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Mary Hall Prout

Rosie the Riveter
World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by

Ben Bicais in 2002
and
Sam Redman in 2012

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Mary Hall Prout

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Interview 1: April 5, 2002

Bicais: I'd like to start off asking you about your early life. Where were you born?

Prout: I was born in San Francisco. I lived with my parents and my sister. I was seventeen months older than my sister. She is still alive. I went to Catholic schools in high school and grammar school. My father was in the small-town newspaper business and we moved around a lot. I was actually born in San Francisco, and then my folks lived in Sacramento Valley. My mother came down to have me because she used to be a nurse, and she knew a doctor in San Francisco that she felt very secure with. So then she went back to the Sacramento Valley. My dad had a newspaper, and he was a very creative man. So then finally he started the *Gilroy Dispatch*, to Watsonville, *Morning Sun News* and then to Petaluma.

When we were in Petaluma I went to San Jose State University. I received my BA in education and psychology. After that, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had a credential and could teach, but that didn't appeal to me very much. I went over to Dominican College to see my sister, and there was a lady there that said they were hiring in Richmond. This was in 1944. She said they needed teachers because they were starting a large child-development program. They used to call it "child-care centers." We eventually got the "care" out and the State Department of Education called it "children's centers." We just didn't want to be labeled as a welfare program. It was an educational program. I went over to Richmond, and they needed teachers so badly that they just hired you. I became a teacher, and the program was financed by the federal government because Richmond had the shipyards and all the parents worked in the shipyards. The children needed care; they needed a preschool program. The program started in 1943, and I got into it in 1944. We had about twenty to twenty-two centers—I'm not entirely sure about this. Richmond was lucky because it didn't have any old school buildings to place the children. The Lanham Act was developed by Congress, and there was money for regular nursery school buildings. They built them in Richmond and we had a beautiful physical set up.

Bicais: So all of the buildings in Richmond were brand new?

Prout: All brand new, and people came by bus from all over California and all over the United States to see these buildings. They were the first early childhood centers that were really developed on a large scale. They had the classrooms, and they had the little bathrooms attached to them and lots of windows to look out. It was a beautiful setup. Going back, the federal government financed the program, and the school district administered it. It was really all over California. Los Angeles, Oakland and San Francisco all had them. They also had them in Oregon and Washington, but in these states, they closed them after the war was over. In our case, they kept them open. We had about twenty-two centers, and we had one center that was open twenty-four hours.

Little children would come because their parents were on swing shift or graveyard shift. The children whose parents were on graveyard shift would come in their pajamas, and they would sleep. We provided the swing-shift children with dinner, and the other little children would have breakfast to enhance their nutritional needs. We had daytime students and swing shift and graveyard. That was just in one center.

They had big staffs. They had a director and they had a nutritionist; the food was excellent and well prepared. We had a kitchen in each site. These ladies were very conscientious. They were all ladies that had had children, and the food had to be perfect for the center's children. The parents appreciated this a lot. At night, they could go home and maybe just give the children a glass of milk and maybe some soup. They were all so busy; many of the men were overseas. There was a lot of trauma connected with the times. The federal government had a fee schedule. For one child it would be \$3.60 for the next \$2.75.

Bicais: It was very affordable then?

Prout: Yes, definitely. The teachers were not simply aides; they knew a lot about child development. Our first director was a real educator. She didn't want any part of welfare. She just didn't want the program to have that stigma. It was really wonderful; she hired only credentialed teachers. They knew about early childhood. When a child painted something, they knew what it meant. The curriculum had science and art, all kinds of cognitive material and language development. The children really learned how to read. Later on, when the program was a little bit different, all the kindergarten teachers wanted our children because they had had such an advanced background. The program was excellent.

The federal government pulled out after the war. I think it was in 1945 or 1946. We had a hard time getting finances. The field was new, and people thought that women should not be working. People had to work to be eligible for the program. We had ways of verifying this. The state of California took over, the childhood development office. Unfortunately, they never gave us enough money. At first, we had ample funding. It was based on—grants through the state—on the number of children you had, so much per child. We also had a full-cost fee, and teachers and nurses children could participate in the program. The real cost was picked up by the school district. The government wasn't paying anything for them; they were paying themselves. We had an override tax that paid the rest of it. It was all done on a means basis according to your income. When the men began coming home, they took advantage of the GI Bill, which was probably the most wonderful thing that ever came out of the war. Many of these men would not have gotten an education without it. The state of California would give us money for just a year at a time. It was really rough budgeting.

We were administered by the school district; we were all hired by them. Our salaries were set by them. By that time, we had closed some of the centers because we didn't need them. They were scattered all over Richmond which was wonderful.

We had an art supervisor, a music supervisor; the children received every form of education. We did a lot of parent education. These were young parents who needed help. Very cooperative. We had a PTA group and had good speakers come. The centers stayed open from 6:00 in the morning to 6:15 in the evening. Sometimes it was a little hard to schedule, but we maintained good ratios. We had a fine medical program. We had a part-time doctor on our staff. When the parent first brought the child in, Dr. Albert would give them a physical exam. Six months later he would give them a recheck. We did a lot healthwise. We kept track of all the immunizations, which some of the parents didn't. By the time the children got to kindergarten, we had the whole record so we could just turn it over to the schools. We didn't have to depend on the parents finding all these pieces of paper. We had access to any special education in the district. We had a psychiatrist that we could refer the parents to if we had a child that had really deep problems. We had a dental hygienist and a full-time nurse at each site. We had to cut this down gradually.

We opened two brand new centers. One was in the San Pablo area. There was a wonderful minister that realized the need for one there. He talked to the school district that talked to Sacramento. They put a beautiful portable set-up there. It was made especially for this program. It had classrooms and isolation room for ill children. They had a long hall going down the middle and bathrooms attached to each one. We had school age children before and after school. You should have seen the boys; they were so cute. They learned to knit, and they didn't think anything of it. They learned all this art. Some of them were really very good. It was all their work. We didn't use any cutouts or anything. They could recognize their own painting. We had art appreciation. They learned so much about the Impressionists.

Bicais: Something everyone should know about.

Prout: Absolutely. There was this one little girl who looked just like a girl in a Van Gogh painting. I called her mother's attention to it. We had nice outdoor equipment for physical development. The San Pablo center was full before we opened it; we had such a waiting list. We had about 100 children there. It was so intimate; everyone knew everybody else. It gave the children a great deal of security. So many people say, "Oh, child care; you're taking them away from their parents," but you're giving them so much." When you have more adults. We opened the Lake Center in San Pablo in the sixties. In the seventies HUD came into the act. The city of Richmond received HUD money.

Bicais: HUD was what exactly?

Prout: HUD was the housing development of the federal government. The city received the money, and then they knew that we were the only ones that knew about childhood development. They came to us and asked us to develop a program and to see that the right equipment was bought: "We will pay for the equipment." The HUD money paid for the equipment. It was the most beautiful center. We had a young architect working on it. I was director of the program. My assistant and I had to plan it under the direction of this architect. Every day when the child would come in, we had an inspection, because we wouldn't take a sick child. The architect planned the most beautiful center from the ground up. It was an ideal center.

Bicais: It was federally funded, you said?

Prout: The city had the HUD money to erect the building, and then the school district bought all the equipment, the beds, instructional supplies, et cetera. It was a wonderful cohesive interaction between these two big departments. More of this should have gone on. I was a teacher for eight months.

Then I thought I should do something else. Instead of principals, we had head teachers. I went to my boss who had valuable experience. She had worked in the WPA and did a lot of things before she took over the job as the director of this big program during the war. It became smaller, but at one time it was massive. We had thousands of children, and she really knew what she was doing. I went to her and told her I thought I was going to quit because this wasn't for me. She said, "Yes it is. I want to make you a head teacher." This instilled so much confidence in me. I was twenty-three years old at the time. I said, "I don't know how to be a head teacher." She said, "You can learn". And I learned! I went to two of the big centers as assistant head teacher and then to a couple of smaller centers as head teacher. When our director retired, I took her job as director of the whole program. It was long lifetime career of about forty-two years. It was so rewarding. For a long time we made it on our own with the state money. However, it got to the point where costs were too high. We paid excellent salary. We had to skimp a lot. The district began to give us money, but that stopped after a while because they needed that money. The program was closed in 1990. I retired in 1985. They let the county take the grant over from the state. I had been retired for three years, and they asked me to come back to help settle the books. It really made me sick. The county had a poor program. They were just using the grant money, and you just couldn't do that and have an excellent program. It's still going that way. It really hurt us when we had to close it.

Bicais: So it still exists to this day, only the county runs it?

Prout: It's not the same program at all. Many of our staff received jobs there. Some of our custodial and classified staff. They tell me it's just terrible. They don't have the standards that we had. They said if I were there it wouldn't have happened, but it would have. It was dollars and cents. The district was giving

quite a bit of money, but they got to the point where they couldn't afford it. It was just sad. I was there the last day. The new people didn't know what they were doing, they criticized our program. The school administration offered help, but they didn't accept it. It was the people involved. We had a strange book-keeping system that was highly audited. Thank God we never made a mistake. No gross errors. Our teachers kept attendance books. We started to call them the Bible because they were audited so heavily. We received money on daily attendance. It had to all be right. Each one of those hours were dollars. I got paranoid over it. We had auditors, federal, state and local. We had certain eligibility requirements for parents. The parent would give us verifications of his employment. We would have a big file that we placed all this information. Auditors would check. They would check the number of days they were there. We knew the rules and we abided by them. Some places had a hard time. People interpreted it incorrectly.

We had a great staff. Our nutrition program consisted of breakfast in the morning. We had lovely nutrition program. We taught the children nice manners, how to use a napkin. The three-year olds were in a classroom by themselves with maybe two or three teachers and aides. Some would come at 6:00, 7:00 or 8:00. Breakfast was served at 7:30, and it was brought from the kitchen on carts into the classroom. They would set up a little cluster of tables, and the teacher would sit down and eat with them. It was lovely. She would serve them and correct their manners.

I know that a great deal of children benefited from the program. So many parents were working so hard that I don't think that they ever sat down and had a nice meal. I just don't think that they had the time. That worked out well. We also had a well-balanced dinner that was served in the various classrooms from 11:00 to 12:30. That was set up the same way. Then the little ones had a nap for about two hours. We would bring the beds in and put them down in the classroom. Each child had his own bed. Nice clean sheets at all times. It was a Cadillac program.

Bicais: It sounds like a very all-inclusive program.

Prout: Oh, it was really. And then in the afternoon we would get up and have a little snack. We would have milk, and there would be fruit wedges and sandwiches so they would have a little bit more to eat before they went home.

Let's see. We had school-age children before and after school, and it was wonderful. The little kindergarten children would go to the adjoining school from the center. Each center had a different public school because they were located all over Richmond. We got to know the teachers, they got to know us, and they depended on us a lot to make sure that notes to the parents got home. And then the children could do their homework. And then in the summer we had a wonderful program. We would hire buses and take them all over, you know, to Sausalito where they have the Model of the Bay that the US

engineers put up. And the children got so much out of it. And then we would take them to the zoo. Thank God we never lost anybody. We could've but we didn't.

But the school-age program was a big success so that children would come back to us for the hot lunch. Because the school was very close. They would walk back and then go to school in the afternoon. They would get nutrition and then come back and do all kinds of activities. We even had a tea one time. We had an elderly teacher; she was great. She really knew children. And she decided to bring some of her nice little cups, her china cups. And the boys were even involved in it. They loved it! And they would have tea in the pretty cups; it was really a learning situation.

Bicais: One of the things—you said something about, just kind of when the program went from not being federally funded anymore, after the war. I was wondering, this could be a stretch, but do you think this was in anyway kind of indicative—you talked a little bit about how you did a lot to avoid the stigma of the program being welfare. Do you think that was—?

Prout: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it. I think that—see, they called them child care centers. And once the war was over we still had that name, and we didn't want it. So we had to go to the legislature and ask them to change it. Just as we changed them to children's centers the big boom in the federal government in day care came out. We didn't like when it happened. We had a big compliance bureau in Sacramento. They examined us from head to toe. We always had some consultant coming up. Nutrition or education. They only had one big department that could come and evaluate the physical setup. We had to have a certain amount of square footage per child. We had more rules than the public schools, I think. Because every department gave us rules. [laughs] But anyway, then our name was changed to children's centers. So that denoted education.

That stayed all the time until I retired. Let's see, how'd it go? This big department in Sacramento was under social welfare, and it was the compliance if they saw a teacher that was cross-eyed or something, they'd report it. They were just terrible.

Our whole division, which was a big division because it included all these other towns, they fought so hard not to be put under this compliance. We wanted one of our own. But they had one, and it was already established. Some of our head teachers had terrible times with them. They would assume something had happened. Like we had one big black aide, and he was a wonderful fellow, but he dressed a little peculiarly, you know, and they found one child that had been abused. Once we found a child that had been abused we had to report it to the police, you know. And call the parents in. That was within the last fifteen years that that law was passed. Well, they were going to accuse this man of doing it. I knew he hadn't done it. He was a wonderful

young man; he had a marvelous report. But this woman was writing him up, so we had to go to the headquarters and say, “She’s not doing it right.” But they were very picky. And then of course we had the child development office. We had to write a program each year, which was wonderful, telling them what we did, what we did in science and why we did it. The reasons for it and everything.

And one time we had something funny happen. This was a developing program, so a lot of things happened, and they are still happening that way. I was directly under an assistant superintendent in the Richmond schools. They had special education, and our program was placed under special education. We were writing this brochure. And language development beginning to develop. Dr. Ricklin said to me, “What do you do?” I said, “We assimilate the children”—I was just guessing—“and these little children from Vietnam don’t know the English language, and they come in here, and they are so smart that they learn it like that.” And he looks at me and says, “Well that sounds pretty good.” And then about two years later he came in, and some woman at Texas University had written a paper on assimilation for language development! [laughs] And we laughed together, we said, “We were guessing about that.” I’m not taking credit or anything, but it was just funny- the incident. And he laughed, and he was very supportive.

We had union problems. We had aides that had been kind of used as teachers a little bit but weren’t paid as teachers. Our former director was saving money to hire them. Well once the aides realized that was happening, we went to arbitration and won. We should have won. Because it was a little unjust. And we had a good program for school-age children: if something was wrong with one child, we could go through the schools and have counseling, and we had many support systems. Then, as I was leaving, the program was declining because the district didn’t have the money for counselors. They had maybe one for four thousand children. They are beginning to realize now that early diagnosis is so important and to get the parent involved.

I feel we did a lot for the children, a lot for the parents. Some of the parents were very young, and they needed to know how to treat their children. They loved their children. Like one man who was a huge man—and he was a nice man—his wife had died. But he had two little girls. When he spanked them his big hand would almost destroy their muscle development. So I had to call him in one day, and I said, “You know, I’m not being critical of you; I know you’re a good parent,” because he used to hem up his little daughter’s dresses—he was just nice—but I said, “You’ve got to stop spanking the children because there’s going to be no muscle tissue left.”

Bicais: He didn’t realize how strong he was.

