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Berkeley, California

Dorothy Owens

Rosie the Riveter

World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2012

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Dorothy Owens

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Interview #1 June 7, 2012

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01-00:00:07

Rigelhaupt: It is June 7, 2012. I am in Arlington, Virginia, doing an oral history interview with Dorothy Owens. To start, I like to ask people if they could say their full name, perhaps a maiden name if applicable, and where and when you were born.

01-00:00:30

Owens: I was a maiden lady at that time, and I was born on October 23, 1921, in in Forney, Texas. It's quite close to Dallas. Went north with my father and the rest of the family for him to get a PhD and for me to go to first grade. My New York schooling, I'm sure, carried over a great deal, because they didn't know where I was from. Long Island had not ever, in the first grade at least, had not heard much about Texas. But we got along. It was all right.

01-00:01:54

Rigelhaupt: You went to New York in 1927?

01-00:01:57

Owens: Yes.

01-00:01:58

Rigelhaupt: What are some of your earliest memories of Texas?

01-00:02:06

Owens: Helping Daddy milk the cow, ride the pony, read pony books. And leaving Texas, mainly. Leaving all my dolls and goodies behind. I had one trunk—it was about this size—to pack everything in that was going to be mine. It was helpful, but not nearly enough space. Even that came along. We found that New York children were playing up against the wall. If they had one wall, they had a game for it. You didn't need any toys, really, because you had so many games.

01-00:02:51

Rigelhaupt: What was your father studying that brought him to New York? You said your father went to New York to get his PhD

01-00:02:59

Owens: He went to NYU, yes.

01-00:03:01

Rigelhaupt: What was he studying?

01-00:03:03

Owens: He was studying economics and international relations.

01-00:03:08

Rigelhaupt: Did he, after he finished his PhD, accept a teaching position in New York?

01-00:03:13

Owens:

Yes. He finished a PhD at the same time my mother got her bachelor's degree. Then they splurged and went to Europe. Which is other way of celebrating, I think. He said his French wasn't acceptable though.

01-00:03:38

Rigelhaupt:

What was your mother studying while she was in school?

01-00:03:41

Owens:

She was studying literature, English literature.

01-00:03:46

Rigelhaupt:

Did your parents ever talk about whether it was common for your mother, as a woman, to be studying, going to college? This would have been the late twenties. Was that normal?

01-00:04:03

Owens:

No, no. Most un-normal. Mother never was normal. Her family came from a family of teachers. Her own father was a classical scholar. He knew his Latin and he knew his Greek. The college, which he had bought just after he married, burned to the ground, of course, with no insurance. We didn't have insurance in Texas at that point. His teaching was really stepping down in scale forever, almost, because of the fact that he didn't have the cash to start that college. I think he probably regretted it.

01-00:05:01

Rigelhaupt:

So your maternal grandfather, your mom's father, owned a college?

01-00:05:07

Owens:

He owned a college. You bought colleges. Now you have to earn them. As a president of a university, you have to get out and beat the drum for alumni contributions. In those days, there were very few colleges in Texas, but you bought them.

01-00:05:40

Rigelhaupt:

So what were your first impressions of New York when you got there?

01-00:05:44

Owens:

I think the largeness of it was overwhelming, almost. I didn't understand most of the kids talking, either, because they talked so fast. Some of them didn't talk English very well. They had just come over on the boat, so to speak. At least they didn't talk my kind of talk. Of course, mine was a very broad "Texas A" at that point.

01-00:06:27

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about starting school in New York?

01-00:06:34

Owens:

Well, I hated it, primarily because my father and mother—it was the beginning of what we call extension courses, or they used to then. Extension courses is when the professor came to you rather than vice versa. Daddy was a

flying professor, one of the first, if not the first. If the students couldn't get out of Buffalo, New York to come to class, he would go there. It was sort of an easy way to get a degree. You eventually collect enough credits.

01-00:07:26

Rigelhaupt: So he was teaching or studying at this point that he was going to other places?

01-00:07:30

Owens: He is teaching and studying simultaneously, as did mother. Mother got her bachelor's degree at the same time she was teaching some of those same subjects. She knew them. She was good at math. No reason why she couldn't teach math. You didn't have to have a degree in it, so she taught math. They needed that.

01-00:08:09

Rigelhaupt: I'm going to pause for one second. Just for the record, what was the elementary school, the name of the elementary school, you started in New York?

01-00:08:26

Owens: PS something. I haven't the vaguest notion. I only went there one year.

01-00:08:32

Rigelhaupt: You only went one year, and then where did you go next?

01-00:08:34

Owens: Well, we moved. Mother got tired of the dumbwaiter that brought bugs from other people's apartments into our apartment. She got tired of the clothes rack that hung over the kitchen table where we ate. That was where the laundry was all hanging. So we looked very, very bad. We fit right into the slum motif.

01-00:09:17

Rigelhaupt: Where were you living that first year?

01-00:09:19

Owens: That first year, we were living in an apartment my aunt had chosen for us as being something that was affordable, and not too bad, and close to the subway. We moved to a neighborhood community with playgrounds and that sort of nice stuff.

01-00:09:52

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what neighborhood it was that first year you were there?

