether school was closed for a day or two. I do remember this happening. But it was very hard on the farmers, for their crops and all. I think that's what started the—. Now, you go back to Kansas, and there are almost forests around all of the fields, as windbreaks. But it was a rough time.

Besides the dust, of course, was the Depression. I know that one winter we kept four families in food. It was relatives, young marrieds that were having a very rough time of it. Mother and Daddy would watch the sales at the grocery stores, and they'd get these big boxes and fill the four boxes full of staples, and it kept four different families going. People did that sort of thing back in those days.

Dunham: You were in high school, coming into when the war started. What was your high school like?

01-00:15:40

Overton: Well, when we got into the war, we had a state championship basketball team. Within forty-eight hours, we didn't have a tiddlywink team. Because of the economic situation, the boys all belonged to the National Guard. The vice principal was the commanding officer. So we were almost a female school afterwards. Of course, the minute the boys would get old enough, of course, they would enlist.

It was a typical small-town basketball team. We were known as the Newton Railroaders. When we'd have out-of-town games, the Santa Fe provided us with a special train. We'd meet at the high school, the band in uniform, and the students and the townspeople, we'd parade down Main Street, get on the train, and they would take us to the closest place that they could to the high school gymnasium of where we were playing. The standing joke was when a male child was born in Newton he was given a basketball in one hand and a locomotive in the other and said, "Have faith in God and beat Hutchinson." That was the neighboring town.

Dunham: That's wonderful. So did Santa Fe employ a number of Newton residents, then?

01-00:17:20

Overton: Yes. At one end of town was almost a Mexican town. They were the road labor that kept the tracks going. It was kind of a village. Of course, those children were all in our schools.

Dunham: Were those first-generation immigrants then, their parents, the children's parents? Or do you know?

01-00:17:54

Overton: I wasn't even aware of first generation, that sort of thing.

Dunham: Were the kids very integrated in the schools—

01-00:18:06

Overton: Oh, yes.

Dunham: —or it's a small school, so—

01-00:18:07

Overton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Dunham:

Were there any challenges for them culturally or relating to education?

01-00:18:21

Overton:

They were just a part of the school. I was more aware of the few blacks that we had in the school, for the reason that most of them, their fathers were Pullman porters, and they had the latest fashions, and they knew the latest dance steps. I remember that there was one young man that had two or three different classes the same as I did. Between one class, I'd dump my book onto his and say, "Please take that to the next class." I'd head for the restroom to put on lipstick. [laughs] We weren't the race conscious that so many of the towns had. Maybe the only distinction that we had was that we didn't have any black boys on our basketball team. But the coach had a black basketball team, and he had them in a separate league, and they got to play. They were good.

Dunham:

Not part of the high school league, though? It was like a rec league or something?

01-00:19:44

Overton:

It was more a recreational thing.

Dunham:

Do you have any idea when that might've changed?

01-00:19:52

Overton:

Well, it was after *I* left. [laughs]

Dunham:

So aside from that type of example, were there any issues of tensions that you knew of, around race?

01-00:20:06

Overton:

Not in terms of race. We were a German-Mennonite community, the kind that wore the bonnets. The girls were very adamant on education. Anything the high school wanted, the Mennonites were behind. Except the dancing. [they laugh] But some of the Mennonite girls would come with their little bonnets on and their long skirts, and the first place they'd head was the restroom, and off would come the bonnet. The boys would never tell on them. Then the last thing they'd do before they're going home, went to the restroom and put the bonnets back on, braid their hair.

Dunham:

That's the way it goes.

01-00:21:05

Overton:

That's youth.

Dunham: When you say that they were very into education, you mean that they wanted to make sure they had the same opportunity, that the girls had the same exact—

01-00:21:13

Overton: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In fact, we had a college. I guess it *was* actually a Mennonite college; it was Bethel College. A lot of the local kids went there, whether they belonged to a Mennonite church or not. But they were very definitely a part of the community.

Dunham: Well, aside from so many of the boys leaving soon after the war started—this was in your senior year, right?

01-00:21:51

Overton: Yes.

Dunham: Do you remember when you first heard of the Pearl Harbor attack?

01-00:21:55

Overton: Yes. I was sitting at the dining room table, doing homework, and had the radio on. Youth can have music going at the highest decibel and still study, and they're doing both. So we had the radio on, and they interrupted the program with a bulletin about Pearl Harbor. You just couldn't believe; how dare they do it? But by the same token—now, my sister, my oldest sister, the day she graduated from college, she enlisted. She was a WAC. She was with the Signal Corps; she was attached to the Signal Corps. But what she actually did was decoding. We were not supposed to know where she was, but she'd call home collect, and the telephone bill was always from Arlington, Virginia. The Signal Corps conceded that we would probably—because we thought we were going to be invaded, to begin with—that we would hold the line at the Mississippi River. Of course, it didn't happen, fortunately.

Dunham: How much older was your sister?

01-00:24:05

Overton: Twenty-six months.

Dunham: So she went in about '43 or '44, that she joined the WAC?

01-00:24:14

Overton: Yes. Well, about '42.

Dunham: Was that something she enjoyed doing, the signal coding? Had she wanted to do anything else?

01-00:24:25

Overton: She felt since Daddy didn't have sons—she was the oldest—it was her patriotic duty. [laughs]

Dunham: How did your parents feel about it?

01-00:24:38

Overton: I don't know how they really felt about it. They were very, very proud of her.

Dunham: They didn't put up a fight?

01-00:24:47

Overton: Oh, no. Oh, no. That's another story completely, not pertaining to this.  
[laughs]

Dunham: About other things that did come into conflict or something?

01-00:25:05

Overton: Well, to a degree. They weren't geared to handle women in service. She was stationed in a barracks that had potbelly stoves and a tea kettle on top that froze over every night. They slept with all of their clothing, the big, heavy overcoats on the bed. It wasn't a really good situation.

Dunham: What challenges, as a woman, did she face in that setting?

01-00:25:55

Overton: That's when the Irish came out. She wasn't allowed to leave the base by herself; she had to have somebody with her. She had to sign that she would not leave the continental United States for twenty years after the war ended. On any job interview or anything, she just put, "Signal Corps, contact General So-and-So."

Dunham: Was she frustrated with kind of the restrictions, the special rules imposed upon women?

01-00:26:36

Overton: Knowing Virginia, she probably was. I don't know how she maneuvered it, but she made an appointment with a California senator. She just laid it on the table, of what the conditions were, what was happening. The next thing she knew, she was sitting opposite a general, and they assured her that what was said in that room would go no further. They said, well, asked what her education was. Well, she was a medical social worker. They transferred her to Birmingham General Hospital, in Van Nuys, and she finished out her service as a social worker, working with the soldiers coming home.

Dunham: So that was a relief. So something specific, or just the general things that had happened there?

01-00:27:57

Overton: They didn't want them to be married, but they couldn't very well stop it. But several girls lost their babies. So this one girl went to bed. She was pregnant. They didn't want them to furlough out. She wanted out. And she stayed in bed

until she *got* out. So they did have some means to—. It would depend on their own personalities with what they were going to do.

Dunham: I understand it's a very delicate topic, but when you say several of the women lost their babies, you mean under what—

01-00:28:53

Overton: Because they made them continue to do what—they had to clean their own barracks and things like that.

Dunham: So just extremely grueling physical work.

01-00:29:05

Overton: Yes. Yes.

Dunham: Which they saw this repeatedly happen. So essentially, you're saying the military didn't care because that wasn't an outcome they wanted anyway.

01-00:29:16

Overton: Yeah.

Dunham: Was that specifically one of the things that your sister was speaking up about?

01-00:29:24

Overton: Yes.

Dunham: Did she have that experience as well?

01-00:29:26

Overton: No, no. She did get married while she was in that group to the boy that she was engaged to at Kansas University. He was on Guam. He was an Air Force mechanic.

Dunham: Again, I'm just very interested in what we'll talk about, gender dynamics at Douglas, I'm sure, as well, but—

01-00:29:54

Overton: I'm not sure I'm supposed to even be talking about this.

Dunham: As I said, the transcript will come to you, and you'll have the right to review, and if there's anything you want to seal or whatever, you're more than welcome to. But on the other hand, I think you probably recognize, in your wisdom, that this is valuable perspective for historians.

01-00:30:12

Overton: I'm eighty-seven; I think she's eighty-nine now, so there's not much damage can be—

Dunham: Well, and obviously, she felt strongly enough about—it was in a private situation. But you said she got a meeting with a California Congressperson,

which brought a general in then, and they responded. I guess the question is, do you think they made any positive changes for women—?

01-00:30:53

Overton: If you can contact the right person, you can always get action. It's knowing who to get.

Dunham: She got personally transferred out of there, but do you think there were any positive improvements for the other women?

01-00:31:06

Overton: I have no idea. I have no idea, because I had no connection with that.

Dunham: I appreciate you sharing that about your sister's experience, because it certainly is interesting. Let's talk a little bit more about Kansas, and then we'll get out to California here. So just back, I guess, your senior year—you mentioned about the basketball team. Because you did have this small town that was diverse with Mexican Americans and blacks. I'm just curious: the example of the basketball team, where you had a great basketball team, but the blacks were not allowed on the team, and they had their own separate team. Were there any other things like that, where there was sort of imposed segregation or self-segregation?

01-00:31:54

Overton: No. I don't think we were really aware of it, because they had their own culture.

Dunham: Were school dances and things open to all?

01-00:32:13

Overton: No. I was an art major, and we had several very, very talented—we had one girl; she did beautiful, beautiful work. I assume she went on to college, I don't— I left and I've never been—well, I did too go back, after the war. Getting back to the basketball team, the coach was the high school principal. He was one of these quiet men, never raised his voice. If he had got off his seat at the game, everybody—. [chuckles] But I don't know how many years—well, when we built a new gymnasium, during the PWA workers, it was named Lindley Hall, after the coach. Now, I don't have correct numbers, but say in twenty-five years, he had twenty championship teams. So we were known for our basketball.