- Prout: He really didn't, and he said, "I don't realize how strong I am." One blow from him would've sent the child careening over. So we could intercede and help the parent.
- Bicais: It seems like there were a lot of young families around at the time.
- Prout: Oh, yes.
- Bicais: Maybe kind of inexperienced with child raising and whatnot. I've read a little bit about just the Bay Area in general at the time, and it seems like it was a mass exodus to the Richmond and Oakland area. Richmond went from like 25,000 to 100,000 in a few years.
- Prout: You know what? During the war the kindergarten teacher would have 100 students in one class. She could barely take them out to the bathroom and count them. It was just a huge job. A lot of fine teachers. They were really dedicated, and they did the best with the facilities that they had. But there was something else—but the school district really didn't like us, we were a burden to them. Because they had the K-12, and they were having problems with them. This was just an added program. But little by little they realized what we were doing. By the time I was director there was much more understanding of the goals and objectives of the program. Our first director would come back with tears in her eyes sometimes.
- Bicais: The program was based solely on need, right?
- Prout: It wasn't for everybody. That's a good point.
- Bicais: So it was a relatively small percentage of the kids so they just saw you guys as almost a nuisance.
- Prout: Yes, and we had different guidelines that they had to work on you know. But then, when I took over, it was getting better. It was about twenty years after the program had started. Dr. Griffin was wonderful; he was assistant superintendent in charge of special education. He was very supportive of the program. Anytime we had to go in front of the union—the union became very impractical—he helped us. We had just so much money in our budget we couldn't spend anymore.
- Bicais: This is the teachers union?
- Prout: No, this is the classified union and teachers both; all our teachers were under this. And we had a bad time with them. Then finally they began liking us a little bit. Realizing that we were doing something for the benefit of the children. But we had one teacher who was always reporting me. Always reporting me for some little dumb thing, you know? And, so the union leader and I got to be good friends. And he says to me, "Mary, get her off my back."

So we all realized that we had to work together. But when they wanted more money, one time Dr. Griffin said, “You’re going to have to give it to them.” And I said, “If you can find any extra money in the budget we will give it to the employees.”

Bicais: That was the school board?

Prout: No, we had a teacher’s union, and a classified union. The classified one is for people who did everything but teach. They became very active in the district. One of the superintendents—he was very fair, he was a fine man and he could see some of the injustices in education and tried to counteract them. And so he didn’t do it; he let the unions in. They were going to get in anyway; they had a powerful man at the head. Part of it was good, and part of it wasn’t so good. There always benefits and tradeoffs.

What else can I tell you about the children? Oh I know! In 1962 remember when Kennedy died, and they were enacting the civil rights legislation?

Bicais: Sure.

Prout: Welfare on the federal level was going to give us money for the children. So we had to take for a while people that were on welfare but they were going to school or ill. And they had to be doing something, and they had welfare grants. And then many of them—I admired some of the girls; they were marvelous. Some of these black girls wanted babies, so they’d have a baby out of wedlock, wouldn’t finish high school, and then go to community college and get their degrees from community college and get good jobs. But they wouldn’t give them enough; it would be an entry-level job. So there wouldn’t be enough money; the grant was better than the money from the job.

So we encouraged them to give them a supplement, and welfare did. The supplement lasted for about three years. And it was the only way to get them off welfare. I don’t know why the federal government hadn’t figured that out. But one of the girls—one time a fee schedule went very high. See, the state had a fee schedule that was based upon the income plus the welfare they got. And the fee schedule was raised so high throughout the state of California. We knew these girls would go back on welfare. So they had a welfare referee come to each school district, and I had to represent the school district and just say that we were doing what the law said. But we didn’t believe in the law. And these girls came and testified, and they showed us their budgets and everything. Oh, they were wonderful. I couldn’t have made a budget like they did. And they were trying so hard to get off welfare. So the referee said to me, “You’re really for these girls aren’t you?” And I said, “Yes, I am because they are trying to improve their status instead of going back 100 percent on welfare.” All the people in my position throughout the state said the same thing. So they changed it. And it was so good because then it was realistic to say that they could have a little welfare and have a job and do well.

- Bicais: And then the welfare didn't last that long.
- Prout: And social workers were telling them how to spend their money. These were smart girls. They led their lives the way they could and budgeted. But we had some parents that were really mad; one parent was cheating on it, I knew. She didn't put down her welfare grant. So we had to go in front of a group, a welfare group. And somebody said, "You know, she's going to kill you." And I said, "No, she won't kill me." But she followed me down to the welfare office, and I had all the papers in my hand to prove that she hadn't paid. I don't think she would've killed me, but who knows.
- Bicais: That's scary.
- Prout: They could get pretty volatile. But you know what has happened here in California which is so wonderful? You know, when Dr. [Wilson] Riles was Superintendent of Public Instruction for all education he started a pre-school program. And that was for underprivileged mothers whose children needed that type of education. Now that program is going 100 percent. In Richmond one of my friends that was in our program became the director. Her name is Sharon Fogelson. She is operating a beautiful program. She's gotten all kinds of grants outside the government program. And she has twenty-eight classrooms. She's going to be retiring in a year. I think she knows right now, more about early childhood development than anybody. She's just marvelous. I'm so proud of her because she had been a head teacher in our program. And she's just very dependable. Very, very good. But she received funding for I think four new programs this year. And then there are a lot of grants coming through to the Richmond schools, and she's getting a great deal of them. And then she can improve her program and give orientation.
- Oh, that something else we did. We had all kinds of orientation for our teachers. You know, you can get a credential and know a lot about specific programs their goals, and objectives have to be explained and how you relate to those goals and objectives. That helped us a lot. Many of them were elementary teachers who had not had too much preschool education.
- Bicais: In your previous interview, you talked something about how the school district ate up the buildings after your program was finished, or something along those lines?
- Prout: Yes, well a lot of the buildings were torn down. A few of them were temporary. Now Lake [center], the one that I told you about that was the portable setup? That's still going, and the county has that. And Crescent Park, the one that was brand new—but the county didn't keep up those buildings. They look terrible. And we were so fussy about that. Of course they are examined just the way we were. I don't know how they get by with it.

Then we had the two big programs, one was Pullman and one was Maritime, and these buildings could hold 180 children. They had about eight classrooms and big kitchens; all of them had kitchens, but some of the centers were a little bit smaller. We ended up—probably when I left, oh, we had to whittle it down a little bit. We ended up with probably—do you remember reading that?

Bicais: No. I didn't see it.

Prout: I'm probably going to tell you too many, but there were probably about 450 children in the late eighties and nineties.

Bicais: And there were thousands at one point?

Prout: Oh yeah, it was just huge. You know, because we had all of those centers. I threw away a lot of things when I left. We had a wonderful brochure. But I thought I'd never use that. I should have saved it. It was a happy program. Even the housekeepers were concerned about the children. They did the custodial work.

Bicais: It sounds like an ideal program.

Prout: Very idealistic. That's put very well. Yes it was. Our first director set the goals and objectives for the whole program, and she had such high standards. Her name was Erla Boucher.

Bicais: And she was the mastermind behind it?

Prout: Oh, she was the mastermind behind it, and then I just continued it because I realized what she had done was just right. And all of our teachers would get mad at her because she was the last of the authoritative administrators. She said, "Do this, do that." And they did it. And then when I took over, I really did both setups. I believed that the teacher should have their say.

And we had an arts supervisor that was excellent. I'd love to have that brochure too. She had a brochure that showed how you would set up various art displays and art activities. She did so many wonderful things and set it up so well for the children. We had easels, and then she would take a long strip of paper, and cans would have different colors of paint, and she would put a circle here and the color. That was identifying the color. Everything was educational. It was excellent programming. We had many of teachers on various committees that the district had—they learned. That last year that I was here I would haul great big cartons of food to each center so we wouldn't have to call a truck driver. We really just stretched everything and we couldn't stretch it forever. We just couldn't.

Bicais: So it just slowly got smaller and smaller? You slowly lost funding?

Prout: Well, it got the same amount of funding, but expenses rose. Salaries went up, which they should have. And everything was more expensive, so that's what happened. It's a shame when I see all this information that President Bush is putting out about the Head Start Program. It's a federal program, and I know it's a lot better than it used to be; I shouldn't be criticizing it, but it was a poor program. And lately in the paper, he said that some of this money is going to—he did mention child development, which is good, but most of it is going to go to that Head Start Program. And I'm sure it's better than it was.

End Tape 1, Side 1

Prout: When this federal money came into Richmond and they had all these home—little programs, where maybe a lady would take care of twenty children. They were little centers. And we had some wonderful people. A lot of people didn't want advice. But a lot of people said, "You've been doing this for so long; what kind of toys should I buy, what should I do?" And we had this one lady, Roberta Griffin. She was great. She really listened to us, and she had a great program, but it was a federally funded program. It had nothing to do with the school district. She did well. But some of them—a lot of money was wasted, it made you sick.

Bicais: Just on—

Prout: Well, on equipment. If they just listened to us and bought the minimum amount, it would have been great. Equipment that pre-school children shouldn't have. Developmentally they weren't ready for the task of heading a program of this kind. And that was sad. I think we should have gotten some of that money. We got some of it because we got to the point where we only took welfare children, because the money was out there. We had to go over our books and find out how many children were on welfare. I remember this assistant of mine, we were pounding it out on the adding machine, and she says, "I'm tired", and I say, "Listen, this means money, and we've got to do it!" So anyway, we received money for quite a while. Then the federal government pulled out, and it was just the state funding.

Bicais: It sounds complicated, dealing with the different agencies.

Prout: Well, it was basically the state and the federal government. The federal government started it first, then came into it again in the sixties, and then the rest of it was the state.

Bicais: Did Prop 13 have anything to do with this?

Prout: Oh, it had a big impact because it had an override tax for some of the special activities, and ours was one of them. And when that was done away with, that really was the demise of our program. It really was. I'm glad that you mentioned that. Because we didn't have that extra money from the override.

And we could charge fifty cents an hour for children, and the school district would pick up the rest of the cost per pupil. And adult education had it, and we had it, and there were a couple of special programs that had it. It murdered us.

Bicais: I think it was '79.

Prout: Seventy-nine. Well we existed for maybe about twenty years after that, but barely. You see, we just made it every year. We could not carry money from one budget year to the next; see, we had all these rules: state local, federal.

Bicais: Sounds very complicated.

Prout: Well, our teachers would get so mad because we had reports that we had to send to the feds. Well little Mississippi had to do it too, and we were so big. The teachers would get so mad. It was on how many welfare children we had, and how many AFDC 1, 2, or 3. And it didn't apply to us, but we still had to make numerous reports because we took that federal dollar.

Bicais: Kind of just going through the motions?

Prout: Yes, and they would get so angry because they didn't have time for much paperwork. They did essentials and did them well. But that override killed us. That's what did it. We got that extra money. We could make more children eligible. It was a better assemblage of children. They weren't all poor little children. Some of the mothers were teachers or nurses. So it was a good socio-economic blending of children. And I think that helped.

Bicais: It sounds like it was a good place for children to interact with their peers and whatnot.

Prout: And some of those school-age children were so cute. One little boy, Johnny, was always getting into trouble, but never defending himself. He went to public school, and the principal was always giving him a bad time. And I would say to him, "Johnny, speak up, don't just stay in the periphery of the group." "Oh no, Mrs. Prout, I'm okay." So two days before I left, John called, and he hadn't been in our program for years. He went into the Army. He said, "I heard you were retiring, and I wanted to thank you." I got tears in my eyes, because he was always getting into trouble, and I was always getting him out of it. But I loved that boy. He did well in the Army, got married; he married a nice girl. So it was a thrill for him to remember. He was in his forties then, I'm sure.

Bicais: I'm sure you made a huge impact on him. I'm sure you made a huge impact on all the kids.

- Prout: Well, I don't know, but we all tried. No one took all the credit. I always felt that it was the teacher; we all just helped the teacher. She was the important one. And we tried to instill that in her. We did in most cases. We were there to support her.
- Bicais: That's a good philosophy.
- Prout: But if she was ineffective, the program was poor; we couldn't motivate her.
- Bicais: She is definitely the front line.
- Prout: She was the front line, and the aides were too. Some of the aides went on to become teachers. They went back to school. One girl, she was a black girl and a lovely girl. One day I was giving this speech and saying how important education is and going on and on. And I looked at her face, and I didn't think that she was maybe even listening. Well she went back and got her AA at community college, and when she got it she came up to my office and she said, "I have a little gift for you, because you're the one who inspired me." That wasn't completely the truth because she worked hard to develop her educational skills. She was so honest and so sweet.
- But another time I went to talk; it was terrible. It was to a bunch of kindergarten mothers, and I was going on about the benefit of nursery school education and how everybody had to have it. This cute little Asian mother came up to me and said, "Do you think I have abused my child because I didn't give her a pre-school education." And I said, "Oh no, no, no. I'm sure you're a good mother." You get too general sometimes so we all make mistakes. I'm so glad you mentioned the override, it was so critical. We gradually knew what it would mean.
- Bicais: When it first came out on the ballot, did you realize the dire consequences that it would have for the program?
- Prout: No we didn't until later, because that wasn't publicized very much. But then we began reading carefully and realizing and those other programs did too.
- Bicais: You have to read the fine print.
- Prout: Oh, you certainly do.
- Bicais: Someone who is advocating a political stance isn't going to come out and tell you the down side of it.
- Prout: No, they are not going to tell you. But you know, we did a lot of legislative work too because that kept us alive. You know senior George Miller who was in Martinez—his son is now a Congressman and he's one of the heavy democrats, I think, in Washington—old George was wonderful. My former

boss name was Erla; she would go to him, and he would say, “Erla, what do you want now?” And she’d say, “We have to this and we have to do that.” “Okay, I’ll see that it’s taken care of.” He knew it was a good program.

And then a lot of these state legislators enacted legislation that helped us. They would put us on the bottom of the bill where no one noticed we were there. We would go up on Legislative Day, and they would have some of the organizations would have it. And all of these legislators’ offices were open, and we would go in and talk with them. We had powerful organizations too. We had a directors group. When the program first started we all had Social Security, but we weren’t in the state pension system. San Francisco had a state pension system because it was through the City of San Francisco, but they were the only ones. So, my boss, and the gal from Oakland, and about five of them lobbied to get that. So now, we all have pensions. We’ve had them since the sixties, I think. So we have both, which is wonderful because a lot of programs don’t have both. The San Francisco director said to my boss, “You’re going to ruin it for everybody.” And my boss said, “What do you mean? You’re the only one that had it. Your people have a pension but our people don’t.” So by God they went to the right legislatures and got it done. So now we all have good pensions.

Bicais: Wow, that’s great.

Prout: The teachers were all under STRS, which is the State Teachers Retirement. And a lot of us stayed under PERS, which is basically for classified people. There was a fiscal man in Richmond that helped me a lot with our program. I had a chance to go under STRS in the middle of my career. And he says, “No Mary, stay where you are, it’s a better system.” Well, it’s debatable whether it is or not. I think it’s caught up with PERS. PERS is the largest public retirement system in the world, I think. It has state and all the police, and community officers are participants. When you get a job, make sure it has a pension. Because it all happens very fast. And you suddenly think, “Oh! I have to retire.”

