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University of California
Berkeley, California

Roscoe Robinson

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Brendan Furey
in 2003

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Audiofile 1

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Interview with Roscoe Robinson
Interviewed by: Brendan Furey
Transcriber: Conor Casey/Sam Schramski
[Interview #01: January 13, 2003]
[Begin Audio File Robinson 01-13-03.T01]

1-00:00:12

Furey:

Here we are, January 13, 2003, in Roscoe Robinson's home in Richmond, California. The way we start this out is from the beginning, which is where you were born and the date you were born. Could you talk a little bit about your place of birth?

1-00:00:28

Robinson:

Yes. I was born in San Antonio, Texas. December 31, 1919. I lived in San Antonio for four years and we moved to Houston, Texas, because my father could get more work there. I was raised in Houston from age four to age twenty-three. At age twenty-three I was working for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company in a freight station, loading and unloading boxcars and trucks. And my brother, who had come to California ahead of me, he found out that I was working for sixty-two and a half cents an hour from sunup to sundown and making half as much as he was up here. So he encouraged me to come to California and work in the Kaiser shipyards because they was hiring anybody to help build ships real fast.

1-00:01:25

Furey:

Maybe we could back up. Could you, for the record, tell—what were your father and mother's names?

1-00:01:32

Robinson:

All righty. My father's name was Porter Robinson and he was from State Line, Mississippi. His mother was an Indian; his father was an African. They were both slaves. I went to school in Houston, in the elementary class at four years old because my mother taught me how to read before I went to school. So I graduated from high school at age sixteen and I went to Prairie View College and I didn't stay there very long, only five months, because—would you cut this off for me?

1-00:02:33

Furey:

Sure. [tape interruption] Okay, so we talked a little bit about your father—Porter Robinson?

1-00:02:41

Robinson:

Porter Robinson; P-O-R-T-E-R Robinson.

1-00:02:47

Furey:

What did he do? What was his occupation?

1-00:02:49

Robinson:

He was a cement mason. In San Antonio he could do small buildings and when one was finished he'd got to wait until he could find another one. But he heard that in Houston, Texas, a hundred and ten miles away they was building a fifty-two story building called the Esperson Building, so he figured if he could get there, he'd have work for a long time. So we only stayed in San Antonio four years after I was born and we moved to Houston and he did get work on the Esperson Building. Should I go to my mother?

1-00:03:25

Furey:

Sure.

1-00:03:28

Robinson:

Okay.

1-00:03:30

Furey:

Her name—do you have her maiden name?

1-00:03:31

Robinson:

Yes. My mother's name—her maiden name was Willie Mae Mosely, and her father's name was William Mosely—he was a Pullman Porter on the Missouri Pacific railroad station. And she had four sisters, so whenever he was gone those five sisters were alone. And so the oldest one sorta pinch hit as a mother, because before that, when the mother was living, she took sick and my grandfather hired a lady to take care of her. The lady figured if she could get rid of my grandmother she could get my grandfather, so she poisoned her. But my grandfather didn't like her.

1-00:04:23

Furey:

So she poisoned and killed—

1-00:04:26

Robinson:

Killed my grandmother so she could get my grandfather, but he was very hostile about that. He continued on the railroad but he left the five sisters alone, but they stayed real close together. And the oldest sister just stepped in and took the position of the mother and they stayed together until my mother was a young lady when she met my father and they came from State Line, Mississippi, here and got a job working at the post office. And that's how they met. Eventually they married and there was three brothers of us as a result of that marriage, one sister who died at birth so I never did know her. So we lived in San Antonio, Texas for four years. There's very little I can remember of it, but I do remember some parts of it. I remember that we lived close to an army post and the soldiers would pass our house every day. Sometimes they'd have a funeral and there'd be a wagon holding a coffin, you know, and it was so interesting to us—we'd sit out on the sidewalk and watch it. And I remember the Breckenridge Park, because it was unusual. The streets go through the Breckenridge Park—the river come up about six inches across the street—and that was real amazing that we had to drive through the water to go through

Breckenridge Park. So there was not too many things that I remembered about San Antonio, except that my mother started teaching me to read and write when I was, oh—less than four years old.

1-00:06:20

Furey:

And what was her occupation?

1-00:06:21

Robinson:

Well, at that time she was just a house—a homekeeper, but when we moved to Houston, she became a—she opened up three playgrounds, because we only had one playground in Houston: the Emancipation Park. And Houston was a big place; you could fit San Francisco in it twenty times. One playground was not large enough for all the black people in Houston. At that time—this was in the thirties—and, you know, they were divided. So they only had one playground for the blacks. My mother went to the school board and asked them if they would let her use the junior high schools in each of the different wards when they closed at three, let her take over at three-thirty and keep them open until nine, and get the recreation department to furnish her with the equipment, and the colleges to give her volunteers to help her run it. So she had playgrounds in Sixth Ward, and Fourth Ward, and in Fifth Ward. Many of those kids in those playgrounds grew up to be in professional sports. And it was a great asset to me because I had to be with her all the time so I learned all the games very well.

1-00:07:40

Furey:

She would organize the administration of the playgrounds?

1-00:07:46

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:07:47

Furey:

So was she—was this a common thing for woman to do?

1-00:07:52

Robinson:

No.

1-00:07:50

Furey:

It doesn't sound—

1-00:07:54

Robinson:

She was the first one that ever did in Houston. She had one in Fourth Ward, Fifth Ward, and Sixth Ward. As she would establish one and get it going good, then she'd put an assistant over that one while she would establish another one. She would put someone in charge and she'd go and establish another one. And she had a good recommendation because the first one she had opened was so successful—the children, when they got out of school, they had someplace to go

instead of getting into trouble. And they was learnin' different games. They had boxing, they had table games, there was art and plays, we had plays—circuses and different things like that. And so, when she would get one established and had two or three people helping her and had it where it could go by itself, she would move to another ward and open another one and then she'd move to another ward and open another one. But she'd still keep check on all of them. Also the city would, too. That's where I learned how to fight. I was a fighter from 1935 to 1943. I was inspired by Joe Louis. And I fought—I gave exhibition bouts at each one of the playgrounds every Wednesday night and I worked out every day five days a week to stay in good shape. I played football and all table games: ping pong and art and things like that.

1-00:09:38

And so I went to college. The Recreation Department assisted me in going to Prairie View College. The girl I had been courting, I didn't realize, you know, that we had gone as far as we had and when I was in college five months, my mother sent me a telegram telling me to come home at once. I thought someone was sick or something and I went home and when I got there she told me, she said, "This lady came over and brought her daughter with her and said that she was pregnant for you." She said, "Is that possible?" I said, "It's possible but not probable." [laughs] So she said, "Well, why do you say that?" I said, "I was only with her once." She said, "It don't take but once." So she said, "I always taught you since you was twelve years old not to take a lady for a girlfriend that you didn't want for a wife. Now you're responsible for that child being in the world and you're going to have to get out of college now"—because I was going to be a doctor, because I was going to be a surgeon—"and you're going to do common labor. You have to support this kid. You can't go into doctoring at this time."

1-00:10:56

Furey:

And how old were you?

1-00:10:58

Robinson:

I was eighteen.

1-00:10:58

Furey:

You were eighteen and you had just entered Prairie View College?

1-00:11:02

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. I'd been there five months.

1-00:11:01

Furey:

Was this a black college?

1-00:11:10

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:11:09

Furey:

In Texas.

1-00:11:09

Robinson:

Yeah, around Hempstead, Texas. About sixty miles from Houston.

1-00:11:15

Furey:

So your education up until that point—you went to a high school, a public high school?

1-00:11:20

Robinson:

Yeah, I graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in Houston. Then when I went to Prairie View I was very active, but I got in a lot of trouble there, too, because I just had a lot of energy and I wanted to get into different things. [laughs] They put me at the head of the table in the cafeteria, and whoever sits at the head of the table they bring all the desserts and all the milk to them and they see to it that everyone around the table has what they want and whatever's left of it, they do what they want to it. They'd have eighteen or twenty tables like that. I was the head of this particular table, but the lady who waited on us, she didn't like me. So she came and said something bad to me and I responded; they took me to the dean! [laughs] So he told me, he said, "I'm responsible for these girls, and I don't want you to ever get out of line with one of the girls again." I told him, "I wasn't raised like that. My mother's a missionary." And I said, "She kept picking at me until she provoked me." I said, "I won't do it again." And so he said, "Okay." They had a girl's dormitory was separate from the boy's dormitories and we went to a tennis match one evening—all of the girls and boys together. They'd sit together at the tennis match so they could make plans for the night, you know, and I was very devious so I asked one of the girls, I said, "Why don't you make some cookies and lemonade tonight, invite me and my friends up?" She said, "All right." So she said, "How are you going to get up?" I said, "Tie some sheets together and tie it to the bed and we'll come up." [laughs]

1-00:13:14

Furey:

[laughs]

1-00:13:17

Robinson:

So there was a guy around there with a uniform on who patrolled the grounds all the time—we called him the Lone Ranger. I could outrun any of the other kids so I told them, I said, "Now look, you three guys go up first. If I see the Lone Ranger, I'll get him to follow me and get you a chance to stay." And so they did; they went up first and just about the time I got halfway up, there he come! So I just turned it loose and started running—I knew he couldn't catch me—I went around one building, around another one, around another, until eventually I ran into one and I told the guy, I said, "The Lone Ranger come in here, don't act surprised, don't say nothin'." I just jumped up in the bed and got a paper and sat there like I was reading, trying to keep from panting too hard. [laughs] So he came in, he looked around, he said, "Robinson," he said, "I can't swear that was you," he said, "but you got on a white shirt and black pants." I said, "A lot of people in this room got on a white shirt and black pants." He said, "But I feel like it

was you, and I'm going to report it but I'm not going to say it was you. I'm going to say that I thought it was you."