Dunham: I think of Indiana as the biggest basketball state, but obviously, you were rivaling them with your fervor for your basketball team and community.

01-00:34:20

Overton: And in those days, KU was—well, Wilt Chamberlain was a few years ahead of us, but Kansas had its share.

Dunham: Absolutely. Now, was there a girls' basketball team?

01-00:34:44

Overton:

At that time, we weren't allowed to play the game as we know it. We played at one end, and we had to stand there while it went to the other end. We weren't geared for that; we wanted to play like the boys.

Dunham:

Because you knew the sport so well you wanted to play out the room. So outside of school, did you ever play real basketball then, so to speak?

01-00:35:12

Overton:

No.

Dunham:

It just wasn't really—

01-00:36:13

Overton:

No. No, that wasn't my expertise at all.

Dunham:

And your sister the same?

01-00:35:22

Overton:

No, she was speech and debate. But scholastically, the school was top notch.

Dunham:

Your focus was art.

01-00:35:36

Overton:

Art, yes.

Dunham:

What kind of art?

01-00:35:39

Overton:

Well, when you go out, I'll show you; it's in the hallway. My love of what I really wanted was stage design. I worked with the theater groups in high school and in college. But at that time there was only one or two schools in the United States that was really into that. There again, because of my health, my folks wouldn't let me go that far.

Dunham:

What schools would those have been?

01-00:36:13

Overton:

I could've told you five years ago or ten years about it but not now. I'm sorry.

Dunham:

That's not so important, I just wanted to check. The girl you were describing, who was very gifted at art, she was a black girl? Is that what you were saying?

01-00:36:29

Overton:

Yes. Yes. Annette.

Dunham:

Had it been since grammar school, that you had grown up both with the diverse kind of school population, or did that shift in—?

01-00:36:42

Overton: Yes. Being a division point of the Santa Fe, why, their fathers were—that was home base.

Dunham: Was there ever any dating across racial lines, that you know of?

01-00:36:59

Overton: No. At least not in my times. Whether it changed after, I don't know. I don't know what the percentage of colored and—well, there'll always be Mexicans there because of the Santa Fe. Well, it isn't Santa Fe; it's Amtrak now. So it's a whole different ballgame.

Dunham: Were there any Native Americans or Indians?

01-00:37:35

Overton: No, I don't think so. No. That would be in New Mexico and Arizona. And Oklahoma. The Osage.

Dunham: Let me ask you one more thing. You mentioned the family doctor. What was healthcare like growing up?

01-00:37:58

Overton: First of all, they made home calls. An interesting side note, our family doctor took care of my dad. He had pneumonia in France, and Dr. Martin was the doctor. He was in the attic of an old school building. After the war was over, there was a parade, and Daddy was with Mother. He said, "Stay right here," and he took off. He had spotted Dr. Martin at a distance and recognized him and brought him back over and introduced Mother to him. They had no children. His wife was his nurse for a good many years, in his office. So he more or less claimed my sister and I as his kids. When I walked down the aisle at my wedding, looked down, he winked at me. [chuckles] He was there. But they adopted twin girls. They were a number of years younger than I was, so I really didn't know them. But we had two hospitals in our town, Axtell and—it's gone. Bethel. That's what happens; you know, getting old ain't for sissies.

Dunham: Let's talk about your journey out to California. The doctor had advised that your parents—this just coincided; your dad had accepted the position out here?

01-00:40:22

Overton: Well, from the time that Daddy signed up, within forty-eight hours, he left. He came to California. So Virginia went off to KU, and Mother and I packed up that house, and we drove. We had a 1937, I think it was, Dodge. It was loaded to the gills, [laughs] and we drove to California.

Dunham: Now, did you have to get special—in terms of gasoline and rationing, for that type of trip?

01-00:41:07

Overton: No, they didn't start rationing till after we got out here.

Dunham:

Oh, right. Right, because that's '42.

01-00:41:12

Overton:

I don't remember how long it took us, but we went Route 66. The roads left a lot to be desired. The one phase of the trip that we've chuckled about down through the years, we went down through Jerome, Arizona. We were driving along the plain, and I said, "Mother, look up there." It looked like ants up on the hill or the mountainside. I said, "Well, we wouldn't to go there." Thirty minutes later, we started up. Well, Mother was driving at that point, and she was so thrilled at the view. Oh, look! [they laugh] I'd say, "Mother, I'll look; you drive."

So finally, I was almost biting my fingernails. So she pulled off to the side and she says, "Get out." I got out, and she says, "Go around." She says, "You drive." I said, "I don't want to drive." She says, "You drive. You won't be afraid." Well, first of all, she was driving so slow as she was looking that I was scared we weren't going to make the grade. So I picked up a little speed, and we went along up the mountainside. Just as we were tipping over the summit and started down the other side, here came—it must've been a Model A Ford. It was one of those boxy older cars. Here was an older man, with a ten-gallon hat and a cigar in his mouth. His wife had the proverbial straw hat, and she was sitting up, ramrod straight. Of course, they were on the outside edge, and here they come over the top. Well, it was so ridiculous that we both started to laugh. We have laughed about it so many times down through the years, that farmer and his wife coming down the hill.

Dunham:

You had driven before. This wasn't your first time driving?

01-00:43:42

Overton:

I learned to drive on a Fordson tractor. I was probably in junior high school. My dad was a frustrated farmer. He had seven acres of land, so he farmed that seven acres, besides his railroad work. He also raised registered Guernsey, Jersey cows, so we sold milk. They had to come and get it, because we weren't licenses dairy farmers. But Dad, for so many, many years, worked what we would call swing shift now, from four to twelve. Well, the cows were his. Even though Mother had been raised on a farm, she never milked a cow while she was married to him. So in the barn, he had it modernized—as much as you do in a barn—through the PWA. But on the wall hung three canvas folding stools. In the summertime, when we all went down to milk, Mother and Virginia and I would sit and visit with him while he'd milk the cows. He had, I think basically, two; maybe we had three. But when they would calf, if they were female, we had a Dorothy, we had a Patty—after our girlfriends, we named them. [laughs] They were very proud of the fact they had a cow named after them.

Dunham: So like your mother, you didn't have to do the farm work?

01-00:45:59

Overton: No. No. But I was his tomboy, so I was the one that got to drive the tractor. So when it got time to learn to drive the car, out behind the barn was two or three acres of alfalfa; we could take the car back there any time that we wanted. Around and round and round we'd go. [laughs] The people that lived across from us were farmers; they were German-Mennonite farmers. The wife had been a nurse in Germany, and she must've thought, "Those crazy Irish people that lived across the road," because, you know teenage girls; we'd get excited over something, we did a war dance around the kitchen. Invariably, she would be knocking at our door and catch us at it. But she told one of the other neighbors that she had seen us out in that field, going round and round; what on *earth* were we doing? [laughs]

Dunham: Now, were there ever any tensions with any of the German immigrants during the war?

01-00:47:32

Overton: Oh, *yes*. Virginia worked at Rich's Mercantile. It was an appliance store. She worked a summer, before she started at KU. That was when the rural electrification started, and they were working in our area. So she would load the car up with Mixmasters, any small appliances, anything she could get in the car, and she'd go out to all the farm wives. She did a very big business; enough that they wanted her to come back every summer. Well, of course, then when the war started—but anyway, somebody made a paint bomb of some sort, and threw it in their store. To my knowledge, that was the only—at least that was the only thing that I was aware of that ever happened. As I say, we left to come to the coast, so I really don't know what the tensions were.

Dunham: What happened to the farm and the cows when you left?

01-00:49:03

Overton: They were sold.

Dunham: You kept the land?

01-00:49:06

Overton: Yes. We rented the house out, which was a big mistake because the only ones that would want a house that big was somebody that had children, and we had done a lot of redecorating and bringing it up to the twentieth century. We eventually sold it, and the man that owned the local lumber company bought it, and he subdivided that. Made a mint on lots. In fact, there was a street that cut through it and all, but he built houses then.

Dunham: You'd sold the whole land to them?

01-00:50:08

Overton:

Yes, we sold the seven acres. Because when the war was over and Daddy was sent back to Kansas, he went to Wichita. That was a big city. [laughs] But I got married then. I went back to Newton to my home church and was married there.

Dunham:

We'll get back to that in a minute. We've almost used the whole first tape; so maybe before we get to Douglas and California, I'll just ask you a couple more questions about the early years, kind of thinking again about how things changed once the war started, at your school, aside from kids leaving. Were you very aware of the war already, before Pearl Harbor? Or did that really, from that time forward, you were brought into it?

01-00:51:02

Overton:

Well, not really, being a teenager. You knew it was there, because of the news broadcasts and the papers and all; but it was happening to somebody else; it wasn't to us. You just weren't that concerned about it. Being raised in the Midwest—maybe if I'd been on the coast the full time—because by the time we got out here, they had the blackouts. When you'd come over the hill, at Signal Hill, your lights went out. And all of the streetlights on the ocean side were black; they had painted them out so that when you were coming in, you could see to get in, but you couldn't see to get out. Oh, no, you could see to get out, but you couldn't see to get in.

Dunham:

Let's go back. We have a few minutes here. So you came out to California with your mom and you met your dad. Did he already have a place for you to live?

01-00:52:19

Overton:

My mother's sister was living in Long Beach, and we stayed, I think, maybe two or three nights with them. But Daddy, when he came out here, he was transferred to San Diego, or he came to San Diego. Then they brought him up here to Los Angeles. He had surveyed the situation and decided that Huntington Park was as close to Los Angeles as he wanted to be. So they rented a one-bedroom, over the garages, in a cottage-type court in Huntington Park. I'm trying to remember. I think the fold-down bed, a Murphy-type bed, was in the living room because I don't remember sleeping on a couch. So there had to be a fold-down bed. The following year, I went back to KU and when we came back, why, by that time, Mother's estate had been settled. She had inherited a cottage court down on East Third Street, right off Alamedas, across from Montel's Mortuary.

