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University of California
Berkeley, California

Mary Ann Probert

Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project

Interview conducted by
David Washburn
in 2004

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Mary Ann Probert





Mary Ann Probert [first row, left] at Kaiser Shipyard 3, 1943

Mary Ann Probert - TOC

Audiofile 1

Parents' life in Italy and coming to the United States — A coal miner's difficult life in the Midwest — Influence of unions — Meeting her future husband at a dance and parents' reaction — Father's black lung disease with years in the hospital — Teaching citizenship for the WPA — Moving to Richmond, California in 1941 — Explosion at Chemurgic in Richmond — Factory work making railway torpedoes — Switching to the Richmond shipyards to avoid office work at Chemurgic — Comparing life in California and Illinois

Audiofile 2

Working as an expediter in the Richmond shipyards — Changing unions — Anger at having to prove citizenship because of being born in Italy — Relocation of Italians in Richmond — Thoughts on Japanese relocation — Comparing World War II with the war in Iraq — Describing the expediter job at the shipyards — Clothing on the job — Attitudes toward women in the shipyards — Sexual harassment and sex in the shipyards — Being pregnant on and then off the job — leaving the shipyard after the war and working for Beckman Instruments — Use of birth control — Husband's strict parenting

Audiofile 3

In-home day care — Rosies and whether to work after the war — Soldering at Beckman Instruments — Kaiser health care after the war — Returning to Catholic church after the war and turning to Methodism — Describing photos from the war times

Interview 1: February 24, 2004]

Audio File 1

1-00:00:00

Washburn: Mary Ann, I'm just going to ask you a few questions, and we'll start now.

1-00:00:08

Probert: Okay.

1-00:00:10

Washburn: You told me about your life, and so we're just going to start with just some basic questions. What is your full name?

1-00:00:17

Probert: Mary Ann Probert.

1-00:00:19

Washburn: And Mary Ann, I know you told me the story about Italy, and we're going to ask that. Can you tell me where you were born?

1-00:00:30

Probert: Milan, in Northern Italy.

1-00:00:34

Washburn: Oh, one second—I forgot one thing here. Can you press the red button on that? Go back on the camera—does it say record there? Okay, so you were born in Milan, Italy. In what year?

1-00:00:47

Probert: 1921.

1-00:00:48

Washburn: So can you tell me the story of how your father and mother met?

1-00:00:52

Probert: Well my father came here, must have came to United States when he was young, and he went into the Army. He was in World War I, and after the World War I he went home to see his mother. At that time, my mother was like a peasant working for his mother, and when he came home, he noticed that my mother was carrying this wood on her back. My mother thought that he was from America, and my father asked her if she wanted to come to United States, and she said yes right away, that she wanted to come to United States because of—well, it would better than working for his mother. His mother didn't like the idea of her marrying her son. My father said right away, he said, "Who's marrying her—you or me?" So they got married in a big cathedral in Milan.

My father came back to United States and told her that he would send for her. In the meantime, my mother got pregnant, and I was born in Italy in 1921. And he sent for her, and she brought me over here when I was five months old—my mother and I. She brought me over to America, and my mother really thought that America, it had gold—pick up gold off the streets or whatever. She was very

disappointed when she came here to the coal mines in Illinois. My father was working in the coal mines, and the women helped my mother with setting up. They didn't have a house, but she got pregnant again right away after she got here. And then my father got a home. I have three, two other brothers. She got pregnant right away with my brother Jim, and then she had another child the next year, she had Nick. So then my father decided he could afford a house. He got a home.

- 1-00:03:19
Washburn: Well let me ask you, briefly, what were their full names?
- 1-00:03:22
Probert: My brother? Jim.
- 1-00:03:24
Washburn: No, your parents.
- 1-00:03:25
Probert: Oh, Fassino, Fassino—F-a-s-s-i-n-o. It's an Italian name.
- 1-00:03:30
Washburn: So what was your father's full name?
- 1-00:03:33
Probert: James. James Fassino.
- 1-00:03:36
Washburn: And your mother?
- 1-00:03:36
Probert: And my mother, Katherine. And she named me Mary, Mary Ann.
- 1-00:03:43
Washburn: And so, what was your father's occupation before he entered World War I?
- 1-00:03:48
Probert: I don't know. I really don't. He traveled all over United States, and I know he worked in Montana sometime, in some kind of mines over there. And then he had a brother that was living with him too, but the brother, he didn't make it overseas because he got sick while he was traveling on the train. My father said they just stopped the train, buried him someplace in the out west. But my father, they took him in the service.
- 1-00:04:24
Washburn: Can you recall, thinking back, what your folks looked like? Can you describe what your dad looked like?
- 1-00:04:28
Probert: Oh, my father was strong, a big, husky man. Most Italians are; we're rugged looking. He was very rugged looking and big nose and, you know, real tough

looking. And he was strong; he was so strong. That's why they had him as a driller in the coal mine. That's where he went to work, in the coal mine.

1-00:04:56

Washburn: And what about your mother—what did she do?

1-00:04:57

Probert: Oh my mother, she just stayed at home. She didn't—

1-00:05:1-00

Washburn: What did she look like?

1-00:05:1-00

Probert: Oh, she was real sweet, short, and she was kind. She never shouted or anything. She was really a sweet person; everybody liked her. She never complained, actually. Thank God we had her that was good to us, and she made friends with Italian ladies, and they all helped each other. She was very helpful. She never worked. She didn't know how to work. She just cooked and cleaned.

1-00:05:36

Washburn: Do you remember any food she made which were really her specialties?

1-00:05:41

Probert: Well, mostly soup and maybe some spaghetti and she was very religious. We just had simple food. The miners—because from working in the mine, they all wanted soup at night and a piece of meat and a vegetable. We had a garden. My mother just did that kind of work, cook. She had gone to the school in Italy, in the nun's school, and she learned cutwork. She taught me how to crochet and embroidery. She made sure that I learned that, and in order to—I remember her, if I wanted some different clothes she'd make a pair of pillowcases and sell them to some ladies that had money. That's how she got some extra money, by doing that fancy handwork, and they learned that in Italy. They teach them how to do embroidery.

1-00:06:36

Washburn: What do you remember she would think about women doing industrial work? What would her opinion have been? How were you brought up to think about women and work?

1-00:06:51

Probert: I've always had to work. I worked since I was able to. Even as a young girl, I'd go next door and help them. They had like housecleaning. I always worked. We always had to work. And it's important to keep your house clean, and work was something that we knew we had to do. Even around the house at night you have to bring in the wood or the coals for the next day, and I always had to work. So I just grew up knowing that that was part of life, this work.

1-00:07:29

Washburn: How old were you when you came to the United States?

1-00:07:38

Probert: I was only five months old, so I grew up as an American because—and in the coal mines, in the camp, amongst other families—Russian, Polak, Lithuanian—and they all had big families. Seven kids, ten kids, and we grew up different than what the kids do nowadays.

1-00:08:05

Washburn: So, what did your mom, in these stories, tell you about coming to the United States?

1-00:08:10

Probert: Oh, she didn't tell too many stories about the United States. She'd just make up some stories, like to treat animals real good. She'd always mention about "don't be mean to like a cat or a dog or anybody." She was very loving, and she never wanted to have no fighting, and all the kids liked her when they came to our house. My mother loved children very much, and she was satisfied—she never complained that I know of. And she made do with what we had. But my father made wine, and he used to drink once in a while, like on New Year's they have a celebration, and he'd drink too much wine or get drunk. She'd get real upset with him over drinking too much. She was really satisfied with life; she never complained. She missed her people in Italy, though. I know she did. I know she missed them very much, her mother and her brothers.

1-00:09:16

Washburn: So what can you tell me about life in—well your parents settled in—

1-00:09:28

Probert: Benld. It's B-e-n-l-d, Illinois.

1-00:09:33

Washburn: And why did they settle there?

1-00:09:33

Probert: Oh, because of the coal mines. And a lot of Italians, all the Italians. Coal mines.

1-00:09:41

Washburn: So what can you tell me about the life there in Benld? Was it a big town, a small town?

1-00:09:47

Probert: No, about three thousand, not even three thousand. That's everybody. It was made of mostly miners and different nationalities like Russians, Croatians, Slovak, Italians, just coal miners. It's a small town, very small, and everybody more or less knew each other. Then they had like one part of the town was the newer section. They'd say, "That's a newer section of town." It depends, as the city grew, different sections of town. And most people were about the same. There wasn't anybody with lots of—we didn't have a car. Most people didn't have cars. They just had children and cattle, cow, yard, garden. We had a garden. It was a small city.

1-00:10:51

Washburn: Hold on. One second here, Marianne. The light keeps changing here [Discussion about technology of the taping.]. So did you grow up in a mining—was it a company town?

1-00:11:40

Probert: Yes it was. It was owned by Superior Coal Company. There were four mines; there was one, two, three, and four. And each mine had their own town built around them.

1-00:11:53

Washburn: So what were some of these towns? What were their names?

1-00:11:55

Probert: I lived in Benld. Then there was Sawyerville. Well Eagerville is number one, Sawyerville, number two. Montclaire is number three, and Wilsonville was number four for mines. And some of them had more people in them. It all depends on—well, it was really cornfields. There was nothing but just—you'd have to work in a mine there. There's no factories or anything. That's why I had to go to St. Louis to work, or Springfield. There was a hospital I worked in there.

1-00:12:31

Washburn: So, what were the living conditions like there in Benld? Did you live in a company house, or did your parents buy?

1-00:12:42

Probert: No, my father bought it, but there's a lot of people that did live in a company house. They were little places that were around the coal mines, and they were all right. Nobody had toilets inside. Or we had pump water until the city put in the pipes and stuff like that. It was really—country! And, even like if they had a cow, they had to bring the cow to the pasture, and then they'd bring it home at night, then they'd bring it back in through the pasture. They didn't have—and the roads were still unpaved, no water system. They slowly got all that in later on, but not when I was growing up.

1-00:13:35

Washburn: What about electricity?

1-00:13:36

Probert: Well, we had electricity. But we wouldn't have the inside toilets or bathrooms or anything like that. You had to go outside.

1-00:13:47

Washburn: Was your neighborhood—were your neighbors all Italian?

1-00:13:52

Probert: Mostly. But my neighbor on this side wasn't. They were from Czechoslovakia. And the one—they had the alleys, behind the alley they were Russian. And on this side, they were Italian. And then across the street, there was Italian. Then there was a Croatian; then there was a Russian. They were kind of mixed up. They

really didn't—people got along more or less because we all worked in the mines. And there wasn't this racial—the only thing I think sometimes there was—like they were mostly Catholics. But the Russians had their own church, their own graveyard, and so they didn't have problems like they have now.

1-00:14:45

Washburn: Do you remember hearing Italian and Russian, and all these different languages?

1-00:14:50

Probert: Oh yeah. I could speak some Croatian, and the neighbor next door, we called him Pulaks. He could understand some of the Italian. You pick it up real easy. Most of the people understood each other even if they didn't speak American. In the stores—they'd have one store that dealt mostly with the Italians. They had another store that dealt mostly with the Slovaks. And it was all like on credit, bills, and they'd come to the house, and ask them what they want, and then they would deliver them. That's how we got the groceries, the horse and buggy. Then later on they had a car, but they still came to the house. And my mother used have to tell what she wanted. And then they'd bring it.