Prout: And those dollars come in handy every month. Our district put in 13 percent for us, and we put in 6 percent a month. Which was pretty good; they put in the bulk of it. Our district had wonderful medical coverage. I’m still getting it right now as a retiree. They put it in a contract, and they can’t renege on the contract. For a while we had medical, dental, and pharmaceutical, and I paid one dollar for my prescriptions; that’s all. I’d walk into a doctor’s office and not give him anything because this was such a good plan. Now it’s changed, and we have to give a little bit more. We have \$1000 dental coverage which doesn’t go too far, but it takes care of many problems lot of your needs.

Bicais: Filling in cavities and whatnot. [laughter]

Prout: And you get to be this age, and you really have to have construction work done.

Bicais: Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

Begin Tape 2

Bicais: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how—along I-580 and Cutting Blvd, how some of the temporary wartime housing was razed.

Prout: It was mostly along Cutting Boulevard. And some of those streets that went into Cutting. And then a lot of—as you said, with I-580 [coming in] there were a lot of housing areas there. Each housing area had a central—it was like and administrative building. There was a man in charge, and he would collect the rents and do any maintenance that had to be done. We had Terrence Center and Harbor Gate, and Canal Centers; they gave us room for child centers in these areas. And they were awfully good to us. Of course they were under the federal government too, and that's when we were under the federal government. But they would give us rooms in their administration buildings to develop a children's center. And we had, in one location, about 100 children. The manager would come in and talk with us and help us on lots of things. So it was a good correlation of these two agencies, of the housing and the school district, and the federal government. And it worked very well together. And then, I can't remember when they tore the housing down, but it was like in the fifties.

Bicais: Early to mid-fifties I think.

Prout: I think so too.

Bicais: When they tore down the housing, they tore down the daycare centers as well?

Prout: Let's see, we had two big daycare centers or children's centers that survived it. And this was our Pullman Center on 23rd and Florida St; that's just off of Cutting. And then our Maritime Center, which had been the first one to be constructed, and that was on 10th Avenue off of Cutting. And those are still remaining today.

Bicais: But initially they were on the same land as the housing, and they got spared basically.

Prout: Yes. Right. And it was good because people could walk their children to the children's centers. Especially the ones that were in the housing areas. They had a lot of support from community of people. That was part of the housing contingent; they were the ones that were torn down. We really didn't need them after the war. Because a lot of people went home, and many people went to school. Some of the GI fellows and their families lived in that housing.

They used to call it the GI housing. It had nice little apartments, and it was kept up well.

- Bicais: After the war a lot of that temporary housing wasn't really needed at that point?
- Prout: Well, it was needed while these men went to school. See they only had the GI Bill and maybe their wives' salaries. And so they needed low-cost housing.
- Bicais: Kind of an interim period?
- Prout: See, that gave them the incentive to go to school, and that was part of the purpose of the GI Bill. That was really one of the best things to ever happen to this country. It really was wonderful. And Roosevelt was responsible for that. He signed it and everything. When they say he was the greatest President, you wonder, but he did a lot. And there were so many isolationists that didn't want us to go to war, and we had to. He just pushed the bill. To think that the poor man was crippled and everything, but he was so smart.
- Bicais: He was President through a lot of critical times, that's for sure.
- Prout: And Churchill depended on him. I remember reading in a book about the Lend-Lease and how Churchill didn't want any part of it. And Roosevelt knew that it would save England. You've got to have these ships and this power behind you. If it weren't for Roosevelt, England could have gone under. They were bombed, and they just had a rough time. And Churchill wasn't as realistic as Roosevelt, but they were good friends.
- Bicais: Churchill was more from the old school, I remember reading someplace—this is kind of off topic—but that Churchill wanted to retain the English Empire after World War II. And Roosevelt wanted none of that. He used to kid Churchill about the old English Empire.
- Prout: It was a good relationship because they each helped each other quite a bit. But I think Roosevelt helped Churchill more than Churchill helped Roosevelt. But it was a different era. Mrs. Roosevelt played a big part. She came out here and viewed our centers. They always said that Franklin would start the programs, and he wasn't as mobile as she was, and then he would send her out to evaluate them. It was a good team.
- Bicais: And she actually came out to your centers?
- Prout: She actually came out. I'm sure she did. I could be wrong on that. I never saw her. But I could be wrong on that. But her influence was felt on all the legislation. It was an interesting time. A constructive time. All these men going to school; it was wonderful. Some of them got their PhDs, some got

masters, some became teachers, engineers. Many of them are some of the famous men today. They really worked hard.

Bicais: It really got a whole generation going. And trickled down, so to speak, to their children and grandchildren. A lot of people my age's grandparents are really the solid force in our country today.

Prout: Exactly, and everybody should go to school. You can never get enough schooling. I remember my own father; it was so important to him to my sister and me to college. It was marvelous.

Bicais: That's the attitude that you have to take to be successful: put a priority on education.

Prout: Once in a while there will be someone like Bill Gates [laughs]. It's funny; the children that came from this group of people were all staunch Americans. They were all—many of them were from the Midwest. They knew what a dollar meant, and they knew how to get an education. It was really a constructive time.

Bicais: Do you think that coming out of the Depression, just the fact that money was so scarce? That generation had the attitude that money was something to be held on to; you saved it. And then coming out of the war, and having such an unprecedented period of prosperity, do you think that in any way contributed to the conservatism that followed. Because people had such a high value for the dollar and maybe they didn't want to see it given away to social programs.

Prout: Yes. Yes. And some of them gave too much to their children. Because they had been deprived with the Depression and everything, they gave too much to their children. And I don't think that was good. You needed the necessities and you needed an education, but you didn't need a lot of other things.

Bicais: It kind of spoiled the next generation, huh?

Prout: Yeah, spoiled the next generation. But then some good things happened too. You know. There were a lot of good kids out there. Like you! [laughs] I mean you want an education and a future, and you don't just want to sit around. And that comes from your family. I know it does. So it was a big era in the history of the United States.

Bicais: I'm interested in looking a little deeper into how the country didn't seem to have the same—what's the right word—I guess sympathies coming out of the war. Maybe I'm reaching here, but it seems like a lot of people in the Depression maybe felt that, since they got through it and they were maybe well-off after the war and felt the economic benefits of the wartime boom, that maybe after that they were less inclined to be socially liberal, and to give money to social safety net type programs. I'm trying to work that in to your

experience with how the federal government after the war began to withhold funds from your program. Do you think that—I guess I'm trying to make that connection.

Prout: I think that they thought it just wasn't needed. And now more and more—it's really early childhood education, and everyone should have early childhood education. The child is ready to learn, and if he just stays at home all the time he can learn from books and puzzles and all that. But they need the camaraderie and the socialization with other children. And if the child doesn't have that, they miss a lot, I think. And then the kindergarten teacher can't go on to her next level. I remember the kindergarten teachers all wanted our children because they had all of the aspects of child development along the way. It wasn't just play it was learning.

Bicais: And they were probably much better behaved than the other children.

Prout: Well maybe not so well behaved [laughs] because they kind of got excited a little bit. They were used to being in a group. But they did have the—many of them were bright, and they had been exposed to activities on their level. The emotional part too. Children are so ready for kindergarten and first grade because they've have the emotional part tie of leaving their parents out of the way. You know, being away from your parents. Also the health factors. I think I told you that we had a pediatrician on our staff. They accumulated all the records. So when it came time to go to kindergarten, all these things were amassed in our files. It was the vaccinations and everything. So there were many pluses and benefits, the child's whole health record.

Bicais: Do you think that as the war came to a close and you received less and less money—I guess you stopped receiving money from the federal government and it went to the state, but there was a diminishing in the funding overall, is that right?

Prout: I really don't know if it was a diminishing of the funds. The state did pretty well at first, but we had a grant from the state. And it was good it took care of a lot. And then of course with Proposition 13; we could add to the program because that was local money. We were in pretty good shape. The only thing that worried us was that the money from the state was enacted every year. So on June 30 we didn't know on July 1 if we were going to be open. It was a lot of emotional upheaval. Afterward, they put it on a permanent basis. But we received money on an attendance basis, similar to the school district. It was very involved as far as book work was concerned. But, we got along. And then, as I said to you, after I left—we didn't receive district money when I was there—but after I left they had to because we had good salaries, and they just couldn't pay them with the grant. We were always going to Sacramento and asking for more money. Sometimes we would get it and sometimes we wouldn't. It was a little iffy there for a while. And then when the school

district pulled out because they needed the money, then they knew they couldn't make it. It was impossible.

Bicais: Last time when I talked to you, you mentioned that World War II was really the golden age of the program. You seem to have a lot of fond memories of the program during the war. Was the same standard upheld after the war?

Prout: Oh yes! And that's why we ran out of money. Because our salaries were so good we insisted that we had credentialed teachers and had to pay them. The money was getting less and less. We weren't getting any more money.

Bicais: But the cost of living was still going up of course.

Prout: Yes, the cost of living was going up. And so that's what broke the back of the program. And then the county took over. But the county didn't have the same goals and objectives that we had.

Bicais: It just wasn't up to speed, huh?

Prout: Oh, it wasn't and still isn't. All of us old timers feel very bad about the demise of the program.

Bicais: I guess what I'm trying to get at was, after the war do you think that the program was able to meet the same needs as it did during the war?

Prout: The needs weren't as great as the years progressed after the war. We developed these two new centers, and one was in the San Pablo area. There was a minister there that knew there was a need. So he went to the school district and went to bat for us. At that point, we had a lot of welfare children. And we would receive money from the federal government as far as the welfare children were concerned, and they didn't pay anything. That was on one other transition. And then, a lot of that money dried up, and the eligibility rules changed a little bit. You see, before, during World War II, we could take any child; we didn't have eligibility rules. Once the state took over we had a means test, and the parent could make just so much money. And then, when the federal government came back in to the program with the AFDC children we had a little bit more money, but not a lot. I hate to keep talking about money, but money really made the program. We really became almost a welfare program, but we weren't; we had the name "child care center" during the war. All of us hated "care" because it denoted welfare. So then, we got the state legislature to change the name to "children's centers." Just as we did that, the big child care boom in the nation came. Federal money was poured into some small programs. And so it identified our program, but it didn't identify every program. We did not want to be called welfare. It was education. This is what we stressed because we were under education. We didn't want just a babysitter program. And we really fought over the years. We didn't want it to be labeled that. When the school district tried to call us

welfare we said, “We are administered by you, but we are not a welfare program.” When we got the name changed, it helped a little bit.

Bicais: Do you think that people started calling you a welfare program because during the war it wasn't need based, and then it became more for only the lower income kids?

Prout: It could be.

Bicais: I'm trying to tie in the trend towards more conservative politics at the time.

Prout: That lessened the desire to have our program, the conservative politics. Because a lot of those legislators thought the mother should stay home and the child should be reared at home. And they didn't think that these programs were very important. But we had a couple of key legislators that really helped us out. When I think about it we would go and talk to them, and they would put us in a bill, and we would get more for buildings or maybe supplies or teacher's salaries.

So it was very challenging. Very challenging. Our parents—the parents that we had were very convinced that their children were getting a good education, and that was very rewarding. We had no problems with the parents at all. We had parent groups, and the parents helped legislatively a lot on the state level. They would write letters to the state legislators. They helped a lot with the money programs. They were loyal and good, you know. Increased the money that flowed. It made a better program.

Bicais: I'm assuming that the people who sent their children to the centers during and right after the war, most of the women probably worked?

Prout: And the men went to school. That was a whole period. That lasted for maybe four or five years after the state took over. Then it became—then we took welfare children. Remember when Kennedy and Johnson had their big welfare emphasis; they wanted to get people off welfare. And so we would get extra money for children. And then our food program was developed around that as well. If they had so much money, the child would be eligible or not. So we had a lot of paperwork to do. And we had auditors all over the place. And thank goodness we never had a bad report. But we had federal auditors, we had state auditors, and we had local auditors. Each school district has to hire a team of auditors every year to make sure the program was meeting its finance goals. We were very fortunate. We had a many people that were conscientious, so we never had a bad mark.

Bicais: So because for an initial time, you said it was GIs and their families that used the center, and then after that it predominantly became welfare.

Prout: Well there was a period between welfare and the GIs where we had means testing. It was workers that made quite low salaries. So the government didn't have to put a lot of money in, but they put some. So it was that period that lasted about—well, 1965 is when the welfare money came. And it lasted.

And see, the color of our program changed too. A lot of black people lived in the public housing and paid rent and lived in the housing program, poor people, after the GIs left. So that was a phase of the program. And many of those girls went and got jobs, good jobs. They were eligible if they went to community college or some kind of vocational program. So it helped the community a lot. As it progressed, sometimes we would feel it was going down, but then it would go up again. The federal government influenced the first days and those middle days. And then finally they pulled out completely except for the lunch program. And of course the lunch program is that way in the schools too. It was all based on family's income. Then when I left we still had a lot of black children, but we had a little bit of everyone. But the requirements were getting more, not less. So but it was still under the state.

Bicais: You talked a little bit about LBJ and Kennedy, their push to get people off welfare. Do you think that this had a negative effect on the child care or children's centers?

Prout: No, I don't think so.

Bicais: You don't think there was a conservative push to end programs like this because it was welfare in the eyes of some?

Prout: Well, in the eyes of some legislators. Some Republicans. They didn't want anything to do with it. This was an anti-social deal; it was like Sweden in particular: all the children out of the homes putting them in these other buildings. It took them a long time to get that through. Some of them never did. Some of them don't have it now.

Bicais: They saw it as a negative thing?

Prout: An anti-social thing. But more and more with early childhood education, the theories are being developed that it's a wonderful thing for children. It's now a plus rather than a negative. So the whole history of it has been very interesting because we can see improvement during times, and we can also see non-improvement at times. But most of it was constructive.

Bicais: Overall it seems that without question it was a positive thing.

Prout: And the school districts began to realize that these programs were very important and they would build them up—our former director was under elementary ed as far as the school district was concerned. And then when I took over we were under special ed. We had a wonderful superintendent that

would meet with me once a week and talk about our problems and everything. And he was very supportive. So we finally got a little acclaim. Acclaim that we needed and acclaim that we deserved. But it was a new program, and it was just one more thing for the school district to worry about. They had so many special ed programs. But finally we got the right people in some of those jobs. They were younger people. They were people that had early childhood courses in college. They knew the importance of it. But we always had that conservative element.

Bicais: And you were always fighting them, Basically conservative Republicans of the time were anti-New Deal, anti-welfare, and anti-FDR and his legacy. A lot of conservative Republicans came into the House in the 1942 elections.

Prout: Yes, they did.

Bicais: They probably saw this as a borderline socialist program.

Prout: Babysitting. They said it was babysitting. This just killed us. We weren't babysitters, but that's what they thought we were. But then finally the programs began being accepted. And this was very gratifying.

Bicais: And this happened around what time do you think?