01-00:09:57

Owens: It was right by the tracks of the interurban—not the interurban. That's Texas. Sorry, Mother's not here. I can't ask her. It was close by the tracks, so it was easy for Daddy and Mother to both commute, because their classes often did not overlap.

- 01-00:10:27  
Rigelhaupt: So it wasn't right next to campus at NYU. It still required a subway—
- 01-00:10:32  
Owens: It was a multiple campus at NYU anyway. The lovely ceremonies are at the north campus. They both actually got their degrees at the same time.
- 01-00:10:57  
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what neighborhood you moved to next after that first year?
- 01-00:11:01  
Owens: Of the first year?
- 01-00:11:02  
Rigelhaupt: After that first year, you said you moved.
- 01-00:11:05  
Owens: We moved to the Sunny Side Gardens, they called it.
- 01-00:11:10  
Rigelhaupt: Is that in Manhattan? Brooklyn?
- 01-00:11:14  
Owens: It was a couple of miles away, but it was a different school system. That was a good idea. It seemed to be a newer, more progressive school than the others. They always check out tourist beds and your school.
- 01-00:11:48  
Rigelhaupt: How did you like this new school that was near Sunny Side Gardens?
- 01-00:11:53  
Owens: It was all right. They had pushed me ahead one grade, and I didn't like that, because I missed my friends. Other than that, it was all right. It was sort of a bore, those first five or six years. I should have been more alert, I'm sure. I was very easily influenced by noises in my stories, jokes. Bad words.
- 01-00:12:41  
Rigelhaupt: You got to New York in 1927. About two years after you were there, in 1929, started the Depression.
- 01-00:12:52  
Owens: Yes. We knew, yes, it was terrible. People talk about what we have just been hopefully through. My best friend's father was the president of the bank in White Plains, New York. He just couldn't take it and jumped that first day. Other people, who were really very wonderful people in their own right, were just taking it out. They could see no rhyme or reason to what was happening. The papers didn't seem to talk about it very much, except in retrospect.
- 01-00:13:54  
Rigelhaupt: But you remember seeing or knowing that people were being hurt in very real ways?

01-00:14:01

Owens:

Oh, yes. Yes. People with good jobs, supposedly reliable jobs, were ones that often got hit most. You almost laugh. You see the apple sellers on the corners here. You don't take the apples that are shiny, ever, because they've been polished against the man's coat, usually, after you spit on them to increase their value, their shininess.

01-00:14:51

Rigelhaupt:

So you remember seeing apple sellers and images like that from the Depression in your neighborhood?

01-00:14:59

Owens:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It was a constant nightmare that we would have to go to someplace like that. You couldn't get away from feeling that why did you think you were so fancy that you're immune.

01-00:15:18

Rigelhaupt:

Did your parents ever talk about if moving to New York had been a good decision? Were they forced to rethink moving to New York? It sounds like a long way from your family, that—

01-00:15:33

Owens:

They went every summer, in August. Texas in August and no air conditioning. But when summer school was out, we'd all pile in the car and go. Sometimes we went by boat, when we were feeling rich. Often we went by boat. It was a nice vacation all the way to see the relatives.

01-00:16:05

Rigelhaupt:

What was it like coming back to Texas in the summers? Did it seem different?

01-00:16:11

Owens:

Oh, yes. Yes. I didn't see the contrast so quickly, because I was little to begin with. My friends were still in Texas that I had before I went to New York, and we just sort of picked up in the summer and went ahead and played together.

01-00:16:41

Rigelhaupt:

So for you it was not as though much had changed. You were staying with your family, playing with the same friends.

01-00:16:49

Owens:

Right. Yes. Dad had been superintendent of schools there. He knew the same teachers, and the same kids did the same Halloween tricks as they always do for the coach.

01-00:17:11

Rigelhaupt:

What was the school district your father had been superintendent of, do you remember? Or what city?

01-00:17:21

Owens:

Plano High School, as far as I know. They didn't go in for people's names very much then. They did have, of course, a black school and a white school.

- 01-00:17:42  
Rigelhaupt: In Texas?
- 01-00:17:43  
Owens: The superintendent of schools was separate superintendent of both white and the black school.
- 01-00:17:52  
Rigelhaupt: Did your father ever talk about if that was hard to manage two different schools?
- 01-00:18:01  
Owens: He never complained about it, but that was just the way things were. Particularly discussed the football. Whose team was better. He wished he could make some substitutions.
- 01-00:18:22  
Rigelhaupt: The black and the white football teams never played each other?
- 01-00:18:24  
Owens: Oh, never. No, it just wasn't done. No one made a big fuss about it. Because that's just what it was for quite a while.
- 01-00:18:41  
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how the Depression affected your family and friends in Texas?
- 01-00:18:52  
Owens: I didn't pay much attention to family and friends and how they were doing. They were doing all right. They were coping. Most of them, I mean. The unusual case was having real trouble with the realistic approach. Certainly some of our best people were out selling apples or selling anything they could sell. Family heirlooms. All kinds of things. Because it was a desperate time, a terrible time, when your kids are hungry. Or yourself.
- 01-00:19:43  
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any of your family from Texas having to move somewhere else? That the situation became so hard in Texas that they had to move to other places for jobs? Or did any relatives from Texas come up and stay with you in New York? Or everyone did okay?
- 01-00:20:03  
Owens: Everybody stayed with everybody. We were going to skip to school. We always had real fun rotating rooming house, because it was cheaper. We were paying for tuition for your brothers and sisters, because there were eight of them. Eight children in the family. All of them went to college. All but one graduated. I think he finally did.
- 01-00:20:41  
Rigelhaupt: So you have seven brothers and sisters?