Dunham:

What family was that from? That was from her mother?

01-00:54:06

Overton:

That was Mother's father. That was the Van De Marks. He married my grandmother, an Irish Colleen. He came from a wealthy family. He decided he'd go to the goldfields in Colorado; then when he got settled, he'd send for

Grandma. Well, it got back to Grandma that he was posing as a single man, and so, basically he deserted her. So she married what I considered my grandfather, who was a prosperous wheat farmer. He was a widower. So she had two little girls, and he had, I think, about seven children. He had one child, a little girl that was Mother's age that the grandparents took and raised. When they got their household together, the grandparents begged him to let them keep the little girl, and they raised her. Arthur Van De Mark had the ability to attract. He was snow-white haired, a very handsome man. He attracted wealthy women. He was married, I think, four times in his lifetime. But each time it was for money, except the last time, and she took him. [they laugh]

Dunham: But no suspicious circumstances along the way, with—

01-00:56:32

Overton: So it's one of those things we just don't discuss.

Dunham: Fair enough. Had you been outside Kansas before this road trip out?

01-00:56:43

Overton: Oh, yes. Daddy was a fisherman, and we would go to the Yellowstone. He ended up, eventually, with his own boat and two motors, and he could put his womenfolks in the boat, and we could troll and he didn't have to spend all his time climbing trees to get our—. I never did learn how to fly fish. But we'd go to the Yellowstone almost every year. Then we went to Minnesota one year. I don't recommend it. The mosquitoes were horrible.

Dunham: In the summer? Okay. What were your impressions of California?

01-00:57:36

Overton: Well, my first trip to California, I was in first grade. We came out for Christmas. Of course, I came with long underwear and long stockings and the whole bit and ended up in bobby socks and a sweater. It was very exciting. It was a different climate and so completely different. It took me quite a while, even after I lived out here, to—I came back by train one time. As we come in, all of a sudden I got excited; I was going home. So from that point on, this has been home.

Dunham: So your father had gotten this place in Huntington Park. Was housing hard to get? Do you have a sense of that?

01-00:58:40

Overton: Yes. The defense workers were coming in. The shipyards and all. That was one of the reasons why I missed out. Instead of going in for the second semester out here at UCLA—I couldn't get a dorm. The dorms were all full, and the private homes that normally were college students, the defense workers were taking them. Then gas rationing went in and food stamps.

Dunham: You were going to school where then?

01-00:59:31

Overton: When I finally got back into school, it was Long Beach City College.

Dunham: Was that that fall, or that was later? You're saying you were trying to get in in the fall.

01-00:59:40

Overton: The following year, I went back to Kansas, when my sister was a senior and I was a freshman. At that point, the Santa Fe was—. Of course, I was traveling free.

Dunham: That was a nice benefit.

01-01:00:03

Overton: Yes. I've lost my train of thought.

Dunham: Well, how long a ride was that, by the way, back then, the train ride from here to Kansas?

01-01:00:23

Overton: I think it was thirty-nine hours. The first time I had to buy a ticket to go back, like to kill me. [laughs] I used to tease my husband. I didn't know which I hated to give up worst, my maiden name or my pass rides.

Dunham: Now, did the pass ride—did they expire as soon as your dad retired?

01-01:00:49

Overton: Oh, no. No. Mother had pass rides up until the time of her death. Even after he retired, they had their pass rides. We could travel foreign lines. When I was in junior high, just before I started in high school, Virginia and I went back to Washington, DC to a national Job's Daughters convention. We left by Santa Fe, and we went to Chicago. Then we changed to the Pennsylvania line to I think it was Baltimore. I believe it was Baltimore and Ohio. But anyway, we had three different trip passes. Or two different trip passes. Of course, all for free.

Dunham: Were there other specific benefits—obviously, that's the big one, but—as far as working for the Santa Fe, that your father had?

01-01:02:07

Overton: Well, of course, Daddy had free hospitalization in Topeka, at Santa Fe Hospital. But for the rest of the family, no, not that I can think of.

Dunham: Well, I'm going to go change the tape and then we're going to—

Begin Audiofile 2 08-09-2011.mp3

Dunham: Okay, this is— [audiofile stops & restarts] —on August 9, 2011, and this is tape two. So we finally made it; you're out in California. I know you didn't go work at Douglas right away, so what happened first for you?

02-00:00:20

Overton: Let's see. I'll have to stop and think a minute. I have a cousin that's a year younger than I am, and she worked at Curry's Ice Cream, down at the corner of Belmont-Shore. I would go down late evening, and I would— [phone rings; audiofile stops & restarts]

Dunham: We just had a phone call; we're back on and we were just talking about— I think you were visiting your cousin late at night, at the ice cream—

02-00:01:13

Overton: I would go down to be with her when she would close up the ice cream shop, so she wouldn't have to ride the bus alone at night going home. It gave me something to do. Well, then it ended up that I worked there for a very short time on a morning shift. The lady that made the cones, that was in a glassed-in room, and it was warm. I would be cold in the morning, so I'd go stand in the doorway, when we weren't busy, and talk to her. She knew that I was saving my money to go back to KU in the fall, and she said, "Well, why are you working here for thirty-five cents an hour, when you could go out to Douglas and make sixty-five cents an hour?" So I decided that was a pretty good idea. So I went down. My folks discussed it among themselves and decided that I would never pass the physical, because of my rheumatic fever, so they'd let me do it and console me when I didn't pass the physical and maybe increase my allowance, and that would be that. But the day that I took my physical was the biggest hiring date to date that they had had, and it developed that I only got half of my physical, so I passed it. [they laugh]

So then they sent me to Compton Junior College, and I don't remember whether I was there two weeks, six weeks or what, but anyway, they taught me how to rivet. I actually went to work at Douglas on Thanksgiving Day of 1942. It was pouring down rain. At that time they had netting, chicken wire, going across Lakewood Boulevard, over all the parking lot, clear over to Clark Street. They'd cover that with chicken feathers, and then they'd spray paint it, so that from the air, it looked like fields, growing crops. Of course, they would periodically repaint it, because it had to be different crops. Well, those feathers would drift down. It was a mess. Well, first of all, I didn't have sense enough—I'd never been in anything that big—I didn't write down where I was parked. So when I got off at midnight, here I was, dripping wet, going up and down one aisle and down the other, and probably in tears. Finally, I made my way up to the guard shack and I said, "I'm lost." So they put me on the back of a bicycle and we went up and down the aisles till we found my car,

and they explained to me how I was to check the section and the rows and all and to write it down on something if I didn't think I'd remember it.

So that was my hiring experience. But my partner was an Iowa schoolteacher, who decided to come out and work. She was inside the plane, and I was outside. Well, they had these big hollow boxes that you could stand on. Well, I weighed all of eighty-two pounds in those days. [chuckles] The gun weighed almost as much as I did. Well, I was reaching up to shoot a rivet in—it was what we called the belly of the plane—and I was on this box, up about this high. When the gun went off, the rivet sat one way, the gun, and I went the other way. Here was this gaping hole in the plane. Well, of course, they sent an inspector out. There are miles and miles and miles and pounds and pounds of paperwork for one airplane. So this supervisor was checking it with his flashlight and all. He looked down at me, and he says, “Child, you’ll work many hours to pay for this.” Well, I can see him taking it out of my paycheck. I figured I wasn’t working for nothing. [laughs]

Well, anyway, they didn’t fire me, but they did move me where I was down on the ground and didn’t have to stand on a box. So my health wasn’t that good at that point, and my folks said, “You’re just going to have to quit. You can’t take this.” Well, I had tasted that sixty-five-cent-an-hour paycheck, and I kind of liked that. So my partner said, “Well, why don’t you go ask the foreman to transfer you to someplace else?” So I trotted up to the foreman. Well, the procedure was they immediately sent you to the dispensary, for the doctors to check you over. Well, I took my little pass and went down to the dispensary. I sat there and watched him fire two women. So I was pretty teary-eyed by the time I got in there. This doctor raised up at his desk and says, “And now, what don’t you like about your job?” Well, the gates opened and I said, “I like my job fine.” But I explained that my rheumatic fever was coming back, and I just couldn’t take that kind of work. He said, “How the hell did you get put in here, if you’ve had rheumatic fever?” He says, “Did you lie about it when you took the physical?” “No.” So he called his nurse and he says, “Go pull her file.” So they come back out, and that was when we discovered I’d only had half my physical. So he said, “Well, what are you doing here?” I told him I was riveting. He says, “Well, why are you here?” I said, “Well, I’m saving my money for college.” He said, “Well, what are you going to major in?” I told him art. He studied a minute and stepped over to his phone, and he called a number and called the man by first name and said, “I’ve got a little girl here that needs to transfer, and she’s saving her money for college. You got anything over there you could use her for?” “Yeah, send her over.” But in the meantime, when he was examining me—. When I left home for college, my father put a little Masonic keystone on a chain around my neck. I don’t know whether you want this in or not.

Dunham:

It’s fine.

02-00:09:07

Overton:

He spotted that. He says, “Where’d you get that?” I says, “My daddy put that on me.” “What’s your dad do?” I told him. Well, where was his lodge? Well, it was in Kansas. That was where the connection was with the man on the phone. Well, when I got up there, it was one of the head designers. What did I know about giant airplanes? Not a thing? What that program was, was that the local businessmen wanted to do their two cents worth. So they would come in, I guess about six o’clock, and maybe work—I don’t know whether they worked a full shift or how many hours. This was in the tooling division, and they had broken it down to different divisions. The men would spend two weeks in each of the various departments, and then they would take a test on it. At the end of the time, why, they checked the scores and what did the men feel that they would be the best at, and that’s where they would go. So there was so much of it. There was the foundry and the form block, stretch form block, and I don’t know what all. Templates and jig builders. So much of it was manual labor that eighty-six pounds wouldn’t do. So I would sit in the foreman’s office with a book and read. Sometime during that two weeks, he’d come and get me and take me on a tour and tell me what it was all about, and then I’d be passed on to the next department.