Prout: Well, it was a gradual thing. As different legislators came in—they were younger some of them—the whole country began conforming a little bit to education at three years old or even two years old. It was better than having the children at home with an inexperienced person who didn't know anything about childhood development. A lot of legislators were young, and their wives were working. It was just a different philosophy. Completely. It grew.

Bicais: So in the sixties and seventies as women started working outside the home, and it became more accepted, as opposed to the World War II generation and before when women stayed home. It kind of became more accepted overall. That makes sense.

Prout: Yes, it was a whole philosophical change in the world. Some of it was for the good; most of it was for the good.

Bicais: A little more realistic in a sense, because it was inevitable that women were going to begin to work outside of the home. It was just a matter of time.

Prout: Yes, many of these women had a good education, and they wanted to develop this. So anyway, it progressed pretty well. Anyway, San Francisco still has children's center. Berkeley has them. I think Albany's are still open. And they are funded just the way ours was. Los Angeles has them too. There aren't small towns in LA anymore. We had a good situation, we had what we had a director's association. And this director's association did a lot for the

program. They were all the directors of all the programs in the south and the north. And we would meet once a year in either the north or the south. So we could get a lot of legislation done that way. We were a bigger group, and we got a lot done.

- Bicais: It sounds like coming out of the conservatism of the forties and fifties people eventually came around and saw that these programs were a good thing, and we should support the teachers and whatnot.
- Prout: It took a while, and it would be great if we had a little bit more. You know, like now the teacher's salaries are just terrible and the money for teacher's salaries has to come from the local level. And if there is a bill that comes from Sacramento that makes it look like there will be some money, they spend it on something else. It's a great inequality.
- Bicais: And of course when you offer lower salaries, you are going to attract a lower caliber of person.
- Prout: Lower people, right. And the teacher is the most important thing. I used to say to our teachers, "We're just here to help you. Because you are the ones involved in the children." And the more I think about that, the more I realize that it is so true.
- Bicais: And it's hard once you get the cycle started of underpaying teachers, you do start attracting, I don't want to say lesser people, it sounds bad, but—
- Prout: Well you lower the standard.
- Bicais: Yeah, someone who is coming out of a really good college probably isn't going to be inclined to take the \$30,000 a year teaching position. And once you get that cycle started, it's hard to throw more money at the teachers because you already have a lower standard of teacher. You really need to keep the standards high the whole time, because at this point, we have a lot of teachers that are underpaid, but there is also a lot of bad teachers out there. In the public schools.
- Prout: That's right, but there are a lot of good teachers too that stay because they believe in what they are doing. I have a little niece who graduated from John Hopkins, and she entered the Teach for America Program, and she's has been there for three years. I don't know if she is going as a teacher to stay there or not; she says she loves the children, and she feels like she is doing something for them. I'm so proud of her. Her degree was in international relations. And she's a smart, lovely girl.
- Bicais: Probably could have gotten the high paying job out of school, but she opted to teach?

- Prout: And she has about twenty little children, and they just do fine. She's really motivated.
- Bicais: Those are the type of people that we need as teachers. You need people that are highly qualified and don't mind taking a pay cut. Unfortunately, they're hard to find.
- Prout: They're not worried about the paycheck. But it seems so unrealistic with Silicon Valley. We did get teacher's salaries up a little bit, but now they're just horrible. I have a couple of friends that have been in education for a long time, and their salaries are decent. They're not bad. But they are in bigger school districts. Dr. Riles, he was the public superintendent in Sacramento, and he started a program for just poor little children. It was called 1331; that was the legislation that started it. I think the eligibility—I think the parent still has to not work.
- But I have a friend who is in charge of this massive program, and she's done a beautiful job. She was one of the head teachers in our program years ago. She has about twenty-eight classes, and she's doing beautifully. I think she knows more about early childhood development and education than anybody maybe in the United States. Her salary is pretty good. The districts are realizing that they have to have programs of that nature, or they can't compete. That's a program that evolved from this original program. There are a lot of benefits to it. We belong to all the educational organizations, and we brought back all the materials and everything. And we had a lot of information coming back from the Eastern colleges that had early childhood programs. We had a lot of good information so that we knew what was the latest.
- Bicais: That's great. Well, I'd like to thank you for your time; I got a lot out of this interview.
- Prout: You're welcome. If you ever need anything else, just let me know.

[End of 2002 interview]

Interview 2: May 11, 2012
 Begin Audiofile 1 05-11-2012.mp3

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and today is May 11, 2012, and I'm sitting down today with Mary Hall Prout, in Greenbrae, California. Mary eventually became a teacher, then head teacher, then director of the early childhood development programs in Richmond, California. So today, that'll be most of what we talk about. But I'd like to first begin by asking you if you could tell me your full name and where you were born.

01-00:00:40

Prout: Before I was married?

Redman: Sure, that's fine. We can start with that.

01-00:00:46

Prout: It was Mary Agnes Hall.

Redman: And Mary just spelled M-A-R-Y.

01-00:00:54

Prout: Yes. Agnes, A-G-N-E-S.

Redman: And your maiden name, last name, was spelled?

01-00:01:06

Prout: My last name was Hall, H-A-L-L.

Redman: And that became your middle name when you were married, and you took the last name Prout. Could you spell that?

01-00:01:17

Prout: Yeah, P-R-O-U-T.

Redman: And you were born in San Francisco, is that right?

01-00:01:22

Prout: Right, at Mary's Help Hospital.

Redman: And what date was that? When were you born? What was your birthday?

01-00:01:29

Prout: What was my birthday? It was August 7, 1921.

Redman: Can you tell me just briefly, just for a moment, about your father?

01-00:01:41

Prout: My father was a very interesting man. He was a newspaper man. He bought the *Gilroy Dispatch*. And he was very clever; he could do the front office and the back office. And he bought that newspaper—it was in Gilroy—and he had

it for probably about six years. Then he got bored and wanted to go on someplace else. So my mother said, “Okay, John, we’ll go where you want to go.” So then he started a paper in Santa Cruz, and it was a weekly paper. He would go up and down the main street of Santa Cruz, and he would interview people. He just had a lot of fun doing it. Then he went to Watsonville. And the Watsonville people were very mean to him; they didn’t want him in the act. It was a syndicated group. They didn’t want him there. So whenever his boys would deliver the papers in the morning, they would go around and pick them up and throw them away. So that got to him a little bit. Let’s see, then he went to Petaluma and had a nice little newspaper there. What was so good, what we admired, my sister and I—I have one sister—we admired so much, the fact that he could do it all by himself. He did the artwork, he did the mechanical work—he just loved it. It was really astounding to see the talent that he had.

Then my mother was a housewife, but she became a nurse before my mom and dad got married. She was born at Mary’s Help Hospital. An excellent nurse, loved it. But her father didn’t want her to become a nurse because he felt that it was too hard on girls. They had to do all the custodial work and everything. So she said, “Okay, Father, I’ll graduate from high school, and then in three years I’m going to go to become a nurse.” And he said, “That’s fair enough.” So she had a young sister, so in three years, they both went to Mary’s Help, both became RNs. Then after— well, it was after the war, I guess, my aunt was just a little gal, and she was getting that virulent flu that they had then, that terrible flu. It was just awful. So my mother knew that she wouldn’t live through it. So Mom tried to get an ambulance, but she couldn’t find one, so she got a hearse, and she went down to the veteran’s hospital in Palo Alto, picked up my aunt and saved her life, really.

Redman: This was in 1918, the influenza?

01-00:04:40

Prout: Yes, exactly, that virulent, terrible—

Redman: I’d like to get back to that in just a moment. [audiofile stops, restarts] Thank you for letting me fix the audio there. When we left off, we were talking about your parents and your mother’s recollections from the 1918 influenza outbreak of the flu, the Spanish flu.

01-00:05:04

Prout: Oh, yes, that was terrible. People were dying by the inches.

Redman: What did your parents tell you about how they met? Do you remember about their early courtship and how they got together?

01-00:05:18

Prout: Yes, I do. We’re Roman Catholics. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, always had the priest to dinner or to breakfast. She was very proud of that, because he could only come every other week, I think it was.

Her name was Flanagan, a good Irish name. So anyway, my father was starting in the newspaper business. He had a little newspaper up in Colusa. And my mother had beautiful red hair and he saw her at the holy communion rail and just thought, boy, that lady's for me. There was a twelve-year age difference. So anyway, he popped the question, and my mother said, "Well, John, I can't go right away, because I've promised another nurse that I would take her and a patient by train, to Chicago, and I can't let them down." She did that. Then when she came back—she was cute—she said she saw the bridges and everything and thought, oh, this is where I want to be. So anyway, my mom and dad got married and then they had just two of us.

Redman: So you came along in the early twenties and your sister is a little younger?

01-00:06:39

Prout: She's seventeen months younger.

Redman: Seventeen months younger, okay. And what's her name?

01-00:06:43

Prout: Her name is Gabriella. Gabriella Thomas.

Redman: In San Francisco?

01-00:06:49

Prout: Yes, she's now in the Sequoias. She broke her shoulder and she's a *very brave* girl. She's going to be in the hospital, I think she said, for three months. So it was a bad break.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit about where you attended elementary school?

01-00:07:11

Prout: Yes. We went to Catholic schools. We started out in Gilroy, and we went to the Presbyterian Sisters there. We were there for maybe about three years, and then we went to the Daughters of Charity, in Santa Cruz, up until about—I was a sophomore in high school and my sister was a junior. Or no, she was—what do you call it? I can't think of the right word. Well, she was a junior in high school, and I was a senior. Then my dad moved us to Watsonville, and we went to the Notre Dame Sisters. They were good teachers. Oh, boy, they were wonderful!

Redman: What was it like to be a young girl in a Catholic school in those days?

01-00:08:05

Prout: It was just fine. We loved the nuns. They were so nice, and they were all overly qualified. They had PhDs and everything. And they did a lot of music, and they did a lot in the arts. At our school, let's see, we had fifty girls, period.

Redman: So it was an all-girls school?

01-00:08:27

Prout: All-girls school.

Redman: And it was a good environment for you.

01-00:08:29

Prout: Oh, it was wonderful! We had this one nun that would write poetry, and she was just great. Then we had this other sister, so funny. She wrote books and everything, and she was very learned, but she was funny, too. She would take all the peanuts away from all the girls. And we had desks that lift up like this. You probably never saw a desk like that.

Redman: I haven't used a desk like that, but go ahead, yes.

01-00:08:58

Prout: But anyway, so the part that was open would be standing here, and then she would eat the nuts herself. [laughs] She was so funny.

Redman: Some of the things you hear about Catholic schools in that era are about punishment. One of the things you hear is that it was a stricter system than later educational styles. Can you speak to that? Is that characterization overblown, do you think, or is that something that happened?

01-00:09:28

Prout: Once in a while. See, a lot of the sisters came from Ireland, and they disciplined children. They just did. They were kind of mean. But I never saw any of that, because the nuns that we had were all very reasonable. They were wonderful. If they called your mother, you'd have a chance to tell her what was wrong. Nothing that was quiet or anything.

Redman: Was there an aspect of being in California, do you think, that—

01-00:10:03

Prout: It might.

Redman: —had a little bit of a laid-back attitude towards those sorts of issues, maybe?

01-00:10:09

Prout: Yes. Well, I never thought about that, but they were just very fair with us and very—I know they wanted my sister to take music lessons. She had a beautiful voice. But she said, "No, I'm just going to waste Dad and Mom's money, because I'm lazy." Yes, I always remember. But this nun was saying, "Go ahead." Then they wanted me to become a nun, and I didn't want to become a nun. I always remember, there were twin girls. Well, one of the twins became a nun. She was so devout and great, but she would go behind the altar and drink some of the wine. She was a character. So we said, "You're going to get caught."

Redman: Now, how about you? With some of the encouragement to become a nun, why did you choose not to?

01-00:11:03

Prout: Well, I just didn't want to be a nun. It's too cloistered. In those days, they got around a lot, but it was just—you couldn't get married, life was limited, and it just didn't appeal. We couldn't go out with boys. Oh, we could go out if we wanted to, but we never had any chances to.

Redman: Now, you would've been about, I understand, in second grade—or first or second or third grade, thereabouts—when the great stock market crash happened—

01-00:11:35

Prout: '29, yes.

Redman: —in '29, in the autumn of '29.

01-00:11:38

Prout: See, I was about eight years old.

Redman: But I understand that things got a lot worse then, after the end of the year; that in '30, when—

01-00:11:47

Prout: Oh, it was bad.

Redman: Things just got worse and worse. Could you talk about that?

01-00:11:50

Prout: Yes, I can. But my mother and dad protected us. They never told us much about it. I had friends that oh, were bemoaning the fact all the time. My dad lost our home. The Bank of America took it, and he was just as scalded as anybody else, but they never mentioned it in a negative way.

Redman: So they shielded the kids from some of that stress.

01-00:12:14

Prout: They shielded us, yes.

Redman: Do you think it had a toll on them, those things?

01-00:12:20

Prout: Well, I know this one friend of mine that the parents were very open with it all. She remembers changing majors in college because she just couldn't finish. She was going to be an artist and she wanted to be, but her folks thought it was very impractical and that there was no point in her going through with it, where my family would've encouraged me to do it. They were always so placid. We had a grandfather that lived with us, my mother's father. He was wonderful. Tall, good looking Irishman. My mother would scold us

and then he'd say, "Anna, you can't scold them, because they're good girls." Well, he had thirteen children. Thirteen children. She'd say, "Father, I remember you disciplining us." But they had a nice rapport. It was happy time.

Redman: So for you, I imagine that your father's newspaper businesses would've come up against tough times, certainly, in those days.

01-00:13:27

Prout: Oh, yes. But you know what he did? He was a young man. The first newspaper was in Gilroy. Gilroy was a pretty small town then. But anyway, one of the men got measles. He was the man that sold hay. So these fellows were all still so young, they—let's see, how'd that go? Well, they had a dummy horse up on top of the feed store, so they put red dots all over. So they had a wonderful time. Then my dad joined all these clubs, the Kiwanis, the Rotary. He was just a doer.

Redman: So he was active in joining clubs and associations?

01-00:14:15

Prout: Elks. Yes.

Redman: For someone that, let's say, is unfamiliar with the Elks Club or the Kiwanis Club, what types of things did that mean?

01-00:14:23

Prout: They were service clubs. The Elks Club did a lot for charity. Then they had the Kiwanis Club, too. You had to be in business to join the Rotary and the Kiwanis. Well, you had to be a businessman.

Redman: So certain men in the community would get together and do charitable activities or service activities?

01-00:14:49

Prout: Yes. Then they always had lunch on Tuesday. That got a little boring for my father, I think. But he loved it, because he knew that these men were all his friends, and they were good and they were working hard. But it was a lovely time for a young couple, I think. So there was a lot of happiness. Then we would want to go to Sacramento for the state fair. My father'd say, "No, no, we can't go, girls. I'm getting this wonderful offer to print something." I can't remember now what it was, but we just can't go. Well, then my mother came home, and she was packing to go to Sacramento, and we said to my father, "We knew you'd let us go." He always wanted to widen our horizons, which was a lovely way. So I have nothing negative to say about either of them.