01-00:20:44

Owens:

No, I don't have seven brothers. I have one brother. Well, I had one brother then, no sisters.

01-00:20:57

Rigelhaupt:

Your brother had been born when you moved to New York, so it was all four of you that moved together to New York City?

01-00:21:03

Owens:

Right. Right. He probably doesn't figure as much as he would normally, but he was born with—he was a weakly child they would have said in Texas, I think. A weakly child. He was weak, not strong as he was supposed to be. Especially if he was to carry on the family name.

01-00:21:44

Rigelhaupt:

He was younger than you?

01-00:21:46

Owens:

Yeah, two and a half years. The neighbors in Plano thought they would never get him to New York alive. But he made it. He made it quite a long time after that.

01-00:22:24

Rigelhaupt:

You mentioned that the school systems in Texas were segregated. There was a black school and a white school. Was that true when you got to New York, too? Or were there also black children that went to school with you in New York?

01-00:22:42

Owens:

Oh, we always had black children. There was all stages in between. But that didn't seem so shocking, somehow or other. I've thought about it since then, but it didn't seem to make any difference. That's just the way things were.

01-00:23:10

Rigelhaupt:

The reason I ask is sometimes there's places like New York, residential segregation, where the schools aren't officially segregated, like they had been in Texas, because of where people lived. But it sounds like you had African-American classmates throughout your schooling in New York.

01-00:23:34

Owens:

I don't remember that they stayed in those geographic areas. That was the keynote of whether or not they felt like they were home or not, or safe or whatever.

01-00:24:04

Rigelhaupt:

Let's jump up to World War II. How do you remember hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

01-00:24:18

Owens:

By reading of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. We just thought it was the most horrible thing that ever happened to this country. Utter disgrace. I can

remember sitting on the sorority rug. Too many people sit in chairs. There wasn't a dry eye, because it was such a horrible shock. To realize that we were on the downside of that shock, too, was just so disconcerting. You wonder about whether or not the United States is any good. You get the feeling that, if this could happen so could something else horrible. We were getting very, very scared of the Japanese at that point. It was, I thought, sad, and just overwhelming. I think most people were. I can't imagine anything that's happened since that's been even half as ugly and terrible.

01-00:26:06

Rigelhaupt:

It sounds like your reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor created a sense of fear, a sense of doubt, about the United States as a—

01-00:26:23

Owens:

Daddy was working for Selective Service. My fiancé was number eighteen in the first draft. We were all involved immediately in the military. It was a time when you couldn't get a hotel room in Washington. The neighbors had to put the bridal party up. Everybody in the neighborhood got at least one. It was very nice. Otherwise, no place to sleep. Really simple.

01-00:27:09

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get married right in 1942?

01-00:27:12

Owens:

October 3, 1943. It was the beginning, really, our part of the war.

01-00:27:26

Rigelhaupt:

Leading up to Pearl Harbor, you were at Cornell, it sounds like, since you said you were at the sorority house when you heard about it. Did you have any sense that the United States was going to become involved in what became World War II, or was it still up in the air?

01-00:27:50

Owens:

I think my dad felt that we were going to definitely be drawn into the complex. Wasn't quite so embarrassed in the way it was running. He could almost say that we were going to be. Most people who thought about it realized that we could be drawn into the war. Hard to see the cherry blossoms and things, that they gave us these as, what, a goodwill present early on?

01-00:28:42

Rigelhaupt:

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, how did it affect campus life? Were students talking about it? Were they signing up for military service?

01-00:28:55

Owens:

Oh, it was a mixture. I remember one friend of ours was an honor student at law school, and first of all he wanted to be in the service. Then he desperately didn't want to be in the service. He went back and forth, and I think a lot of young men who were very smart did this. They were putting their medical careers or their graduate careers on hold for forever, maybe, and didn't know

what to do about it, particularly. Then they were worried they had flat feet. That was one of the common concerns.

01-00:29:55

Rigelhaupt:

One of the other things that we read a lot about with World War II was that there was rationing. How did that play out on a college campus?

01-00:30:09

Owens:

I wasn't on a college campus at that—well, I was. Sure. I didn't have a card, a food card, because I was married to a GI at that point. So I didn't have one. I was just missing one. I think they tried to do a fair job of distributing food coupons and gas coupons. We all carpooled. Everybody carpooled. It seemed to work out very well. Even my brother, who had money for the bus, chose to hitchhike, because it was more fun. He hitchhiked from the end of Lee Highway. That has become the hitching place, I guess, forever now since the war. That's where the bus didn't move until the black people went to the rear of the bus.

01-00:31:50

Rigelhaupt:

What brought you from Ithaca and Cornell to Washington?