1-00:15:43

Washburn: And so, what was the religious for you at that time—did you go to church?

1-00:15:50

Probert: My father, mother—no, no, no. I went to church later. We were all baptized. I was baptized in Italy, but my brothers, they got baptized in Illinois. And the Catholic church was so far; it was over a mile or more. So I didn't go. My mother didn't go. My father didn't either. My father was a server boy in Italy, and my mother—they grew up with that religion, so when they didn't have to go, they didn't go. And I went with my friends because they were going to church. There was no forcing. It was up to us to want to go.

1-00:16:31

Washburn: And correct me, was work there six days a week? Only Sunday off? Or did they have Saturday?

1-00:16:37

Probert: Saturday and Sunday off.

1-00:16:41

Washburn: What about other religious holidays, like Easter? Did you celebrate?

1-00:16:47

Probert: Oh yes. My mother did. Well she became Americanized, with the eggs. They go to school—when we started going to school, we'd bring home ideas, and you have to go along with the—they never argued with us, "You can't do this," or "You can't do that." We were just lucky to have what we had. And like those Easter eggs, the coloring eggs, they had a different idea of Easter, the idea of the Christ being born, and like Christmas. We celebrated Jesus.

1-00:17:38

Washburn: Did you guys say grace at dinner?

1-00:17:47

Probert: No, we didn't pray.

1-00:17:51

Washburn: And did your folks speak Italian to each other around the house and to you also?

1-00:17:55

Probert: Yes, yes they did. Oh yeah. But not all the time. My mother would like to talk in English better, and my father tried, but he wasn't too crazy about talking a lot in English. But they would talk between each other more in Italian. And we all talked English. My brothers and I, we never talked together in Italian.

1-00:18:25

Washburn: So you and your brothers all spoke English to each other?

1-00:18:28

Probert: Oh yeah, from school. That's what you go to school for, is to learn English.

1-00:18:30

Washburn: What do you remember hearing about the unions in Benld? Did your father belong to the union?

1-00:18:45

Probert: Yeah, they believed in the union. They did, they were—well they didn't make too much money, and I think John L. Lewis want to get them so more money. But yeah, they were union. They had regular wars like—it was terrible. Bombings.

1-00:19:01

Washburn: Do you remember growing up—what was your impression of unions when you were growing up? Were they a good thing?

1-00:19:07

Probert: I believe in a union. After they join the union, I believe in union. That's the only way you can get decent wages.

1-00:19:16

Washburn: Why is that?

1-00:19:17

Probert: Because they have benefits, and John L. Lewis must have had the contacts. If you're owned by the company, they can do whatever they want to you. This way, with the union, you have the hours, the benefits. They never had no health plans or anything, nothing! Even when my father left, even with the unions sometime, they don't—they could fight for their rights. Whereas, if you didn't have a union no one is going to talk up for you. But I don't know, my father never complained. He wasn't a strong person against the unions. Especially I think if you're a family man, they think about their family.

1-00:20:13

Washburn: Let's talk about meeting your husband. Where did you meet your husband?

1-00:20:25

Probert: At a dance. At a dance. That's one thing. They had a big dance hall. It was between St. Louis and Chicago. Big bands came there. I can't remember right now. It was a real big dance hall. And every Saturday, big bands come there. My girlfriend and I, we walked to that big place to dance, and we walked home. We didn't worry about nobody mugging you or anything. And the boys would come in a car. They come there, and we come there, and then we stand around like this, and then they come around, they say, "You want to dance?" and we said, "Yes." That's how I met him. He asked me to dance, and I danced with him. That's how I met him. Then he start coming to the house. He had to walk to my house or take a streetcar. He came from the other town, and that's how I met him, at the dance.

1-00:21:24

Washburn: Where did he live?

1-00:21:25

Probert: He lived in Gillespie. I lived in Benld. He came from the Scotch, English, all different nationalities. But my father worked in the same that his father worked, and he had three brothers and a sister. They all had big families too.

1-00:21:44

Washburn: Do you think your father knew his father?

1-00:21:46

Probert: Yeah, he probably just said hello, working in the mine. But, I got married out here, in Richmond.

1-00:21:55

Washburn: So what did both families think about an Italian gal dating a Scottish boy?

1-00:22:02

Probert: I don't know. My father didn't know what to say. When he first came into the house, my father brings him under the light and looks him over, and then he checks him out, and my husband—he wasn't my husband then—offers him a cigarette. My father always smoked one of these long pipes that comes from Italy. He tried to smoke that cigarette, to show off to my Richard, to my boyfriend then. I don't think he knew how to smoke it! [laughs] But he accepted him because he's a coal miner's son. He didn't make my father feel funny that he was Italian, that he couldn't speak as well. He accepted him really quickly. I mean, he was never against him.

1-00:23:05

Washburn: Didn't say anything bad about him in Italian?

1-00:23:07

Probert: No, no.

1-00:23:08

Washburn: What was your husband's name again?

1-00:23:14

Probert: Richard. Richard Probert.

1-00:23:19

Washburn: And so what about Richard's family? What was their reaction when you guys were dating?

1-00:23:22

Probert: Well, they had me over for dinner once, and his father was sitting there in the rocking chair, and he had a Bible that he was reading. He just accepted me. They didn't check you over. It was okay. I had dinner, and we didn't have these big, fancy dinners. We just had like french fries and maybe some steak or something. It was okay. I fit in all right. They didn't say anything.

1-00:23:49

Washburn: But I thought I remember you saying something about that because you were Italian, they—what did they think about you being Italian?

1-00:23:55

Probert: Oh, I don't know. I think they accepted me, that I was Italian and a Catholic. They didn't express that, "No, you can't go with her," or, "She can't come over," or, "You have to pick somebody else." No, we didn't have no problems there. But my father—he didn't speak to Richard that much—he liked him because his father worked in the same mine.

1-00:24:29

Washburn: Do you think your parents, in all honesty, wanted you to marry another Italian boy?

1-00:24:36

Probert: Oh, no—in a way, maybe yes. They never made a big issue of it because my brother married somebody else, and she wasn't an Italian. My other brother married somebody else—we didn't stick to the Italians. But I used to hear they liked that because that way you get along better than, and it wasn't that because you're Italian. They could communicate better. Otherwise, there wasn't any of this "because he's not Italian, I don't want you going with him." My father never did hold that against, but I'll tell you the ones that my brother, the one in Long Beach, he changed his name. They got married secretly, and the parents there, they disowned the daughter for her marrying my brother that's Italian. And they were the highly educated degreed people that have all the degrees you know. And he still has that name. Not long ago my brother said, "Oh, sometimes I'm kind of sorry I changed my name." They changed their whole name because—

1-00:25:59

Washburn: What did he change his name from?

1-00:26:1-00

Probert: From a Fessino to Danny. They're the ones that—and they never had anything to do with our family at all! They all had these big degrees. They were university people, and they were all educated. To think that their daughter married a—my brother was a chorusman; he was in the Navy. Then they got over it because my brother went to college; my brother went to college here in California, and he made something of himself. School teacher. They finally accepted him.

1-00:26:45

Washburn: So let's talk about your father's illness. I know your father got sick. Can you tell me about what happened to your father?

1-00:26:51

Probert: Well, we didn't have no money, so being that he was coughing, spitting up, and they said, "Well, you'll have to go to a hospital," we didn't have no money. So since he was World War I they decided to send him to a veterans hospital. And I didn't know anything. My mother didn't know nothing. They said, "Where does he have to go?" We're in Illinois. They sent him to Kentucky. To Outwood, Kentucky. I haven't been there, but I've seen pictures of it. And so my father just had to get on a train and go over there, and he stayed there *six years*, in that hospital. They taught him to how to make crafts and all kinds of things for on account of his lung. Actually, he had black lung. They didn't say that when he first went in there. He stayed there because that way they took care of him. And my mother—that's how come I had to go on WPA and support the family.

1-00:27:53

Washburn: Did the Superior Coal Company help you out?

1-00:27:57

Probert: Nothing. Not a cent. Nothing, nothing, nothing. And listen, when they had those cave-ins like you see in the paper, they don't—maybe they get something now, but they didn't then. They didn't get anything. They didn't have no union. They didn't have anything.

1-00:28:12

Washburn: Was your guys' house paid off at that time?

1-00:28:19

Probert: Well, yes it was. When they buy a house up there, they don't buy it on payments. They just buy it. It's cheaper that way. We were lucky. It's only three rooms, two bedrooms and a kitchen.

1-00:28:31

Washburn: So once your father went off to Kentucky, what did—how old were you?

1-00:28:41

Probert: Well, I was in high school, high school already because fifteen, sixteen. And I was always working. I was always cleaning houses, housecleaning, and doing other kind of work, working for other people.

- 1-00:29:1-00
 Washburn: So it was the Depression during this time.
- 1-00:29:02
 Probert: Oh yeah, yeah.
- 1-00:29:03
 Washburn: What was the Depression's effects on Benld?
- 1-00:29:05
 Probert: Oh, it was terrible. Nearly everybody was on relief. They called it relief, the Depression. Nobody had any money. They all got the—like here—a little bit of—we called it relief. They'd give you some flour. You had to go—my brother and I had a little wagon. We'd go and get some—for cereal.
- 1-00:29:27
 Washburn: Oatmeal or something.
- 1-00:29:27
 Probert: And that lard. Even the margarine wasn't even colored. They give you this greasy stuff, and then you'd color it. [laughs] Yeah. And so much they give you relief—they called it relief, whatever. It's surplus. It was a surplus deal.
- 1-00:29:51
 Washburn: When you graduated high school is that when you started working for the WPA?
- 1-00:29:56
 Probert: Yeah, yeah.
- 1-00:29:57
 Washburn: So tell me how you got a job working for the WPA. And what did you do?
- 1-00:30:04
 Probert: Because my mother needed help. She didn't work, and I had two brothers. And so, they said, "Well, if you can work or do something," they'd put you in WPA. And in my hometown, we had a lot of Italians, and we had adult education. And adult education—we taught them citizenship. That's teaching them how to get their papers. I got into that because I had just finished high school, and I could relate to them, being that I'm Italian, and I could talk to them. And you should see these little ladies. They have the little grocery bag. They have the little book in it, and they come every night. They walk to the school, and we taught them. In the morning, we put in the hours. You have to put in the hours in WPA too, you know. It's a job. And we'd make the lessons, like, "I live in the United States of America," and this and that. They had to learn the federal government, state government, city government, and they came. Then when it was time to go get the papers, we would go to the county, see the teachers, and go with them, and they got their citizenship papers.