Redman: Were there any struggles that you would point to in the Depression?

01-00:15:53

Prout:

Oh, yes. My dad and mother lost their home, a beautiful home on King Street in Santa Cruz. That, oh, my father was just—he was ready to kill [Amadeo] Giannini. Really. Because Giannini was the big banker, Bank of America, and he was doing terrible things. Some of these poor little farmers, he was telling them that they had to close their doors. That was an *awful* time.

Redman:

Do you think that California suffered the full brunt of the Depression?

01-00:16:29

Prout:

I think so. Yes, I think they did.

Redman:

So people could really feel it. But it sounds like, though, in the home, there could be a sort of situation where your parents might be able to protect you from—

01-00:16:42

Prout:

Oh, yes, they did. In fact, I don't think my sister or I even knew about it, because we were so protected. Then we moved to another house, which was very nice, so it wasn't so traumatic. And the other house had ducks, so we were all crazy about the darn ducks.

Redman:

[audiofile stops] When we left off, we were talking a bit about what life was like before the war, during the Great Depression, growing up with your sister and your mother and your father. Then for a while, your grandfather was also in the house.

01-00:17:23

Prout:

Yes, he stayed with us.

Redman:

He was from Ireland, you said.

01-00:17:26

Prout:

He was from—oh, he was a handsome man. Great big, tall man. Had a beard and everything. My mother—see, she had a lot of brothers and sisters, and they would always come down and see him. And my Aunt Virginia wrote him a letter every day, from San Francisco. They just adored him. And he had been a tough parent and not an easy one. He had five sons, and they didn't all want to be Catholics. They would say, "Dad, you're taking our little sisters, when it's pouring rain, and you're not covering them up enough." So anyway, they really got after him. Then finally, he lessened a little bit and he wasn't so strict. But he loved the kids; you knew that.

Redman:

How about then, as you get a little older, as you're starting to get into high school age, were there subjects that you and your sister both enjoyed particularly much, or subjects that you disliked?

01-00:18:39

Prout:

The only thing I disliked was geometry.

Redman: Geometry.

01-00:18:42

Prout: Geometry. But I loved algebra. And we had good teachers. They were wonderful; they inspired you. But geometry was very hard for me. I hated it. And I made it harder. We had this nun, she was a great big nun, and she taught us typing, too. She had this long, long room and she had typewriters and here and here, and then she could barely go in the middle, with the typewriters. Anyway, but she was great. She taught us how to type.

Redman: So that skill typing sounds like that would come in handy.

01-00:19:25

Prout: Came in handy. Very, very much so.

Redman: That was something that young women of your generation, many of them didn't get skills in typing, it seems like, and that they would have to pick it up later on or they would struggle.

01-00:19:38

Prout: Well, I think most good high schools had it, because they knew that it was the only communication we had, really. It worked out well and everybody—then we'd do the hunt and poke, where we look over here. But Sister Eleanor was cute. Then if she saw us not doing that, she would tap us on the shoulder. Then once in a while, *boom!* But she meant so well and was a good instructor. So they weren't angry with us.

And my mother and dad were so fair. One time I had a report card that my mother knew did not belong to me, because it was terrible. So anyway, we went up to the school. My mother would never criticize one of the sisters. She was very, very diplomatic. So she said, "I know this report card doesn't belong to my daughter, because she has much better grades." Well, they had copied the wrong report card. But Mom never, never said bad words about the teacher. She just kept her level, and we knew it was going to turn out all right because I was a good student.

Redman: That seems like something, a character trait that you would want to see in a head teacher.

01-00:21:05

Prout: Yes, exactly.

Redman: Someone who doesn't blow up or respond to things, someone who keeps their cool.

01-00:21:08

Prout: Oh, yes. I was a head teacher for a while, and we had some interesting times. I always remember this one black man. He didn't want his child disciplined. I said, "I don't think you know what the term discipline means." I said, "We

don't put our hands on the children. If we did, Protective Service would be called in right away, and we would be in trouble." And we would've, so we never did it. But this man was threatening me. We were in the hall of that Maritime center, and all these other parents were coming by me and trying to see if I needed help. I said, "No, I'm fine." So he backed me up against the wall, but didn't touch me. I said, "Sir, now I'm going to say good evening and I'm just not going to think about what we've been talking about, because I know now you understand where we stand." You had to be *very* diplomatic. And then, you learned to be diplomatic. Then he never said a word after that. But the word discipline was, *ugh*; he didn't like that.

Redman: We'll get back into those stories in just a moment, but that was a really fascinating example.

01-00:22:27

Prout: It was good.

Redman: San Jose State comes next for you. You started in 1939, is that right?

01-00:22:33

Prout: Yes, I graduated in—well, just during the war.

Redman: So '43, you graduated?

01-00:22:40

Prout: I graduated in '43. Now we have about three or four people here who graduated about the same time.

Redman: Is that right?

01-00:22:47

Prout: Because we've had a lot of Cal people and a few Stanford, but we'd never had anybody from San Jose, so it was fun. Now this lady is leaving because—she didn't stay very long. Her husband died. She had a home someplace and they were going to paint it, and she decided she would leave.

Redman: What was San Jose State like when you arrived there? What was the school like when you got there?

01-00:23:13

Prout: Well, it's always been kind of a mess, because they would have to take—architects would bid on the schools. So those campuses just had a little school here, a little school there; it was just a mess. We hated that, but we loved the common area, which was so—I loved that school. I just loved it. It was fun. We did well in school and we just had—I joined a sorority.

Redman: Did your sister join you, as well, the next year?

01-00:23:52

Prout: No, she went to Dominican [University].

Redman: Oh, is that right?

01-00:23:55

Prout: Yes, she went to Dominican and she wanted to. We had an aunt who was a Dominican nun, and she wanted us all to go to Dominican. But I didn't want to go, and my father didn't make me. So I went to community college for two years, and then went to San Jose and graduated from there.

Redman: What were you studying at—?

01-00:24:16

Prout: Teaching.

Redman: You were studying to be a teacher all along?

01-00:24:18

Prout: Yes.

Redman: Did you know when you arrived that that's what you wanted to do?

01-00:24:23

Prout: Yes, because it was basically a teacher's school for so long, and now it's broadened; it's everybody.

Redman: What were the options for a young woman like you in those days? You'd mentioned nursing was clearly an option that was in your family, becoming a nun, or becoming a teacher. Were there sort of career opportunities that might've presented themselves?

01-00:24:47

Prout: Yes, like librarian. They had a wonderful library school there, just wonderful. I always remember when Eisenhower first went in as President, we had a place where it was kind of a common area, and he spoke and it was the first time anybody spoke on television. It was really very awe-inspiring. It was marvelous. Then during the war, it dropped so much because the men weren't there, and it was a small school.

Redman: What was December 7, 1941 like for a student? The day Pearl Harbor was attacked, what was that like, to be a student?

01-00:25:30

Prout: I'll tell you. My friend and I went down to Watsonville; we were going for the weekend. We went to her home and her grandfather was there, and of course, Pearl Harbor came on. He looked at us, and he said, "My dear girls, we must pray." I'll never forget that old man. So everybody had a distinctive meaning to what happened. Really, we just cried, because we knew that all the men

were going to go and some of them weren't going to come back. It was a terrible thing.

Redman: So part of the sadness of that moment and the emotions that came up were about the implications for the young men around you. It wasn't just about what had happened on that particular day, which was, of course, very sad.

01-00:26:31

Prout: Yes, yes. But you know what? I heard an interesting thing. I'd never heard this before. We were in the [Hawaiian] islands later. They said that some of those fellows that had been on those ships that were bombed, that they—let's see, how did that go? They had a musical contest. They won, I guess, and the head general said, "I want you fellows to sleep overtime, because you won the contest." And they were some of the ones that were killed. That was so sad, when you think back on that. But I'd never heard that until the last time we were in the islands. Interesting.

Redman: Let me ask about after the war starts. So you were in your second or third year of school by that time.

01-00:27:24

Prout: Right.

Redman: Had you transferred to San Jose State by that point, do you remember? Or was that still in the community college days?

01-00:27:30

Prout: No, I just had two years in the community college, and then I went to State.

Redman: War is declared not that long after, and early in 1942 President Roosevelt issues an executive order that sends the Japanese on the West Coast to internment camps.

01-00:27:52

Prout: Yes, right. I had a couple of friends that were in an internment camp and they—

Redman: Can you talk about that?

01-00:27:47

Prout: Yes. And they loved it. They go back every year, because they were little kids and they had fun. And they all lived so close together in those internment camps—

Redman: And they could play, as kids.

01-00:28:10

Prout: They could play. The only thing that was so sad, I had a friend who— [mic noise; audiofile stops, re-starts]

Redman: When we left off, we were talking about what school was like, what college was like for you and the start of the war, because those things would've coincided in your life.

01-00:28:35

Prout: Right.

Redman: And we were talking about some of your friends who were young kids, who were of Japanese ancestry, who went to camps, and they had a different perspective on it than you might imagine.

01-00:28:50

Prout: Oh, they were wonderful. They were with other kids of their age. The only thing is, my friend Mary was a beautician. Mary's father was taken away, one of the men that was taken away, and eventually brought back. They had scars in their family and it was just terrible. I remember she worried so much about her father. Then finally, he came back to camp. But she goes every year. She loves it. And she has *more friends*. She made new friends. It was *marvelous*. It's just a plus. And it's so sincere. It's just marvelous. Then Roosevelt was really on the pan, because he wanted to—oh, no, I know. The Governor of California was really giving him a bad time. He said, "You've got to do something, because the Californians think it's going to happen again." That was very dramatic. Very dramatic. Then of course, it didn't happen again, but they were afraid it was. Then they had blackout curtains all around here.

Redman: Did your family happen to have a particular perspective on what had happened to the Japanese?

01-00:30:14

Prout: Well, I think they felt very bad, because a lot of them had beautiful ranches and farms and everything, and a lot of those things were taken away, and they were never brought back. There a family over here in Richmond. I think a lot of their possessions were taken away. So there's a lot of bitterness. Those people are so sore. And they're *good* people. They're workers. That was an atrocity, really.

Redman: Can you talk about what your parents said or what they felt about FDR?

01-00:30:49

Prout: Well, they liked him.

Redman: Did you grow up listening to FDR on the radio?

01-00:30:53

Prout: Yes, we did.

Redman: I understand that during the Depression, he would've had fireside chats.

01-00:30:58

Prout: He was wonderful.

Redman: What would those have been like to listen to?

01-00:31:03

Prout: Well, they were just about what was going on, giving people hope that it was going to change. A lot of times, he would send his wife, because he had infantile paralysis and he never wanted to stand up, if you ever noticed the pictures. He was always sitting down. But he was a wonderful president.

Redman: He brought about a series of initiatives that we today— well, even then, were known as the New Deal.

01-00:31:34

Prout: New Deal.

Redman: In particular, I'm wondering if their works programs, like the WPA and the CCC—

01-00:31:42

Prout: It worked. It worked.

Redman: Can you talk about what those were?

01-00:31:47

Prout: Well, they were wonderful. Some of these men were tramps; they didn't have work. So I remember my mother would always give a tramp food. She said she could not stand it. In the meantime, her engagement ring was stolen, a beautiful diamond, but—never got it back. But she thought that poor man maybe needed it to convey it into food or something. So there were a lot of good things.

Redman: So these programs hired people and resulted in parks and roads and things like that.

01-00:32:24

Prout: Oh! Oh! Oh, yes. They were wonderful, and that money was put to such good. Roosevelt was a fine, fine man. Everybody loved him.

Redman: This is great.

01-00:32:35

Prout: Well, everybody liked him and loved him. But he was a fine leader. And with that infantile paralysis, he had had a bad time.

Redman: What about Eleanor Roosevelt?

01-00:32:45

Prout:

Oh, she was wonderful. A lot of times he would send her out to fix things up, because it would be too hard for him, and she did it. I remember we were in Australia one time and she came along—there were pictures of her—and she would smooth the way. But she was bright, very, very bright woman, and always could convey his message, which was so good. Really wonderful.

Redman:

So let me get back to college for a moment. What were some of the methods taught to you as a teacher, that you would describe as particular to that time or that era? So we'll talk about how some of them changed, but give me a starting point.

01-00:33:30

Prout:

Very permissive. Everything was permissive. You couldn't tell a child—you couldn't tell him anything. It was Dewey; Dewey was the man.

Redman:

John Dewey.

01-00:33:42

Prout:

John Dewey. I remember my brother-in-law, who was a very fine husband and a fine disciplinarian, but he would say to me, "If you ever have children, you're going to be too permissive," because that was during that era. Now we don't feel that way at all.

Redman:

So I understand John Dewey was an educational theorist who had run the Chicago experimental school, and then had gone to Columbia. So he would've been an educational theorist that you probably would've used his textbooks or used his methods.

01-00:34:16

Prout:

Oh, we used his methods and texts. Then we had a school in New York. I can't think what the name of it was, but it was very permissive. We all began realizing that that wasn't the answer. That permissiveness did nothing for children.

Redman:

So first of all, was there a student-teacher program? What was your first experience in the classroom? Did that come when you were a college student? Were you a teacher's aide or something?

01-00:34:48

Prout:

No, you weren't a teacher's aide, you went in and you took the place of the teacher, and then she was there. Student teacher, they called it. It was really good, because the teacher was there; but she wasn't doing any work or anything, she was just listening.

Redman:

And maybe providing some—

01-00:35:08

Prout: No, no. First of all, they had an observation class first, where you'd observe; then finally, a student teacher, where you'd actually teach with the teacher. So they did really a good job.

Redman: Did you find that the methods that people were talking about in the classroom lined up at that time to what teachers were actually doing?

01-00:35:29

Prout: They were doing, yes.

Redman: So they were taking pretty much the textbook methods, the Dewey methods—

01-00:35:36

Prout: Absolutely.

Redman: —and really applying them, whether or not they were effective or not.

01-00:35:41

Prout: Yes. That's kind of the trouble with education sometimes; they have so many new ways of doing it. Like developmental teaching, where you put a child—let's see, the child will be in the first grade. Then he gets better and better and better, and then he goes to another grade, but he's never quite ready. But then he comes back and starts again. And then they put some of the good ones in the classroom and some of the ones that need help, and that's developmental. And that's a wonderful thing. That really clicked.

Redman: So there seems to be sort of this shift between the Dewey-based, then, the theories of childhood development, and the psychology of the stages of childhood development. So I'm wondering about preschool and pre-K or pre-kindergarten—

01-00:36:41

Prout: It's all the same thing.

Redman: Sure.

01-00:36:42

Prout: It's all the same thing. The only thing that is different is that the teachers have degrees and they know what they're doing. They're early childhood teachers. See, that's what our program had for so long; those girls knew what a child was supposed to do. And I hated that word preschool until I died, because it didn't mean anything.

Redman: Right, it was a meaningless term, okay.

01-00:37:10

Prout: Yes. Then we had to write curricula for the state, and we wrote some good, good things. Our girls were wonderful.