01-00:31:56

Owens:

It was going to be a good place to be, I thought, during the war, with excitement. I wanted to be doing something. I knew if I stayed with IBM, I would be better off than if I had gone in the service, because I would just be putting on a uniform and doing the same thing that wouldn't be as much fun.

01-00:32:33

Rigelhaupt:

So you already had the job with IBM before you came to Washington?

01-00:32:37

Owens:

Oh, yeah. They came to Cornell—this is what they don't do anymore, it's so ridiculous. They don't do any of that pre-screen. They came to Cornell every—I think it was early fall. Maybe, I don't know, before that. They interviewed. If you wanted an interview, sign up. They talked to anybody, and got some very interesting characters, I imagine, along the way.

01-00:33:23

Rigelhaupt:

Did you interview with IBM April of 1942?

01-00:33:26

Owens:

No, when I was just graduating.

01-00:33:30

Rigelhaupt:

What year was that?

01-00:33:31

Owens:

Nineteen forty-two.

01-00:33:34  
Rigelhaupt: Then you moved to Washington as soon as—May or June, when school let out that year?

01-00:33:45  
Owens: Right. That's where I wanted to be posted. You traveled from your center post.

01-00:33:59  
Rigelhaupt: You said it was 1943 that you got married?

01-00:34:02  
Owens: Mm-hmm.

01-00:34:04  
Rigelhaupt: Had you already met your soon-to-be husband in 1942?

01-00:34:09  
Owens: Yes. He already told me we were going to get married. I laughed in his face, but then we worked it out.

01-00:34:26  
Rigelhaupt: What was dating like in 1942?

01-00:34:31  
Owens: Just like even early on, except the conversations were certainly more oriented for the Army, the Navy, the Marines. And the headlines, because the headlines were pretty shocking. The *New York Times* and the bigger papers carried the stories quite well.

01-00:34:58  
Rigelhaupt: But staying with your future husband, did he immediately go into the service in 1942, or was he—?

01-00:35:09  
Owens: Yeah, he went. Eighteen was his number in that first system. They had given him already, a deferment, given him six months to finish college. So he was in his six months. This was it. He changed from chemical engineer to economics, I think. He needed that extra time to catch up.

01-00:35:52  
Rigelhaupt: Then what branch of the service did he go into?

01-00:35:56  
Owens: Infantry.

01-00:35:59  
Rigelhaupt: Then I assume that means he served overseas, if he was in the infantry?

01-00:36:04  
Owens: Mm-hmm.

01-00:36:05  
Rigelhaupt: Where did he go?

01-00:36:07  
Owens: He went to Italy. First Africa, and then Italy. All the way to Brenner Pass.

01-00:36:25  
Rigelhaupt: Did he stay in Europe all the way until 1945?

01-00:36:29  
Owens: Yes. He wanted to stay in later than that. He had an offer to stay with the occupation, but I wanted him home. Probably the mistake of my life.

01-00:36:57  
Rigelhaupt: I'm not sure I'll ask a follow-up there.

01-00:37:01  
Owens: I don't blame you. [laughter]

01-00:37:09  
Rigelhaupt: Tell me, if you could describe your first day at IBM.

01-00:37:15  
Owens: It was the happiest day of my life. A beautiful October day. John L. Sullivan, the boxer, was my boss. He held out his long arm and said, "Welcome to IBM." He said, "We're so happy to have you as our new personnel director." I got what I wanted. I've never been able to do anything mechanical. I can do it better now. Certainly at that point I thought, "Forgive me, for I won't do mechanical." He was an excellent boss and taught me a lot. He also said that we had an ad running in the paper for the last week, and "We want you to hire between fifty and a hundred people the next week." So that's an introduction when you say, "What do you do?" Sometimes you know, if they were warm, we would take them. Very unscientific.

01-00:38:51  
Rigelhaupt: So your first week there you become personnel director, and you're in charge of hiring fifty to a hundred people?

01-00:38:59  
Owens: Yeah.

01-00:39:00  
Rigelhaupt: That's a lot of responsibility right out of college.

01-00:39:03  
Owens: Well, sure. That's why they hire you. That's the only thing that makes sense, is that you are flexible. You have to be flexible in almost any new job, because they do it differently unless you did it all your life. It's doable.

01-00:39:38  
Rigelhaupt: Did you stay doing similar work? Hiring lots of people?

01-00:39:45

Owens: I did, until I married. After a leave of absence, I went to the sales office and really got down to work.

01-00:40:06

Rigelhaupt: What were your first impressions of Washington, DC when you moved here?

01-00:40:14

Owens: I'd lived here for a while. Washington, DC. The family moved here just after Pearl Harbor. In fact, I think maybe they moved here before, because Dad just put on his uniform. He had kept his uniform all of his training. He went in as a full colonel, I think.

01-00:40:55

Rigelhaupt: So your parents moved to Washington, probably, it sounds like, somewhere around 1941?

01-00:41:02

Owens: Right.

01-00:41:03

Rigelhaupt: They did not stay—

01-00:41:03

Owens: He was here a year before we sold the house and moved.

01-00:41:09

Rigelhaupt: What brought them from New York to Washington? Did they come for a job?