1-00:14:28

The dean called me in his office again the next day. He told me, "This is the second time you've been sent to my office here in two weeks." He said, "Now, I can't have this." He said, "I'm gonna have to do something about this." So nevertheless, they gave me a job working in the horticulture, I guess you call it—it was for flowers—working with a guy who did all of the gardening and I worked with him. That's where I wasn't getting into contact with nobody where I could get in trouble. I was working over there one day when the telegraph came from my mother and I went home. My father said, he said, "Well, look. I make enough money where I can take care of the child and the girl until he goes ahead and finishes his education because he wants to be a doctor." My mother said, "No. That's his responsibility and I taught him year in year out not to get into anything like that." So I wound up unloading boxcars, putting bales of cotton in the compress, I loaded sugar boats with hundred pound bags of sugar, and doing all type of work that I had no intention of doing. I don't know whether this is what you want to hear or not.

1-00:15:53

Furey:

I am very much interested in knowing what your work, your occupation was prior to going to California and prior to coming into the shipyards.

1-00:16:04

Robinson:

So what happened—the last job I had before I came into the shipyards was working for the Southern Pacific Railroad station unloading boxcars and trucks, and I was only making sixty-two and a half cents an hour. My brother was making a dollar thirty-five an hour and he said he worked less in a whole week than I did in one hour! And so, he encouraged me to come out here. I got the railroad company to give me a pass to California for my wife and my three children and I left Houston, I just walked off from my home with everything in it for anybody who wanted it and I came to California. My brother had gone to Chinatown to the telephone building right across the street from the park in Chinatown between Grant and Kearny— 555 Pine Street—and it was a telephone building there, but the basement was not being used. Housing was hard to find at that time so he talked them into letting him remodel it and make it into a home for us for however long we needed it.

1-00:17:19

Furey:

This is in Chinatown?

1-00:17:20

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:17:20

Furey:

And who was he talking to?

1-00:17:22

Robinson:

To the owner of the telephone building.

1-00:17:26

Furey:

He wasn't a Chinese—?

1-00:17:31

Robinson:

No, but he was right across the street from a Chinese park and right between Grant and Kearny, and Grant was the main street in Chinatown at that time. He allowed us to take the basement floor. I came, my mother came, my father came, my four brothers—three brothers and one foster brother came. We all stayed down there; there was plenty of room. And we fixed it up like a home and we stayed there for a while. So I got a job. All of them had just signed up for the merchant marines when I came here, but they had been working in the shipyard before. I told them, I said, "Look—I don't want no merchant marine. I'm twenty-five, my wife is twenty-two and I can't see being at sea six months at a time!" So they say, "I'll tell you what you do, we'll take you down to the painter union on Sixteenth and {Capp?} in San Francisco and let you join the union, and we've already got painting equipment where we've been working out there. You don't have to even buy any clothing." So they did; I got a job, I entered the union and they took me the shipyard and introduced me to the people whom I needed to meet to get a job there.

1-00:18:46

Well, one of my brothers had been a spray painter so he had on a coverall suit which had spray paint all over it so they assumed I was a spray painter. When I went there for the job, there was about twenty-five or thirty of us. He said, "I need eight spray painters." He said, "This one right here"—he pointed at me, because I had spray paint, but I was not a spray painter! Then he said, "And the rest of you will report to the brush painting department." When we were going to the spray painting department, he said, "Now look, I don't care whether you guys know how to spray or not." He said, "I'm gonna get paid no matter what you do." He said, "So what you do is you watch what the other person do, and you do what they do." He said, "It's all right with me!" [laughs] So I went to work for this fella, he was spraying red lead on the decks, which was very simple. But the main thing I was watching about was how he connected the gun and the hoses and how much pressure he put on the pot and how he strained the paint first. And I got all of it down pat because it doesn't take long to learn how to spray. And so, inside of two or three days I had it down pat and I worked on that for a couple weeks.

1-00:20:07

Furey:

In the Prefab?

1-00:20:06

Robinson:

In the Prefab. No, this was in Yard One. But what happened is, I didn't work there long. I only worked there two weeks and I got in a fight. [laughs] And they fired me, so I went right on back to the union and they hired me, sent me back to the Prefab the very next day! And so, I worked there a long time. Now, Prefab would prepare deckhouses—foredeck and aft deck houses. Where, right next door in Yard Two they had a ship on the keel block and they'd start working

from the keel clear on up the sides and the superstructure and all of the ship. But when they finished—they had a fixed time so by the time we got the fore and aft deck built and painted, it would be just in time to put them on the ships.

1-00:21:02

Furey:

Mm-hmm.

1-00:21:04

Robinson:

I worked there for a long time and I got in trouble again.

1-00:21:13

Furey:

So—do you mind if I go back for just a second to—?

1-00:21:16

Robinson:

Okay. Come on, any time.

1-00:21:17

Furey:

When you were in Houston and you're about to come to California, I was wondering—what were your expectations of California? Obviously, you'd been—had you been receiving letters? How did you communicate with your brothers?

1-00:21:30

Robinson:

Yes, they stayed in constant contact with me. And the way he really fooled me—he sent me a picture of him with a bunch of pretty girls around him and he was all dressed up, laying up on the orange tree at the University of California. He sent me a picture from Berkeley, California, and the next week I'd get a picture from him in El Cerrito, California with a bunch of— [interruption]. And so, the next week, he sent me a picture from him in El Cerrito, California, with a bunch of girls looking all sharp, you know? And orange trees all around. And the next week, he sent one from Richmond, California, and then he sent one from Oakland, San Francisco, or Marin County. I said, "My, that guy's travelling!" You know? He hadn't traveled fifty miles! [laughs] And so, he told me how much money he was making and every time I see him he had a bunch of pretty girls around him. I said, "It don't make sense for me to work this hard here." I worked so hard until—when I wake up in the morning to go to work I worked, until time to come home at night. And I'd be so tired all I could do was take a shower and go to bed, get enough rest to go back the next morning. I was only making sixty-two and a half cents an hour and he's making a dollar thirty-five an hour and he's having all this fun! [laughs] So that's what enticed me, because I had a wife and three kids then to try to make it on sixty-two and a half cents an hour. I figured I could give them a better life on a dollar thirty-five an hour, which was minimum wage at that time.

1-00:23:28

Furey:

Did you have other options? Or did it seem within your community that most young men in your position were coming to California, or were there other options like going to back East or to Chicago? There was a big shipbuilding—Todd-Houston was in Texas so—

1-00:23:48

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:23:48

Furey:

—what were your other options?

1-00:23:52

Robinson:

Well, I had other options. I had other jobs. I worked for Howard Hughes at his plant, because he had oil well equipment there and I'd go there and spray oil on it to keep it from rusting. And I worked as a secretary for another oil well company. This man had just come from Sweden and his father was an established oil well man, but his father was trying to get him started in business for himself. He had an office, and a car, and two great big tankers. So what he would do, if he would hear of someone hitting a wildcat—in other words, discovered oil—he would try to get there first so he could—since, if you first discover oil, you have no pipes going to the refinery. So he had his trucks to deliver the oil and he'd try to get there first. He had two great big diesel trucks, and so he—I was at the employment office one day and they said somebody was coming from the road company and hired somebody. I was there and we waited—he was supposed to be there at nine and we waited until eleven and he wasn't there. So I went up to the office and I told the man, "Sir," I said, "I have a wife and three kids to take care of. I've been here two hours, and the man from the road company hasn't come." I said, "And if he's not coming, I've got to go somewhere else and find me a job." So he said, "Well, I can't guarantee you that he's coming," he said, "but he said he would be here this morning." So when I went back to all of the guys, the black guys come up to me and they said, "What did you say?" And I told them. After a while, another—this Swedish man, Mr. Hansel, from Sweden—he came in to ask this man. He said, "I need somebody to work in my office, because I've got to be running off from one oil well to another to find out if I can get the job." He said, "But I need somebody to take phone calls for me and it's a little office. You sit there and take phone calls." He said, "Who would you recommend?" He said, "I'd recommend that guy there." He said, "He's very aggressive." [laughs] He said, "He came over and talked to me and nobody else wouldn't. When he went back, everybody ran to him." So he said, "I would recommend him."

1-00:26:14

So he hired me, and I worked there—in fact I worked there for quite a while and whenever he would have to go out of town he'd leave me with a brand new car so I could drive home and back every day. It really was an asset to me, and when he'd have an entertainment, he would have—because his father was very rich—he'd have Betty Grable and other movie stars come to his house. And he'd have me cook—or cook barbecue or something like that—and have a big dinner, because I was a very good cook because my mother and father both worked and I had to cook. I was the oldest son. He was a lot of help to me, and eventually, when I came to California the reason I was encouraged to come was because Kaiser would send a train down to Houston

and getting as many people as he could on that train and bringing them to California, free, to work in his shipyard. I didn't have anyone else offer me that kind of deal. But I didn't use his transportation: I got a pass from my rail company for me and my wife and my three kids.

1-00:27:29

Furey:

So you didn't have to go in the Kaiser boxcars?

1-00:27:32

Robinson:

No.

1-00:27:33

Furey:

Because I heard that journey was—it was really crammed—people were really crammed in together.

1-00:27:42

Robinson:

No, but I got a pass from my railroad company for my wife, three kids, and I.

1-00:27:46

Furey:

So the final job you had in Houston was—

1-00:27:51

Robinson:

Was working for the railroad company, loading and unloading those boxcars.

1-00:27:54

Furey:

So how did your secretary job end?