Redman: Back maybe when you would've graduated from college, would those sort of pre-K programs have been around? Or were they a new—

01-00:37:37

Prout: They were starting, I think. They were starting, yes. Then they kind of went hog wild a little bit and then they leveled off. And I do know that Head Start, they never had enough money. Then they had—oh, what are some of the— Montessori. Montessori was strange, because it was one child. You probably have heard about Montessori.

Redman: I've heard a little bit about it, but I'd love to hear you explain it.

01-00:38:03

Prout: Yes. The child works on his own. I have a couple of nephews that were in schools like that, and they were very bright little boys, and they did quite well. But I do know that just being by yourself—see, the social aspect is so important for kids. They need to interplay with their friends.

Redman: Can you talk a little bit about graduating in the midst of World War II? I imagine that the outlook for a young teacher, a newly-degreed teacher—

01-00:38:43

Prout: Sure.

Redman: Now, did you have to do an additional licensure after that? Or in your degree program, did you come out a licensed—?

01-00:38:52

Prout: Oh, yes. We had to take tests. They were state tests. We had to take those. Then we just graduated, got a credential, and we're on our way. That was an exciting time. Really exciting, because finally, you were somebody and you could do it. You knew you could do it.

Redman: You were ready, it sounds like.

01-00:39:13

Prout: Yes. But this is kind of interesting. When I first graduated, I went over—my sister is seventeen months younger, and she was at Dominican. They had a *wonderful*, wonderful early childhood program; the nuns had it. It was done just the way most of us would like our programs to go. They were marvelous women. They still have it. Anyway, one of the sisters said to me, "What are you going to do, Mary?" And I said, "Well, I want to get a job and I'd like to be in early childhood ed." She said, "They're hiring in Richmond." So I went to Richmond, I got a job. We had so many people looking for jobs. I ran all the way home to tell my mother I had a job! [they laugh] She was getting a little leery about that.

Redman: In those days, Richmond was changing really rapidly.

01-00:40:12

Prout: Oh, Richmond was wonderful!

Redman: Now, in, let's just say, 1940, or when you would've started college, I understand that Richmond was a pretty sleepy town; but then—

01-00:40:50

Prout: It was.

Redman: —when the Kaiser Shipyards move in and Standard Oil is booming and there's a war boom, a legitimate war boom, that affects everything. That affects the drycleaners, that affects the movies; and that also affects the schools, doesn't it?

01-00:41:09

Prout: Oh, yes. But also, that was a gradual thing, too, gradual. It just didn't happen all at once. We used to get mad at Standard Oil because they had a refinery there. It was just almost over the hill from San Rafael. They would let some of their gases go into one of our yards. We had to go and talk with them and say, "You're doing something just terrible to these children." Then you know what they'd do? They'd take the staff out for dinner. Bunch of crumbs.

Redman: Oh, that must've been frustrating.

01-00:41:50

Prout: That was terrible.

Redman: Can you talk about your job interview for your first job in Richmond? Do you remember what it was like to interview for that job?

01-00:42:01

Prout: Yes. Well, see, I just went in. Mrs. Boucher was the director. And she had very high ideals, so she knew that I was going to take her place. So anyway, I just walked over and got in the desk and I became known—well, I had been known, because I was a head teacher. She wanted me in that job; she knew that I loved the field. She had said to me, "Are you planning on staying?" And I said, "Yes. Yes, I am."

Redman: But your initial job, though, as a teacher, when you first arrived at Richmond, do you remember that interview?

01-00:42:44

Prout: Oh, yeah. Well, I really wasn't interviewed, I don't think; I was just placed. I was just placed.

Redman: So you walked in and presented your—

01-00:42:53

Prout: Credentials. They needed bodies, see? It was during the war and they needed people. I was with two-year-olds, and it was fun. I enjoyed it and I felt that we did a lot. And the field was just opening up.

Redman: So would you have started there as a teacher in '43? Or maybe in '44?

01-00:43:16

Prout: '43. No, it was '44.

Redman: It was '44.

01-00:43:19

Prout: '44, yeah.

Redman: So before you go on, I wonder if, while the war is still going on, can you describe what a typical day would've been like for you as a teacher in 1944?

01-00:43:33

Prout: Well, I'll tell you. First of all, it's hard to explain.

Redman: You might wake up in the morning—

01-00:43:40

Prout: Yes, you wake up in the morning and have breakfast with the children. Then the school-age children go to school, and then they come back for hot lunch. Then in the afternoon, they have activities, art activities and things like that, to keep them busy. It worked out just fine. But also we had a twenty-four-hour center, where the parents would bring the children in their nightclothes. So they'd bring them maybe at 8:00 o'clock at night, and then we'd have them go to bed and sleep. Then their parent would pick them up about 7:00 o'clock, because they had all those shifts in the shipyard.

Redman: Now, who would cover on the twenty-four-hour center? Was it teachers?

01-00:44:24

Prout: Teachers, yes.

Redman: So did you have to do the occasional overnight shift? Or did people sign up for that?

01-00:44:30

Prout: No, no, I think they were just scheduled. They had a head teacher, and she would schedule. It really meant just going to bed. Wearing your nightclothes, and then the mother would pick you up. But see, the parents worked shifts. They did everything for the war, those Victory ships and everything.

Redman: They would run three shifts, so you would have to have some sort of place, I assume, if you had a child, to bring them—

01-00:45:03

Prout: Oh, yes. Yeah.

Redman: —and for them to get to school.

01-00:45:05

Prout: And then they'd pick them up, yeah. And then the school-age children would go to the adjoining public school, like Lake. We were very fortunate to get Lake, because Lake was an interesting school. It was built in parts. I can't think of the word they called it; it was a word—

Redman: Piecemeal, sort of?

01-00:45:30

Prout: Well, yeah, but it was a beautiful little building, and it went to all our needs. We could really establish it ourselves. And Crescent Park was the same way. The district paid for the building of Crescent Park, and then we paid for the equipment. Did anybody tell you about the daily inspection period that we had?

Redman: No, can you talk about the daily inspection period?

01-00:45:46

Prout: Oh, yeah! Oh, that's wonderful. The mother or father would bring the child into the building, and we had a little lamp. That was kind of superfluous. But anyway, they would look at the tummy of the child. We didn't want a sick child to come in. It was really wonderful. Sometimes they'd have to go back home with their parent.

Redman: Who would do the daily inspection?

01-00:46:17

Prout: Had a teacher.

Redman: The head teacher would?

01-00:46:19

Prout: Not the head teacher, but an inspection teacher, we called her. Because the head teacher had to administer the whole bit, the whole thing, the whole program.

Redman: Can you tell me, what were the duties of the opening teacher? What did the opening teacher do?

01-00:46:34

Prout: Well, she did some of the bookwork, and she would interview the children and interview the parents, if anybody was sick, and wouldn't let them go to work if there was something going on. Then she had, usually, a place in the classroom, eventually, that she would be the teacher in the classroom.

Redman: So she would get to the school early and would go through several steps, in order to get it ready for the day, but then would proceed to be a normal teacher.

01-00:47:11

Prout: Yes. We had deep schedules. Everybody knew where they were going to go, what they were going to do. Our first director was wonderful. She planted the core to everything.

Redman: What was her name?

01-00:47:25

Prout: Erla Boucher. She died, oh, some time ago.

Redman: Can you talk about her a little bit?

01-00:47:31

Prout: Oh, she was wonderful. She was a marvelous example. Everything had to be perfect, almost too perfect. But she had been the head of—oh, what do you call it? WPA nursery school, a small one in Richmond. The superintendent—I can't think of that man's name. We had a little center at Peres. We had maybe about sixty children. What is that man? I know it so well. But he and Mrs. Boucher paced off the amount of room for a regular school. They were just wonderful; so many things, they did for themselves. And we had wonderful maintenance people. They always knew we had the smallest children. So if we called, they were there, because they knew something had broken or something was hazardous. So we had a lot of support.

But the superintendent didn't like us. And I remember seeing Mrs. Boucher going to the head office, where the superintendents were, and she would come back crying because we were just one more program that they had to worry about, and they hated it. And the whole field was so new then. But then when Dr. Griffin came along, he had a great sense of duty and what you could do. He was wonderful. He would meet with me every Tuesday; we'd have lunch. He loved the food because our food was so good. He was a dear, dear man. He helped us a lot. And with the union, I always remember the teacher union and—

Redman: So the union comes along a little later, is that—

01-00:49:20

Prout: Yes.

Redman: Do you remember about when? Because I talked a fair amount with Sharon Fogelson about the union activity, but I'm curious if you can situate us in time. That starts to come about—

01-00:49:34

Prout: That was about maybe ten years from the beginning. But Henry Clark was the main man. He turned out to be a very good friend. Then the teacher union, he'd call me, and he'd say, "Mary, get that teacher off my back." That we became good friends. Then he'd say to me, "You and Sharon are doing a beautiful job." Well, we were. We were working hard.

Redman: This is great. With this, I'm going to stop this tape.

Begin Audiofile 2 05-11-2012.mp3

Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and this is tape two today, May 11, 2012, with Mary Hall Prout. And in the interim, we discussed a little bit about some of the changing theories and changing ideas about education in this era. We're working with younger and younger children, and new research is coming out about how the brain actually develops in that age.

02-00:00:50

Prout: I know; it's quite something.

Redman: So you're taking the ideas taught by the Deweyites, and they don't seem to fit entirely, with what you're trying to do. So some new things seem to have to be innovated.

02-00:01:07

Prout: But they really do. We hated to evaluate. We had evaluations that we did on children. But we did it mostly by observing the child. Then we would call the parent in and talk to the parent. We had a *wonderful*, wonderful system going. It was marvelous. There was a law that was passed in Sacramento, asking all these people to have evaluations. So our people—we called them assessment devices, and they were wonderful. They would observe the child. It wasn't really like a big old evaluation; it was being critiqued, and it was just how we saw the child. That came out wonderfully when they went to kindergarten, because the teachers in kindergarten weren't that good and our people were excellent. They just did a beautiful job. What they would do is the teacher would have maybe three or four children that she would evaluate. Each one of those teachers would establish goals and objectives. They would establish them, and then they would try to exemplify them, how they exemplified them. They were really invaluable. Those little kids were little, young, but they always hit it right on the nose. Then the parent would come in, and we would talk with the parent about it. It was never gross. It was just the way it should be, but it wasn't a lot of gobbledygoo that didn't mean anything.

Redman: Tell me about who the parents of the kids were. First during the war itself, and then I'll ask again later on, because I suspect that there are actually several pretty major demographic shifts of who the parents were, of the kids. But during the war, what were the parents like?

02-00:03:17

Prout:

Well, the parents were just people that were working in the war effort. They were from all over the United States. They were hard-working people, and they got good salaries. Many of our cooks had been cooks for big, big programs and they'd been from Oklahoma and from Texas. Those women could cook! And they never wasted anything. The director was kind of involved in the food items. But they never wasted. We never had leftovers, because they just knew what to order, because they'd ordered for big families. The parents would come in, and they'd smell the cornbread. It was so good. Or they'd smell something that—because we had these big, huge, huge stoves.

Redman:

Now, you'd mentioned that the director—I wonder if you could go back and elaborate—was interested in food. People have told me over and over again, the high quality of the food. How did that happen?

02-00:04:25

Prout:

Well, see, we had a nutritionist, at first. We had everything at first; the money was just flowing, just flowing, and we found a lot of money. And we had this lady who was a retired nutritionist. Her name was Lee Leet, I think it was. [audiofile may stop & restart]

Redman:

You had a nutritionist. And what was her name again?

02-00:04:49

Prout:

Alice Leet. She was from Columbia, and she was retired. She really set the pace on that program. She was wonderful.

Redman:

Sorry, she was from Columbia University?

02-00:05:00

Prout:

University. She'd been there; she'd been retired. I don't know how Mrs. Boucher got a hold of her, but she did. She set the menus, and she did everything to do with—so you knew that the program was well set up and it would have the right kinds of nutrition. Then we had these lovely setups. The carts would come from the kitchen with the food on it, and then they would go into each classroom. It was a lovely setup. Then we taught the children manners. They didn't have to be taught; they just had good examples from the teachers. So there were many plusses, just oodles of plusses.

Redman:

I've heard a number of stories where kids who maybe hadn't had good food before, or things like, in particular, fruits and vegetables, this might've been their first exposure to fruits and vegetables.

02-00:05:56

Prout:

I think it was.

Redman:

And later on, I understand, a garden—

02-00:06:00

Prout:

Oh, they were so funny! These kids didn't like the food that they cooked. It was so funny. Most little kids don't like radishes. Because they grew them themselves, they ate them. But there were so many, they'd say no, no, they didn't like them. I don't blame them.

Redman:

But they gave it a try.

02-00:06:21

Prout:

But they gave it a try. That was very important, to taste everything. See, everything was a learning situation. The whole program. We took it very seriously, and we *loved* it, and that came through.

Redman:

Do you think that there had been previously in that age group, a tendency instead of seeing things like a learning opportunity or based on a curriculum, based on research, that instead, it was more of a daycare center, a baby-sitting sort of thing?

02-00:06:55

Prout:

No, no, no. We had a curriculum, and we had to write the curriculum, and we had to send it to the state, so it was all accredited. We had nature study, we had art, we had science. I would have head teacher meetings, and this is where Sharon came in so beautifully. She's so vocal. She was really great.

Redman:

I want to get back to that. I understand that there was a science curriculum and something set up called the science committee. So I'd like to ask you about that in a few minutes.

02-00:07:37

Prout:

Well, we had a lot of—

Redman:

Committees.

02-00:07:40

Prout:

Committees, yes. Committees on curriculum and on parent education and on everything. Then we had PTAs too, where the parents would come and they would have learning situations.

Redman:

Can we talk about the end of the war? Do you remember when FDR died?

02-00:07:59

Prout:

Yes. I was in San Francisco, walking down First Street, when the paper came out and says FDR died. I remember everybody cried. They loved that man. I always remember. That stayed in my mind for a long, long time. Everybody was crying. Everybody had stopped; they were just stunned. A good man, and they knew he was a good man.

Redman:

How about Truman, when he came in? Did you have thoughts about him? He obviously was a very different person than FDR.

02-00:08:43

Prout:

I think he was a very good man. I remember going back to where he lived and going through his library and everything, and how interesting it was. He fooled a lot of people. He wasn't the haberdasher that they thought he was; he was a brilliant man. I remember going to that place out of Kansas City, and Bess had this beautiful old home, and she never wanted to do what Harry wanted her to do, as far as being first lady. She did just what she wanted to do.

Redman:

Yes. So it's interesting thinking about those transitions. Then in '45, the Germans surrender. But then a little later on, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

02-00:09:37

Prout:

He's the one that had to have the nerve to do that.

Redman:

I'm wondering if you could talk about when you first heard the combined news of the atomic bombs and then the surrender of the Japanese, what your initial thoughts were.