It was really a good job, and I was lucky, being that I had to support my mother. I was lucky to get under a teacher that had the degree. I mean, she was a regular

school teacher, but her husband had stolen something, and she had two children, so she had to take care of her kids. So she was in charge of the adult education at night. We went every night, and I was helping her, and we'd write on the board. You should see those people. They really studied and everything. Then we went to the courthouse with them. At that time you sat in a chair, and the judge was up here and the examiner down here, and he questioned these little old ladies that raise a big family, and he said to them—I always remember this—"Do you own any property?" And the lady said, "Property? Property? Property?" They scared them. They acted as if they were criminals! Finally the judge said something to her, to that examiner, and then she said, "Yes." It was the idea of how they got their papers. So then she got her papers. Nowadays, they don't even do that to become American citizen. They had to know all of that. And those people were so happy when they got their papers. We'd say, "Don't tell them you're going to get your papers just to get on relief or something. Tell them how you really feel." That they want to become American citizens. I stayed on WPA.

1-00:33:01

Washburn: How long were you on WPA for?

1-00:33:04

Probert: Well, until I came to California, until I got my vacation.

1-00:33:09

Washburn: Well, how many years would that be?

1-00:33:10

Probert: Well, I was in it about two years, maybe two years, maybe more.

1-00:33:15

Washburn: When you think about the WPA and Roosevelt, what do you think?

1-00:33:18

Probert: Great! He couldn't have done anything better. Even today, I tell—anybody open their mouth about Roosevelt, he had the camps for the boys, he helped build—he put them to work. And they were all working and happy with it. I would vote for Roosevelt anytime—or a Democrat—at least anybody that was on WPA. They were not lazy. Maybe there were some lazy ones, but they had the WPA people just laying there. They're not doing anything. But the adult education, they had—they built dams. They worked. And they even had those CCC camps. I think there was something else. See, I think that was a good thing that Roosevelt did.

1-00:34:13

Washburn: So after that, you've been voting Democrat ever since.

1-00:34:16

Probert: Oh yes, and I won't change. It's what's in the man, but at least Roosevelt did help the working class.

1-00:34:29

Washburn: So let's talk about coming to California. Why did you come to California?

1-00:34:33

Probert: Because I was on WPA, and I had a chance for a vacation, and I was going with my husband—met him at the dance—and he didn't have a job, he couldn't find a job. So he volunteered. And all the guys in that town, they got together. They were going to go in the service for one year because they didn't have no jobs, so they volunteered. And they sent them out to Presidio. All those guys from Illinois out to Presidio. Well, I didn't even pay no attention to that, but the other—one of my friends went to see her boyfriend. He was stationed there; he was one of them.

1-00:35:16

Washburn: The Presidio in San Francisco.

1-00:35:16

Probert: Yeah, Presidio. And then I was entitled—I got a vacation on WPA. It was my time. And she said to me, "Mary, you ought to go and visit him at the Presidio." Well, she went, and she talked to him and everything. I didn't realize that I had relatives here. In Richmond. Cavoretto. That lady—they were coal miners, and they left it to come here. They had relatives here in Richmond, California. We had lost contact with them. I know I hated to see them go, but we thought—even I, I thought, California, when you think California you think movie stars. They're all down in Los Angeles or somewhere. We didn't know exactly where she was. And when she—her husband died after he came out here. He was a coal miner, didn't get a job or whatever, and she was at the Presidio. So she heard about all these young men from my hometown, and she said, "Oh I bet they need somebody to come and visit." So she invited them—my husband included—to her house for a spaghetti dinner. "Come to Richmond. Come over and have dinner." And, oh! They all came over to her house when they had time off.

1-00:37:09

Washburn: What was her name again?

1-00:37:09

Probert: Cavoretto.

1-00:37:10

Washburn: How do you spell that?

1-00:37:11

Probert: C-a-v-o-r-e-t-t-o, Cavoretto. That's a family, they're still here. She died of course. So they're talking—and she met my husband there—and they said, "This is a guy from the other town Gillespie." And he said, "Oh, I'm engaged to a girl named Mary Fassino." "Oh!" she said. "I know them. I'll get in contact about when she can come out here and visit."

1-00:37:42

Washburn: And stay with your relatives.

1-00:37:44

Probert: Yeah, yeah. So I came out.

1-00:37:49

Washburn: So tell me about coming out.

1-00:37:51

Probert: Oh gosh. I didn't know anything about traveling. I bought the ticket, and my father had come to see me be at home or something, and I went with him up to St. Louis. When he was in St. Louis he went to Outwood, and I came out, was coming to California. I didn't bring any clothes. Not even a sweater. I thought California was hot! I didn't have any idea of the traveling and that it takes two days and two nights to come over here on the train—I had to take it. So I came, and my husband met me. He wasn't my husband then. My mother wrote to her and said she could come and stay with me. Otherwise, I couldn't come.

1-00:38:48

Washburn: So it's important that your relative was in Richmond?

1-00:38:48

Probert: Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah. And she said, "Tell her to come and stay, visit." So, I can never forget that. Come to San Francisco at night, off the train. I was freezing! It was so cold! And it was so dark! Ah man. And here's my husband with all those army clothes on; it didn't bother him. So he brought me over to the house. Right away I had to send for a buy a sweater.

1-00:39:21

Washburn: He took you to the house where?

1-00:39:25

Probert: To where I was supposed to stay, in Richmond.

1-00:39:26

Washburn: So tell me about that. You arrived—this was in what year?

1-00:39:30

Probert: 1941.

1-00:39:32

Washburn: Was this after Pearl Harbor?

1-00:39:34

Probert: No, no.

1-00:39:34

Washburn: Right before Pearl—so what were your impressions of Richmond when you were there?

1-00:39:38

Probert: Oh, it was okay. She had three boys. And I grew up with them. I lived with them in Illinois. So I couldn't get over all the food that they had, all the fruit! And the boys. One was working Standard Oil, and the other was working another place, and she had all kind of food to make their lunches. I was eating all this stuff

because I was not used to having grapes, bananas, everything. Start putting on weight! But I got a job. Three days I was here, I got a job.

1-00:40:21

Washburn: Where did you get the job?

1-00:40:24

Probert: Chemurgic. There's a—well, it was a friend. Another Italian said, "You just go over there and tell him you're related, and you'll get on. I'm their cousin."

1-00:40:35

Washburn: How do you spell Chemurgic?

1-00:40:37

Probert: C-h-e-m-u-r-g-i-c.

1-00:40:40

Washburn: What was Chemurgic?

1-00:40:43

Probert: They made flares. You know the ones that you light on a road? I didn't want to stay doing nothing for a while. She said if you want to work—and I wanted to get off the WPA; I didn't care about that—she said, "You just go tell them you're my cousin." And I got on. And I worked there until I was blown out of the place. That place blew up.

1-00:41:09

Washburn: Well, I want to ask you about that.

1-00:41:12

Probert: I got the whole thing to show you, the blast.

1-00:41:17

Washburn: I want to ask you about that. Was Chemurgic in Richmond?

1-00:41:21

Probert: Yeah, it was out there by the bay.

1-00:41:21

Washburn: Where was the plant?

1-00:41:22

Probert: Out there by the bay, Richmond. It was out by the bay.

1-00:41:28

Washburn: Was it near the Ford plant?

1-00:41:30

Probert: Yeah, no. Ford plant was over here.

1-00:41:31

Washburn: Was it near Stauffer Chemicals? Near Stege Marsh over that way?

1-00:41:35

Probert: No, no, no. It was out here. There was a—they made the bathtubs.

1-00:41:47

Washburn: Oh, American Standard?

1-00:41:47

Probert: Yeah, out that way.

1-00:41:48

Washburn: So that was in North Richmond?

1-00:41:50

Probert: Yeah, and they made anti-sep—to kill the bugs. There was a place out there.

1-00:41:57

Washburn: What was that called? It was Ortho? No, it was something else, but I know what you're talking about, yeah. Were there mostly Italians who were working there?

1-00:42:06

Probert: No. Well she's Italian, my cousin was. She just said, "Tell them I'm your cousin." They were just hiring anybody. It was a chemical—the flares, I made the railway torpedoes is what I made. And standing up. When I say torpedoes, everybody thinks those torpedoes that you have in the bay or whatever. This is torpedoes—you know what they are; they're signals for the train? No, no, it goes on the track. It was like a biscuit. I learned to make those. There was a hot place here, Rozen. You know how a vanilla wafer looks? Well they made that. That was the powder. And then the girls—there was her and I—we were in cement buildings. And only two people worked in that one building. What we'd do – we'd dip your paintbrush like, and we had—it's a red paper—I wish I saved one—it's a cross like this. There's a lid strapped to it. And then we go like this. Take the hot stuff and swish it. Take that biscuit tool in there, fold it real quick, and then put a little lid and turn it around. Railroad torpedoes. It's a signal for the train. They wrap that little lead strap, wraps around the rail. And when the train comes over, it goes off, and that's their signals.

1-00:43:45

Washburn: What, signal for what?

1-00:43:46

Probert: For whatever.

1-00:43:47

Washburn: Oh, so maybe change the track or something like that.

1-00:43:52

Probert: Yes. And I made those, and we had to make a hundred forty-four in a gross, and we made about fourteen grosses a day, so I stood there like that and worked all day.

1-00:44:02

Washburn: Was this the first kind of factory work you ever did?

1-00:44:05

Probert: Yes, first time.

1-00:44:06

Washburn: What was that like for you? Did you think it was tough? Or did you think it was easy compared to other work? What did you think?

1-00:44:15

Probert: I was used to work, but it was kind of hard because we had to stand. But the other girl—there were just the two of us in this one place. Then it goes into another section, all cement. And they clean it off, and then they put it in a big box at night to ship out. And we just worked. And we didn't make that much money. I'd get real tired.

1-00:44:48

Washburn: Yeah Mary Ann, if you could just keep your hands away from the microphone because it rustles a bit when you hit the microphone.

1-00:44:53

Probert: Well when I talk you know, I'm describing the—well, anyway.

1-00:45:01

Washburn: Let me ask you, when you were coming out to California did you think you were going to stay, or were you just coming to visit?

1-00:45:05

Probert: No. To visit.

1-00:45:07

Washburn: So when did you make the decision, "I'm going to get a job here, and I'm going to stay"?

1-00:45:10

Probert: I'm going to stay. I didn't want to go back. There was nothing for WPA back here. My mother said—well, I got married too. I didn't want to stay here not married. I got married by the Justice of Peace in Richmond. As long as he was here, I didn't—oh, I had a job. My mother said, and I was living with, and my mother knew her in Italy, and I had a house, and I was working at Chemurgic. And the girl that said I was her cousin; she was Italian too. And I liked it, but it was hard work, standing all time.

Then, you know what happened? Well, when these things—you know the ones we were making. The guy that goes in another department, they clean him and put him in a box. And then at night, there's a—they have boxes like that, and they have to put the tops on, nail the tops. And there's one man—we had a man that came and did that at night, and he missed the top. When he hit the nail it didn't go through where it was supposed to. It went into the explosives and blew the whole

place up. I'm going to get that stuff, and you can see it later on. He blew that whole place up. He just went to pieces. All the women that were in that room were dead, and by the time the blast come through the building, it blew me out. I didn't have any burns, but I had to go to the hospital. What bothered me most was the noise, the explosion.

1-00:47:07

Washburn: The hearing. Did you know any of the women who were killed?

1-00:47:10

Probert: Oh sure!

1-00:47:11

Washburn: Well that must have been very sad.