1-00:28:01

Robinson:

The secretary job ended when my wife was having a baby and I was out to his house preparing a barbecue and serving and he told me, he said, "Roscoe, phone call has come." He said, "Your wife is having a baby," he said, "take my car and go see about it." So I took the car and I went to see about her and when she was free to come home, I took her home. So then I told him, I said, "Mr. Hansel," I said, "You're the nicest man that I've ever worked for. You've helped me more than anybody I've ever known." I said, "But now I've got another member added to my family and the salary you're paying me just won't cut it." I said, "And I can understand you're just getting started and you can't do any better," I said, "but I can't explain that to my wife and children. So I got to have a job paying more money." So that's why I left that job. But it was a wonderful job. That's when I went to the railroad company because they was paying more money, but they was working me—

1-00:29:19

Furey:

So, manual labor?

1-00:29:19

Robinson:

Yeah. When I heard about—my brother kept sending me all these pictures, telling me all the money he was making, and how easy—things was better out here; people will treat you better and all this sort of thing. Well, it encouraged me to come out here.

1-00:29:39

Furey:

Now did he talk about—did he say anything about California being more liberal—

1-00:29:46

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:29:48

Furey:

—and being—accepting blacks more?

1-00:29:46

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:29:49

Furey:

Because I know that even though there was plenty of segregation in the Kaiser shipyards, you know—blacks tended to be in the heavy loading jobs—

1-00:29:58

Robinson:

Yeah. Of course, most of the people who came out here was from the South anyway.

1-00:30:02

Furey:

Yeah. The Midwest—there were a lot of Midwest people. And I interviewed one woman who worked first in Prefab, as a welder, and in the shipyards. Then she went to Todd-Houston in Texas and she said the shipyards there were completely segregated and blacks could not be journeymen, or I think that's the highest they could be—I can't remember. They had to be assistants.

1-00:30:29

Robinson:

Yeah. Well, see, here I made supervisor—not only did I make supervisor, my foreman when I worked for Hamilton Air Force Base out here after that, he was going to retire in two years so they started training me to do his job at Hamilton Air Force Base. But that's another story. Because I worked for—when I worked—when the shipyards were over, I went to service from the Bethlehem Shipyards in San Francisco and when I came back, they were supposed to give you your job back when you went to service and came back. When I came back, they told me, they said, “We don't have no proof that you worked for—or that you were in our union before you left.” I said, “I worked two years in your union, and I have my cards where I paid every three months.” I said, “How could I get a card every three months if I weren't in your union?” “Oh, you could crawled through the window and went back there.” I said, “You mean to tell me

every three months I could crawl through the window and go back there and get a card?" He said, "Yes." So they said, "The president, treasurer, and the secretary all ran off and took all the money and we don't have any money."

1-00:31:52

[Pat] Brown was district attorney of San Francisco at that time and I went to him and talked with him. He told me, he said, "You mean to tell me they won't give me your job back?" He said, "That's the law they've got to give you your job back when you come back from service." He said, "I'm gonna subpoena all of them to be in my office at nine o'clock in the morning. I want you to be here." So when I went to his office, he said, "Now I'm gonna tell you fellas something," he said, "he's going about it the legal way, but if I went to service and left my wife and three kids, and put my life on the line for my country, and came back and you're all giving me this cock and bull story you're giving him," he said, "I'd get me a shotgun and shoot all of you." [laughs] He said, "Now I want him to be at your office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning and," he said, "if they don't treat you right, you come tell me and I'll see to it that they are rightfully punished." So it happened that when I got home that afternoon, this black contractor in Berkeley had heard about it and he had heard about how good a painter I was, so he told my wife to tell me, forget about that. Come to his office on—what's the street? So I said, "Well, I guess that would be better because we're talking about some confrontation here could cost some lives over here." And so I says, "Not that I'm afraid, because I never was afraid of anything or anybody," I said, "but I got a family to take care of." So when I went to see Mr. Dunn and he questioned me, and put me to work. And so we did interiors—we were master painters and decorators. We worked up in the hills, doing jobs. We painted churches, we painted—

1-00:33:45

Furey:

This is after—this is the late forties?

1-00:33:48

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

1-00:33:49

Furey:

After you'd come back from—

1-00:33:50

Robinson:

Yes, after I come back from service.

1-00:33:55

Furey:

Okay. Well, I'd like to get back to where you first came to Richmond and how you became acclimatized in Richmond. How you found housing. So maybe we could start there.

1-00:34:11

Robinson:

All righty. What occurred is—I was living in, as I said, in that telephone building in the basement and I'd go down to the Ferry Building and catch a boat and it would take me to the shipyard every day. But it would take so much time going to and from, then I got to work all day.

So I said, “Now, if I could live in Richmond it would save me a lot of time.” So I started inquiring around and they told me that they had housing—multiple housing—you know, eight or ten families living in two-story housing, and they had a whole bunch of—a colony of them, and it was in walking distance from the shipyards. So I just started investigating it, and I found out that you had to get on a waiting list, so I got on the waiting list and eventually I was called and so they gave me an apartment in Richmond in the Canal Section. So I moved there, and my wife and kids and I moved to the Canal Section and I was in walking distance to work. I just stayed there until I was inducted in service.

1-00:35:29

Furey:

And that was the Federal Housing Authority that you went to, to inquire about the housing?

1-00:35:34

Robinson:

Yes.

1-00:35:35

Furey:

What was that process like? Because I heard there was a big run-around for new migrants that came to—you’d go to the Housing Authority, and you’d wait in the line, a really long line—

1-00:35:47

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. Well you see, I had—I skipped one little thing in there, because my mother had moved—she had gotten called before I had, so she had got a place on South Twenty-fifth Street. She told me, she said, “Well, you don’t need to stay in San Francisco until they call you—come on over here and live with me and you’ll be walking distance to your job.” So while they was putting me off and delaying me and different things, well I was still in walking distance of my job. While I was living with her they eventually called me to my own place. And so, then I went to Canal and got my own place.

1-00:36:33

Furey:

With all your family.

1-00:36:33

Robinson:

Yes, it was just my wife and my kids and I.

1-00:36:36

Furey:

And how did that whole—how did it, the move, affect your family? Was it hard? Was your wife at all—did it take time to adjust, or did you have a community of people, of family and friends?

1-00:36:51

Robinson:

Yeah. I knew some of the people who were already in Canal apartments.

1-00:36:55

Furey:

From back in Houston?

1-00:36:57

Robinson:

Yes. Mm-hmm. It wasn't a problem, because I was just determined to take care of my family regardless of what I had to go through. And so, I came there. I'm skipping a lot of things that wouldn't be interesting to you.

1-00:37:12

Furey:

Uh—no. Tell the story as you need to tell it. It's always impossible to tell everything all at once. You know, it would take a whole lifetime to tell all of it. Just, you know, about your family and your children.

1-00:37:29

Robinson:

When I was in Prefab, I was a spray painter. They gave spray painters yellow cards and they gave brush painters white cards. With white cards, you only got a dollar twenty cents; with spray painters, you got a dollar thirty-five. Nowadays it doesn't sound like much, but in those days it made a difference.

1-00:37:45

Furey:

Yeah.

1-00:37:46

Robinson:

I noticed that when it rained, they wouldn't even give the black people yellow cards. They'd give us all white cards. That means we was only getting a dollar twenty. But the whites were still continuing to get the yellow cards whether they would spray or not. And so, I asked the guy—because I always was adventuresome—I said, “Why do you guys spray when the weather's fair, and you don't spray when it isn't fair?” I said, “Don't you know that when the weather's fair that those white fellows can't do all this work?” I said, “They need you then.” I said, “But even then, you're working then.” I said, “All you've got to do is refuse to work when the weather's fair, and then they'll have to get you some cards when the weather's not fair.” And so they said, “Yeah, but that's a big step.” I said, “Well, if you want anything worthwhile you've got to take a big step.” They said, “Will you be the leader?” I said, “Yes I will.” I said, “I'll go approach the foreman and tell him to give us white cards all the time if he's not going to give us yellow cards all the time.” I said, “But I want to have this understanding—I want every one of you to be behind me, because if you're not all behind me it's not going to work.”

1-00:39:14

So I went to the foreman. I said, “Mr. Lehman,” I said, “We don't feel like we've been treated fair. And I feel like, if we're not going to get yellow cards all the time, give us white cards all the time.” He said, “How many are—I want the name of everybody that feels that way.” I said, “Well, put my name down first.” And so, I was looking around, watching them all and I saw Jones trying to take off. I said, “Mr. Jones is going to the restroom. Give them his name next!” [laughs] And so he got all our names. So the next time it rained he gave us all white cards. And

finally he gave us white cards every day. But then, when the rain happened and it dried up and everything was nice and clear—those people that was building the ships, when they got to a certain point they want those fore and aft decks to put on there. The ship can't go without those. And so, he came to me. He said, "Robbie, you're my best painter." He said, "And if you will come and work with me, I'll give you a yellow card every day." I said, "Look, I talked all these black men into giving up their yellow cards and I'm gonna get a yellow card?" I said, "You want me to have them kill me?" [laughs] I said, "No way!" I said, "Either you give us all yellow cards or explain to the union why you're not!" And so then he set a trap for me to kill me. If you're on this deck and there's a deck down below, in order to put a ladder, steps from this level to that, you've got to cut a hole first. Then you put the ladder down there. Until then you have stanchions all around with ropes around. So he came and told me one day, he said, "Robbie," he said, "I want you to do a {develop?} for me."

1-00:41:35

Furey:

Who is this that's telling you?

1-00:41:36

Robinson:

My foreman.

1-00:41:37

Furey:

The foreman. Who is—he's a white foreman?