So in the process of doing that, one of the departments I went through was the jig builders. Well, the airplane sits in a frame that moves. They can move it manually, or parts of it go on track. To build those jigs, the Army had loaned them surveying instruments, transits and levels. Basically, what I did, I would wander around and ask questions if something interested me. Well, I was fascinated by this man that was standing behind the instruments. He’d work for five or ten minutes and, okay, and then they’d weld or something and do the job. I began to ask questions about it. Well, he was from Wichita, Kansas, and he was a building contractor that had come out to make some big money during the war. So he took me under his wing and he taught me how to use them. I don’t think I went clear through the entire program, but anyway, I marched back up, because I clocked out up in Building 18. I said, “Well, I found where I want to go.” “What is it?” “I want to be a jig builder.” So I explained. So he’s studying me: “Oh, yeah, he’s so-and-so. I know him.” So he called him and said, “This girl would like to work there.” “Yeah, send her on down.” So that was how I ended up as a transit operator. There were, I think, three or four of us women. One husband was a photographer at the *Press Telegram*. All I know is she was blonde, and she was very tall. Who the other one was, I don’t remember.

But in the meantime, in going through some of those departments is where I met my husband. It was a department that I couldn’t do anything. At pass time, when they weren’t busy, or on their lunch breaks, clocked out—Plexiglas was the latest invention. Well, the men would make hearts out of them, necklaces and things like that for their family. So I decided that I would make one. So I was bent over double, into a big trash—where scrub parts were. They had a black plastic, which was Delecto. I decided that would make

a nice one. Very, very hard, almost like wood. Harder than wood. I found a little piece, and I took it over the saw man, and he sawed out the rough edges. So then I went over to a grinding wheel, and I proceeded to try to bevel the edges. Well, here come this tall, big, gangly guy, and he said, "You can't do that." He says, "It's too hard." The plastic would more or less melt down. I told him to mind his own business. [chuckles] So it finally ended up—he ended up making it for me. But I kept saying, "I don't want a flat one, I want a fat one. I want it to have shape." So we finally got it.

But he finally asked me—well, next, off the bat, one of the men came up to me. Well, when any young male would come up to me, talk to me, one of the men on the crew would just automatically drift over. "What'd he want?" "Well, he wanted to take me fishing." He looked at me, he says, "You want to go fishing? You get your dad, and I'll take you and your dad fishing some Sunday. You don't go." So I'd go home and report this to my dad. It went on for several times. So when I come home and announced that I had a date for the next Sunday, my dad looked at me and says, "What'd your jig builder say?" I said, "They approved. They said it was all right." "Oh, all right." So when he arrived, he arrived with his sister. Years later, I asked him, I said, "Why did you bring Peg with you?" In fact, for almost six months I never had a date with him alone. It was with his sister and her fiancé—he's seven years older than I—and he said, "I figured if I had a daughter and somebody seven years older wanted to go out with her, I think I'd have somebody with her." So I was protected.

Incidentally, when the war ended and Dad was sent back to Kansas—. Well, anyway, I had met a young airman from Kansas, in Kansas, and I had more or less promised that I would be footloose and fancy free when he got home. So when I knew I was going back to Kansas, I did the honorable thing. I broke off with Leo. He wasn't very happy about it, but he had known that there was somebody in the background. But he made me promise that I would write to him and let him know that I'd settled in and got back home safely and so on. So time went on. I don't know if it was Thanksgiving or Christmastime, but anyway, I was bored one day, and I sat down and I wrote him a letter. I took it out to the kitchen, where Mother was, and I said, "I wrote Leo." She says, "Was that wise?" I said, "Well, I told him I would." So I read her the letter, and she laughed. She says, "Go ahead and send it." The sum and substance was that I said, "Well, you can see by the envelope I'm a still a little Griswold girl." That was all I said. Then I proceeded to tell him about our trip back to Kansas and that I was enrolled; I was going back to KU the following year. Or the next semester, actually.

About seventy-two hours later, there was an answer back. Same tone that mine was. He'd taken his mother back to South Dakota, to wind up some business affairs and so on. At the very end of it, "Are you going to Yellowstone this summer? Can I meet your folks there?" I answered that pretty much, it makes me no never mind. So each letter he'd write, he kept

backing it up and backing it up. Finally, I was at—was I at KU then? Anyway, he arrived Valentine's Day with a diamond. My dad had said, "Well, look. You know what your education has been costing you, health-wise. If you're serious, you're actually going to marry Leo. You stay home, build up your strength, and I'll give you the money it would cost for your school year for your wedding." So I went to work in a little grocery store in the bakery department. I sold donuts and that sort of thing.

Dunham: This is in Newton? In Kansas?

02-00:20:58

Overton: Yes. We were back in Wichita.

Dunham: Oh, right, you had gone back to Wichita.

02-00:21:01

Overton: Yeah. So after we were married in June, then we drove back to California. That was our wedding trip. [laughs] I think every American Legion group in the United States were having a convention. It was almost impossible to get hotels, motels. I stayed in some places that I wouldn't take a dog to nowadays. [laughs] But we got back to California.

Dunham: You always found a room, though, somewhere?

02-00:21:32

Overton: Oh, yeah. That was in '46. In '51, I hired back in.

Dunham: I definitely want to hear about your returning to Douglas, but let me ask you a little more back in the warfront years. So you had these protectors, if you will—

02-00:21:53

Overton: Yes. Yes.

Dunham: —who kind of were watching out for you, on behalf of your father or you family. But what about other women and men? What was kind of the social, dating—any hanky-panky in the workplace, so to speak?

02-00:22:05

Overton: Well, I rode with, started out with—he was a truck driver, and I don't know what she did. He drove trucks for Douglas, but he had been a long-distance driver. They had a club coupe with a rumble seat, and I rode the rumble seat for quite some time. Then I started driving my car, but I had a rider that lived in the next town over—Maywood, I guess it is—and I would drive over to him, and he'd get behind the wheel, and we would come in to Douglas. Back in those days, that was before flood control. One night it was terribly windy. It was one of the rainiest years they'd had in recent years. As I was coming out the end of the building, I put my umbrella up. Just about that time, the wind picked it up and me, and the umbrella took off. Two men come over and

pulled it down, closed the umbrella, and said, “You better get wet, rather than fly away.” [laughs] But the river would flood, and they would close off the bridges. I don’t remember where we finally ended up, but we couldn’t take the regular straight route up to Huntington Park. The water was over the bridge, so we had to keep detouring. Then we couldn’t get that bridge, but we made a circle around to get over the river so we could get back to Huntington Park. It was early morning hours by the time I finally got home that day. There was a complete social life, a different life. There were bowling leagues for swing shifters. My husband-to-be belonged to a bowling league.

Dunham: Which shift were you on?

02-00:24:33

Overton: I was on the swing shift, from four to twelve.

Dunham: So did you go out after swing shifts?

02-00:24:39

Overton: Yeah. Yeah, you’d go out.

Dunham: Go out bowling and—?

02-00:24:41

Overton: We’d go bowling, we’d—

Dunham: Did movie theaters have late shows here, too?

02-00:24:47

Overton: Yeah. Oh, yeah. There was a complete social life. I guess there was even dancing, ballrooms that were open almost twenty-four hours a day. You could get a steak dinner for ninety cents, so it got to the point where Leo would bring me home on Friday night. Or sometimes we were working Saturdays, and then he’d come back and get me to take me back down to Long Beach, where his parents were, and I would go to church with them. Then we’d go on out to dinner and to a play or a movie or whatever we had planned for the evening. My men used to tease me that I slept on Monday morning, or Monday evening, over my transit. They’d say, “We’re going to need you in about ten minutes. Take a walk and wake up.”

Dunham: Because you’d had quite a weekend.

02-00:25:59

Overton: Yeah. Of course, being unmarried, I don’t know how much social life the married couples had within—very often, husband and wife both worked there.

Dunham: Well, what about just the general nature of women coming in and working in these traditionally male roles? Were there any, initially, men who were resistant to that?

02-00:26:46

Overton: Oh, yes. [laughs]

Dunham: So can you tell me a little bit about that?

02-00:26:54

Overton: Actually, this was a little later. I was in the department where—I was making templates, which is a pattern for an airplane part. The sheet metal, the aluminum, would be bigger than a folding-up table, that size. Well, one woman couldn't possibly lift one of those. I know I asked. Most of the men were very, very courteous and very helpful. But this one man, I turned to him and asked him if he could help me lift it so I could take it over to the saw man to get it sawed what I need? He says, "You get the same pay I do. Take it over yourself." Turned around and walked out. Well, two other men overheard him and, boy, over they came and grabbed a piece of it. That was not the general rule that I found. Of course, I was much younger than the older people around me because what they were doing was skilled labor, and most of them had experience in it; they weren't green kids, like I was. So basically, they were very protective of me. But it was quite an experience.

Dunham: Had you heard any other stories from other women about difficulties they'd had in their own work situations or anything?

02-00:28:45

Overton: No, because, with very few exceptions, I didn't have a social life within Douglas. I had my family, I had my own activities. I'm not even sure if she's alive; I had just one person left that I worked with out there. We took a cruise together. Then I had one lead lady that I stayed friends with, and I took a trip with her. Or she took a trip with me, I should say. We went to Alaska together.

Dunham: Well, in that kind of surveying program that you did, you said, with the businessman—I realize it was through kind of that special connection you made, that you got that opportunity—were you the only woman who was doing that?