1-00:47:12

Probert: Yeah it was. And one of them had just gotten married too. And you know what? We didn't get a penny. Nothing. Not a cent.

1-00:47:21

Washburn: Why not?

1-00:47:21

Probert: Because we didn't sue or do anything about that. And I had my coat in there, and my keys from the house were bent even. I got them out, and I stayed over at my friend's house, and then they offered me a job up in an office someplace. It's a big place. They made the flare for the road, the ones that you light up. I said no, I didn't want to go. I wish I had because I would have learned something. I would have had a skill. Instead I said, "No, I could get a job in the shipyards." That's why I'm a Rosie. I went over to the shipyards.

1-00:48:01

Washburn: So you were here before the war and before the big expansion Richmond.

1-00:48:06

Probert: Oh, sure.

1-00:48:09

Washburn: Did you spend a lot of time with a lot of Italians in this time in Richmond? What did you do with your free time outside of work? Who did you socialize with?

1-00:48:17

Probert: No. Well, my husband would get some time off, and I'd go to San Francisco. He was stationed right across the street from the zoo, Fort Funston and Fleischhacker Zoo, and then he couldn't get out. I'd go just to the guesthouse and say hello to them. We didn't do anything, and then the lady I was living with, she'd invite the boys over and stuff like that. We didn't—

1-00:48:49

Washburn: So you don't remember—you didn't socialize with too many Italians in Richmond?

1-00:48:53

Probert: No, no, no. Well the relatives, yes. Just the relatives. Nobody else I know.

1-00:49:1-00

Washburn: And so, you know you told me that in Benld you didn't go to church. Did you go to church in Richmond?

1-00:49:07

Probert: Oh yeah, Catholic. Yeah, yes I did.

1-00:49:08

Washburn: Tell me about your religious life in Richmond.

1-00:49:11

Probert: Oh, I didn't go too much because my aunt—I called her aunt—she didn't go, and I didn't go. I didn't get involved. I went to a Lutheran church there where Wilson and Kratzer is. She didn't go, and if I had any time I would go to visit with my husband at the fort.

1-00:49:39

Washburn: Were you sending home money to your mother?

1-00:49:44

Probert: Oh no—sometimes I would, yes, definitely. I always had to send her something. She'd say, "No, I don't need it. I don't need it." Sometime I wish she would have said, "Come home and stay home!"

1-00:49:58

Washburn: You wish she had said that?

1-00:49:59

Probert: Sometimes, yeah.

1-00:49:59

Washburn: Because you were homesick?

1-00:50:01

Probert: I worry about her, but she never said nothing. She never said—she said as long as he was there, I'm married to him, "you stay with your husband." That's the rule. And thank God that my husband was there, and then Pearl Harbor came on, and they was under alert. And then she said, "If you're married, you stay with your husband." So I did. And I went to work in a shipyard.

1-00:50:30

Washburn: Why not return to Illinois?

1-00:50:52

Probert: There's nothing there. There was no jobs in my town. I worked in St. Louis during the summer to get money for the books to go to school. There was nothing, no work, nothing.

1-00:51:08

Washburn: Can you describe the difference between what life was like in Illinois and what life was like in California for you?

1-00:51:16

Probert: Oh yeah, yeah. I liked California, and a lot of opportunities here in jobs and people, and I even would have liked to go to school to become like a beauty operator or something. If I had the money, I would have did that. I didn't even learn to drive until I got married and went to night school. I didn't have no car, didn't have that much money. As long as my husband was stationed here at Fort Funston he was lucky because they went on alert during the war. The war broke out December the seventh. My husband would have been discharged then. So, as long as he was here, I stayed here.

1-00:52:02

Washburn: And it sounds like from what you've said, there are more foods and fruits to eat. What did you notice about that?

1-00:52:08

Probert: Oh yeah! Oh, lots of fruit. My gosh! I was eating all the time. I put on so much weight! Oh, avocados, and my aunt, the one I was living with, she had those three boys, and they had all that grapes and bananas, and all kinds of food! I put on a lot of weight. Because I'd go too and make me a lunch, and when I was working at Chemurgic, I ate so much lunch I could hardly work! Because I had to stand and make those things, and you know if you eat too much you can't do no job. Gosh, it was so hard, so I kind of had to cut down. When I went to work at a shipyard, it was different. It was different. I walked in the steelyard; I was as an expeditor. First, I was in the office; then I got out and carried the orders to the cranemen to pick up the plates.

1-00:53:09

Washburn: Well, let's take a break and have a soda, and then we'll talk about the shipyards. Let's take off the tape there -- you're stuck there. Great.

Audiofile 2
2-00:00:34

Washburn: We're on tape two, recording with Mary Ann Probert. We're going to talk about working at the Kaiser shipyards. As best as you can remember, how did you find a job working there?

2-00:00:49

Probert: Oh, everybody knew that they were hiring at the shipyards. You didn't have no problem getting on at the shipyards. They brought people in from all the different states by train because they needed so many people. It was no problem. You just go in and say you need a job, and they just hired you right there and then.

2-00:01:17

Washburn: What year did you start on at Kaiser?

- 2-00:01:22
Probert: I don't really—I'd have to figure it out.
- 2-00:01:32
Washburn: Do you remember if it was after Pearl Harbor?
- 2-00:01:35
Probert: Yeah, after Pearl Harbor. No. Yeah, after Pearl Harbor.
- 2-00:01:39
Washburn: Was it shortly after Pearl Harbor or?
- 2-00:01:41
Probert: It was after, right after.
- 2-00:01:43
Washburn: So you think in like 1942?
- 2-00:01:44
Probert: Yeah, yeah, '42.
- 2-00:01:46
Washburn: And so what was your job there?
- 2-00:01:48
Probert: Expediter. They called them expediters. Oh, first I worked in a steel order department. I was going to get in an office, so that steel order department. That's where they made the ships, in Yard One. And so the order department, they order all the steel for the yard, and the men come in and want the order, so you write it up. We'd have big charts showing how far the steel is and how many, how much there was. So that's all I had to do was just take care of the people—they called them leadmen, the men that were in the plate shop. They come in and say they need so many pieces, plates of steel. It's just like making a dress. They had the templates would be pattern. They had a big template shop. The pattern for the ship. And then the plate shop, they'd have tables all down, big tables, and the men worked on each side of the table. They'd bring in the steel, and lay it on the table and stencil it, like marking it. From there, it'd go in the burners, another section that's in that shop. And they're the ones that had those—they were skilled; they cut it out. Then from there, they take it to the welders, and the welders weld it together to form the shell of the ship. But I just worked in the—then I transferred out of the office. I wanted to follow the orders. see that crane man got them, and then see that he delivers the right—I got to walk around. They call it expediting.
- 2-00:03:54
Washburn: Well, let's talk briefly about working in the steel order department. How long did you work there, for a few months or few years?
- 2-00:04:02
Probert: Several months. The reason I wanted to get out of the steel order department, we'd make more money. Because the office girls never make that much money. I had to transfer to another union.

- 2-00:04:17
Washburn: So you were part of a union in the steel order department? Were you part of a union?
- 2-00:04:24
Probert: Yeah, it was union, and then we—I wanted to go outside, so I went out. [phone rings]
- 2-00:04:38
Washburn: So Mary Ann, we just took a break there. You were saying you were a part of a union when you were working the steel order department.
- 2-00:04:48
Probert: Yeah, an office union. I wanted to get outside, so you have to transfer unions to another.
- 2-00:04:55
Washburn: Explain again why did you want to work outside instead of inside?
- 2-00:04:58
Probert: Oh, I don't like to be in an office.
- 2-00:05:01
Washburn: Why not? Why didn't you like working in an office?
- 2-00:05:07
Probert: It was small, and I like to move around more. I don't like to just fill in how far—just to fill out the orders. I mean, the guys from the plate shop come in and just tell them how much steel we have or whatever. I wanted to get out. I'm not an office girl. So, and it's more money too. And that was when I got in trouble, when I wanted to change unions.
- 2-00:05:41
Washburn: We'll talk about that. Just one second. What were the kind of relations between men and women in the office?
- 2-00:05:50
Probert: Well, there was only one man in the office, and the rest was just women. It was too small. It was real confining. I didn't like—those charts were up high on the wall, and all you have to do is fill in. It wasn't enough movement. I like to be busier. And more money too.
- 2-00:06:18
Washburn: How much money did you earn per hour there in the steel order department?
- 2-00:06:21
Probert: I don't know. They didn't pay that much. Ninety cents an hour, probably. The wages weren't that high at that time like they are now.

2-00:06:32

Washburn: Let's take a minute and talk about when you transferred jobs. Tell me the story about when you transferred jobs from the steel order department to being an expeditor.

2-00:06:41

Probert: Well, they told me I had to change unions. So, in Richmond, they had this big place where they hired people, and you had to go there. So I went there and I told them I want to transfer union. He says, "Where were you born?" I said, "Italy." That was it; we were at war with Italy. So, he said, "You'll have to go over there. You have to get your finger printed, and you can't go to work tomorrow until you prove your citizenship." I told him that I was born in Italy, and at that time, I thought, "Well, I'll have to do what he says." I had to go to the immigration office. I told them later what year I was born; I was born in 1921. My father, mother were American citizens, and I was a citizen through my parents. Then they straightened me out, and I missed one day's work, and everyone in the shipyard found out that I was Italian. Really made me very angry.

2-00:07:58

Washburn: Express that. Why'd it make you angry?

2-00:08:01

Probert: Because there's no need for it. I was, I am an American citizen. And he didn't give me no chance to explain how I became a citizen. He figured I was an alien, and I couldn't go to work. So I have to *prove* my citizenship. What I should have said later on—he said, "Well, if you had said I'm an American citizen but born in Italy, there wouldn't have been no problem," but since I said I was born in Italy he didn't ask me anything. He just said, "You're not going to work tomorrow. You got to bring in the papers. You got to do this and that," and that's what I did.

02-00:08:40

Washburn: Why do you think in his mind, what was wrong with you being Italian?

02-00:08:41

Probert: Because we were at war! And I'm working in the shipyards. That's defense, and I don't think he had any right to, but you have to do what they say, so then I had to go and get my—I finally did get, I got them right here. I could show them to you that I'm an American citizen through my parents. My father, mother married in 1921. I was born in 1921. They married before then. And my mother became a citizen then. But they changed the law in 1922, that I would be a citizen if I was born in another year, so I had to prove that I derived my citizenship through my parents, through that marriage.

02-00:09:36

Washburn: But what's wrong with someone who's born in Italy working in a defense plant?

02-00:09:43

Probert: Well, we were still at war. I think that you're an alien then if you're working at a defense plant, and you're not a citizen. They probably didn't hire them.

02-00:09:56

Washburn: Why do you think they didn't hire them or thought that was something which couldn't happen?