1-00:41:39

Robinson:

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

1-00:41:41

Furey:

Who's in between you and the supervisor?

1-00:41:44

Robinson:

Yes. Mm-hmm. So he said, "I want you to spray the deck—overhead, rather—at lunchtime, while everybody's gone." He said, "You can have it all finished when they get back." He said, "It don't take but one man to do it." He said, "As far as the hole," he said, "we've got ropes all around that, so if you happen to back up and back into one of those, you'll know you touched it and you can make adjustments accordingly." While I was spraying, they took all the ropes away, and I fell off into that hole down to the next deck. And I guess he thought it was gonna kill me, but it didn't. It knocked me unconscious and hurt my back very badly so I couldn't move. I just laid there until after lunch. So after lunch they got an ambulance and took me to Kaiser [Hospital].

1-00:42:43

They worked on me—I don't know what all they did, but I know that when I got through they did have me taped from here clear down to here. I couldn't hardly move. If I sit down, I couldn't get up, but if you put me on my feet I could walk, you know? He knew that I was capable of figuring it out and getting even with him, so he transferred me to the next yard, where his father-

in-law was supervisor. He said, "I'm sending you a bad nigger over there." He said, "You gotta watch him." He said, "Because he's treacherous." Now, I wasn't treacherous, but I was just defensive and I wanted right—I wanted what was due me, you know? And I was willing to do whatever was necessary to get it. He sent me over there and I was working pretty fine and getting along good with the fellows for a while. And one day, he told me, he said, "Get on the outfitting dock." The outfitting dock is the last place a ship is checked over to see that everything is right before it goes out for a shakedown run. A shakedown run is a run out under the Golden Gate Bridge and when it comes back, if anything is out of order the shakedown run would reveal it. And so, he told me, he said, "I want you to go down in a certain room down there, and put on your hood and your mask and everything, and spray that room out." It was only about as big as this room here. He said, "Spray it out as quick as you can, don't talk to nobody." This was sounding very strange to me. And he said, "I'll come back up there after you get through." So I got my equipment and took everything—my pot and everything—and connected my hose and gun and everything. I got ready to put my equipment on—protective equipment. There was a welder in there welding on one wall and there was an electrician working on a box. Well, painters are not supposed to go in until all crafts are through. Because it doesn't make sense for me to paint this wall and then a welder come in and mess it all up. Or an electrician to cut a hole in it and mess it all up.

1-00:44:59

Furey:

Yeah.

1-00:45:00

Robinson:

When I walked in there, I said, "You fellows through in here?" They said, "No. He had another man here before you and he told him to just go ahead and spray all over us." He says, "He left," he said, "but he told him he had one that was bad enough to come in here and run us out of here." He said, "So he went and got you." He said, "But you haven't given any indication that you are antagonistic or nothing like that. So maybe we should explain to you what the thing is." He said, "Now, since you haven't irritated us in any way, we feel like you don't know what's happening. The boat boss is over your boss and every boss in the shipyard. You get the boat boss and tell him what the situation is, and if he say for you to spray before we do our work, we'll get out. But if he say for us to do our work before you spray, you get out." He said, "Is that fair enough?" I said, "That's fair enough with me."

1-00:46:07

So they went and got the boat boss and he came by. He said, "You know very well that you're not supposed to spray nothing in here until the men are through." I said, "I know it, but my foreman came in here and told me not to spend more than ten minutes in here and have this room finished when he come by." He said, "You tell your foreman to come see me when he comes." So the foreman came back, I said, "The boat boss said he want to see you." "The boat boss!" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I thought you was a man." I said, "I am a man. And I'm not afraid of anybody that will bleed, because if they can bleed I can find some way to get some blood out of 'em." [laughs] I said, "But I'm not a bully. And I treat people like I want to be treated." I said, "So, therefore, I'm following the boat boss's orders." He said, "Well, you can pack your stuff up and leave, then." He said, "I thought I had somebody that I could depend on." I said, "Well, if you want that done—you're my supervisor—I know you know how to paint. Why don't you

come in here and run 'em out?" [laughs] I said, "Not that I'm afraid of it, but it's not right." I said, "Because I have protection on me. I can protect myself against anybody." I said, "But why should I come in here and do that?" And so he got angry with me. So he fired me. I come back to the shipyard and got another job the next day, the next yard! [laughs]

1-00:47:32

Furey:

The next yard over. [laughs] So this was your second yard after you had been expelled?

1-00:47:36

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. Right.

1-00:47:36

Furey:

Now was this foreman that you're talking about that you had problems with—was he—

1-00:47:40

Robinson:

He was the father-in-law of the one that I—

1-00:47:42

Furey:

He's the father-in-law? Okay.

1-00:47:43

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

1-00:47:43

Furey:

I'm not quite clear—he was telling you to go into a hold or some part of the ship to paint it to do the final painting—and was he doing that so that you would force other people to leave, and then you would get in trouble, and then he could fire you for that?

1-00:48:03

Robinson:

Yes. Right. In fact, he knew that this other guy might jump on me. And I'd have to protect myself, and naturally I'm going to come out the loser. So I did it, what I figured was the right way to do it.

1-00:48:20

Furey:

And what happened—did you hear about what happened with the boat man and the—?

1-00:48:23

Robinson:

The boat man told my boss—he said, "Look, you know wrong. You know better than this." He said, "I don't want to hear about anything like this again." He said, "You're trying to cause confusion." And so, he ate him out, you know, and he got mad at me, said, "I thought you was a man!" I said, "I am a man!" I said, "I was a fighter for eight years, and I can hold my own with

most anybody.” I said, “Besides that, I know a lot of dirty ways to fight.” [laughter] But nevertheless, that was what occurred in that particular yard. So then they sent me to another yard, but I had no problem in this other yard because this supervisor had no connections with him.

1-00:49:06

Furey:

And which yard was the last one?

1-00:49:11

Robinson:

The last one—let’s see: Prefab, One, Two—oh, they sent me—I know what they did. The union sent me to Bethlehem Steel in San Francisco. That’s what they did. Where I wouldn’t be working for Kaiser at all. That’s what they did.

1-00:49:28

Furey:

That’s the final one? Okay.

1-00:49:29

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

1-00:49:30

Furey:

So that was the end of your time at Kaiser?

1-00:49:34

Robinson:

At Kaiser, uh-huh.

1-00:49:33

Furey:

So how many months—when did you come? When did you start employment at Kaiser?

1-00:49:41

Robinson:

July of 1943.

1-00:49:45

Furey:

July of ’43. And your first, Yard One you were at for two weeks.

1-00:49:50

Robinson:

Yes. And I got in a fight there, and then I went to Prefab and I stayed there for about—oh, about a year.

1-00:49:58

Furey:

A year in Prefab.

1-00:49:59

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. And then I got into it there.

1-00:50:01

Furey:

Now, could you talk a little bit about Prefab? Because Prefab is where there were a lot of women working.

1-00:50:07

Robinson:

Yes, it was.

1-00:50:08

Furey:

As welders there, right?

1-00:50:08

Robinson:

Yeah, welders and laborers and—

1-00:50:11

Furey:

And they had Asians doing some electric stuff. Can you talk a little bit about the work environment of Prefab?

1-00:50:16

Robinson:

Prefab was really a nice place except the pressure they put on me. I loved my work and I could do it better than the rest of 'em could, so I wasn't having any problem with my work. In fact, my best friend was Kelly Wong. He lived right—a half a block from me on Grant Street in San Francisco.

1-00:50:44

Furey:

And was Kelly Wong a—where was he?

1-00:50:46

Robinson:

He was a burner. You know, there's welders and burners? Well, he was a burner. And he had a friend of mine—we called her "Good Time Charlie." She lived in Berkeley. He and her worked together. And both of them were friends of mine. See, at lunchtime—we had an hour lunchtime—and we used to shoot dice at lunchtime. If we wanted to. If I didn't, I didn't play. But I was pretty good at that too.

1-00:51:20

Furey:

So you would interact with the Chinese?

1-00:51:24

Robinson:

Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

1-00:51:25

Furey:

How about with the women? Would you work shoulder to shoulder with the women there? Or were they, the welders—

1-00:51:30

Robinson:

I didn't see any Chinese women in—

1-00:51:32

Furey:

Oh no, not Chinese women. Just women in general.

1-00:51:35

Robinson:

Oh, yeah I had lunch with the women. I had two or three women I ate lunch with every day. In fact, one of them invited me to her house in Oakland on Sixteenth and Adeline. She fixed me a dinner fit for a king and then took me to a movie after. And that almost got me in trouble with my wife! Because she came outside where I live and came out there in front of my house, and blew her horn!

1-00:52:04

Furey:

So she liked you?

1-00:52:07

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

1-00:52:07

Furey:

Now, I've read somewhere that there's this kind of old fear of white men—this is what I've read, that there's a traditional kind of fear that black men would start dating the white women. Now, was that—did you notice that at all? Say, if you were to talk to a white woman for a long period of time, would that tradition—

1-00:52:30

Robinson:

I got fired in Houston for that. And I wasn't courting the lady, but we were working in a plant. It was making parts for the atomic bomb but we didn't know what it was. But these women were working on lathes. You know, it turns around and it spins a lot of—what do you call it—it spins, a lot of metal comes off. And I would have to come around and clean that metal up and oil their machines. There was about twelve, fifteen of them. And at lunchtime I would go up to Washington Avenue and buy my lunch. And so a lot of them would tell me—they'd say, "Bring me this and I'll give you a dime. Bring me this and I'll give you a nickel for my meal." It wasn't much money, but I mean I'm going up there anyway so why not collect as much as I could? Sometimes I could get eighty-five cents or a dollar, just going up there and I'm going anyway. So this young girl came over there—she was only eighteen. And she started working there, see?