02-00:29:51

Overton: As I said, I was the only one on my shift that did it. But there was one for each shift. Those transits and levels were loaned to us from the military, from the Army, and we had an Army—I think he was a major, that was in charge of them, and we checked them into him and out. He was very conscientious that they weren't abused. We weren't allowed to just walk off and leave them. In fact, we were pretty much on display because it was something different. Any visiting dignitaries that came into the plant, they always showed us off. For one thing—if I can get up—we were told that you would to stand behind your transit or your tripod, and when you were not working, you were supposed to stand with your—like this. So you had good posture, and you looked like you were a professional. [they laugh] At one time, I had a picture of that, but well,

since I've lived out here, I got rid of a good many scrapbooks, so I don't have it. My daughter Marti has the only picture of me that I'm aware of in my clothes.

Dunham: Did you donate those anywhere, or were they just passed on? Just purged them? Your old scrapbooks.

02-00:32:02

Overton: My little sister probably latched onto the coveralls. But one of the other interesting things that I did, I worked on the C-47, which was the cargo; the B-17 bomber; the {Army or RV 6—}. Oh, dear.

Dunham: I have a list of some of them.

02-00:32:36

Overton: I keep telling you, you're twenty years too—. Well, I had worked on every plane that Douglas came through the Long Beach plant, at one time or another. I set the jig that they used to install the Norden bombsight. They came and got me in a military car, took me across the plant someplace—I don't even know where, but it was through two or three different restricted zones—and they stayed right with me every minute while I was setting them up, and then took me back to my base, wherever it was. I didn't know what I was doing until I got back. The driver, when he let me out, he says, "Do you know what you were doing?" I said, "No, not really." He says, "Well, you were setting the jig up for the Norden bombsight." There again, too much time has elapsed. Wasn't that in the tail of the plane? Or was it down in the belly?

Dunham: I should know, but I have to admit, I don't know. You're the expert.

02-00:34:12

Overton: As I say, too much time has elapsed.

Dunham: We can certainly look it up.

02-00:34:16

Overton: These are things that I have been trying to wrack my brain since I talked to Laura about it, how much I would actually remember of it, because it was a completely different world.

Dunham: Why did they specifically ask you to do that? Was to have a woman specifically do it, as a promotional thing?

02-00:34:44

Overton: No. You mean to set the bombsight?

Dunham: Yeah, to set that specific one.

02-00:34:47

Overton: No, it's just I was the only one there.

Dunham: It was just your job and you were the one to do it.

02-00:34:51

Overton: It was my job.

Dunham: And it was just an especially secure thing.

02-00:34:54

Overton: Yeah, it was a situation that come up that needed to be done, and I was there. So they came and got me. I did it and went in, back to work, doing what I was doing beforehand on another day. But one thing that just came to mind, I don't remember which airplane it was. Was it the B-17 or the C-47? But anyway, they were setting up the jigs for it, and the day crew would set it up, and they'd get their okay, and they would install that particular part. Then the next crew would come in, and we'd set up. It was off. They'd tear it down; we'd reset it. This went on for maybe a week. Finally, they figured out the line was moving. I don't think it was once a shift, but once a day. When they'd open up the doors, which is one whole end of the building, to move a plane out of that building, into the next, or to the flight ramp, it would change the temperature, and that was affecting the welds. So once they found out what was causing it, then they could remedy the situation.

Dunham: Do you know how they did remedy that?

02-00:36:45

Overton: Well, I assume that they would not move it until the seam, the welding, had completely cooled down so that it wouldn't change the temperature of it. See, if the jig moved, that affected the whole airplane. So it was one of these things that was a new industry in terms of mass production that way.

Dunham: Did you have specific targets or quotas around how fast or how many?

02-00:37:25

Overton: No. Naturally, they wanted it yesterday. They had incentives. I know someplace in my jewelry box, if my kid sister hasn't raided it, they had an E with wings on it that was given when we had made a certain quota or accomplished something or other.

Dunham: So you really enjoyed working, though, with the jig and sitting—you had picked that.

02-00:38:19

Overton: Yes.

Dunham: Was it still challenging?

02-00:38:22

Overton: Yes, it was. You were working with surveying instruments, which are very temperamental, and you had to keep them—before I'd take a reading, I had to

check from all different angles, that everything was right where it was supposed to be. If we waited ten or fifteen minutes, I still had to go back and go through this routine, to be sure that I'd covered my bases, that I wasn't causing any discrepancies.

Dunham: How long did the training take, specific to this work then? Do you know, about?

02-00:39:10

Overton: Oh, I followed this man around for two weeks, and in the course of that time he was showing me how to do it. I don't remember whether I went with him after I was actually transferred into that group. It didn't take a college education to do it.

Dunham: Okay. Did you join a union?

02-00:39:51

Overton: Not at that time. That came when I came back, after the war. I worked there twenty-three years.

Dunham: Let's talk about when you came back in '51, then.

02-00:40:04

Overton: Okay. In '51, we were living and managing Mother's cottage apartments, and we decided we wanted a house. Well, of course, the fact that we weren't veterans, we didn't have any of the veterans' benefits.

Dunham: The GI Bill.

02-00:40:27

Overton: So we figured the only way we were going to get out of that apartment was for me to go to work so we could get a down payment. And that was what we did. We bought the house in '51. So apparently, the unions came in before because I had worked there six weeks, and we went out on strike.

Dunham: Yeah, I was familiar. There was a strike in both '51 and '52, I believe, right?

02-00:41:11

Overton: Yes. I don't remember how long we were out. Were we out six weeks? More than that? I don't know. It's too much water under the bridge. But we moved into the house. The apartments were furnished, but being the owner's daughter and being the manager, we'd begin to buy our own furniture and put Mother's in the storage area. So we thought we had enough to set up a house. Well, we had no rugs on the floor, we had no refrigerator, didn't have a washer or dryer. The house did have a garbage disposal. But anyway, when we finally settled the strike and got our first paycheck, the merchants were on the curb, waiting for the Douglas employees to get there.

In the meantime, back in those days, the Helms [Bakery] man had a truck that came through with bread and baked goods and all that. The milkman delivered milk to your door or to your refrigerator or what have you. So I think it was the Foremost Dairy delivery man rang my doorbell one day and wanted to know if I wouldn't like to—that I was new—and wouldn't I like to take the milk? I said, "We're out on strike. I don't have a refrigerator." He says, "That's no problem. I'll bring ice and put it into your washtub," that's permanent, with water over it. That, he did. He brought the ice, he delivered the milk. So until after he retired—maybe till I moved; I don't even remember—but we had the same milk man. A competitor rang my doorbell one day and wanted to know if he could deliver milk to me. I said, "No, I have a delivery." "Oh, but mine is so much better," and he'd begin to do all the things that he said they had, that I didn't have. I said, "Well, it's like this. If you can get Emil to come and work for you, yes, I'll leave in a minute. But," I said, "until that said time, I'm not interested." He said, "You're not buying milk, you're buying a service." I said, "You better believe it." [laughs] But he watched my children grow. He was the one that—I think it was Martha, we were having problems with formula—and he came in one day. He let himself in, and he serviced my box, because I worked. He told me when I needed this and when I needed that, and that's when he left it.

Dunham: Were you able to be on credit for a little bit, while you were on strike, also? When you said the merchants were waiting—or was it just because people would have money?

02-00:45:01

Overton: No, no, the merchants were at the curb, waiting for us to come in.

Dunham: Yeah, yeah, to spend.

02-00:45:12

Overton: But the first paycheck that I had after I went back to work, I bought staples. I bought beans, I bought flour, I bought sugar. The cupboards were practically bare. My folks kept saying, "Are you all right? Do you need anything?" "No, Mama, we're doing fine. We're getting by." When they found out how we did it, they just exploded. "Well, we would have sent you money each month, if you needed it." We didn't want to be in debt when it was over with. We survived. But it was rough days.

Dunham: When you returned to Douglas, you were doing the same type of work, working with the jig?

02-00:46:07

Overton: No. No.

Dunham: What were you doing then?

02-00:46:10

Overton:

The fact that I had experience was one foot in the door, or at least a finger or thumb. The fact that my husband worked there, and I had an inside voice as to who was hiring, what was happening, that helped. I could always get in the door. When I went back in '51, in the meantime, I went out to City College, and I took a business course. I was never a speed typist, but I could type for ten, fifteen minutes, five minutes or whatever, with one or no mistakes. So my typing teacher said, "You may have trouble getting the job, but you'll keep it when they find out that you don't have to redo it so many times." So I didn't concentrate on—I took typing, but I also took business machines and all that sort of thing, and billing. So when I went out, I was going to go into the office, that type of work.

While sitting in the little cubicle with the interviewer, there was another, and I was hearing the conversation over there. What they were offering me, I think it was ninety-two cents an hour at that time, in '51. I said, "What's that lady over there?" Or maybe it was even a man; I don't remember. "What are they applying for?" "Oh, they're going to be a sealer." I said, "What's a sealer do?" "Oh, you wouldn't want that. It's a dirty job. They work with glues and things. It's messy." I said, "Yes, but it pays so much more." "Well, yeah, it does." I said, "Look, I'm not out here to win no beauty prize, I want money for a house." I said, "You got any more openings over there?" "Yeah." "That's what I want." So I hired out as a sealer. If I had one vain thing, it was my hands. I used to model for art classes when I was in college for my hands. When I saw all this gooey stuff, and some of the girls, their nails were a mess, I thought, that's not for me. So they issued you rubber gloves. I said, "Okay, you learn to use those rubber gloves." So I put on the rubber gloves, and I had my weekly manicure, and I'd come in and the girls would look at me [she mimics a noise].

But I could always get in the plant, as a sealer. So then I learned that after I'd been there for a while, I'd look around and see what looked interesting. Then I would apply for a transfer. That's why I worked at so many different things. I worked as a template maker. That—my husband was a foreman in that department. The powers that be eventually discovered it. Husband and wife couldn't work in the same department, so they just shoved my desk down [laughs] to another group, so I wasn't under him, and I went right on my merry way.