02-00:09:56

Prout:

Well, I was just trying to think. I think the whole thing was so overshadowed by—it was so immense. And MacArthur and all that. We had friends that were being tortured, we had friends—it was just almost unbelievable, because you weren't there. Some of those men really put up—my brother-in-law was one of them. He went behind the Marines. He was in the Army. My sister says he couldn't talk about it, to this day. But I have a friend right now who was a pilot. He was wonderful. He was in Africa. They were bombers; they bombed the German bombers. He said the first time he killed someone, it was just terrible; but he had to do it. Someday, I'd love to have you talk with him. He tells some of the most interesting stories.

Redman:

Let me ask, do you remember that time, being around the school at the end of the war? Were there any changes that occurred overnight? Were there any implications for the school immediately, at the end of the war?

02-00:11:18

Prout:

No, I don't remember any. I really don't.

Redman:

Because it seems like there are a number of implications after the war, in that the shipyards start shutting down. But then also we talked about the GI Bill.

02-00:11:34

Prout:

Oh, the GI Bill was great.

Redman:

I'm wondering maybe if you could sort of put this in a bit of a package for me, in telling me how Richmond was changing at the end of the war, as the war ended.

02-00:11:45

Prout: Well, you know what happened in Richmond. They put all the black people in the county part and they were just—it was terrible.

Redman: There was a lot of segregation.

02-00:11:55

Prout: It was just terrible. Then finally, they began to treat them as human beings. And a lot of those black men had fought in big squadrons and everything, fought for the country. Remember that one big group?

Redman: Tuskegee Airmen?

02-00:12:12

Prout: The Tuskegee Airmen, yes.

Redman: I wonder if a small-town girl from California, who had gone to Catholic School with fifty other students, what race looked like to you at that time.

02-00:12:32

Prout: I was always very pleased. Now we have a couple of staff members that are black and they're—well, no, they're here, really. They're living here. They're the most wonderful people. And we grew to love so many of these black people, and so many of them would bring their children, then they'd bring their grandchildren ten years later. I remember one woman, I said, "You're back again!" She had raised two sons and then she had three grandchildren. But they trusted us; that was the main thing. I think there was trust all over the place.

Redman: So the other interesting thing is that you come from an Irish-Catholic background; Sharon Fogelson—

02-00:13:16

Prout: Comes from a Jewish.

Redman: It seems you guys got along really well.

02-00:13:26

Prout: Oh! Oh! Oh, we loved each other. She would do anything I asked her to do.

Redman: I wonder if, to an extent, having such different backgrounds helped you, in some sense.

02-00:13:37

Prout: I think it did. I think it did. And I think it helped her, too. But we've always been good friends, because we believe the same philosophy.

Redman: What philosophy do you think you two had such an agreement on? What was that core philosophy?

02-00:13:55

Prout:

She was a heavy union person for a long time, and that was okay, because we needed better salaries. So she took care of a lot of that. And we liked each other. She respected me, and I respected her. Very much so.

Redman:

And it seemed like you were both deeply committed to the craft of teaching—

02-00:14:18

Prout:

Oh! Oh!

Redman:

—and improving your teaching.

02-00:14:20

Prout:

Oh, we just loved it. We just knew we were doing something, something for these children. And we felt very confident. We were the first ones that really had good programs that weren't just little mollicoddle things. And the parents respected us. We had a lovely black man. He was a minister. He had polio, and he used to say to me, "The polio's going to get me, but it won't get you, because you don't have polio." We'd go round and round about that. Then I always remember, he had a white congregation in Arizona. And one time, I had to go down to Adachi's and pick out some corsages, and here he comes, he's back, and he grabs me and he waltzes around like this. And all these women look at us, a black man doing that to a white lady. Oh, they were having a fit. But we were such good friends. No, he believed the way we believed.

Redman:

So it seems like you found allies and support of people who cared about young kids.

02-00:15:39

Prout:

Oh, we all cared. We all cared. No matter how old the people were, they all—there was a dedication that you could feel throughout the whole place, and they didn't let anybody down. There was a loyalty that—and Mrs. Boucher stirred that, because she's the one that started all that.

Redman:

What were the duties of the head teacher?

02-00:16:00

Prout:

Well, she was basically a principal, like a principal. She had to fix up her staff; she had quite a big staff. And she would do any troublemaking. If any parent complained, she had to be involved in it. Then we had a receptionist. There was money involved—everybody paid a fee—and all those books had to be audited, because the state had a strange system. I used to get paranoid over it and I'd say to the girls, "It's got to be right." Then they would send the forms to us in the main office, and then we would edit them before we'd send them downtown, because I thought the feds—the feds had a right to them, the state had a right to them, the district had auditors. I thought if I ever did anything wrong, I'd just walk down those stairs and forget the whole thing.

Redman: Right, it was overwhelming.

02-00:17:07

Prout: Overwhelming. But it was easy, too, because everybody did his share.

Redman: How did parents pay their dues?

02-00:17:15

Prout: Well, it was based on income. Based on income, and then based on what you did. Like nurses and teachers were eligible, but they paid the full fee, which was fifty cents an hour. Full fee. Well, we had them for probably maybe about ten years or so. And then the black crew came in, and those girls were going to school. They were bright, bright girls. And there was a lot of criticism about them. I just couldn't stand that. So anyway, let's see. The fees were changed and they were too high; and we knew they were too high. A lot of the districts would send people to—what do I want to say?—to the meetings, where they were trying to change the fees. And I remember this one referee, social welfare referee, said to me, "You really care for those girls, don't you?" And I said, "They're wonderful. They're getting a little bit of AFDC to put them over the hump, but they're not depending on a lot of it; but they're going to get some of it because they need it to raise their child." See, all education was eligible. But they would make us mad, because we were trying so hard, and most of the girls would get jobs afterwards. So it was a learning situation.

Redman: There's one other definition question I want to ask. What were the duties of the closing teacher each day?

02-00:18:58

Prout: Well, sometimes you had to combine classrooms, because people would pick up the children. Oh, let's see. The closing teacher would take the first—number one, number two. By 5:30 you wouldn't have all the rooms open, and you didn't have to have them staffed, either. So you would combine them as they went. Then as the day progressed, there might be one or two. But there was always somebody in the building that was an educator.

Redman: And then would teachers be dismissed based on no longer needing them at the end of the day, once enough parents came to pick up their children?

02-00:19:48

Prout: No, not really. How can I explain that? No, they would know where their child was, because it was repetitive. So if you were in one and two, and then two, everybody from two went home and—but was still in one. So it was that kind of a thing. See, we were open from 6:00 to 6:00, so that was hard to schedule. And what was hard, the union got after us on a couple of things, because—we did this on purpose, because we had to survive—we would have aides there from 2:30 to 3:30, but we wouldn't give them any benefits because we couldn't afford it. We never gave them a benefit because you could give anybody that was there four hours a benefit, but you couldn't give anybody

that was three. And the union knew we were doing it. I said, “You can see our books, but we can’t afford to give—”what do they call those?—“fringe benefits.” And they weren’t fringe benefits, they were expensive.

Redman: Can you talk about fire drills and fire escapes, how those would’ve happened?

02-00:21:01

Prout: Well, we had those wonderful fire escapes, but we never used them in my time.

Redman: But what were they? Talk about the fire escapes. How were they built?

02-00:21:14

Prout: Well, you just left the classroom and they were huge. They ended up being slides. But that was a long time ago. Then we had also—oh, what do you call those things? I can’t think of the right word. We had everything to protect the child. But one fallacy was they had a barbed wire fence on one of our yards. Where that came from, I’ll never know. We got rid of it.

Redman: It looked a little too menacing.

02-00:21:50

Prout: Oh, it was terrible, yeah. Awful.

Redman: Were there ever any accidents or incidents?

02-00:21:55

Prout: Yes. One little girl. How did that go? She was working with scissors, and they were sharp scissors, and she hit her eye. I can’t really remember how that ended up, but we were terribly worried. But it was okay. Then we had one child drown. We had access to the recreational big swimming pool, and we would send children there, with teachers. That’s where we learned a lot about the kids. It was really cute. Then one little boy, who had—oh, what do they call that? He stuttered a little bit. But all the other kids loved him, because he had command of what he did. And he was so cute. They would always wait for him to talk, because they knew Stephen had something worthwhile saying. So there’s a lot of different types.

We had a lot of psychological help from the school district, too, an awful lot. We had a psychiatrist and then we had our own pediatrician, this Dr. {Alpert?}. He was wonderful and he loved the program. He also had a big office of his own. Oh, we gave children physicals, and that was a marvelous thing, because then all their immunizations were all up to snuff. Then the parents could come, when they went to kindergarten, and say, can I have those records? So we supplied the records for them. So we did an awful lot.

Redman: How did the kids react each morning when you would give them cod liver oil?

02-00:23:46

Prout:

Well, it wasn't as bad as it sounded. Usually, the three-year-olds. The problem is, you'd get it on your clothes, and then you could get on a bus, and you just reeked. But then that lasted probably about three years, and then they started doing the other, the pills.

Redman:

So they were multi-vitamin pills?

02-00:24:09

Prout:

Yes. That lasted during the war years, I think.

Redman:

We've talked a little bit about the segregation in Richmond, and you'd mentioned this pretty delightful scene, when the minister takes you on a little dance in the streets of Richmond there, but people look at the scene of a white woman and black man dancing. Can you describe a little bit of the racism that was out there in this era? Because of course, this is before the Civil Rights Movement.

02-00:24:51

Prout:

Yes. Well, one of our teachers, I remember, she came from the South. She was black. Listen, she told me that she could not go into one of our California restaurants, because it was taboo, that even though she had money in her pocket she couldn't do it. So the beginnings of the children's center, we had some of that, but then it went away. Went away and everybody began getting calm. Then we had a couple of aides that were black that were *good women*. Oh! They cared about the kids. They would say, "Now, Miss Hall doesn't want you to do that." They'd quote me, and it worked. They were just wonderful people. There was a loyalty that I never will forget, in that whole deal. And Mrs. Boucher is the one that started that. She started the whole feeling. I remember all the teachers—it was during the war, so clothes were hard to get—but they all wore smocks, and she wanted them to look very neat and nice in these smocks, and they really did. Did they tell you about Monica Haley and the art program?

Redman:

I've heard that Monica Haley was the director of a really innovative art curriculum program—

02-00:26:14

Prout:

She was wonderful.

Redman:

—that included finger painting as an activity.

02-00:26:19

Prout:

Easel, easel painting.

Redman:

Easel painting.

02-00:26:22

Prout: And also—oh, what's that other? There's another activity, where they put little pieces of paper together.

Redman: Collage.

02-00:26:30

Prout: Collage, yes. But also Monica set up the situation in each classroom, so a child could—they had about fourteen cans of paint, and it was done neatly, very—she was really a very good person. Her husband was an art professor at Cal, John Haley. They lived in Point Richmond, and they didn't have any children. Monica's house was so interesting. They had all built-in wooden furniture. Very interesting!

Redman: Do you know why she became so interested in children?

02-00:27:07

Prout: Well, she didn't have any of her own. But she was interested in the art part of it, and that's where it stemmed from.

Redman: Did she bring something a little different, personality-wise, or was she pretty similar to the other teachers? Or was there more of a focus for her on the art?

02-00:27:29

Prout: No, no. It was all—she was an art supervisor. When she would set up, she would take all these cans, and she'd put, like red here, green here and all this. Then she'd have the easels set up. And she'd never tell the child what to paint, see? That was the main thing. They painted what they wanted to do. It was hysterical, because all these little kids—art is a developmental things, and all three-year-olds paint a lot, all four-year-olds paint a lot. And same way, because it's developmental. I remember the parents would come in, and the kids would have their pictures on the wall. The little kids would go right to his or her painting, and they all look alike. [they laugh] I used to love to watch that; it was just so funny. They had the paintbrushes and the cans of paint, and she was very diversified. Then also she had a lot of reproductions, nice reproductions, and taught the children who the artists were. That really stuck around for a long time.

Redman: Interesting.

02-00:28:30

Prout: Very.

Redman: It's been written about, that the images that the children would paint—it was voluntary—would stem from their own minds.

02-00:28:53

Prout: Exactly. It's all developmental. All three-year-olds paint a lot, all four-year-olds, all kindergarten. They're all doing the same thing in their age range.

Redman: But during the war, I understand that some of their images were especially influenced by wartime imagery. So there would be more flags or tanks or things like that.

02-00:29:17

Prout: Well, there was one very interesting deal. This little boy would always—let's see, how'd that go? He'd say that the Japanese were flying above, and they really were down below. I can't remember how that went. But anyway, he was at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese bombed. It's amazing what painting can do. It made a real deep impression on that child.

Redman: So he could imagine this.

02-00:29:56

Prout: Let's see. He would put the Japanese above and then the white people below, because he had been in Japan when the war was starting, when Pearl Harbor—so it was just the reverse of what we would've done. Very interesting. Then also this finger-play stuff. We had this one little girl—and it was a Van Gogh. Monica had *wonderful* reproductions. And we all learned ourselves, a lot about it. She was very methodical, and the teachers didn't like her very well, because she wanted them to do things in a structured way, and they wanted to do their own thing. So as the new teachers started coming in, they thought she was too rigid. But she served a lot. When I think back on it, she taught the children a lot that they were capable of learning. And then her husband was a very modern painter. He was from Cal. Nice, nice man. But he would have exhibits in the Richmond Art Center, and we would have to ask Monica to put a name on them because we didn't know which was which, because it was so modern. It was really something. But Monica contributed a lot.

Redman: You think the kids got a lot out of these programs.

02-00:31:39

Prout: Oh! Oh! Oh! They had to.

Redman: For many of them, it would've been the first time they would've—

02-00:31:44

Prout: They had to. And they did, I know. We had one little girl named Tazie. Beautiful little blonde. I always remember she was so cute. I said to her, "Have you ever shown your mother the Van Gogh picture that looks just like you?" And she said, "Yes." She four years old. She says, "Yes, yes, I did." I said, "What did your mother say?" "Looks just like Tazie." They were so cute.

Redman: Can you tell the story for me about a little boy who you saw in the hallway, who wasn't behaving? What happened?

02-00:32:27

Prout: He was so cute. He really was behaving, but he was escaping. [they laugh] He was escaping. When he saw me, he thought, uh. He was only two years old.

So anyway, I said, "I'm going to string you up." I was just so mad because he could've gone walking someplace else. I said, "I'm going to string you up." Then his father was just behind me and his father said, "Miss Hall, if you can figure out how to do that, let me know." I was so embarrassed. But he meant well. He was a nice young GI.

Redman: Can you talk about any other stories? The kids would usually be pretty amusing, I would imagine.

02-00:33:12
Prout:

Well, we had a school-age boy named Johnny Toplick. Johnny was an old dear, but he was always there where there's a fight going on. He was about eight years old. Always there. I said to him one day, "Johnny, you've got to stay away from groups. You just have to do that. They think you're guilty, when you're not." "Oh, yeah, Miss Hall, I'll do that. I'll do that." So then anyway, he called. He went into the Army, and every once in a while, he'd call me at school and tell me what he was doing and everything. So finally, at my retirement, he came. I was really, *oh*, just full of it, because he didn't mean to be naughty, but he was always there when something was happening. He was curious. He was curious. But when he came, oh, I cried, because I was always on his tail. Because he didn't have too much common sense, that's what it was. Then one time we took the kids, the children, to the zoo. And Johnny didn't show up. We had buses. Johnny didn't show up. So we all thought, "Oh, gosh, I wonder what happened to him." So then finally, the caretaker comes and has Johnny by the ear. We said, "Johnny, where were you?" "Oh, I just went back to see the lion." I thought, "Oh, that's all we need."