1-00:53:44

Now, I was fighting then every Wednesday night and there was two white guys on a motorcycle. They were good friends of mine, and they would drive out to watch me fight every Wednesday night. This white girl that came out there, her father was a foreman at Hughes Tool Company. And so, she came out there and started working. I'd go to raise her machine and clean out the shavings—that's what it is: the shavings. And she would keep me there talking longer than I really needed to be there. And she'd call me more often than she really needed me there. And see, I was only nineteen and I'm in perfect shape because I'm fighting all the time and staying in shape. The owner of the place, his son was sweet on this girl but she wasn't paying any attention to him. And so, when I got ready to get my paycheck he'd give me half a check. I said, "What is this?" He said, "Your work fell off." I said, "Well, I thought it was customary letting a person know if you're gonna cut their salary so that they could have an option of working or quitting." He said, "That ain't the way I do it. When your work pick up again, then your salary will pick up." She really was bold; she made a couple of plays that were not too kosher. She came to me and told me, she said, "I belong to what they call a Ford Club. Everybody in my club," she said, "seventy-five of us, we have Fords and once a year we go down to Mexico." And she said, "Each one of us, if it's a boy who got a car he takes his girlfriend. If it's a girl got a car, she takes her boyfriend." She said, "But I don't have no boyfriend, and I just want you to go as my chauffeur." I said, "That's not gonna look right. To haul south, we gotta go—you gonna get me hung!" [laughs]

1-00:55:54

Furey:
[laughs] Whoa!

1-00:55:56

Robinson:
So, I told my wife about it and my mother, and they said, "Oh," they said, "Don't go for that." So I told her, I said, "Well, I can't do that." She said, "Well, you know my mother and I were making some clothes—some dresses—and we bought some material. And I know you've got some girls." She said, "We changed our mind about using this material." She said, "Come over to my house and pick up the material when you get off of work. Instead of you catching the streetcar home, let me take you to my house to get the material and I'll take you home." I thought, "This don't sound right to me—she's gonna get me in trouble. She's not gonna get in trouble; I'm the one who'll get in trouble." So I said, "Well, why don't you just bring the material to work in the morning?" She said, "Okay." So the next morning she said, "I forgot it." I said, "Well, I'm afraid I've got something to do this afternoon. I can't go." And so I didn't go. Then, when the boss came to me with this half a check—and another thing, too, is when I'd go up on Washington Avenue and get those goodies for the people they'd give me five or ten or fifteen cents. When she'd come and found out that this was happening, she started giving me a dollar. And that was a whole lot more than anybody else was giving. And she said, "You buy what you want, and you take this dollar." I said, "You know, you're making a lot of attention on me. It's pressure on me. It's not pressure on you." She said, "It's my money, I can do what I want with it." I said, "That's true." And so, that's when the boss came to me with his half a check. I told him, I said, "Well, I'll tell you what: you keep the half a check, you won't be bothering me anymore." I said, "I can find another job."

1-00:57:57

So it wasn't three days before I had a job at Dairyland Ice Cream Company. I would take the ice cream when it come out of the big vats into the five-gallon cans and when it filled up, I would put them into the freezer and put a top on it. So when the trucks come, it would be all ready for them to take it to delivery. Then this other girl came to work a couple of days after I did. My wife fixed me a nice lunch every day and when I sat down to eat, I noticed that she was sitting there looking at my food. I said, "Aren't you gonna have a lunch?" She said, "I don't have any lunch." I said, "Oh, God." [laughs] I said, "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do." I said, "I'm gonna give you half of my lunch today, but I'm not going to do this every day." I said, "Because I just came to this job from getting fired"—not fired but mistreated—"because I was friendly to a white girl on this other job." I said, "And I'm not gonna lose this job. I've got family to take care of. I can't look for jobs every week." And so, I gave her half of it—half of my lunch. Nobody noticed. She didn't bother me anymore and I didn't have any problem out of that one. But I mean, I had problems on several jobs.

1-00:59:26

I worked for Mr. Dunne; he was a real rich oil well man. But he had a son who was kind of loose upstairs. And so, when these movie stars and rich people would come to his home in River Oaks, he would act crazy and do any kind of stupid thing and it was embarrassing Mr. Dunne. So he bought a ranch out in a place called Anawak, which was about sixty-five or seventy miles from Houston. And the ranch had a cow and horses, turkeys and chickens, and everything on it, a garden. The island was seven miles around and his son Lindsey lived on this end and there was an old man who lived way on the other end. That's the only two people who lived on that island. So he told me, he said, "I want you to go out there to cook because he can't cook." He said, "That's all you've got to do is cook for him."

1-01:00:29

Furey:

And be with the crazy guy! [laughs]

1-01:00:31

Robinson:

And keep him away from the house so I could—

1-01:00:35

Furey:

While he was entertaining guests!

1-01:00:33

Robinson:

Yeah! And the way you get there, you have to drive to Cove, park your car, get on a motor boat, and drive seven miles to the island. My wife was pregnant with my first child and I had made arrangements with Mr. Dunne. I said, "My wife's gonna have my first son in June," I said, "and I'd like to have two weeks off at a time." He said, "Okay." And so, when it got—every month he would let me have a week off at home with my wife—well, not a week, maybe three days weekend, like that. So when it started getting close to June, I told him, I said, "You know, it's getting close to the time for my wife to have my baby. She's living with my mother." I said, "Now, I would like to get my two weeks off so I can be with her when the baby's born." So he said, "All right. When the time comes, you can—you tell me what day you want to go." So I told

him the day the doctor said it would be. I said, "I'd like to go three days ahead of what he say, because he could be wrong. And then I'll be there for sure when the baby's born." So the date that I gave him, Lindsey came and took the boat and left and there was no way for me to get to land. And kept the boat for three days. I was still waiting. And I'm worried to death for my wife; she wasn't fifteen years old. I wasn't but eighteen. And I said—and I'm mad as I could be. I said, "He had no reason to do this. He knew what arrangement we'd made." I was out in the stable, raking up—

1-01:02:30

Furey:

Do you mind if we just quickly change the tapes?

1-01:02:33

Robinson:

Go ahead. I need a break, anyway.

[End of Audio File 1]

[Start of Audio File 2]

2-00:00:04

Robinson:

As I said, I was supposed to be able to come and be with my wife when my baby was born. He took the boat and left for three days, and he knew that was the day that I was supposed to leave. I was in the stable, just scraping it up, cleaning it up, when he pulled up at the boat. I said, "Mr. Lindsey, why did you leave me like this and you know I'm supposed to be with my wife?" He said, "Just take off and walk on that water and go on over there." I said, "That's not possible." So he said, "Well, don't talk to me biggety like that." I said, "I'm not talking to you biggety. That was an agreement made," I said, "and you're not keeping your part of the agreement." "Oh, I'm not keeping my part of the agreement, huh?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, I'll keep my part of the agreement." He took off and run into his house, run through the front door. So I took off and went to mine and went through the back door. When he come out, he had his rifle, and I had mine. So I said, "What you want to do?" He put his rifle down and jumped in the boat and left me, "I'm gonna get my dad." So he went on back to Houston. When he came back the next day, his dad came with him. He had me all type of candy and cake and ice cream and funny books. So Mr. Dunne say, "See, never been a problem." I said, "So what?" I said, "What do you mean, what's up with that?" I said, "I want you to take me home." I said, "I quit." He said, "Well, you can't leave me like this." I said, "You can't leave me like this, either." He said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You go home and stay a month, think it over, and then come by and let me know if you want to come back." I never saw him again. So that was the end of that. There's so many parts of my life.

2-00:02:27

Furey:

Back to kind of the differences in what was acceptable, or the relationship between white people and black people, how did the social relationship change?

2-00:02:45

Robinson:

Well Mr. Dunne and I, we got along real well. And Mr. Hansel, when he had his trucks and things, I got along real well with him. Because I knew the limitations of myself and I stayed within the limitations. I tried to maintain my integrity at the same time. I knew, for instance, if I'm walking down the sidewalk, and this man and his wife was coming down the sidewalk, I've got to step off the sidewalk. Let them pass on by.

2-00:03:19

Furey:

That wasn't the case when you came to California?

2-00:03:21

Robinson:

No. Uh-huh. Then with those streetcars, they had a long car and it had a little sign on it like this. On this side it said "White" and on the back side it said "Black." They could adjust it according to the amount of peoples on the car. If there was only about ten people on the car, they could put it right behind the last white person. So a black could sit anywhere in there, but if some more white people come back, they'd slide the card back. So the black ones sitting in front of it would have to get up and go back and stand up. I mean, I was raised under those circumstances, so I knew that I had to do that. There was many, many other things that we had to deal with.

2-00:04:12

I told my mother—I saw something happen one time. I was visiting this girl, and her father came in from work. He brought his boss with him. He couldn't read or write so he had to do a little brown-nosing to keep his job. When he came, when the boss came, he came in and slapped the man's wife on the butt. "Come sit on my lap." She sat on his lap. He said, "Get up and go get me a drink." She goes grab some beer and gave it to him. So I left, and I tell my mother, "Well," I said, "I heard that in California, black people are treated better than they are here. I'm not going to live if I stay here, because I'm not going to stand for no man to slap my wife on the butt. I don't care what color he is." I said, "And I saw that today. He treated her like she was an animal. I really want to go to California. I heard they treat people like humans out there." She said, "Well, son, don't get too upset." I said, "I can't help it. I'm not like that." I said, "I'm not going to mistreat nobody and nobody's going to mistreat me and get away with it." I said, "If I have to die, I'm gonna kill somebody first." So when the opportunity came for me to come out here, I took the first opportunity and came.