02-00:10:06

Probert: Oh, I guess they do a lot of checking. Why did they—you know what? Why did they make all the Japanese go? They were American citizens. They owned land right here in Richmond, and they made them go into those camps! That wasn't right at all! That was terrible, and they did that to the Italians too, and I was one of them. But I had my papers. They didn't even give me a chance to say how I became a citizen. I had to go to the immigration office, and I got my own papers now, and it cost me money to have that paper. I'm glad I got it, but I don't see where they had any reason to question. And that man said, later on he said, "Well if you would have said you were an American citizen but born in Italy, this wouldn't have happened." Because I called the immigration office in Oakland. It still makes me mad. I mean, they don't even give you a chance to—I think that was terrible. I mean, I lost a day's work. Of course now that I want to go on a cruise, I have to get a passport, and I have to show—at least I have the papers. I'll show them to you afterwards. Makes me mad.

02-00:11:21

Washburn: When you missed a day's work, what did folks say to you when you came back?

02-00:11:24

Probert: Oh, well, they looked me over, that's all. They didn't open their mouth. I don't like the idea of arguing. I knew that the immigration office said, "If you were born in China, I was an American citizen, and they had no reason—you're an American citizen no matter where you're at. Through my parents. You could have been born in China." It was just the idea of the people that I worked with found out that I was Italian.

02-00:11:53

Washburn: Do you think they thought poorly of you? Or what do you think they thought about that?

02-00:12:00

Probert: No. Because we were at war with Italy. I'm not connected with no Mussolini. You know, it's funny how—I guess it's because I'm from a foreign born, overseas, or have parents that are Italian, and they're at war. They're probably figure they're checking, want to check up on spies. Maybe they did have a lot of spies in the shipyard or whatever.

02-00:12:34

Washburn: Let's talk briefly about the Italian relocation in Richmond. What did you know about the Italians being relocated in Richmond?

02-00:12:41

Probert: They made them move up out of the house. I was living with my relatives, and he—

- 02-00:12:52
Washburn: Hold on. Let's wait for this truck to go by here. So tell me that story again.
- 02-00:12:57
Probert: I was living with him, and I didn't know that—she didn't have no papers. And so when this came out, they made her move. Her husband got to live in that house in Richmond, and the wife had to go move, find a place up there past the [San Pablo] Dam Road, out that way in Richmond.
- 02-00:13:19
Washburn: What was her name?
- 02-00:13:19
Probert: Perelli. Perelli. The husband and wife, they separated them.
- 02-00:13:29
Washburn: Tell me that story again. I didn't quite follow. How did that work again?
- 02-00:13:36
Probert: Because she wasn't an American citizen, she had to go and leave her husband in the house—they lived in there; they called it the Stege then—and move out to the section that they had out here. It was out by the Dam Road out there. She had to move, find another house. I mean, live with somebody else. Yeah, they did. And the Italians and the Japanese.
- 02-00:14:05
Washburn: Why did she just have to just move from Richmond just five miles away?
- 02-00:14:12
Probert: The boundary lines. They had a boundary line. They had a boundary line for the Italians.
- 02-00:14:15
Washburn: Well, explain. What was that boundary line about?
- 02-00:14:19
Probert: Well, she's considered an alien. Maybe I would have had to go if I didn't have my papers. You had to move out away from her house.
- 02-00:14:32
Washburn: But why was that boundary line important?
- 02-00:14:32
Probert: Because we're on the coast here. This is a declared area, imagine area that has to be—that's why they moved the Japanese. Why did they move the Japanese?
- 02-00:14:48
Washburn: Well also I heard that people talked about Richmond being a central defense area. There are all the defense plants that people might—

- 02-00:15:01
Probert: Oh yeah, that's true, that's true. That could be true. Because the shipyards were here. And I had never seen or heard any sabotage in the shipyards. The only thing I heard about the shipyards probably is people stealing stuff out of it. They walk out with half the tools or walk out with—stealing stuff.
- 02-00:15:24
Washburn: So do you, can you talk about—do you talk about it? Do you think it was paranoia on people's parts?
- 02-00:15:32
Probert: Yes, yes, definitely, and I think—
- 02-00:15:32
Washburn: Why do you think it was paranoia?
- 02-00:15:35
Probert: Because of the war. I mean people get—I don't know. They don't trust anybody. They thought more of—well, maybe they had a reason to, but I myself couldn't see any reason. It almost broke their hearts, the wife had to move over there. He had to stay over here.
- 02-00:16:06
Washburn: So what else did you know about the Italian relocation? How else did it affect people you know in Richmond?
- 02-00:16:12
Probert: That's the only one. That's the only one because I didn't. They didn't never question me after that because I could always show them my papers, and I made a point tell them I'm an American citizen first, then that I was born in Italy.
- 02-00:16:29
Washburn: Did you, at that point, start carrying around your papers?
- 02-00:16:32
Probert: Yeah, I got them.
- 02-00:16:37
Washburn: So but let's compare the difference though. Before the war, were you carrying around any papers?
- 02-00:16:37
Probert: No, no, no, no, no.
- 02-00:16:42
Washburn: So now why did you carry your papers around during the war?
- 02-00:16:43
Probert: Well, in case I needed them. I didn't need them after—I didn't always carry my citizenship papers to the shipyard when I was working there. I knew I had them here. They didn't bother me. I mean, nobody questioned anybody in the shipyards

like that. I don't know. I don't think it was right, but a lot of things they didn't do that was right either. And I have a friend now that I work with, and she spent the time in the Japanese camps, and there was no reason for them to go either because they were right here, and they were American citizens, and they don't listen. They just make you do it. Just like with me. I could argue all I wanted. I had to produce the papers.

02-00:17:34
Washburn: So did you ever sense a little fear that maybe you were going to be taken away?

02-00:17:39
Probert: No, no. No, well I didn't think so. I didn't have the fear. I don't know why. And I would have had to go like my friend did. The husband and wife—they can cry all they want. They had to separate.

02-00:17:56
Washburn: Can you explain for people who don't know, how did they decide who they were going to relocate, which Italians they were going to relocate and which they weren't going to.

02-00:18:06
Probert: I don't know.

02-00:18:10
Washburn: Which Italians had to leave and which didn't?

02-00:18:18
Probert: Oh, I only know of the Italians that lived in Richmond, my relatives that I was living with at the time. I was renting a place from them because I was living there. But I know there must have been a lot more Italians that had to move like that maybe. Like the husband had the papers, and she didn't get any, so then she had to move.

02-00:18:38
Washburn: So was it just about papers? I've heard it was about folks who their residency was in—can you clarify that at all?

02-00:18:48
Probert: Not these people. They just had to move. There might have been sabotage. They had a lot of Italians in San Francisco that they had problems with. But the Italian people aren't people that fight all the time. I mean they're not a—even the guys that were stationed here from Italy. I mean, didn't they capture some Italians, and they brought them over here to San Francisco? They're not fighters. They don't care.

02-00:19:28
Washburn: The people that you knew at least in Richmond, what did they think about Mussolini?

- 02-00:19:34
Probert: None of us had any use for him. We're not fighting people. Italy is like the United States. There's certain parts probably—the Northern Italians are all different from the Southern Italians. So maybe the section, like the gangsters, Al Capone and all those, they're a different type of people. The Northern Italians, you don't hear about them always having—stealing and robbing and all that. They're just different sections. They grow up different. They're not peace loving. My niece is in Germany. She went over to Germany to study. She married a German over there. She's in there now. She a doctor in Germany. And Hans—they're still there. I could say, "Well I don't like the Germans."
- 02-00:20:39
Washburn: So you didn't know much about Mussolini yourself.
- 02-00:20:42
Probert: No, no, no.
- 02-00:20:43
Washburn: But you knew of him?
- 02-00:20:44
Probert: Oh, yeah.
- 02-00:20:45
Washburn: Because he was at war with the US.
- 02-00:20:47
Probert: Yeah, you know. I don't have any—
- 02-00:20:49
Washburn: Who gave you this problem when you went go change unions. Which union was that?
- 02-00:20:58
Probert: The clerk. I was in the office, office man, office union man. I wanted to go into shipfitting.
- 02-00:21:10
Washburn: Which union was that?
- 02-00:21:10
Probert: Shipfitters they call it. From the clerks to the—I was in the office. I wanted to get out of the office union.
- 2-00:21:21
Washburn: So you applied with the shipfitters.
- 2-00:21:26
Probert: Yeah, yeah.
- 2-00:21:27
Washburn: And they gave you this hassle.

- 2-00:21:30
 Probert: Well, I told them that I was born in Italy is all, and when I told them I was born in Italy, at this big center they had in Richmond where they process all the aliens and all those, and even when I called Oakland, they were surprised that I had that problem with them. They thought that was terrible that I had been—I got my citizenship through my parents and that I had to miss work.
- 2-00:22:02
 Washburn: How did that change your idea about the union?
- 2-00:22:09
 Probert: I was angry at them. They didn't even—then he tells me, "Well, if you would have said you were an American citizen through your parents, you wouldn't have done anything. They didn't give you a chance to say anything. Right away, you're—because I said, "Italian, I was born in Italy." That was it. I'm still mad at them.
- 2-00:22:36
 Washburn: I can tell. Let's talk really quickly, as long as we're on that subject, about the Japanese relocation. What did you know at the time about the Japanese relocation?
- 2-00:22:44
 Probert: I didn't pay no attention. It didn't even bother me. I didn't have no feelings about none of that. I didn't know that that was really going on because now that I'm working with a—the lady that spent all that time in the desert they sent them someplace of Colorado—I don't know what, a desert—she tells it was terrible, just terrible. And they were born here, and they planted the flowers here. This is was their land. I don't see where they had any right to put them in the camps.
- 2-00:23:17
 Washburn: So why don't you think you knew what was going on? Why don't you think you knew?
- 2-00:23:23
 Probert: I didn't pay no attention. I had my own problems of being an Italian. After, you know it didn't bother me that much. I never had any—even today, Japanese to me, I can't, I don't like what they did, but I don't hold it against them. I mean, I figure they're human people like you and me, and how do you know what—I was an American citizen through my parents.
- 2-00:23:52
 Washburn: What's her name – the woman you know?
- 2-00:23:55
 Probert: That's Chinese?
- 2-00:23:58
 Washburn: She's Japanese right?

- 2-00:23:59
 Probert: Clara Yashuda. I got her name.
- 2-00:24:03
 Washburn: I'd like to meet her. That'd be neat. And she goes to your church.
- 2-00:24:07
 Probert: No. No, no, no. She has her own church.
- 2-00:24:09
 Washburn: How do you think your attitude would have changed had you known what was going on in the Japanese?
- 2-00:24:19
 Probert: I don't know. You know what you have to do? You have to feel—I didn't get involved with worrying about the Japanese, you know? I didn't like what they did—dropping the bombs on Pearl Harbor. But war. There's a lot to war without—I don't like to say it, "Being that I'm Italian, I'm responsible for the Italians are all doing."
- 2-00:24:49
 Washburn: And so vice versa, you wouldn't like to say that about the Japanese.
- 2-00:24:52
 Probert: Yeah, no, no ,no. They didn't even bother me as far as that goes. I didn't even know they were doing that as far as that goes either, and I don't think a lot of people—. But whoever ordered that if they were an American citizen—. I taught citizenship and literacy. You're an American citizen, you own this, you work land. How did they have the power to take that land away from them?
- 2-00:25:18
 Washburn: Well, you know FDR signed the act which put them in the camps.
- 2-00:25:24
 Probert: What?
- 2-00:25:26
 Washburn: FDR signed the act.
- 2-00:25:27
 Probert: Yeah! That was bad on his part. That's plain old politics. It isn't the truth. I mean I really think that that was horrible, and those people couldn't do nothing about it. Nothing!
- 2-00:25:43
 Washburn: Does that change your impression of FDR, that he signed the—
- 2-00:25:48
 Probert: Well, yes in a way. And if you come to think about this whole thing of now with the Iraq, with him doing what—he took powers that I think—we preach that the Congress declares war and not the president. Our president has taken so much

power that he doesn't—about Iraq. I don't think that was right either, right now even. Of today. You ask half the people about this war in Iraq, that there's 540 people dead already, American boys over there. Dead! For what? This war here is so different. You notice all this type of war that we're having here, they dropped these explosions—I don't know what you would call it—they blow stuff up all the time with the bombing. It's not a war like other wars. You know, they fly over and drop bombs. Now they're having the—I can't say it—

2-00:27:03
Washburn: Well how's the Iraq war different from World War II? Well what's the difference in attitude and everything?