01-00:41:15

Owens: Oh, a job. Yeah. General [Lewis] Hershey, head of Selective Service, had asked for him. His teaching experience with young people.

01-00:41:31

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned earlier that you wanted to come to Washington because it seemed exciting, and it's somewhere you wanted to be. Part of what I wanted to ask about was, did Washington hold that same attraction for young people? It seems like there's a lot of people now, right out of college, in their twenties, that move to Washington to start careers. Was that also true in the early 1940s?

01-00:42:03

Owens: Yes. Almost like they're going to take care of you. In some ways, it seemed almost more straight to the point of protecting you. There was a magic about Washington. I don't know whether it's deserved or not. During all the riots here and everything, there were all kinds of feeling, both ways.

01-00:42:47

Rigelhaupt: One of the other things I've read a lot about with the beginning of World War II is that things expanded very fast. That companies grew fast. It sounds like

IBM was growing fast. Did a lot of people seem to be moving to Washington in the early 1940s, around the beginning of World War II?

01-00:43:12

Owens: Right. They're moving in, moving in everywhere. It was coming all this way. This can't {inaudible} get in to see your congressmen, for congressmen.

01-00:43:31

Rigelhaupt: Was it hard to find a place to live in Washington?

01-00:43:36

Owens: Yes, almost impossible! And it was hard to find a car. It was hard to find anything. Because, of course, we did not have priorities, and we shouldn't have had. The military did need them.

01-00:43:57

Rigelhaupt: When we talked earlier about IBM, you mentioned, or I jotted down, something about flag school.

01-00:44:09

Owens: Slide school?

01-00:44:10

Rigelhaupt: Flag. Like, flag school. You did three months of training somewhere with IBM.

01-00:44:18

Owens: Oh, yeah. This is what we call tent city. IBM was taking a big move forward, actually, to reverse the sales pitch and to reverse the sales activity so that they would continue to sleep at the homestead, which is a big deal in {inaudible}. We in the field, which are really neophytes, testing us that we could live in tents for a summer and get along and learn and improve all things that—right. Because we could learn and we could get along, and we didn't have tents that blew up or anything. It was a very civilized kind of existence.

01-00:45:39

Rigelhaupt: Was this near Washington?

01-00:45:44

Owens: No, Endicott is the headquarters of IBM. It still is. They have other points. They have Poughkeepsie, various other stations around.

01-00:45:59

Rigelhaupt: That's Endicott, New York?

01-00:46:00

Owens: Endicott, New York, which is just down from Cornell. I remember that we ate regular food in the dining room. The sales staff ate after we did.

01-00:46:11

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned that you worked for a little while for US Health, through IBM.

01-00:46:22

Owens:

Right, I was on loan to US Health. I was there to be helpful any way I could, and with procedure charts and working those out over the summer. Plus seeing if we could streamline some of the circuitous treatments. The routes were really not very smooth, so that it was quite a job to do right. I only did part of it right, I'm sure. I did spend all summer there. Everything was fine until my name came through as a contact, that I had given someone, a GI, I think, VD. That was hard to take. Everybody pitied me for a week. Then they let it go. At least I didn't have a gold tooth right here. [laughs]

01-00:47:55

Rigelhaupt:

You said you also did some work in New Orleans with IBM.

01-00:48:03

Owens:

Five weeks. Part of the summer.

01-00:48:05

Rigelhaupt:

What were you doing there?

01-00:48:08

Owens:

I can't even remember the name of the project. It was a major time-consumer, as you can see. We moved every five days because we couldn't stay in a hotel more than five days. After five days, you moved, and you planned your move ahead of time, fortunately, and you had a room waiting for you as you moved along. It was a pain, because your stuff was spread out all over everywhere. But you had to go. Your room was not available after five days. Washington never got that bad, I don't think. Remember there were too many people who had strings on houses or something.

01-00:49:34

Rigelhaupt:

You mentioned when we talked earlier that part of your job was to straighten out problems before they happened. Do you remember any projects in particular that were meaningful to you or you thought were significant or you did a good job on that were along these lines of helping the U.S. government?

01-00:50:08

Owens:

Of course, we were working for state governments with the local level. That, I think, was very helpful, because they needed someone. We were the closest they could get to a regular salesman. The older gentlemen were available. I think I learned a lot the summer I spent being responsible, I thought, out at this teleservice. We were all working together. It didn't matter where they worked. IBM or Health.

01-00:51:14

Rigelhaupt:

What you talked about, working at US Health, public health, this relationship between a private company, IBM, and the US government. That they're working together. From what I've read, there was an expansion during World War II of this kind of working relationship between private business and the US government. Did you have a sense as it was unfolding that this was a relationship that was going to last, or did it seem temporary?

01-00:51:54

Owens:

Looking back, I think it's going to last. But at the time, I'm not sure I was clairvoyant. I don't think I was. I think we took it for what it was at that point. We did what we could under circumstances that were not optimal.

01-00:52:26

Rigelhaupt:

You mentioned working for state and local governments. Were they getting bigger, too? Were they dealing with lots of problems because people were moving in?

01-00:52:37

Owens:

Yeah. It seemed to be burgeoning everywhere. There were people on the go, certainly in the state capitals, which we had a small section here, a big section here, actually. There was more and more being done not by the adding machine, and more was being done in an orderly manner. Of course, the concern was keeping the controls on so you know when you're going and where you've been.