2-00:05:49

Now, I've met prejudice out here. It's like that everywhere you go, but it's not as deep-seated as it was there. I remember one day here when I was working here at a shipyard, and I decided to go to a movie up on Macdonald [Avenue]. I went up there, saw the movie. It was a real hot day. I was coming back and I saw a beer joint, and I decided that I'd stop in and have a cold pint of beer on the way home. I walked in the beer joint. I noticed there was nothing but whites in there, but I didn't think nothing of that. The owner was wiping the counter, and when I went in he went down to the other end and started wiping the counter. I went down there, and he come back up this end and started wiping the counter. I said, "Sir, it seems that we can't get together." I said, "All I want is beer and I have the money to pay for it." So he said, "Well, I'm going to be honest with you, Sir. I wouldn't mind serving you a beer, but all of my income comes from these white people," he said, "and they don't want me to serve you a beer. So I can't do that and injure my

income.” I said, “Well, I can understand that.” So this guy said, “You want a beer?” I said, “You heard me say I wanted a beer.” He said, “I’ll buy you a beer.” He said, “Bring him a beer.” So he bought the beer, and he said, “Drink it.” I looked at him and I didn’t say nothin’. He said, “Drink the beer.” So he said, “You’d better be glad you didn’t drink it, because if you had drank it, I would have knocked it down your throat.” I said, “This is a place of business, and I’m not going to cause any confusion in here.” I said, “But if you gonna step outside, you can come outside and knock that beer down my throat if you want to.” He wouldn’t come outside. [laughs] And that was right on Sixteenth and Macdonald, right by the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] station. I begin to realize that I hadn’t left it altogether, but it wasn’t near as bad as it was down there.

2-00:08:06

Furey:

In the Prefab, was there any racial tension or segregation?

2-00:08:10

Robinson:

That’s where I got fired. What happened was I was friends—there was only two of us working on the ship. I was spraying red lead on the deck, and this welder was working on it. He didn’t say anything to me and I didn’t say anything to him. So there was no facilities on there for restroom, but on the dock they had restroom down there. So I left the ship and went down to the restroom, urinated, come back up. “Where’d you go?” I said, “Restroom.” “Why’d you go way out there?” I said, “I assume that’s what they built it for.” “You don’t have to go out there, you can go in—there’s a gun mount here. That’s where I go.” Next time I got ready to go out, I went back out there again. I come back and he says, “You went back out to the restroom again?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Why go way out there when you can urinate right in here.” It was that deep with urine in that place. There was nobody on the ship but he and I, so I guess there must have been somebody, I’m assuming, before I came on. So, he said, “It don’t make sense to go out there, so why don’t you just go ahead and urinate in here?” I said, “It just don’t seem right to me.” He said, “How do you think all that got in there?” I said, “Well, I guess I will.” So next time I had to go, I urinated in there, and he went down to my shop and got my foreman and brought him back up there. And he said, “He was up there urinating in this gun mount.” I looked at him. I said, “What did you say?” He said, “I told him you just got through urinating in that gun mount.” I teed off on him, and [inaudible]. That’s why I didn’t work at that first place for two weeks. Because he told me to do it, and when I did it, he went and got my foreman—all the way two blocks down to get him and bring him back and tell him that I urinated in it. I haven’t left all that stuff yet. Well, I know better than to listen to what one will say next time. Nevertheless, I have never judged a man by his color. I judge him by how he treats me, and so I had plenty of white friends, Chinese friends, Mexican friends, it doesn’t matter to me. We were good friends.

2-00:10:58

Furey:

Can you talk about that a little bit, some of the friends you made working in the shipyards and the Prefab?

2-00:11:04

Robinson:

Yes, when I was working in the Prefab, Kelly Wong—I was telling you, the Chinese person who was over in San Francisco—he was working there too. He would always pull little jokes on me,

and I'd pull jokes on him. He came to me—when I was spraying, if you take the hose and bend it like that, well then nothing but paint will come out. No air will break it out and make it into a fan. So he sneaked up behind me and bent my hose and made me mess up. I had to clean it all and do it over. I said, "Okay, I'll get you." I took my hose off my pot and bent it, and had all the power in it. And I went behind him to blow his hat off his head with the hose, with air, and he turned around and it blew his eye up like a balloon. He ran to the dispensary. They asked him what happened. He said, "I kicked the thing and the air came in." He wouldn't tell him I did it. If he did, they would have fired me right on the spot. He and I were very good friends. In fact, his father gave him a Buick and he said he didn't want the Buick. I had just got the call to be inducted into the service.

2-00:12:34

Furey:

In 1944?

2-00:12:34

Robinson:

Yeah. He said, "Do you want the Buick?" I said, "Yeah, I don't have a car, and they're not making cars now." He said, "Well, I tell you what. I'm going to give you that Buick." And they inducted me into the service before he could give it to me. And I never saw him again.

2-00:12:51

Furey:

What kind of social activities would you do with him? You'd play dice.

2-00:12:57

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

2-00:12:57

Furey:

Shoot craps.

2-00:12:58

Robinson:

Mm-hmm.

2-00:12:58

Furey:

Would you go see movies and things like that with him?

2-00:13:03

Robinson:

I never did see him outside the shipyard. But we were good friends; spent most of our lunch periods together, talking. Since I lived in Chinatown, we had some things to talk about, about Chinatown. He told me, he said, "Now listen, when you go down Grant Street and you see all that china on display, don't buy it." He said, "That's fake. The good stuff is in the back." Yeah, he always kept me informed on what was going on. He helped me, he said, "If you want to buy something, you come over here and I'll sell it to you." He and I were good friends until I went in service. I had another friend, I had a couple of white friends that were very good friends too. In

fact, one, when I was at Hamilton Air Force Base, we used to go out together chasing girls. It didn't make no difference which color we ran into. We'd chase them, you know? When I was in the veterans hospital I ran into a guy, he had both his legs cut off. He was a wild one. He'd do wheelies all up and down the hall.

2-00:14:31

Furey:

In his wheelchair?

2-00:14:33

Robinson:

Yeah. I don't know how he managed to take this man's truck with his legs cut off, and ran it off into a ditch. He was living up in Santa Rosa. When we got out of hospital—we were in veterans hospital together about six weeks. That's when the veteran hospital was in Oakland, on Ellis Street. So he would come over to visit me sometimes, near Richmond. I'd go and visit him over in Santa Rosa. He took some man's car, truck, and ran it off in the ditch. He couldn't hit the brake because he had no leg. [laughs] I don't know why he did that, and I don't know how he got it. He must have had some sticks or something pushing the pedals. He and I were very good friends.

2-00:15:27

I had some friends I used to shoot pool with. In fact, one of the best friends I ever had, his name was Lee, and the way I met him—I was in Berkeley one night and I met this girl, and she and I—she at a friend of mine's house. She said, "Where you from?" I said, "Richmond." And I said, "Where you from?" She said, "I'm from Richmond." I said, "What's your father's name?" She said, "Bradford." "Do you live on Second and Chancellor?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Your father's a very good friend of mine." So she said, "This man sitting over there is trying to take me to San Francisco and putting me on the streets. And I don't want to go." I said, "Well, you won't have to." I said, "When I get up and say I'm going to Richmond, you just get up and follow me and don't say anything. If he make any move at all, you won't have to worry about it. I'll take care of him." So, when I got up and left, she got up and left with me, and he didn't say a word. She was a go-go dancer. You remember, they used to have those girls up in a basket up in the clubs, dancing? She was one of those. So she took me to each one of the clubs where she went to dance, where she was dancing regularly. They would treat me royally. They would give me seats right down front, bring me big pitchers of beer, food, and everything. Five nights we were together, and one day she came back to Richmond and we went to {Larkspur?} and her brother said, "Sis, where you been?" She said, "None of your business." He said, "Well, Lee's been looking for you everywhere." See, Lee was born rich, and he was in organized crime.

2-00:17:16

Furey:

This is her father?

2-00:17:18

Robinson:

No, no. This was a white guy.

2-00:17:22

Furey:

Oh. Okay

2-00:17:24

Robinson:

He had never touched a woman until he was twenty-eight years old and she was the first one he touched, and it just blew his mind. He would buy her clothes, buy her a car, buy her a little coupe just so she could get around. He was born right up here in Albany, and he was born rich. Only reason he went to school was to learn how to manage his money, how to make more money, and self-defense. That's all he was interested in. If he'd hear of a contest in Los Angeles, karate, he'd take a plane and go down there. So anyway, what occurred was, she and I ran together for five nights. And when her brother told her, "Lee's been looking for you everywhere," she hadn't told me anything about it. Lee and I had a brand new {doeskin?} Ford just come out of the showcase window, and she was driving a hoopty. She asked me to drive her car, so I parked my car at the motel where I was staying. When we came back from where her brother had told her that Lee had been looking for her, I said, "What is he talking about?" She said, "This man takes care of me. And he's in the underworld," she said. "He takes care of me and my baby and my mother. Gives us everything we want." I said, "Well look. I stopped you from going to San Francisco and be put into a situation that you didn't want to be put in, and now you have me driving this man's car when I got a brand new one sitting right up there at the motel where I'm living." I said, "I don't think it's fair for you to put me in this kind of position." She said, "Hey, he's pulling up beside us right now." At Sixth and Macdonald. It's a bad spot. Nothing but white people there. [inaudible] So he pulled up to us. He said, "Where you headed?" I said, "Ninth and Main." There's nothing but black people there. That helps me then, because I got a pistol and he got one. But I said, if I'm lucky enough to kill him, at least I got all black witnesses. I got a better chance to get away.