2-00:27:10
Probert: To me, I think that it's a big mistake that—he didn't have no business going over there with our boys and killing, guarding those people when they don't want him over there, and our boys are not protected. What do they do? They're standing there. They're living ducks! I mean, how are our boys being protected over there?

2-00:27:34
Washburn: It's dangerous.

2-00:27:36
Probert: It's terrible!

2-00:27:37
Washburn: But how do you sense the differences among the American people during World War II and the war in Iraq now?

2-00:27:46
Probert: Well we believed that World War II was different because it was Hitler and Mussolini, and there was a lot more at stake, the countries. Hitler did a lot to the German people, and he started the war. We have, with this Iraq, that 9/11, the terrorism. It's always terrorism, and it's always—it's a different kind of war because the way they did it. I don't say that that wasn't right what they did, come over and kill all those people. Yeah, I think so, but now, I think we should get out of there, and now they're still blowing up and killing these innocent boys that are over there. For what?! They're not going to change.

2-00:28:45
Washburn: Do you think we had reason to go to war in Iraq?

2-00:28:48
Probert: No. I'm against the war in Iraq. They're not going to change those people. Myself, you know.

2-00:28:59
Washburn: Well, we don't want to talk too much about that, but it's neat to get your opinion.

2-00:29:02
Probert: Well, I don't know about yours. I don't know about yours.

- 2-00:29:05
 Washburn: Similar to yours. So let's talk about the shipyard. Let's go back to that.
- 2-00:29:10
 Probert: Well, that was something, though, the shipyards. There was all the countries were at—I mean there was Italy, France, Germany. I mean, it was a bigger thing than it is now. You know? What's cooking?
- 2-00:29:27
 Washburn: Hold on one sec. Let's pause this. Describe your job as an expeditor? What does an expeditor do?
- 2-00:29:36
 Probert: See, follow the orders, see that they go to the right place and keep them moving and make sure that whatever they order gets in the right place. Like I bring the order to the crane man. He has to pick up the steel, make sure that it gets where it's at, follow the order. Expeditors see that it keeps moving in the right direction of where it was supposed to be. That's all.
- 2-00:30:10
 Washburn: What gets moved in the right—the steel?
- 2-00:30:11
 Probert: Yeah, the steel. Whatever they made. Make sure that—or if somebody can't find something then I have to go find it where it's at, in that certain section.
- 2-00:30:22
 Washburn: So it sounds like the job had a lot of responsibility.
- 2-00:30:26
 Probert: Oh well, in a way, yeah. And I could move around. I could walk through the shop. You know all the lead men. And it was interesting. I like expediting. Yeah it is.
- 2-00:30:37
 Washburn: That does sound interesting. Because I've met a lot of women who were welders or burners, and they worked in a crew. It sounds like you had a lot of freedom to move around.
- 2-00:30:47
 Probert: Oh, I walked around all the time. I was out in the yard out here and there. Then I report back to the steel order department. If they come in and say, "Well we didn't get this stuff," then I have to go find out where it's at and how we're doing. And I used to see this bums. During the war, they'd be sleeping out in the kitchen or sleeping in the yard. We don't like that, but there's nothing you can do about that.
- 2-00:31:15
 Washburn: Were there other women who were expeditors?

- 2-00:31:18
 Probert: Oh yeah! Lots of expediterers. Me and two, Amanda, because they have to know where it—make sure that the steel is going where it's supposed to be. That's all. I thought that was really good.
- 2-00:31:31
 Washburn: So did you have to start wearing heavy clothing?
- 2-00:31:34
 Probert: Oh yeah. I had the boots on and heavy cap. Nowadays everybody's wearing jeans. At that time, we just started wearing the heavy jeans at the shipyard because you're cold. [whispers] It's all different. Now you don't see now dresses. Of course in a shipyard you're cold.
- 2-00:32:05
 Washburn: So tell me the story about wearing jeans. Why did you wear jeans?
- 2-00:32:08
 Probert: Because it's cold! You're right by the water, and the type of work, all the metal, heavy steel, you have to wear heavy clothes. A woman has to wear heavy clothes and the cap, whereas now it depends on what kind of job you have. It's cold. I even had to wear woolen underwear. You're right there on the water. If you were in an office in a shipyard, you wouldn't wear that. You would dress up.
- 2-00:32:47
 Washburn: Did you feel more comfortable working in the office or working as an expediter? It was a little different—
- 2-00:32:56
 Probert: I like, I like it outside, working with the lead men, different, seeing that things are moving. And they were all nice people. They kind of gave the woman a bad name sometime that worked in the shipyard. They thought they were always laying down having sex with the guys in the double bottoms out in the yard, but that's not true.
- 2-00:33:23
 Washburn: Well tell me about that. Why did they think that? What were men's impressions of women at the shipyards?
- 2-00:33:28
 Probert: Well some of the men made it look bad for the women because they start having sex with them where they're not supposed to. In the double bottoms. There's a picture here of one of them laying in a double bottom. You could see. But they didn't do that. I mean, I didn't see any of it. They had high respect for most of the women that worked there. We weren't—it depends on the—you can find that anywhere.
- 2-00:33:59
 Washburn: Well so now tell me the story about the Italian guy and what he said to you once. Did men ever make any remarks to some of the women?

- 2-00:34:09
Probert: Yeah! Yeah! He hollered, "gosoculo." That means big ass. And I turned him in. He knew I was Italian. And the boss really went and told him off, and he shut up. But he was the only one. I think it was just a showoff. You know how some guys want to just make themselves shout out. But most of the men, they respected a woman. He did make me mad; I turned him in.
- 2-00:34:43
Washburn: So you turned him in, so what—?
- 2-00:34:45
Probert: I turned him in to the big boss, the one that was over his section, that "he's hollering, making remarks to me." He knew I was Italian. And nowadays, they all got big rear ends with the jeans!
- 2-00:35:01
Washburn: Why did you turn him in? It was kind of like sexual harassment?
- 2-00:35:04
Probert: Yeah, I think so, yeah.
- 2-00:35:07
Washburn: Why did you turn him in?
- 2-00:35:07
Probert: Because that *is* sexual harassment. And he was the only one. Otherwise, he had no business hollering. He thought that I didn't know what he was saying.
- 2-00:35:21
Washburn: Well what happened to him because he said that?
- 2-00:35:23
Probert: Oh nothing. They just told him not to do it. They don't have to fire him. It's not like now. And sometimes men, like whistle. They just want to attention, I think. Some of them just want attention. Or want to see what I would do. They made fun out of the lead man too. They went and hooked something on one of the men with a hook back here. And he walked through all the plant. You know, how they played jokes. I've seen that too.
- 2-00:35:59
Washburn: So were sexual relations different in the office versus out on the yard.
- 2-00:36:03
Probert: Oh, it would be worse out in the yard than it was in the office.
- 2-00:36:07
Washburn: Why was that?

2-00:36:09

Probert: Because there are so many men. I mean, it's so big and open. And a boss can't stand over you and see what you're doing all the time. It's just too big that they could get away with nearly anything they wanted if they want to do it.

2-00:36:34

Washburn: And do you think some women were having sex?

2-00:36:36

Probert: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. They did, sure. Because women are women. And their husbands were probably overseas fighting. You always have those kind. You can't say you're going to be an angel. I'm not an angel myself. [laughs].

2-00:36:57

Washburn: Were they, so did they have sex in the shipyard?

2-00:37:00

Probert: Oh yeah. They said they used to have it in the double bottoms underneath the ship where you can't see in it. There's a picture in here. You'll see. They could have it. If they wanted to, but most of them, most of the men weren't that bad. And you know who was in the shipyard was the older men that couldn't go into service, so I can't see where they were that sexy when if they had to be a burner or do their job. They must be laying down and not doing any work.

2-00:37:35

Washburn: Now let me ask you frankly, I've heard from one other person that I've talked to about lesbians at the shipyards.

2-00:37:44

Probert: Oh no never, I never—

2-00:37:45

Washburn: Do you remember anything about that?

2-00:37:46

Probert: No, no. I guess I'm just—

2-00:37:49

Washburn: Or women being suspicious because the women start dressing a little bit more like men. Anything like this?

2-00:37:54

Probert: Oh, I'm trying to think. I myself had never noticed anything. Just like now, "everything is gay, they're gays." Somebody just talked to me on the phone today from Illinois. She said, "Oh my, these gay marriages. You're living over there." They think we're living in sin and everything. I mean, they're making such a big to-do about this marriage now. They print it in the papers. You see these two women. You know, they're broadcasting all of this. Then they think that everybody in California are that way. Really! They don't think that much of a person from California because of that. They don't have no morals. They're sick.

2-00:38:45

Washburn: What about race relations at the shipyard? You told me before that you didn't know many, any black people before you came to Richmond. What was it like for you to be working with black people there?

2-00:39:04

Probert: I didn't work—no black people in my yard. Not a single one. There wasn't anybody that I sighted. They probably were outside, but in the office, no. There wasn't hardly anybody that—I mean me personally. Even my town, in the coal mining town in Illinois, no blacks. I think they were after the blacks if they did come in. I think they must have run them out of town, because they weren't there. They were in St. Louis. They were in Springfield. But they weren't in the coalmines. None of them.

2-00:39:41

Washburn: And so in Kaiser, you didn't work with any black people?

2-00:39:45

Probert: No. No, no, no. I don't know. They must have been there, but not even in the shipyard too many blacks. Now the Mexicans and the blacks, there's more blacks or Mexican people.

2-00:40:02

Washburn: In Richmond. I want to talk to you a second about being in the shipfitters union. Did they provide you any help or any support? How did the union affect your life?

2-00:40:18

Probert: Not a thing. I didn't get anything from them. Because you know the war ended, and I quit the shipyard. I was pregnant. They didn't make me quit when I was pregnant or anything, no. I didn't have no trouble.

2-00:40:31

Washburn: Let's talk about the union though. You paid dues?

2-00:40:33

Probert: Oh yeah, yeah. We paid the dues. And I never went to the union meetings because nobody else went. Hardly anybody went to the meetings. They're tired from work.