Dunham:

Oh, so you're still doing the same job, but just not within his—

02-00:50:24

Overton:

Yeah. I had a different foreman. But I had a knack for tracing paper. As I said, there's tons of paper in an airplane. The worker sells to the inspector; the inspector has to sell—it just goes up the chain of command. Airplanes aren't bought and sold like automobiles. They'll sign up for an airplane, and they pay for it by stages from one building to the next. Well, if they aren't

financially ready for it they'll give up their spot in the line, and somebody else, another company, will take it. So each building, all of the paperwork has to clear that building, before it can go to the next building.

Well, I accidentally stumbled into that job when a foreman was having trouble with his paperwork. I don't know how he got my name. Maybe through my husband, I don't know. But anyway, he came and got me and asked if I would help him out. Well, it was fascinating to me. At the time I quit I was the only person that had ever cleared every piece of paper as it went from one building to the other. What they couldn't sell off they negotiated with the next building of what they would assume the responsible for. I had it down to one piece of paper, and I knew where it was, what happened to it, but I couldn't produce the paper. At that point inspection asked if I would like to be an inspector, and I told them, "No, thank you." I didn't want any part of that.

Dunham: Why was that?

02-00:52:56

Overton: Oh, there was a lot of pressure on it, and it could be very political, and I didn't want any part of it. But it was fascinating work. I worked on that, I don't remember how many—. But anyway, I would work my shift, and then if there was overtime they'd make me go back into the department I came out of. Finally, I had enough of that. I went to them and I said, "Look, if I'm good enough to do this the eight hours a day, I want to do it the other two hours or whatever it is." I said, "This having to go change clothes," because I would wear better clothes, good slacks and things like that, for the paperwork; but to get up and crawl around the airplane, why, I had to get into coveralls or—

Dunham: Was that doing sealing, or some other—?

02-00:54:15

Overton: No. What did we do there? We were working on the floors, the cabin floors. Before they finally seal off the floors, before they can start putting other stuff on top of it, every bit of the airplane is X-rayed so they know where every nut, bolt, and screw, false teeth, what have you, is down there. Well, they don't want to take up any more of the floor than they have to, so they—and of course, they have all this fiberglass insulation already in, and you have to go down and crawl. Well, I was the only one small enough to get into that last hole, so I would have to go down in, and the inspector would come along and tell me—he would tap on the floor with his pencil, and I would follow the tap. Then he'd say, "Okay, now three {asterons?} up." I would go up. "Okay, now where?" "Oh, about two to three inches in." Then I'd get under the fiberglass and feel. "Here it is." Then I'd crawl back and hand it out, and they'd glue it onto the x-ray. That was one of the joys.

Dunham: Was that part of why they kept getting you for the overtime, to do that particular place that nobody else could get to?

02-00:56:04

Overton:

I probably did it some on overtime. I can't really remember what. Every so often, they would bring airplanes back in and overhaul them, take all the wiring out. There were miles of wiring and all. They would beef up whatever needed to be done. The airplane was built, so it was off on the back field someplace. The working conditions weren't the best, for convenience or restrooms and the whole thing. You'd have to go into the closest building for the restrooms and whatnot.

Speaking of working during the war years, they had the main cafeteria; but then they had, between buildings, they had tented—well, the side walls might be—basically, they were tents. They would bring the food out because you couldn't get from the back, the last building, up to the cafeteria and back and eat in the time allotted. So we would do that. Of course, the men used to tease me that I was a bottomless pit. My mother would pack me huge lunches, and by the first break, that was gone. It usually ended up I had to go to the cafeteria for dinner. One man even suggested, "Are you sure you don't have a tape worm?" I said, "No."

Dunham:

Having that much of an appetite, was that new, with doing the more physical work? Or had you always had a hearty appetite?

02-00:58:21

Overton:

Probably the physical work, because—

Dunham:

Yeah, yeah , you needed it.

02-00:58:25

Overton:

—at eighty-two pounds, I didn't—believe it or not, I had a sixteen-inch waistline.

Dunham:

Oh, my goodness!

02-00:58:34

Overton:

My husband could take his hands and touch fingers.

Dunham:

Wow. Well, we're just about out on the second tape. I don't know how you're doing. I have a few things I'd like to ask you about, if you're up for a little bit more.

Begin Audiofile 3 08-09-2011.mp3

Dunham:

This is tape three with Bonnie Overton, on August 9, 2011. You were just telling me, when the tape ended, about when you became a lead—what was the title?

03-00:00:17

Overton:

When I was a lead, I went on third shift for about three months.

Dunham: That's graveyard?

03-00:00:31

Overton:

That's graveyard, yes. I think I had thirteen in my crew. They were all black. That was during the period of time of the riots in Los Angeles, and my folks were pretty concerned about it. Well, I'll back up a little bit on that. When I first took that crew on, on third shift, coming in at night, I discovered somebody was trailing me in my car. Well, I was a little bit apprehensive, but I went ahead and parked. I thought, "Well, maybe I'm mistaken." But when I parked, coming in like that, we were clear to the back of the parking lot. This car pulled in beside me. Well, I didn't know whether to get out or just what to do. But he stepped out first, and I saw it was one of my crew members. He says, "I'll walk you in." So we went in together. Well, at the last break, which—I can't tell you what time in the morning; it was in the early hours of the morning, he came to me. He says, "If you will trust me with your car keys, I will move your car up front." What the men all did was, at that break, they'd go get their cars from the back, and by the time the swing shift had gone home, then there was parking up front. So from that time on, he would come and get my keys, move my car, bring me my keys back. So when all this rioting was going on, my folks were so very concerned about it. I said, "Well, if push comes to shove," I said, "I'll back myself in the corner and put Willy in front of me, and I'll be perfectly safe."

We got the line caught up. In fact, I think we got it a little less than the three months, and then we got to go back on days. But that was rough, because I had school children by that time. We'd go to bed about nine o'clock or ten, and then I would set my alarm for about eleven. I'd get up, and I'd go to work. Then I'd come home in the morning, in time to get the children's breakfast and get them off to school, and then I'd go to bed. I finally got the eye masks. I remember my daughter—she was probably in first or second grade by that time—she was leaning over the bed and she pulled the guard up. "Mama, you under there?" I said, "What are you doing home?" "Well, school's out." Because normally, I'd try to be up before they got home from school. But it was trying times.

Dunham: You did the graveyard for three months.

03-00:04:11

Overton:

Yeah.

Dunham: This was in the sixties?

03-00:04:17

Overton:

Yes.

Dunham: Aside from the riots and everything, there was that tension, did anything ever happen with your group?

03-00:04:24

Overton: Not in the plant or not in the crew.

Dunham:

And it was a combination of men and women that you were over, in that group of thirteen?

03-00:04:34

Overton: On the graveyard, I think I had just one woman and the twelve men, but I had a mixed group during the daylight hours.

Dunham:

There was never any problem from the men, with you as a supervisor?

03-00:04:48

Overton: No, not really.

Dunham:

Well, I shouldn't say there wasn't any.

03-00:04:55

Overton: I don't know whether I want to put this down or not.

Dunham:

Well, as I said, it's just as well to put it down, and I promise you can review it.

03-00:05:00

Overton: Well, I had one man that was arguative; I think he did more for just the sake of argument. But I think the subject came up of mixed marriage. I declared myself; I said, "No, I don't believe in it. I don't think that's right." "Well, why?" I said, "Well, I'm not concerned about me or you." I said, "I'm thinking about the children we'd have." I said, "This is a hard enough world anyway. But you get mixed-blood children; they are going to have a hard row to hoe." I said, "And I don't think that we have the right to do that." He'd never thought of it that way. That was just one isolated case, but basically we got on very well.

Dunham:

But there weren't any issues, just as accepting you as a supervisor, as a woman?

03-00:06:19

Overton: No. They didn't say anything about it. Of course, I brought cookies and things like that in. [they laugh]

Dunham:

Well, that helps. So on the day shift, you were in that role—

03-00:06:30

Overton: Yes.

Dunham:

—as well as lead, so you did that for quite some time?

03-00:06:36

Overton: A couple of years, yes.

Dunham: Did you enjoy doing that?

03-00:06:44

Overton: Yes. Not as much as I enjoyed the paperwork that I did out on the flight ramp. I enjoyed that very much.

Dunham: So that was your preferred role, of all the many things you did?

03-00:06:55

Overton: Yeah. Yeah. I could go my own pace. I had to turn in a report to the building superintendent every night, but that was no problem. He never challenged me on anything because I was doing the job. I was doing more than a lot of them had done, in terms of finding the paperwork. If I couldn't find it on what they called the—what did we call them? Well, the chicken boards. I would go into the files—which technically, I had no business being there, but they knew why I was there—and if I could find it, I would take it over to a copy machine and make a copy of it, put the original back where I found it, and take my copy. They knew where to go if they needed their original then. But it was pretty much I was my own boss, and I enjoyed that. There's enough red tape in a place like that anyway. [laughs]

Dunham: Back to thinking about the ethnic makeup of the workers. Back during the war years, what was the makeup of the workers then, in terms of racial diversity, geographic, where people had come from? Was it quite varied?

03-00:08:42

Overton: I think it was probably very varied, because as I said, my partner when I was riveting was a schoolteacher from Iowa. You had all types and kinds. Big, little, fat, skinny.

Dunham: Yeah. With all these people coming together and in all hours of the night—

03-00:09:05

Overton: There were some that were there strictly on the make. If you were looking for whatever you were looking for, you could find it there. [chuckles] I wasn't looking. It could get a little raunchy at times, and I discovered that my best weapon was to play dumb. They'd tell me a shady story and I'd just—I just didn't get it. It soon reached the point, "Don't bother telling her; she doesn't get it anyway." So that was my biggest defense against it. I realized I was out of my element completely. But there were a lot of good people out there, too.

Dunham: Sure.

03-00:10:00

Overton: It was humanity.