01-00:53:31

Rigelhaupt:

That's interesting. It sounds like IBM is a business, certainly a leading institution of putting scientific practices into business, computing. This was a moment they were bringing that to state governments, that they didn't otherwise use some of the practices IBM developed?

01-00:53:55

Owens:

Right.

01-00:53:57

Rigelhaupt:

And they were teaching them how to do it? Was that part of your job, was to help them learn from IBM?

01-00:54:07

Owens:

I didn't do anything at all with the colors. I think it may have come out afterwards. Because we certainly, as the {chantees?}, we didn't rate top rating as far as be sure and tell them first or anything like that.

01-00:54:54

Rigelhaupt:

Let me pause right there. I need to change tapes.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 owens\_dorothy\_02\_06-07-12\_stereo.mp3

02-00:00:07

Rigelhaupt:

It's still June 7. This is tape number two with Dorothy Owens. While I was changing tapes, you mentioned that the IBM office here in Washington was very friendly. Could you say that again while I'm recording? Because that was very interesting.

02-00:00:29

Owens: It was.

02-00:00:32

Rigelhaupt: So it was very friendly, and you said the vice president—could you describe bringing in the—?

02-00:00:38

Owens: Eggs. That was part of the job as secretary to the vice president.

02-00:00:50

Rigelhaupt: You said the vice president brought in his eggs. I was wondering if you could tell that same story while the camera is on. That IBM was very friendly. The camera wasn't on when you told me the story about the vice president and the eggs. Could you tell it again?

02-00:01:10

Owens: I guess.

02-00:01:12

Rigelhaupt: Well, I think it tells us something about the office.

02-00:01:17

Owens: It also tells you something about wartime and how people cope. Remember, we weren't smoking. Women didn't smoke at their desks at IBM. Nobody smoked. Men smoked, but not women. We wore hats to work. We wore rayon stockings, like everybody else. They had high standards for us, including white gloves. They didn't supply us. We had to buy them. They wanted ladies to go out in the field. Anyway.

02-00:02:12

Rigelhaupt: I hope it's not too forward. Did it pay well?

02-00:02:17

Owens: What?

02-00:02:17

Rigelhaupt: Did it pay well?

02-00:02:19

Owens: Yes. Yes, it did. This is why I had no intention of going into the military, because I would have gotten paid a lot less for the same work, or same kind of work. Probably not as interesting.

02-00:02:50

Rigelhaupt: A lot of women entered the workforce for the first time during World War II. Often, it's told, as our project is named around Rosie the Riveter, in airplane factories and shipyards—

02-00:03:03

Owens: That was only one side, yeah.

- 02-00:03:06  
Rigelhaupt: So were there lots of other women at IBM and this was their first job, wage-based job?
- 02-00:03:18  
Owens: I don't know whether they practiced beyond what they considered outstanding college students. I don't think they did further than that, so I don't think they maybe were too brave. But at least they did dip down, and they knew that they were going to have to come up with some fast answers and figure out the best they could at the time to make up the gap.
- 02-00:04:06  
Rigelhaupt: So college-educated women were able to begin working at IBM?
- 02-00:04:13  
Owens: That was the assumption they had. They got fooled every now and then. I think people discovered that also they could do things they never thought they could do. I'm still no mechanic, but I'm not afraid of a machine. I couldn't be.
- 02-00:04:46  
Rigelhaupt: But that, to me, sounds like an important part of a World War II experience, that you got opportunities to experience other things that confirmed that you could do things that you hadn't imagined.
- 02-00:04:59  
Owens: That's right. That's right. IBM has been advertising the last, what, couple of years, big fat ads. You see them. They don't say much, but they're quite telling, and I think they're picking up on some of those ideas that they had then.
- 02-00:05:33  
Rigelhaupt: Let me just ask bluntly, was there what is called a glass ceiling during World War II? Were there certain positions not open to women?
- 02-00:05:46  
Owens: Not open to women?
- 02-00:05:47  
Rigelhaupt: Like, could women be vice presidents, or were executive-level jobs not open to women at that point?
- 02-00:06:02  
Owens: I don't remember any women when I was working there. It's perfectly possible they came in later or whatever. I don't know. Certainly they tried to get me to come back. Of course, I didn't have any stair steps at that point. I guess they had an investment in me.
- 02-00:06:46  
Rigelhaupt: You say they tried to get you to come back. Where had you—?

02-00:06:52

Owens:

I went to the main sales office when I came back from my leave of absence. The coming back at that point was coming back to IBM to work. The gal I had hired as my assistant was doing a fine job. I trained her well. Not fair for her to get bounced. She was in that job to stay.

02-00:07:38

Rigelhaupt:

Did you take a different position at IBM or not—?

02-00:07:40

Owens:

Yeah, I took a different position, for which I had been trained.

02-00:07:46

Rigelhaupt:

About what year was this that you came back after a leave of absence?

02-00:07:57

Owens:

I can't remember. It was about one and a half years, I think. More like three years, I think.

02-00:08:15

Rigelhaupt:

But was this after World War II?