2-00:40:44

Washburn: Well what about union picnics or things like those?

2-00:40:46

Probert: No. Some people stayed on the shipyards after most of us were laid off. I quit because I was pregnant.

2-00:41:04

Washburn: Well, let's talk about that. What year did you become pregnant?

2-00:41:11

Probert: Nineteen forty-four, I guess, because my son was born in 1945.

2-00:41:18

Washburn: And how long did you work in the shipyards while you were pregnant?

2-00:41:21

Probert: Oh about, just a few months. Because it's hard to work when you're pregnant. You're too fat. Walking, you know, pants.

2-00:41:33

Washburn: Did people know you were pregnant there in the shipyards?

2-00:41:35

Probert: Yeah, yeah, my friends. My friends, the ones that had been in the office. They bought me a crib. Yeah. They pitched in and bought me a crib. That was nice. We didn't have no shower. Well they gave me the money for a crib. And I had my son in Berkeley General.

2-00:41:56

Washburn: Now were you excited to be pregnant? Let's talk about that.

2-00:42:00

Probert: Well, in a way, I was. Yeah, it was okay. I was happy, but it's different when you don't have your family. Everybody was nice to me as far as that goes, the doctors. And we didn't have to pay too much to be in a hospital.

2-00:42:28

Washburn: Did you want to continue working?

2-00:42:30

Probert: Yeah, I would have liked to work, but then you can't work when you have a child. My husband came home from the service. Then it was hard for him to find a job. It wasn't that easy for the servicemen that came out. We're from Illinois, didn't have no skill, didn't go to high school, so he had a hard time finding a job. He applied at Mother's Cake and Cookies—you know where they make them—and I already had the baby. He want to sleep, and it's night work, and he finally got a job at Oakland Naval Supply Depot. Oakland Naval Supply Depot, and then we moved to Richmond because I was in an apartment on the third floor in Oakland. I had to find a place for the baby to get out. I used to go to Lake Merritt, take him there.

2-00:43:26

Washburn: What do you think you would have done had you not gotten pregnant, in terms of a career?

2-00:43:33

Probert: We would have stayed here. My husband—

2-00:43:35

Washburn: Yourself in terms of a career.

2-00:43:36

Probert: Oh I would have, I think I would have went to school. I wanted to become a beauty operator. I mean, I wanted a skill. Or work in a hospital. I definitely would have made something else of myself. And I always worked in the stores, part time.

2-00:43:53

Washburn: What about continuing working on in the shipyards and doing industrial stuff?

2-00:44:00

Probert: No, there was no work. There was no work after that. There was nothing in Richmond, just the cannery and Ford Plant. Oh, I'll tell you what I did: I went to work for Beckman Instruments. I put twelve years in there. Because my husband didn't have any money; I didn't have any money. So if you—even buying a house I took care of the child, and then I got a job at Western Electric, the telephone, in Oakland, and they moved to San Leandro. First it was Beckman, then Western Electric, and then E&H research. I always did factory work. I soldered the boards you know that you have, and I worked in the wire department, knew all about the wires, made cables for the wires that's behind there. And I wanted to learn more about electricity, go to college. I did go to Contra Costa for a little while after my husband was out, but I didn't take any special skills. But I did want to go to school. I do have some credits from Contra Costa, like English, the ones you have to take for an AA degree I think it is. Those basic ones.

2-00:45:25

Washburn: If you don't mind me asking because you seem comfortable talking about it, and it's difficult to kind of get women to talk about these kind of things, but were you and your husband using birth control at all?

2-00:45:42

Probert: Yes. Yeah, we did.

2-00:45:47

Washburn: What kind of birth control?

2-00:45:47

Probert: He got fixed. My husband. Oh, before that?

2-00:45:49

Washburn: During the war.

2-00:45:54

Probert: Oh, during the war.

2-00:45:55

Washburn: I'm trying to figure out that you said—

2-00:45:57

Probert: The diaphragm, the diaphragm. Oh yeah, you have to do that. Otherwise you have more kids. It wasn't that I don't like kids, it's just that—and we weren't together

that much because it wasn't that hard. He was in the service, and he wasn't home all the time. When he was home, we used the diaphragm.

2-00:46:19

Washburn: Were most of the other women you know using diaphragms too?

2-00:46:22

Probert: I don't know. I think so. Sometimes, the women, they don't like to say what they're using. Then my husband got that surgery where you don't have any more children, so that was it. Then I didn't have to use anything.

2-00:46:39

Washburn: I guess I'm trying to understand, though, at the time you got pregnant were you using, were you trying to get pregnant, or were you using birth control?

2-00:46:50

Probert: No, no, no. You know why I got pregnant is because my husband was going to go overseas. All the time he was here, I didn't get pregnant. I went to Oklahoma—he was on his way to overseas—and we just got careless, I guess. Because the minute I came back, I was pregnant. That's why I had him here. He went overseas, and good thing he came back. But that's why, you just didn't use anything or didn't think about it, or something happened. But otherwise, we always had the diaphragm. Then he got fixed later on with the surgery that wouldn't have any more children. Because I like children.

2-00:47:32

Washburn: I just want you to know too, because should your son watch this, what would he want to know about that?

Washburn:

Was it your son was your first child?

2-00:47:42

Probert: Yeah.

2-00:47:43

Washburn: Because I don't want him to think that he wasn't wanted or anything like that.

2-00:47:48

Probert: Oh no, no, no. We both liked children. I mean it wasn't, and it was—well he did go overseas; he went from Fort Sill. I kind of wanted to have a memory of him. I wasn't never against children, but it was the idea that he was still in the service, and if it happened then it happened. I can see how you feel, and I wouldn't want him to feel that way because there's five years difference between my son and my daughter. Sometimes he always felt that, my husband, that I favor my daughter more than him. But actually, my husband, he loves his son dearly, but he acted like a Gestapo. You know what I mean? He was real strict with him. Too strict. I'm just the opposite, and sometime even now, between the two they're not too close because of the waiting five years between the two of them. And one's a girl, one's a boy, and it makes a difference.

2-00:49:09

Washburn: But clearly the circumstances of your life were difficult, were strained when you had your son.

2-00:49:17

Probert: Oh yeah. Oh sure. Definitely. Yeah. And you know, when he came home, here's a baby. It makes a difference. He's real proud of him, and he thinks the world of him, but in the military he wants everything just so, just so, and he made him just jump. I mean, he was really strict on him. I think that's why—and I'm just the opposite with my daughter and felt differently. So that caused a lot of arguments, and so, to this day, you could say he doesn't come here that much, and I think this house or whatever, he told my brother that there was too much fighting. I felt like my husband was more of a Gestapo with my son, and we used to make remarks behind his back. I would say, "Gestapo...heil Hitler." I use to go like this, like that sometimes. I'm pretty mean too. So we would say—he was so tough, you know. My son grew up that way. I mean, everything was just so—he just listened to his father. Everything was on time, and when he went into the service—no, he went into National Guards—he didn't have no trouble taking orders because he was so used to my husband being so tough on him. He want him to be—well, in a way, he was right. In another way, he—you grow up when you can't even laugh. We'd say—I called him Gestapo, and I'd say if he laughed his face would crack. [laughs] Hear that? That's mean.

Interview 2: February 24, 2004

Audio File 3

03-00:00:05

Washburn: Now we're on tape three.

03-00:00:07

Probert: I hope this isn't going to go on a tape, is it?

03-00:00:10

Washburn: Well, it could, but we can erase it.

03-00:00:12

Probert: Some of it. I don't care, but I don't think anybody wants to listen to it anyway.

03-00:00:21

Washburn: You seem very frank and people want to know women's opinions at the time. So, you went back to work after your son was old enough. What did you do? Did you put your son into daycare?

03-00:00:44

Probert: No, no, no. I had a lady come to the house, Italian lady down the street. She came to the house, took care of him. Otherwise, I couldn't work. I took care of a child in my home for about a year, and then I thought, well, Western Electric, I had a friend, she said, "Mary Ann, you want to work? You can get on right away." I said, "Sure, if I can find somebody to take care of my child." The lady used to come and take my son, bring him to her house. I always had a lady taking care of mine.

03-00:01:22

Washburn: Did she take care of other kids at the time?

03-00:01:24

Probert: No, just him. I took care of a little girl.

03-00:01:29

Washburn: How did you know her?

03-00:01:31

Probert: Oh, through a friend, an Italian lady. My son only has one child, a girl, and he married a girl next door. That's okay, but he didn't want his wife to work at all because I think they miss not having me home.

03-00:01:55

Washburn: Why did you go back to work? What were you thinking?

03-00:01:57

Probert: Oh, I'm always a worker, and my husband's not a high-salary man. He worked at Oakland Naval Supply Depot, and if you wanted a home, even at that time, you buy a house, you have to have two salaries coming in. It's not that easy. I always worked, and I liked to work, and once you start working,

you get two salaries. We were on a real strict budget. We had the budget books, and you put so much money in each envelope, you start saving. We paid cash most of the time—none of this other stuff—and it just goes on and on and on. That's why I always worked. Well, his wife works now, has worked, they don't say nothing about it. He only had one child, and it's different. My son, it's a lot different than it was. I worked because I wanted to send my daughter to college and my son to college, and they disappointed me because they didn't go. They didn't go to college, see?

03-00:03:05

Washburn:

I'm sure they know that. So, at that time, you could not afford not to work?

03-00:03:15

Probert:

That's right. Once you're working, during the war and everything, I took care of a little girl across the street while her mother and father worked. They pay you about \$5 a week or \$10 a week, just babysitting. My son, he was a little older, and you're responsible for the child from morning till night. It's a job all right, but you don't get paid that much for babysitting.

03-00:03:45

Washburn:

What's this about all the Rosies, they were housewives, and then they put on their heavy clothes and went to weld, and then they went back to being housewives after the war? What's with all that? That doesn't seem like that's you.

03-00:04:00

Probert:

No, no. Before I went in to be a Rosie and after I come out a Rosie, I've worked all the time. I think it's because if you want to look back, it starts way back when my mother didn't work. Back in Illinois, I was working in Illinois already. Some people and some husbands, they don't want their wives to work. They don't have to work. But to me, I just grew up that I had to work, that's all. I liked to work. I get tired just being in here. I go next door and help her—she doesn't feel good—I'm still going to work. I have to keep busy.

03-00:04:48

Washburn:

Who are these Rosies that after they worked, just went back to being a housewife? Who are these people?

03-00:04:54

Probert:

I know some of them, but they're working. Even this Japanese gal, she has three boys. One of them's a schoolteacher, another one's something else, and she's working. She worked for Emporium Capwell. Most of them have continued to work, and that's a lot of baloney that they didn't work. If you want anything, you have to work for it or save it, unless you inherit money from somewhere or you have a skill of some kind where you're rolling in money. If you were educated, if I had to have a degree—and my husband, he worked in a bakery at night, and if he could have learned to be a baker or had a skill of some kind that he could demand higher wages, then you don't have to work. Who is it that got all the money now? It's all these rich people that

have money; they make more money and more money. They don't even work for it. They invest it, they know people that know how to buy stock or bonds or whatever, and they're making the money. They don't have to work, but people like us that don't have the education or the money to start with, how are you going to make it unless you work?