2-00:20:00

So I told her, "Now listen, when we get out here to talk to him, don't say anything flippant to him, don't argue with him. Let me talk with him. Answer his questions civil." I said, "Whatever your problem is, you solve them when I'm not around. I didn't bring your problems on and I'm not here to solve them." So I said, "Don't get between me and him on any circumstances. Stay beside me." I said, "I've got medals for shooting and I'm positive he can shoot clear too. But it shouldn't have to come to that. I think I can talk to him if you'll keep quiet." So when we got there, he said, "Jazzie, I haven't seen you in five days." She said, "What?" He said, "I haven't seen you in five days." She said, "Well, my mother is a missionary. She feeds him, she dresses him, takes him to school, takes him to church. I couldn't do any more, if I was there." He said, "Well, take my car and drive it either to my club, or up in Albany to my mother's house." She started switching in front of me, and switching toward him. "I'm not taking nothing nowhere." He was an eight degree black belt, and he off and grabbed her and twisted her around. There was nothing but his head over her shoulder. So, I mean, he got me at a great disadvantage. He got me my whole body as a target and all I got is his head. I said, "Mister, I'd like to talk with you." I said, "I haven't done anything to you, and you haven't done anything to me. I don't know even know you. She didn't tell me anything about you." I said, "And I wouldn't want her for my woman anytime if she'd put me in this kind of danger after I had gotten her out of the danger she was in." I said, "She no good." I said, "So you can take her. I'm not interested in her. I've got plenty of women." I said, "And I'll tell you another thing: if you want your car driven

somewhere, I will drive it wherever you want it, and you and I can talk while you're bringing me back here to my car." He said, "Okay."

2-00:22:01

So I drove his car to his club. When I got in his car, I told him, I said, "The first thing I want you to remember is slavery time is over. You white people don't own us no more." I said, "And I haven't done anything to you. You haven't done anything to me. I don't see why we should have any beef with each other. You've got a beef with that crazy woman of yours." I said, "I don't want her. I got five or six, ten times better than her." I said, "So I don't see why we should have a beef. But if you insist that we do, well, just explain to me on what basis." He said, "I agree with what you say. We don't have a beef." He said, "Well, take me back there where she is." I said, "Okay." I took him back there to the service station. He went into a women's restroom, went into a men's restroom. She had gone upstairs in my hotel room. He said, "I don't know where she went." I said, "Well, I was with you. How could I know?" He said, "Well, when you see her, bring her up to my club tonight. I want to talk to her." I said, "I certainly will. That's between you and her, I have absolutely nothing to do with it." So I took her up there that night. So they have a little argument, but I left. And I told her, I said, "Look, I don't ever want to see you again." She didn't even know where I lived. I don't know how she found out. I lived with my mother. When I was on the streets—cause I had gotten pretty far out there in wrongdoing. I was raised by my mother. She was a missionary, but I wanted to explore to see what was on the other side of the street. I take it I could have some fun and come on back. I figured I could go out there and have a little fun and come on back, but I got farther than I intended to, and got involved in things I didn't intend to—dangerous things.

2-00:24:14

I was sitting having breakfast with my mother the next day. I had a lady paid to care of my mother's cooking and washing and ironing and cleaning and everything. My mother didn't have to do anything. A horn blew. My mother said, "Who is that?" My family don't blow; they come on into my house. The horn blew again. So she went to the window and looked out. She said, "A woman's sitting in a car, looking over here." I went and looked and there was that same little nut sitting up in the car. I said, "Don't blow in front of my mother's house. I told you I didn't want to see you again." She said, "I just want to talk with you." I said, "There isn't much to talk about." She told me that she and him had broke up. I said, "That doesn't make any difference to me." All of this doesn't lead to a lot of unnecessary talk, but nevertheless he came to me and he told me, he said, "I've got a club I want you to manage." I said, "You want me to manage it?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Why?" He said, "You got courage. And you got intelligence enough where you can manage it." I said, "Why do you want me to manage it?" He said, "Because the fella I got managing it killed a highway patrolman, and he went to prison and did his time because it was in self-defense." He said, "But the Richmond police have heard that he killed a policeman, and when police hear that a man killed a police, they gonna try to kill him one way or another sooner or later." He said, "So I'm going to set him up to do { _____ }, but I want you to manage this club in Richmond." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. It'll take it on a 30-day basis. If after thirty days I'm not satisfied, we can quit. After thirty days, if you're not satisfied, we can quit." And so, I went and ran it for a while.

2-00:26:22

Furey:

What year was this?

2-00:26:28

Robinson:

This was 1973.

2-00:26:33

Furey:

How about we just back up. We can come around, back to—

2-00:26:41

Robinson:

I don't necessarily have to tell all of that, but he got to be my best friend. That's the reason I was mentioning him. Yeah, he got to be my very best friend. But that's just about all I want to talk about there.

2-00:26:59

Furey:

In the Prefab—I imagine Prefab is where you worked around most of the women.

2-00:27:07

Robinson:

Yes.

2-00:27:09

Furey:

So, do you have any stories about—how did you view the women being treated?

2-00:27:18

Robinson:

Actually, I was so interested in my work that I really didn't have much contact with the women. Except one particular one, who found out that I was from Houston, Texas, and she was from Houston, Texas. She invited me to her house. But I don't—I didn't have too much contact other than just speaking to them and treating them with courtesy. See, I was already learning this painting trade, spray painting, over in a car-painting place after the war was over. So I spent all my efforts to learn everything I could about painting surfaces. Making them come out perfect. And that's what my mind was geared to. My wife was only five or six blocks away, so I really wasn't too interested in women.

2-00:28:18

Furey:

Where there any social events?

2-00:28:20

Robinson:

Well, there was, because there were two women there who came to work every day with their fingernails all polished. You could tell they were not working. They'd be dressed in sport clothes, and they'd be sitting up on a top of a hatch of the cargo hold. Then, after a while they'd disappear. They'd go on down in the hold. After a while, they're back up there again. I found out that the supervisor they were working for was pimping them. They were prostitutes. From Vallejo. So there was quite a bit of that going on. But I didn't have much to do with that.

2-00:29:10

Furey:

That was an exception, though, the prostitutes?

2-00:29:13

Robinson:

Oh yeah, that was an exception. Because these two were the only ones that I knew personally. One woman was down there doing it on her own, and somebody told this guy and he went down to try it out, and found out it was his wife. [laughs] But it wasn't a common thing. Those were the only three I knew on the whole ship, the shipyard that I worked in, that was doing that. Most of the women were either welding, sweeping, or doing menial jobs like cleaning up behind somebody or masking. Doing things like that. But I didn't have much contact with them because, as I said, I was really interested in my work because I planned on making it my life's work. I was doing it the best I could, and learning all I could about it.

2-00:30:16

Furey:

Well, then, let's go into that. What was your daily routine as a painter?

2-00:30:22

Robinson:

First thing I would do after I got all dressed in my equipment, I would find out what my assignment was. I would go and find out if it was all clear, nobody else was working in the area. Then I'd just go ahead and do the paint job and do it the best I could. And as soon as I could. I'd clean up my equipment if we had to change different colors of paint, and go to another area. Sometime we'd paint—then, when I worked in the shipyard, it was much different. After I left Prefab. Because I worked in all areas of the ship. I worked on masts, I worked on the chain lockers, I did the chains. I did the captain's area where he worked from. I did the cargo holds, the bulkheads on the outside, the shell of the ship. We got on sort of like little buoys with ladders, three decks of ladders on it. So we'd go round the ship and paint the ship from this instrument. Every part of the ship that had to be painted, I worked on at some time. Even in the electronic department, we had to do what they called {_____?}. We'd paint this electronic equipment and then put it in an oven to a certain degree and it would wrinkle. When you bring it out it would be all wrinkled. So, I did all phases of it—priming, finished work, and everything. Because I wanted to learn everything about it I could learn. When the war was over, I worked in the Mare Island shipyard in the submarines. I worked there four years.

2-00:32:30

Furey:

In your final job, I guess you were in Yard Two? Was your last—no, Bethlehem. The union sent you to Bethlehem.

2-00:32:39

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. I worked in a lot of shipyards. I worked at Mare Island [Navy Yard]. Because when I started working for this black contractor, in the rainy season he didn't have enough outdoor work to keep us all busy. So I went to Hunters Point on a ninety-day appointment. I figured by that time, the rain would be over and I could go back to work with the contractor. But they liked my work so much, after the ninety days, they give me a six-month extension, then they give me a

one-year extension. After two years they're supposed to keep you permanent. They kept me until two weeks before the two years was up, and then they let me go. But what I did, is I went to [Port of Embarkation at] Fort Mason without any break in service, and gave a continuity to my two years. So I got made permanent at Fort Mason and Oakland Army Base. Naval Supply [Oakland Fleet and Industrial Supply Center].

2-00:33:40

Furey:

What years?

2-00:33:44

Robinson:

I started at Hunters Point [Naval Shipyard]. Let's see, I came out of service in '45. I started at Hunters Point in '51 and I worked there just about two years. I was going to be discharged before my two years was up, so they didn't have to make me permanent, but I transferred to Fort Mason and kept my status, so I would get permanent. And I worked there seven years, but I was working for Military Sea Transport[ation] Service. We would paint the ships wherever they would lie, wherever they would land, while the longshoremen were loading. Sometimes it would be Oakland Army Base, and sometimes Naval Supply, sometimes it would be in Alameda [Naval Air Station]. Wherever they would land, wherever they would dock is where we would paint them. They had cargo ships, passenger ships, tankers. And the *Hope* was a hospital ship at that time. It wasn't a hospital ship; it's a hospital ship now. At that time it was a pineapple ship, it just ran from San Francisco to Hawaii, but eventually they made it a hospital ship. But I worked on practically every navy ship that came to Hunters Point. In the period I was working there, I worked on aircraft carriers, on battleships, on destroyers, on cruisers.