02-00:08:18

Owens:

I came back during World War II, when my husband was still overseas.

02-00:08:27

Rigelhaupt:

Did you stay on with IBM after the war?

02-00:08:30

Owens:

After the war, no. No.

02-00:08:34

Rigelhaupt:

What made you decide to leave IBM?

02-00:08:43

Owens:

I think it was his job.

02-00:08:47

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get the sense that other women were leaving IBM after the war?

02-00:09:02

Owens:

Some were, I think. If they could possibly hang on and didn't have too much trouble with babysitting, they'd just stay on usually, because you have an investment. It's training again. If you have women that are trainable and have been trained, you need to hang on to them.

02-00:09:38

Rigelhaupt:

Did you write lots of letters with your husband during World War II?

02-00:09:44

Owens:

Yes.

- 02-00:09:54  
Rigelhaupt: Did he keep you up to date how things were going in Europe, or did he not say much?
- 02-00:10:01  
Owens: Only vaguely. He had to be very careful. This was the Italian front and lots of people were so wishy-washy on what side they were on.
- 02-00:10:17  
Rigelhaupt: How did you keep up with the news about the war effort? Was it newspapers or the radio? Newsreels? Do you remember how you got information?
- 02-00:10:28  
Owens: Newsreels and radio. There were some news programs, but they were very few and far between.
- 02-00:10:48  
Rigelhaupt: How do you remember hearing about V-E Day, Victory in Europe?
- 02-00:10:54  
Owens: The celebration? It wasn't as effective as the nurse being kissed, but it was effective. You thought the day would never come. My husband had been slated for Japan, so I was happy to see the bomb, I'm afraid.
- 02-00:11:26  
Rigelhaupt: I was going to get there in one second and ask about that. The victory in Europe, after you got news, were there lots of people out in the streets in Washington? Was it a big public celebration?
- 02-00:11:41  
Owens: Yeah. I think probably bigger around the capital than any place else. But that was the end of the war as far as most people were concerned.
- 02-00:12:01  
Rigelhaupt: Except, as you just mentioned, that there was—
- 02-00:12:07  
Owens: We still had—
- 02-00:12:09  
Rigelhaupt: Japan and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How do you remember hearing the news that atomic weapons had been used?
- 02-00:12:22  
Owens: I was shocked. I was naïve, I think. I was shocked about it being so sad. Actually, we'd been to both shrines. In each case, you couldn't help but feel so sorry for those poor, poor people, and yet we had to do it.
- 02-00:13:13  
Rigelhaupt: You mentioned earlier that the bombing of Pearl Harbor created a sense of fear that it could happen. Did the use of atomic weapons by themselves, this

new, powerful weapon, did that create a sense of fear? What was your reaction to the weapon itself? Or was there much?

02-00:13:40

Owens:

I don't think we paid much attention. Just what it did. We were glad to have it done. After all, they'd been killing our boys. I can't know anyone who would want that out of their country.

02-00:14:15

Rigelhaupt:

Another big part of the World War II story was the Holocaust. I'm not so much asking about the Holocaust itself, but I'm curious how you learned about it. Did you know anything about it during the war, or did news come after the war?

02-00:14:39

Owens:

I think we didn't know that much about it until after the war. Small mentions. See names. I think it was kept pretty much a secret. The Germans, with cause, kept it a secret.

02-00:15:20

Rigelhaupt:

Did it surprise you, or what was your reaction learning about it? That something like this had happened, and you and other people in the world didn't know it was happening?

02-00:15:39

Owens:

You can only feel a sense of guilt where you were. You read *Diary of Anne Frank*. You read these various books. How could I not have known? I think there have been more of those movies out, certainly, since that time.

02-00:16:08

Rigelhaupt:

Part of the reason I ask is that it sounds like, from your memory, it was not in the news. How would you have known?

02-00:16:22

Owens:

No.

02-00:16:24

Rigelhaupt:

That that's part of—the project's trying to understand is if people knew or did not know, and it sounds like it was not in the news, in your memory.

02-00:16:34

Owens:

Right. Yeah.

02-00:16:58

Rigelhaupt:

What did you do for entertainment while you worked at IBM during World War II?

02-00:17:13

Owens:

We had an awful lot of office luncheons particularly. After that, you scattered, usually by cab, because you're going strange places. I don't think IBM did anything particularly to make for a unified kind of social life. But what I wish

they had done was tell us about war bonds. Their regular investments, not just war bonds.

02-00:18:02

Rigelhaupt: You said people scattered and went in cabs to different places? Is it okay if I ask you—you said to strange places. Where were people going when you said they scattered into cabs?

02-00:18:20

Owens: It depends partly on who has cars, or who can get on a trolley. If you have a friend with a car, he can manage usually to get you there. Maybe not home, but to get you where you're going. There were lots of smaller parties. I'm not sure whether the college kids continued the big parties or not. We had lots of them before the war and right up until it was over.

02-00:19:37

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how you got to and from work? How did you commute?