03-00:06:15

Washburn: Say that again: so, most of the women you knew who were working in the shipyard, afterwards, what do they do? Where do they get jobs?

03-00:06:18

Probert: They're working. They got jobs; most of them had to go to work like AC Capital's. I have a lot of friends, they're all in sales. This one here, furniture, that type of work, when they can afford a babysitter and work. Or they went to school, or they had a school. That's this lady here, too; she worked at AC Capital. And the hospital, I liked the hospital. To me, what is there? You have a family, you want to raise your family, you want to give your kids some education. What I don't understand is these two ladies that are getting married, they're both working, they're not going to sit at home.

03-00:07:22

Washburn: At Beckman's, that was a factory job, also.

03-00:07:27

Probert: I was in the wire department.

03-00:07:28

Washburn: Were you part of a union? Can you describe your work there?

03-00:07:30

Probert: No, no, no, we didn't have no union. It's very easy to do: you learn to solder with the iron, and you learn all the codes of the wire. The wire has a code, the color. If you want to make a cable, this one wire goes here; it's a board and it has nails on it, and you write the wires go certain places. You just have to lay them in, then you have a lacing cord, then you tie it up like that. Then, you just pull it off, and it goes in behind a machine, all those machines. Then, they have a printed circuit board that you can solder. Well, I didn't do that—I could solder, but I liked wire department. We made switches and all that kind of stuff. Right now, I can't get a job. Say I worked in the wire department—I have no idea if I went in electronics, but they move it to cheap labor. They moved the plant, and most of it is done, I don't know who, the Japanese do it.

03-00:08:56

Washburn: Probably in Mexico or China or something.

03-00:08:58

Probert: Mexico. We lost our jobs.

- 03-00:09:00
Washburn: What were you doing for benefits during the war and after the war, health benefits? Can you describe that?
- 03-00:09:07
Probert: I belonged to Kaiser. I had an own doctor, and I think it was Blue Cross. We belonged to Kaiser. My husband and I belonged to Kaiser.
- 03-00:09:24
Washburn: You belonged to Kaiser during the war because you worked in the shipyards?
- 03-00:09:26
Probert: Yeah, and after the war, I still belonged to Kaiser.
- 03-00:09:30
Washburn: You still belong to Kaiser?
- 03-00:09:31
Probert: I sure do. My husband had Oakland Naval Supply, where he worked.
- 03-00:09:37
Washburn: So, when you were at Beckman, did Beckman pay for your benefits to Kaiser?
- 03-00:09:41
Probert: No, no, no. They didn't have Kaiser, then. No, we didn't have no health plan there at Beckman. They didn't have a health plan.
- 03-00:09:50
Washburn: So, what did you do for health insurance?
- 03-00:09:53
Probert: I just paid my bills at the ordinary doctor.
- 03-00:09:57
Washburn: You paid each time you went. So when did you first sign up with Kaiser HMO? Do you remember what years?
- 03-00:10:05
Probert: No, but we've been members for a long, long time. Since, well, after we dropped Blue Cross we went to Kaiser. You have to have a plan.
- 03-00:10:19
Washburn: Isn't that amazing, what Kaiser did? He started there. The first Kaiser hospital was there in Richmond.
- 03-00:10:24
Probert: I got all the articles here.
- 03-00:10:26
Washburn: What do you remember about that hospital? Did you ever go there? What do you remember about that hospital?

03-00:10:28

Probert:

Oh, yeah. They're very good. They were always good, even with the kids, when I had to take them to the one on Cutting. Even after the war, they were very good. I think he's a wonderful man. He was for the working people that even today, I never find Kaiser down. They're not the best, but they're a lot better. I'm a volunteer in Doctors Hospital right here in Pinole, and I could see a lot of things. It's up to your doctor who you have that counts.

03-00:11:09

Washburn:

What can you describe about the building there at Kaiser? Now, it's not owned by Kaiser anymore; it's owned by some other group. Can you describe what the building looks like, the one on Cutting?

03-00:11:20

Probert:

Oh, they're going to make something else out of it.

03-00:11:22

Washburn:

Then, what was the building like?

03-00:11:23

Probert:

Oh, it was the same as it is now. They haven't did too much to it, and I didn't have no trouble with them, never. I never had any trouble with them. Even today a lot of it is the individual themselves. And some of them, they give them a bad name, and it's not even true. That's how I feel. What you see, "Oh, the Kaiser, they're all dying over there," I didn't see whether the hospital was dirty or anything like that. I've worked in a hospital. I worked where the nuns are in St. Louis, all nuns there. It's St. Anthony. They train them, and when I went to work there, you had to stay there, in the place. They give you room and board, and I can't see where they were that different.

03-00:12:19

Washburn:

Let me ask you, briefly, during the war, were you going to church at St. Mark's?

03-00:12:33

Probert:

Yeah, I did go to church.

03-00:12:35

Washburn:

Did you go regularly?

03-00:12:36

Probert:

No. Well, sometimes I did. On Sundays, I went, and then I went to the Lutheran church in Richmond. My husband didn't go, and my son didn't want to sit still. I went to St. Mark's, and he didn't like the nuns with all the garbs that they wear. They didn't have a nursery school. I'd take him up and down and moving around, and one time—things have changed now, the mass, everything, they face the people—when I went to the Catholic church, they had their backs to the people, and the server boys. It was a whole different type of sermon.

03-00:13:29

Washburn: Mass was in Latin.

03-00:13:30

Probert: Yes. My son, Rick, said, "When is Jesus coming out?" [laughter] He hollered this out at St. Mark's, and he says, "When is Jesus coming out?" You can't go to church with kids; they're jumping up and down and trying to kneel and all that, no. My husband wouldn't go.

03-00:14:01

Washburn: Did the religious community support you at all during the war?

03-00:14:06

Probert: I wasn't involved in it. I went because I felt like going. I didn't even go to church during shipyard days. After I'm out, I had Ricky. This was another thing; I lived in Oakland and at St. Francis de Sales, he said I had to be remarried before he would baptize him, baptize Rick, so my husband did agree. We got married in the priest's home.

03-00:14:40

Washburn: Well, explain that, because your husband is not Catholic.

03-00:14:43

Probert: No, that's right, he wasn't Catholic. We had to get remarried in his house, and then I could baptize my son. I did believe in the baptism. There's a lot of things in the Catholic religion since I've been brought up that's still with me. I still say the rosary. I still like to pray to God. There's only one God for me. He's up there, and to me God's over everybody, and he's the one that whatever your life is like—I don't want to sound like a preacher—you have to have some type of a religion or believe in something. To me, I think God is the only one that will answer these questions and prayers. Whatever's going to happen, I don't think we have control over him.

03-00:15:38

Washburn: Mary Ann, it sounds like you weren't so religious, then. Now, you're more religious.

03-00:15:43

Probert: Yeah, that's true. I didn't have the time that I have now, either. My husband's been dead for eight years now, and I find, to me, religion, the Methodist religion, they kind of build your own self up. It's not you have to have to go to confession, you have to have all kinds of other things. To me, that's why I have more time to devote to going. I only go once a week. I go for Bible study, I'm more into the Bible. Before, I never even looked at the Bible through the Catholic school. They have catechism. They have a different way of praying. To me, I feel he's the one that's going to judge me when I die. I don't know where we're going to go or what, and that's how I live. Now, everybody doesn't have to live that way. I'm not an angel, and I make mistakes. I'm just like anybody else; you're human. We all make mistakes, and all I think you have to do is ask for forgiveness.

03-00:16:56

Washburn:

Why don't you think you were more religious during the war years, early on in your life? When you had your first kid, during the Depression, why don't you think you were more religious during that time?

03-00:17:06

Probert:

I didn't bother me. My mother prayed all the time. She sat in her corner and prayed all the time. I went to the church in Illinois, the Catholic church, and I went to Catholic church. I had first communion and solemn communion and confirmation. Then, you marry a man that's not Catholic, you can't be a Catholic if you're going to go to confession all the time and say, "Well, I did this and I did that. I used the name of the Lord in vain." You can make a whole bunch of stuff up and lie about it. You can lie right in the confessional. You hear that priest listening to you. To me, I told the truth, how I feel. As long as I'm not stealing, lying, or hurting another person, or doing harm to them, to me, I don't see where you have to be confessing all the time. My folks never went to church after they left Italy. Sometimes, they have too much church. I think church is the type of people that are in it. That's what makes the church. I'm a Catholic, I'm a Protestant, I'm Jehovah Witness, I'm this and that—it's how you feel, what you believe in. I don't want to sound like a preacher.

03-00:18:52

Washburn:

I think that's a good way to end. Do you have any questions at all, which she hasn't answered?

03-00:18:59

Probert:

I just rattled on and rattled on. She's a little sweet girl, and you have your own ideas about how you want to be and what you want to do, and what you do. I think within your own mind, you know that it's right. [break in audio] They thought the women were laying down like that all the time. That's a lot of baloney.

03-00:19:23

Washburn:

Let's see that picture. What's this picture describe, there?

03-00:19:30

Probert:

"Once they tasted the economic independence after the war, a lot of people didn't go home. They went back to the—." No, that's on there.

03-00:19:48

Washburn:

Say that again, what's this describing?

03-00:19:55

Probert:

Well, I thought that they have this showing how the women had to work in here, and they said that that's all they did, was lay down in a double-bottoms, have sex, but that's not true. This says, "Once they tasted independence, after the war, a lot of the people didn't go home. They went back to what was called 'women's work.'" See, they went back to women's work—this is a

man's job, here. This is a good picture of the ship right here, a shipyard, one of the ships.

03-00:20:48

Washburn: Do you have any personal photos we can take a look at?

03-00:20:54

Probert: Of me? Yeah, I have that. This is me, and these two ladies, they took care of the restrooms. When the women went in there, they looked after the women, and then, this girl lost her husband during the war, was working in a shipyard, and was very sad. These are like the burners, or welders, and each one of these had a different job. I worked in the steel order department, and I think maybe one of these worked in there. These are women from, this is yard one, and this is the crew for our yard one shipyard. I wish I looked like that now. [laughter]

03-00:21:55

Washburn: Her name is Mary Ann Probert, on the left, there. So, we can conclude this, if we want. Yeah, so why don't you turn to the wall and describe a little bit of what's on the wall, there?

03-00:22:19

Probert: At the dedication, they passed these out and they gave me that honoree. You want me to put this one, here? This is my picture, here. They had a wonderful celebration. They had the planes flying over the place we were in and had a band. We had three planes flew over and George Miller from Washington, DC was there. We had a band and marched down to the place where they launched the ships, and we had a wonderful time.

03-00:23:14

Washburn: Fantastic. That's such a great wall, you have there. Look it up—that's very, very patriotic.

03-00:23:20

Probert: Thank you. You mean that flag up there?

03-00:23:23

Washburn: Yeah, the whole thing.

03-00:23:26

Probert: I like the heart. I just made it up myself, the Rosie. This is the towel, and there's the tags that we drew for. Thank you.

03-00:23:42

Washburn: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]