Dunham: Yeah. Well, that being said, I appreciate how you avoided that. [they laugh] What kind of on-the-make kind of things were going on there? Was it more in the graveyard or swing shift?

03-00:10:18

Overton:

Well, the brass all went home at the end of the day shift, so the swing and graveyard were much more relaxed than the day shift was. Now, it wasn't at all uncommon to see Donald Douglas, in a white coverall, coming up and down the aisles. There were a lot of little dynasties in various departments. My husband had one man in his department that had worked with Donald Douglas in a bicycle shop in Santa Monica. If things didn't go to suit Harry, he'd step to the phone, call Donald, and tell him about it.

Dunham:

Call Donald?

03-00:11:22

Overton:

His pet expression was, "To hell mit 'em!" I don't remember if he was from Sweden. He was of foreign descent. Nobody bothered him; they left him alone. He had a pipeline right to the top. [laughs]

Dunham:

Related to that, what was the overall culture of Douglas, relative to the war, in terms of patriotism, in terms of the company itself and its leader? How did people feel? Or was it more, as you had, to at least some extent, needed to make money to save for school, initially; later, for a house?

03-00:12:10

Overton:

Everybody had their own agenda. But basically, you were there to get the war over, so you could get back to living like you were before. But you didn't. Times change. But there was the bonds. You could take out of your check to buy bonds, and you could do it one bond a month, or out of each check, or however you wanted it.

Dunham:

Was that strictly voluntary?

03-00:12:42

Overton:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Of course, we had our own credit union.

Dunham:

Was there any kind of healthcare? Or what about women with young children?

03-00:12:59

Overton:

No, at that point in time, they didn't have childcare.

Dunham:

So how did they make do, women who were—?

03-00:13:06

Overton:

Well, that was each person's individual problem, how they handled it. Whether there was a grandmother at home or a neighbor. I suppose the preschools got started during that period of time, and the nursery schools and that sort of thing. But there again, I wasn't of the age, where that wasn't my problem.

Dunham: Right. You were saving your money for school, and also enjoying a little bit of the wartime social life, the bowling alley.

03-00:13:37

Overton: Yes. Yes.

Dunham: What were the movies like? Do you remember movies you saw then, and the newsreels and that kind of thing? And what movie theaters you would've gone to?

03-00:13:46

Overton: Well, so many of my years were swing shift that even on television, there are great gaps of people; I'll say, "Who's that?" "Oh, you remember them; they were in—" Uh-uh. I was working nights then; I didn't see that. So same way with the movies. During the war—how did I get into it? Well, you've heard about the Hollywood Canteen.

Dunham: Remind me. Remind us.

03-00:14:28

Overton: Well, Hollywood decided that they would have a glorified serviceman's club. I don't even remember where they had it. But men in uniform could go there, and there was dancing and ping-pong and free food, snack food. I don't know what all they actually had. The movie stars would come and socialize. Of course, that was the place to be. Well, then at the various ports, they'd set up auxiliaries, still called the Hollywood Canteen. But they had one down in San Pedro, and I think there was another one in Santa Monica. Every port had them.

Well, it was a very select group. You had to go before a review board and be interviewed, and then you had a custom-made dress. One of my friends at City College, her grandmother— she was living with this grandmother, and I don't know what the connection was, but she belonged to it, and she got me into it. So I was measured for my dress. It was navy blue. It looked like a warrant officer's. The badge was the cross—I think it was between the storekeeper and the—I don't remember. But anyway, it was enough to confuse the sailors as to just what we were. [they laugh] I worked the canteen in San Pedro. In fact, I spent V-J night, and I didn't get home till—it was supposed to be, I think, till about 11:00 o'clock, and it was between 2:00 and 3:00, before I got home. An Admiral brought me home. Brought three of us home. But they wouldn't let the men off base, so all they had was this canteen. I stood at the counter for two or three hours and did nothing but pour coffee. They'd hand me another pot, and I'd pour coffee. At about midnight or thereabouts, one of the officers came and got two of us and said, "Take a break." They took us [on] a tour of the facility. Now, there's your segregation. They took me to another lounge that was all black. They had all the things we had, but it was segregated.

Dunham: And did they have young black women who were there, as well, in roles similar to yours?

03-00:18:08

Overton: You know, I don't remember. [laughs]

Dunham: Well, you just saw that on the tour that time. So was it that you were always pouring the coffee? Or you were socializing beyond that and dancing?

03-00:18:20

Overton: On a normal week night—and I don't remember what night I had, though it was probably on a Friday night—there were gaps. The canteen was considered on base, so the men could come in. But then you could visit with them. We didn't have dancing facilities or anything like that there. But they could get something to eat, and conversation. But we were not allowed to leave with any of them. When we left there, we had to go home and change clothes if we were going to go out afterwards. We could not go anywhere—restaurant, bar, anything—in that uniform.

Dunham: But they couldn't go off base, so you couldn't date them?

03-00:19:21

Overton: No. No.

Dunham: But did anybody ever find a way around that?

03-00:19:26

Overton: I don't know. I didn't.

Dunham: Things happen in that kind of situation.

03-00:19:29

Overton: I had my own social life.

Dunham: What made you want to do that? Your friend was doing it. Was there an official title for your role?

03-00:19:43

Overton: Well, we were "Hostess," I guess you would say. But we were a member of the Hollywood Canteen. It was something that not every girl got to be in.

Dunham: Was there an interview process, then, for that?

03-00:20:00

Overton: Yeah, there was. I can't remember who or where.

Dunham: This was near the end of the war that you were doing this? Or after you'd come back from—. Or had you done it before, too? Because you mentioned you were there on V-J Day.

03-00:20:27

Overton: Now you've got me stumped.

Dunham: [laughs] I'm sorry. I said I wouldn't be particular about dates.

03-00:20:31

Overton: On that, a WAVE rang my mother's doorbell and wanted—well, the reason she was, my baby sister'd arrived, was playing in the doorway. And this WAVE saw her and stopped and talked to her and played with her and peek-a-booed. Mother came to the door. Well, to make a long story short, she wanted a room. She wanted to move in. How she talked Mother into it, I don't know, and then me, but she moved in as my roommate. Do you remember the Ice Capades, that skating show that was so popular?

Dunham: Mm-hmm.

03-00:21:43

Overton: There was a team, Frick and Frack, was a comedy team on skates. Well, anyway, she was engaged to one of those boys, and they tried out for the Capades. He made it, but she didn't. Well, that broke them up. So to make a long story short, when I would go on duty, I wore her overcoat and her regulation shoes. So I was in authentic uniform, which I probably shouldn't have been in because they didn't all have the regulation shoes or the overcoats.

Dunham: But you had been accepted into it?

03-00:22:36

Overton: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Dunham: You weren't just filling in for her.

03-00:22:40

Overton: When Virginia was home on leave one time, we were going to go to the Hollywood Canteen. She was going to put me in one of her uniforms. I chickened out. I didn't think I could carry it out. So I had never been in the Hollywood Canteen as such. But I sure did my duty down there in the [laughs] {inaudible?}. The pins that we wore on our collars were NAA, Naval Aid Auxiliary. If I dug deep enough, I probably would find them.

Dunham: Well, that would fun to see. Well, I just wanted to finish the timeline a little bit, about the warfront years, because I know you went back to University of Kansas. And you were there for two years?

03-00:23:46

Overton: No, I was there one year. I had one year at City College and one year at KU.

Dunham: So one year back there, and then you got married.

03-00:23:53  
Overton: Yes. And then came back to California.

Dunham: So that was in '44, that you came back to California?

03-00:24:02  
Overton: No.

Dunham: '45?

03-00:24:05  
Overton: '46.

Dunham: Oh, '46, after the war. But you were out at V-J Day, in '45. You came back and forth some—

03-00:24:15  
Overton: Yeah, yeah.

Dunham: —because you were visiting, I take it, then.

03-00:24:19  
Overton: Yeah.

Dunham: All right, well, that clarifies it for me a bit. Well, is there anything else you would like to share about either your experiences at Douglas, or are there any other aspects of the planes and things you worked on that—?

03-00:24:35  
Overton: Well, as I said, I worked on the—I'm trying to remember; it's a B-something.

Dunham: The B-17?

03-00:24:47  
Overton: No, it was after that.

Dunham: No, beyond that? Okay, later.

03-00:24:49  
Overton: I started in on the very first, on that airplane. I worked when it was still more or less experimental.

Dunham: Was that the B-66 Destroyer? No? I have in '54 that that came out.

03-00:25:21  
Overton: It wasn't the A-26, it was the B-something or other.

Dunham: Yeah, I have B-66; during the war. I see BTD destroyer in '43, but that would've been in between. Well, anyway.

03-00:25:36

Overton:

At one time or another, I worked on every plane that went to Long Beach in some capacity or the other. I did many things there. As I say, I worked as a sealer; I was a template maker; I was a jig builder; I worked special assignments out on the flight ramp. My husband retired, and it never ever occurred to me that I wouldn't—. We worked together all those years; I thought that we'd retire together. But he's seven years older than I am. I couldn't retire; I wasn't old enough. So he retired, and I worked. He was basically a semi-invalid for years, for oh, over twenty years. He worked, because he had—when his health begin to go down on him, he transferred out of the tooling division and went in as a planner. That was all paperwork, desk work. He carried a terrific amount of knowledge in his head. He had a freak accident. He fell off the roof of our house, putting television antenna up, and he broke his back in two places, the width of the rungs of the ladder. So the men would come to the hospital, pick his brains. When he finally got out of the hospital, he was in a steel brace. Of course, he was wanting to get back to work. They put a restriction; he couldn't lift anything heavier than a telephone book. They finally got him back in.