Then we lost one little girl that died. Our people would take kids to the swimming pool, and this little girl drowned. Mrs. Boucher was the director there. Thank God, I didn't have to call the parents.

Redman: Oh, that must've been just—

02-00:35:05
Prout:

Oh, it was just so sad.

Redman: So that would've been pretty early on in your career.

02-00:35:10
Prout:

That was very early on, yes. No, Mrs. Boucher was the director then.

Redman: So you would occasionally take kids to the Richmond pool, the public pool.

02-00:35:22
Prout:

Well, we had passes to put them in our car, and we were mostly good drivers, and we would take them. Then the teachers would stay there with them, so that if anybody drowned or anything—they would be there to supervise them.

We had these two little boys. They were black, and they were so cute. They would come back for lunch. They would go to school in the morning and then come back for lunch and then go back in the afternoon. I can't think what their names were now. Oh, what were their names? We'll come to it. But anyway, this guard that showed children across Cutting Boulevard would say to this little boy, "I want you to open your mouth." So he'd open his mouth, and she'd say, "I can tell you were naughty today." I thought, that's terrible, to do that to that poor kid. But he believed it. He believed it. [they laugh]

Redman: So this kid was just totally gullible. "*How could she tell?*" Oh, man. So did you ever get the sense it was dangerous to be around any parts of Richmond after the war? It was pretty safe.

02-00:36:46

Prout:

It was pretty safe, yeah. And we had a lot of policemen that we knew. Then our Pullman Center was where our main office was; it was upstairs. We had two or three very nice older gentlemen that would kind of take care of us. They were aware that we were a lot of women. I would come up in my car, and I'd always wave to this little fellow. You know, try to be friendly and everything. So one time he came to the desk and wanted to talk with me. I thought, I wonder what that's all about. So anyway, the girl showed him upstairs, where our office was. Finally, I said, "Sir, how can I help you?" I thought he was interested in buying some outdoor equipment that we had just bought, for his granddaughter. Finally he said, "No, Miss Hall, I'm interested in *you*." I almost had a heart attack. Then I said, "Thank you very much for coming in." I didn't want to hurt him because he was a nice man.

Redman: But you didn't see that coming.

02-00:38:03

Prout:

I didn't see that coming. And I didn't want to hurt him because he'd been a nice neighbor, and his wife was dead. A lot of negativisms and you've got to watch it.

Redman: Sure. So tell me then, about what year did you become head teacher?

02-00:38:24

Prout:

Almost right away. Almost right away. I think about a year. About a year. Well, I was head teacher for about six or seven years, I think, yes.

Redman: So through the end of the war, you were head teacher.

02-00:38:43

Prout:

I was head teacher at Pullman.

Redman: And was that different at all? Because I understand each of the centers were—

02-00:38:53

Prout:

It was just like a principal. Had all kinds of nitty-gritty, and you had to solve a lot of problems or bring a teacher in and talk with her. And as I say, that union man would say to me—some of our girls were awful. I really got mad at two of them, and I said, “You are going to close this program. It’s going to be your fault.” You really had to get tough. I said, “It will be your fault.” *Uh*. This girl had a heart attack.

Redman:

As the years progress, eventually, the teachers start to think about unionizing. I understand that—

02-00:39:34

Prout:

And that helped.

Redman:

That helps a lot. Sharon Fogelson is working with a union rep from Detroit, who comes—

02-00:39:43

Prout:

I know. She’s very good. You ought to hear her talk to the school board. She lays them low! And she usually knows more than they know.

Redman:

It seems like her personality, in some sense, must’ve complemented your personality; and similarly—

02-00:40:02

Prout:

Well, in some way. I was more tactful. But I love Sharon, and she always told the truth. She never lied. We had good talks about philosophy and all that. She still is.

Redman:

So you’re head teacher for about six to seven years, and then you become the director of the entirety of the childcare [development centers].

02-00:40:37

Prout:

Yes, and we’ve had to close a couple of centers, because we didn’t have the money.

Redman:

So you were director then for how long, about, do you think?

02-00:40:49

Prout:

Twenty years.

Redman:

I assume that brought on a new set of challenges. We’ve talked about the union negotiations of salaries and benefits as being a particular challenge, but it also seems like it clarifies a lot of things.

02-00:41:11

Prout:

If you don’t have the money, you don’t have the money, see? But our teachers were on the teachers’ salary schedule; you knew that.

Redman:

Could you talk a little bit about what that was?

02-00:41:21

Prout:

Oh, what that was, that was wonderful. Well, you know how an education salary schedule goes? First you have the AB, and then you have the master's and then you have a PhD and all that. So they were all put on that salary schedule. So when they had those needs, they were paid for them. That killed us a little bit.

Redman:

So it's a little bit of a catch-22, in that you bring up the salaries for your staff; but at the same time, it's expensive.

02-00:41:52

Prout:

Well, it lasted. It lasted for quite a while. And we were happy that it did, because we had a lot of young, good teachers; and then we had a lot of old gals, too. But those young teachers were good. Sometimes they reported too much. They were kind of—well, you just had to know what they were going to do, and then you had to get to them. They were loyal, but loyal in an odd way.

Redman:

So it seems like there were generational differences between the older generation—we talked about the implementation of new methods and theories and things like that.

02-00:42:37

Prout:

Well, you see, Monica, the art supervisor, was criticized by almost everybody. It got to the point, because they thought she was too stern on rigidity of the art program. But she helped a lot. You had to hand it to her.

Redman:

It's interesting that at once, there's both the structure of the art program, in that the cans have to be in a particular place and it's a certain kind of activity; but yet on the other hand, the art itself is child-born; it's from their imagination, it's free.

02-00:43:12

Prout:

Well, it's developmental, what it is. All three-year-olds do it, all four-year-olds. All five-year-olds have the sun up here and the water down here.

Redman:

Right, yes. The box house and the mom and the dad, two windows. Sure. I just have a few more questions, and then I'll ask if there's anything else you'd like to add. Tell me a little bit about the committees, because we talked about the science committee a little bit, but then you'd mentioned that there were other committees.

02-00:43:42

Prout:

The art committee, we had nature study, we had all the curricula on committees.

Redman:

Now, I understand that a lot of people in the US, especially around the time of Sputnik and the space race, there was this new added emphasis on science and math, in terms of teaching.

02-00:44:04

Prout: Right.

Redman: So I know that that's the case for K-12 education; how much of that was coming down to where you guys were?

02-00:44:11

Prout: Well, it's amazing. Counting and all that. It's sort of—what do I want to say? Not just incidental, but we'd have counting boards, we would have puzzles with all the things that led up to eventually becoming aware of all that. And nature study. We had nature study, we had everything. So these little kids just lapped it up; they just loved it. When people say, "Oh, they're too young," that's a lot of hooey because they're ready to go. They're ready to go, and they want to go. Then they have doll corners, and they're so cute in the doll corner. I love to go into a room and just listen to what they say. We had these—oh, they were kind of fences, sort of. Not fences, but dividers. And we could move them around as we wanted to, to make a doll house out of it. If you go down there and listen to the conversation, it's hysterical. One's playing the papa role, one's playing the mama role. It's just fun. When I went to Japan, I was still working. Japanese, you're probably aware of this, have symbols of their food. Like if they have a steak and they have potatoes, that's all in one deal, and they have those in their restaurants and everything. Every time I'd go by one of those I'd think, "I have to buy some of that." So I bought some of it and brought it back to the children, and they just loved it! So there're a lot of side issues.

Redman: Yes. But kids were willing to try anything.

02-00:46:03

Prout: Oh, yes.

Redman: Do you think that more could've been done in terms of languages and teaching languages?

02-00:46:08

Prout: No, no, because we've done all that. We had that finger play. We had that wonderful finger-play book. How'd that go? Two little blackbirds sitting on a hill; one named Jack, one named Jill; fly away Jack, fly away, Jill. I lost my book and we developed, and Sharon lost hers, too. We had all these finger plays. And that's part of language development. We did everything. Everything a normal curriculum would do, but on a smaller basis.

Redman: It seems like we've talked about some of the most important things that—we'll shift now to big picture—

02-00:46:56

Prout: Sure.

Redman: —and look at the school in a big picture, to wrap up. First of all, I'll ask the question, looking back in your own personal life, why it was so important. Then I'd like to ask about the kids, and then I'll ask about Richmond. First, why was the school so important for you, personally? Why was this experience so personal for you, important for you personally?

02-00:47:21

Prout: Well, I was allowed to develop. Mrs. Boucher just let you do what you had to do. There's a freedom there. And then you knew about curriculum, you'd read a lot, you'd been at San Jose, in some of those classes. You just loved the development of children. And see, I didn't ever have any children of my own, but I don't think that had anything to do with it, really. I really, honestly don't. I just love—and then I have these wonderful nieces and nephews. My oldest nephew, Tom, I would bring him to school. He was—let's see, how old was he? He was about four years old or five. We had the children bring slippers, because we had a rest period and they'd have to put their slippers on. The nap period would be finished at 3:00 o'clock, and he'd say to me, "it's about time for me to go home, go home to my mother." He would call her Anna. I'd say, "Honey, we're going to have to wait till 5:00." "Oh, I don't think I can wait that long." I said, "Well, get your slippers, and go and have some activities, and then I'll be there pretty soon." But it was so cute, the way he'd say, "my flippers." He loved it. He loved it. Everything evolved.

Redman: How about for the kids? What did this place mean for the kids?

02-00:48:54

Prout: They loved it. But at first, especially the two-year-olds, at first they would cry, and they'd put on for their mothers, do it on purpose. Now, we knew that. They would do that, they'd cry.

Redman: So you could see that.

02-00:49:09

Prout: And half the time, when the mother was gone, the eyes would dry up and everything. And we knew that. Once in a while, it would last a little longer, but most of it wouldn't. But they'd play the mother to the hilt and make her feel so guilty. And she was doing the right thing. But it was funny, the way it all developed.

Redman: But then from there, the kids would then—

02-00:49:32

Prout: Oh, they *loved* it! They didn't want to go home. And we had little lockers, where we put the slippers. Each child had an individual one. It was just structured beautifully. And see, Mrs. Boucher was the one that structured it.

Redman: It seems that structure and organization and curriculum are things that are so critically important for this place. But then also keeping people on the same

page in all of those things seemed to be incredibly important. Do you think that that's the case with all of these teachers? You have to keep them together on a plan of some sort.

02-00:50:15

Prout: Well, you have a curriculum, and they're developing that, see? They've developed it. So they can pick those activities as they want to, because they're developmentally sound. That's what really happens.

Redman: So then on a particular day, you might choose different kinds of activities, but it's affecting the child's brain at a certain age of their development.

02-00:50:39

Prout: Yes. And I'm sure I told you this, about the evaluation of the children. We really wanted that, because the teacher does the evaluation; it's not just a lot of cut-and-dried verbiage.

Redman: So that's something that it seems like a unique opportunity, in some sense, for these parents in this generation—

02-00:51:01

Prout: Oh, it is. It's wonderful.

Redman: —to have an honest assessment of their child at that age.

02-00:51:06

Prout: And see, many places use those assessment devices, but we got to the point where we didn't like them. We just felt that they weren't authentic. They were poor. So we just got the teacher to do it. Then they passed a law in Sacramento, where the public school had to do it, too; that they were lax, because they hadn't done it. So we were ahead of a lot of people.

Redman: What did these schools mean to the city of Richmond?

02-00:51:38

Prout: Well, the city of Richmond was pretty good to us. Like our Lake center. Our Lake center was in San Pablo, and a minister touted the program, because he knew it was good. I can't think what his name was. And the building was a portable building. So this man from the school district developed it. He had an isolation room. Each room was different. It turned out to be a wonderful center. A lot of people from San Pablo went there. We had a black head teacher there, and she was great. I remember walking in one time, and she was giving this parent the business because she hadn't paid her fee. I said, "Audie, are you talking to that girl?" "She's a friend of my daughter's, Miss Hall," and she says, "She deserves it. She's got a lot of money, and she's not telling you about it."

Redman: So she knew the situation on the ground pretty well.

02-00:52:52

Prout:

She knew it; she knew it. Then also our Crescent Park center, the district paid for the building, and then we paid for the equipment. It was a beautiful center. Beautiful. One of the nicest ones we ever—and it was from scratch up, brand new.

Redman:

All right, so now final question. I am a person who has just walked into the Maritime school classroom, as it was set up in 1943, as it's now been reconstructed. What sorts of things should I think about as I look at this room?

02-00:53:33

Prout:

Well, each parent is interviewed. So you have to kind of conduct the interview. You tell them what we do for the child. That's basically about curriculum, about health, about parent meetings. So you sit there, you interview the parent. Then the child can come and stay for a while. Usually, they get so enthralled with the program they want to stay that day. But that's what we basically do. We let them know what we're doing and how we're doing it, because there are a lot of programs around and some of them are very poor. Then once in a while, you'll find a good one. But we can always say ours was the best, because of the credentialed teacher. But then we can get fooled, too. We had one Japanese girl. Mrs. {Huffert?} and I interviewed her. We had a chance to interview all our staff. She was being interviewed, and she just knew everything. She knew curriculum, she knew health. She was so bright. She turned out to be the worst teacher we ever had. Just a waste of time. We were both so wrong. We were just wrong.

Redman:

But you clearly couldn't get it right every time.

02-00:54:52

Prout:

No, no.

Redman:

But it seems like most of the teachers, you were on a good page with.

02-00:54:57

Prout:

Oh, oh! Oh, yes.

Redman:

Is there anything else you'd like to add about the school?

02-00:55:03

Prout:

Well, I was just trying to think. I think we told you about the Lanham Act and the buildings. Did I tell you about the Lanham Act? That was an act, a federal act. We had Maritime, Pullman, and what else? There was one other center. They were built just for preschool. Because a lot of times, they would put the preschool in the basement of the public school, a terrible environment. Now, let's see. There were three centers that the Lanham Act built. And that lady from Cal had a lot to do with what a nursery school should look like and everything. So they were done according to specific plans. Then the upstairs of Pullman was supposed to be a sleep room they had, but that was condemned because it was upstairs. They thought it unsafe for children to be

placed upstairs. So we used that as a main office. Then what's the other? Maritime was the same way. Those two centers were put up with the Lanham Act money, and they were beautiful. Just perfect. Every facility there ever was. And people from all over the world would come to look at them. We had bus after bus, just in Richmond.

Redman: That's pretty amazing.

02-00:56:40

Prout: Yeah, it was amazing.

Redman: I'd like to thank you so much for taking the time to sit down for an interview.

02-00:56:43

Prout: Oh, listen, I enjoyed it.

[End of interview]