02-00:19:43

Owens: Very roundabout way. Daddy drove our carpool on Monday and Tuesday, I believe. Six people in it. It was a fully-loaded carful. Mother drove to the University of Maryland. She would take me on the days that I was going into the office. I would go with her. Or, if not, if I'm going directly to the factory, I'd get a cab. I'd take a bus, and then I'd take a cab. Or two buses and a cab. This is Northeast in the olden days. It was not very safe, but it worked. For the two free rides I got on the other days, its helped. That's when kids first started coming home to Mother, I think. They couldn't find a place to live.

02-00:21:15

Rigelhaupt: What was your favorite part about working at IBM?

02-00:21:24

Owens: I guess the people. I learned a lot that I didn't know in college.

02-00:21:42

Rigelhaupt: Were there classes you took or things in college that helped prepare you for IBM?

02-00:21:49

Owens: Not really. This is why when they say in big letters, "Everyone should take science," you had a feeling of, "Oh, I don't know." Because it's not just that simple to just take science.

02-00:22:25

Rigelhaupt: Was there anything that you think, as a company, that you saw that IBM did particularly well to help the US government during World War II?

02-00:22:36

Owens: I thought they did a very good job of replacement training. It seemed strange that the head of the science department at IBM was blind. But he got around

the factory without his eyes no problem. This is the sort of thing that they were willing to give you a chance. He would whistle and the whistle would bounce back, and he would know where he was. Good scientist. They did try to take up the gap.

02-00:23:40

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember going to any museums, the Smithsonian museums, during World War II?

02-00:23:54

Owens: I don't remember going to museums, really, until our kids were older. That's a good point, though. They should go earlier. Most of our kids went to college, but some didn't, and they're probably the best educated because they went to the Smithsonian every Saturday morning. Every Saturday morning.

02-00:24:40

Rigelhaupt: Do you know if any of the other women you worked with at IBM had children?

02-00:24:47

Owens: Oh. People that I knew, and were my age group, class of '42, were not really rushing to get married or have children. Bringing the boys back.

02-00:25:32

Rigelhaupt: Were you involved at all with church or other religious organizations during World War II?

02-00:25:41

Owens: I went to the Metropolitan Methodist Church over in town. And we still go.

02-00:25:55

Rigelhaupt: Was that a big part of community life, especially during wartime, to have friends and family around a church?

02-00:26:11

Owens: I think perhaps it was for some. It would come in various stages. Yeah, I think that that's true. The common prayers that are said by large groups are often said for those in danger overseas.

02-00:27:07

Rigelhaupt: I think those are largely my questions. The way I like to end is I'm going to ask two questions. One, was there anything that I should have asked and I didn't? And two, is there anything you would like to add?

02-00:27:28

Owens: I don't know, maybe you could ask my husband if he thinks I've left out anything, but I don't know.

02-00:27:43

Rigelhaupt: Sure.

02-00:27:47

Owens: Bill?

02-00:27:48

Bill Owens: Yeah?

02-00:27:49

Owens: What have I left out?

02-00:27:53

Bill Owens: I think that one of the things you left out was the excitement about your wedding, when I almost didn't make it, and our honeymoon, not finding a hotel to stay. A lot of interesting things because of the war. It's up to you.

02-00:28:15

02-00:28:18

Rigelhaupt: The excitement about the wedding.

02-00:28:20

Bill Owens: About the wedding and the fact that I almost didn't make it. You don't really want me here.

02-00:28:37

Owens: What do you want to know?

02-00:28:40

Bill Owens: I'll tell you. I was at Fort Benning. I was taking the advanced infantry officers course. My regiment, the 339<sup>th</sup> Infantry, was at Camp Pilot Knob in the California desert just across the All-American Canal from Yuma. I got leave to come to Washington for the wedding, but then I had no idea where I was to report after my course at Fort Benning was over. It seems that the night before, or Friday before the wedding on Sunday, I still didn't know where to go, what to do. So I finally got in touch with my regimental commander. He was out in the desert on a double E8A telephone. He said, "Owens, I sent you instructions to your wife's address." Of course, she didn't open my mail, so she didn't know that I had orders to report to Fort Dix, New Jersey, not to Pilot Knob, California, so it was a bit of confusion. But anyway, we were married. We had our honeymoon at the 16<sup>th</sup> and K the first night at the Sheraton—I guess the name was—

02-00:30:11

Owens: Statler.

02-00:30:11

Bill Owens: Statler Hotel. Then, naively, we decided to go to New York for our honeymoon. We took the train to New York and checked in at a couple of hotels. No place to stay. They said, "We can get you a room someplace up in Yonkers or something like that, but there's no hotel rooms available in New York City." It so happened that one of the ushers to my wedding lived in Brooklyn, so I called him, and so we spent our second night of our honeymoon in Brooklyn. It was one of those things that was typical wartime

experience. We didn't know that you had to make reservations. Also, it was the same time the World Series was going on in New York, so the town was completely blank. Anyway.

02-00:31:03

Rigelhaupt: That's great.

02-00:31:05

Bill Owens: You should know this young lady was a junior Phi Beta at Cornell. People courted her. She turned down jobs for Kimberly-Clark and other major corporations. IBM was lucky to get her.

02-00:31:22

Rigelhaupt: That's great.

02-00:31:24

Bill Owens: Arrivederci.

02-00:31:29

Rigelhaupt: That is a very nice, happy note to end on

[End of Interview]