But I realized that—well, the thing that broke the camel's back for me was that I worked on—I don't know if it was a Saturday; it must've been a Saturday. Anyway, he was supposed to pick me up from work and he didn't. Wouldn't you know, all the pay telephones outside Douglas were out of order. So I walked over to City College, which was three or four blocks over, and I couldn't find a telephone there. It ended up I walked home, which was in Lakewood. When I got home, the morning paper was still in the driveway, so I knew something was wrong. So it ended up I called an ambulance, and we got him in the hospital. But I realized that I had to get out of there. I had to be home to take care of him. I went out with the Christmas holiday—and we were closed that week—and I did not go back. I had retired. My last couple of years at Douglas were the most unhappy of my life. Of course, by that time, Douglas consolidated with—well, it was in St. Louis, because the headquarters became there. Then, eventually, Boeing got into the act, and now it's completely Boeing. But the working conditions—I sound bigoted.

Dunham:

That's okay, we don't have to end there, but it's good to hear.

03-00:30:22

Overton:

This, you probably better delete. The union was very, very active, and it was very, very black. The last department that I was in, I was in a sub-assembly department; I can't even tell you what I was building. But I had a black lady as my assistant foreman. My partner was a black lady. Well, the two of them would sit at her desk with their coffee in the morning. If I wasn't at my jig with a tool in my hand when the first whistle went off, she'd call me on it. The other woman, the woman could sit there for ten or fifteen minutes and visit. Finally, something happened. I can't even tell you now. But anyway, I asked to see a union steward. They are required, within law, that they have to answer

a call within a certain length of time. At the last possible moment, here he come wondering in, a black boy. Well, I was shut down before I ever started. So then I asked, another day, I wanted to go over to the retirement board and talk to them. “You can’t do that.” She wouldn’t do it. Finally, I said, “Look, I am going to the retirement board. If you don’t give me a pass to go, I will clock out and go. But I will tell them why I clocked out, and then I’ll come back in, and I’ll clock in.”

Well, I set up my date that I would go out, with the Christmas, and I would not go back in in January. So I went back to my job, walked up to her desk, picked her pencil up off her desk, reached over to her calendar, flipped it over, and I put a great big circle on. I says, “That’s my last day here.” “You can’t do that! We’ll have to train somebody.” I said, “You better start training them, because I’m out of here.” So to add insult to injury, if we were going to call an inspector, we had a little stand that you put a card up on it, and that would tell him that you wanted an inspector. So my little card, each day, I counted off the days, with a big number on it. Well, then she came around to me. I guess I’m basically lazy because if there was an easier way to do it, I’m going to figure it out. So I had what they call shop aids, little tools that I had made to make my job easier.

Dunham: Or more efficient, it sounds like.

03-00:33:54

Overton:

So she come along, she says, “I want all of those on my desk when you leave.” Well, the inspector happened to overhear that, and he knew what was going on. He says, “Take them over to the saw, and cut them all up.” I said, “No, I can’t do that.” But I showed him where the drawer was. I said, “When you come in the next day, if they’re still there, you take them. I don’t care what you do with them.” But I would’ve bet my bottom dollar—because I had turned many of those in for employee suggestions, and they were all turned down—if they weren’t destroyed ahead of time, I bet she took credit for every one of those. Of course, they were many.

Dunham: Was she involved in turning them down?

03-00:35:00

Overton:

She wouldn’t okay them.

Dunham: Oh. So was she your supervisor?

03-00:35:04

Overton:

She was my supervisor. It left a very bad taste in my mouth, and I’m ashamed to admit it. And I had some very dear friends that are black, so I’m no more bigoted than, I guess, the average American is. In fact, we’ve got a man and his wife just around the corner that are lovely, lovely people. My feeling, in terms of ruling them out, that they can’t live in this area or that area, if they’ve got the money to maintain it in the standard it’s supposed to be, more power to

them. We're all trying to do better than our parents did. We want to move up a little bit, if we can. They have every right to, too.

Dunham: With all that tension that was there, and frustration, did it ever, verbally or whatever, escalate into anything, or just what you described?

03-00:36:19

Overton:

I was not vocal with it. I'm not an agitator. There may have been instances in other parts of the plant; I don't know. But I did not take an active part in the union meetings. They got eight hours of my day; that was enough. I had my family and my responsibilities there, so I wasn't interested in politics. I know in any big company, there are problems. I know that the foremen had a big Christmas party every year, and my husband would go, but he never took me. I got more lovely things that I bought for myself, for what my ticket would've cost. So finally, one time, I exploded. [laughs] I said, "Why?" He says, "Honey, what goes on at those dinners, I wouldn't subject you to them. I don't want you to be even around them." He made his point.

This doesn't pertain to it at all, but it tells you a lot about my husband. He never, ever raised his voice. That just wasn't him. Had a *keen* sense of humor, dry humor. I'm Irish, I'm explosive. I don't hold a grudge. I erupt, and then it's over with. When we first moved out to Lakewood, there was a Thrifty drugstore at the corner of Bellflower and the triangle. We'd stop there and have us a Coke. Then at the other end of the block, was a Thrifty Mart grocery store, and we'd stop, get groceries, and then we'd go on home. Well, something had ticked me off; I have no idea what, at this point. But we were sitting at the soda fountain, almost nose to nose, with our Cokes. I was chewing him out one side and down the other, and he never took his eyes off me, just listened intently. When I got all through, dead silence. I said, "Well, damn it, say something!" He put the money for the bill on, got ahold of my arm, lifted me up. "My dear, you've said it all." We left. I told my mother, she just howled. You can't fight with somebody like that. My kids say, "I never, ever heard you and Daddy fight or argue." I laughed, and I said, "That's why we had separate bedrooms; you kids' bedrooms are on the other side of the house." I said, "What we said was said in the privacy of our own bedroom."

Dunham: Well, those Christmas parties, then, did he go to just because, his position in the company, he was sort of obligated to go?

03-00:40:03

Overton:

Yes.

Dunham: But it was something, it sounds, he would not have wanted to go to.

03-00:40:06

Overton:

No. No.

Dunham: Well, not to end on the end of your career—I'm sorry that it did end like that—but looking back on the broader perspective of your career, what is your perspective on all the work and contribution you made there?

03-00:40:26

Overton: Well, I was just one very small cog in a great big wheel. But I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything. I think it broadened my life, because I met people I would never ever have met otherwise. We did do good. We won the war. But no, it was a good experience. I think that every woman should work—I won't say X number of years, because it depends upon the person—before they marry. I had the experience that I went directly from my father's home to my husband's. He paid all the bills; he set me up on a little pedestal. I still can't balance a checkbook. By education, he was an accountant. Because of the war he got into the aerospace industry, and that's where his career was. But that's not good for a woman. We need to have the self-confidence to be able—. To these young women that want to have a career, but they want a family, and they want to do it alone. Now, my daughter is a police sergeant. She's a career woman. She married very young. He was an alcoholic. He was older. It didn't last long. I can't even tell you know how long it was, but she took her maiden name back, and she has no desire to—. The type of work she does, why, it isn't conducive to try to raise children by yourself. But she's sure a good Andy.

Dunham: That's wonderful. Well, do you feel, then, the work you did and other women working there in some ways, did help make it, though, more like—I understand that yours took the course, you went straight from your father's to your husband—but helped? I guess could you also say a little bit about some of the work you said you've done to help education for women? Because I think that certainly is where that comes from.

03-00:43:26

Overton: Yes. PEO is an international women's group that works towards scholarships, grants, and loans for women to further their education. We give scholarships to girls graduating out of high school; we send girls to Cotter College, which I think I told you, is the college that we own. And we accept candidates from all over the world. We have girls coming in from Asia, you name it. In fact, I can show you our monthly magazine that we get. We do millions of dollars a year. Our sole purpose is to make money to fund these various scholarships and grants. There's scholarships for women that have dropped out of college, had their families, got their family going, now they're going back; or they're going for a masters or a doctorate. This sort of thing is to help further their education. I feel it's very worthwhile.

Dunham: Well, as I said, I wanted to make sure we mentioned that, because it feeds directly into what I think you said, which was very profound, that it is better for women to— It may not be working per se, but to have a certain level of independence first.

03-00:45:21

Overton:

Yes. Well, I used to tell my husband—of course, the money I made in the years I worked at Douglas, it all went in the bank. I wasn't on an allowance. I would say, "I want money that is mine and mine alone." He says, "Honey, you know what's in the bank, you know our expenses, you get what you need." I said, "I don't care if it's ten cents a week or a month, but if I want to spend it one penny at a time, it's mine." He could never understand my feeling, that I needed that independence when, basically, I wasn't making a much as he did. But I was making a very good living wage. It all went into a general fund. I don't know whether that's good or bad, but that's the way we handled it.

Dunham:

Well, you felt strongly you wanted some portion of that sort of set aside. That was important to you. So I think I understand, but you deferred in that case.

03-00:46:48

Overton:

I always thought I would go back to school. At one point in my life, I worked for a government agency that gave tests to doctors from foreign countries to get their license in the United States. It was amazing. It developed that American boys and girls could not get into medical school in the United States. They would go overseas, get their training, come back and take the test to be able to practice in the United States. I think that says something for what's wrong with our system. It's, I guess, even more difficult now. They say at Long Beach State, it's practically impossible to get in. My little niece has got her résumés out now. Probably a good percentage of them will go to the junior college for two years, so then they can transfer in at upper class level. Expensive-wise, that's about the only way they can do it. These two, nine chances out of ten, will go on complete scholarships, because the little one had the highest—what?—STAT score?

Dunham:

SAT, maybe?

03-00:48:44

Overton:

Yeah, of the entire school. At their honor assembly, there were seven or eight different divisions in it, and she took every one of them. When they got down to the very last, the outstanding student of the year, the principal was reading all the qualifications. When he got through, the student body said, "Monte, Monica Overton." It was. She was their student of the year. She's a little bitty thing.

Dunham:

This is, you said, your niece? No, this is your granddaughter?

03-00:49:32

Overton:

This is my granddaughter.

Dunham:

So just like her grandma.

03-00:49:35

Overton:

I'm a very doting grandmother. I've got pictures all over the house.