2-00:35:30

Furey:

Can you talk a little bit about right before you were taken, how that happened?

2-00:35:38

Robinson:

I was working at the Kaiser Shipyard at that time, and they sent me a notice to come to Berkeley to [Draft] Board 80. I didn't want to go, so I pulled a little trick to make me fail the examination.

2-00:36:04

Furey:

The physical?

2-00:36:05

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. What I did, I made it look like I was in very bad shape. And so, they waited about a year and they sent me again. And I did the same thing. I said, "I can't be in this good a shape if I was in that bad a shape before!" So the third time they sent for me, they didn't even examine me. They gave me a ticket, told me to get on a bus and go to Camp Beale, up about five miles from Marysville, about fifty miles north of Sacramento. Didn't send nobody with me or nothing. Just told me to go. So I went up there and they wouldn't let me eat nothing but what they fed me for two weeks. After the two weeks, they examined me and I was in perfect shape, so they inducted me.

2-00:36:58

Furey:

You had no choice; you were forced to eat?

2-00:36:59

Robinson:

Yeah. I stayed there for a while until they sent for me for basic training in Wichita Falls, Texas. When I had finished my basic training there, then they sent me to Boise, Idaho for assignment. While I was there, a notice came over the public address system stating that all men with four children or more could get out on request. And so when I went to the auditor room, my friend Nathan Jones said, "No need for you to say nothing. I'm already typing your request." [laughs] So they sent me down to Riverside and discharged me from there.

2-00:37:47

Furey:

How long had you been in the service until then?

2-00:37:51

Robinson:

I hadn't been in there long. I was only in there four months and three days. I was in there enough to pay us the ninety-day status that makes you eligible for benefits. And so that was an advantage I have had. Veterans—I had teeth done while I was in there. My wife's baby was born. I bought two homes on the GI Bill of Rights.

2-00:38:21

Furey:

Wow, so you received GI Bill of Rights?

2-00:38:23

Robinson:

Mm-hmm. If you stay in over ninety days. I stayed in four months and three days.

2-00:38:35

Furey:

Wow, that was lucky. How about we kind of bring it to an end. Would you be willing to do another interview session?

2-00:38:43

Robinson:

Of course.

2-00:38:44

Furey:

Maybe some time next week. I can look over everything we've done and take it at another angle.

2-00:38:52

Robinson:

All righty. Any time.

Interview with Robinson
Interviewed by: Brendan Furey
Transcriber: Audrey Yu
[Interview 2: January 24, 2003]
[Begin Audio File Robinson.t02]

3-00:00:24

Furey:

What I'd like to start out with is just a clarification a little bit about your time here or when you came to Richmond and worked in the shipyards, so I can just have right for the record. You came in July of '43, right? July '43, and the first place you worked was Shipyard One, right?

3-00:00:50

Robinson:

That's right.

3-00:00:51

Furey:

And Shipyard One was the one you worked for two weeks in.

3-00:00:54

Robinson:

That's right.

3-00:00:55

Furey:

You got in a fight with that guy, where he told you to urinate in the gun hole. So then you went back to the union?

3-00:01:05

Robinson:

Yeah, and they sent me to the Prefab.

3-00:01:07

Furey:

And they sent you to Prefab in August or July?

3-00:01:11

Robinson:

It must've been—I got here on the 16th, so two weeks, must've been in August.

3-00:01:20

Furey:

Must've been in August you were—in August, and you were in Prefab for how many months?

3-00:01:26

Robinson:

I was in Prefab for over a year.

3-00:01:29

Furey:

Until the next summer of '44?

3-00:01:31

Robinson:

Hm-mmm.

3-00:01:33

Furey:

Then in Prefab, that's when you got into it with the foreman, and so in the summer of '44—

3-00:01:39

Robinson:

Yeah. Then they sent me to Yard Two.

3-00:01:43

Furey:

Okay, so you went Yard One, Prefab, Yard Two. And then in Yard Two, what happened there?

3-00:01:53

Robinson:

Let me think. Well, actually, I got into trouble, all right, but I was inducted into service. No, no, no. That's right. I got inducted into service from Bethlehem Steel, San Francisco. I had been working there for about a month or two. That's where this guy sent me from Prefab.

3-00:02:22

Furey:

And his father was—

3-00:02:23

Robinson:

His father-in-law was over there at Yard Two. And he told him he was sending somebody over there who was tough, who'd back him up, you know. I didn't know nothing about this. I didn't even know they were related. So when I got over there, he sent me into a place to try to force the men out of the place, by spraying. They were welders and electricians.

3-00:03:03

Furey:

So he fired you. How long were you at Yard Two for before his father-in-law fired you?

3-00:03:09

Robinson:

Well, let's see. I can't remember exactly how long it was.

3-00:03:12

Furey:

That's okay, you don't have to worry too much about it.

3-00:03:14

Robinson:

But it was a few months, and he fired me. Then I was inducted into the army on August 8, 1945.

3-00:03:51

Furey:

So you go to the father-in-law's shipyard, Shipyard Number Two, and you go there for two months, then he fires you. What grounds does he fire you? He just fires you because he wants to?

3-00:04:06

Robinson:

Well, I think it was because I wouldn't run these guys out of the room. See, in other words, they were already in there working, a painter and an electrician. Well, I'm supposed to wait until they get their work done before I paint, but he sent me in and told me just go in there and put my equipment on and just start painting and be through in ten minutes. And so when I got in there, I didn't know what the situation was with the gentlemen, but they could see that I didn't know. So they said, "He told us that he's going to bring us a bad dude to run us out of here." I said, "Well, I'm not here for that. I have a wife and children; I'm here to support my family." I said, "I know that normally painters and electricians do their work before painters do." So I said, "What do you fellas want to do about this?" So they said, "We are going to talk to the ship master." They were going to call him, and he came down and checked. And he said, "You know that you cannot paint before they do this, because if they weld after, there'll be a mess if you're welding. And they can't come in here and work on electrical work with paint all over the wall." I said, "I realize that, but," I said, "these are the instructions that my supervisor gave me." He said, "Well, tell your supervisor to see me." So when I told him, he got angry with me then. So he fired me.

3-00:05:49

Furey:

On what grounds, because obviously the boatmaster—

3-00:05:52

Robinson:

I don't know.

3-00:05:53

Furey:

So it was a completely dirty—.

3-00:05:56

Robinson:

It was. But, you see, the reason that I let it go like that, because I knew that eventually this could be serious. See, if he tried at that time—his son-in-law had already tried to hurt me by letting me fall through the hold. And now he's trying to make me fight these guys, so this thing is pyramiding and eventually somebody gonna get seriously hurt. So I just decided I'd go ahead on and accept the invitation into the army.

3-00:06:33

Furey:

You went to Bethlehem.

3-00:06:34

Robinson:

Well, I transferred—I quit this, that's right, and went to Bethlehem Steel. I was only there for about six to eight weeks before they inducted me into the army from Bethlehem—about two

months at the most. I was spraying under the hulls in the dry docks on the ships there. Then they inducted me into service, and that was on the 8th of August in '45. Actually, when they inducted me, they sent me to Camp Beale, that was about five miles out Marysville, about fifty miles north of Sacramento. They kept me there for a while doing menial jobs, getting ready to send me for basic training in Wichita Falls, Texas. When I went to Wichita Falls, I took basic training. And when I finished the basic training, they sent me to—they gave me a fifteen-day delay en route, so I could stop and visit with my family en route to Boise, Idaho, from Wichita Falls.

3-00:08:03

When I got to Wichita Falls, it was December, and it snowed so hard there until you couldn't go across the street without snowshoes. Normally, soldiers would be cleaning up the area, but you couldn't clean up the area with snow waist-deep. So there weren't enough work really for us to do to keep us busy. The mess hall can only hold so many, so I asked them, I said, "Something I can do?" Because I like to play poker, but, I mean, I played poker so much, I got sick of playing poker. [laughter] So they said, "What kind of skills do you have?" I said, "I can type." They said, "Well, we'll talk to the colonel and see if we can get you a job typing for him." So they made an appointment for me to go to his office the next morning. When I was sitting outside his door waiting for him to call me, a public announcement came over the loudspeaker saying, "Any man with four children or more can get out on request." My friend Nathan Jones worked in the orderly room and so when I went to the orderly room, he's already typing out my request. He said, "I knew you were coming." [laughter] So they sent me to Camp Roberts—that's down in Southern California, right out of Riverside, for separation. That's where I stayed until they finally got my discharge papers and all.

3-00:09:49

Furey:

Then you'd been in the service enough time to get the GI benefits and to get veteran's benefits?

3-00:09:53

Robinson:

That's right, because you only had to be in ninety days, and I was in four months and three days. But you know, actually, it was the falling of the bomb—the date that they fell—if it had fallen a week or two later, they would not have inducted me. But after I was already inducted when it fell—only about a week or so—well then, they couldn't just kick me out then. I had to go ahead on and finish my basic training.

3-00:10:25

Furey:

Yeah. I'd like to back up to learn a little bit about the painters' union and how your relationship with that union was. In any of these episodes that you had—because you had several episodes where you had conflicts with management. One was, you said before, when there were the yellow card and the white card. And then later, you had the problem with the supervisor and his father-in-law. Could you go to your union to represent you in any way? Did you ever do that?

3-00:11:10

Robinson:

Well, actually, it wasn't necessary, because they needed men so badly and so you could get a job any time you wanted to. You'd get fired today, you'd get hired tomorrow. [phone rings] Excuse me a minute.

3-00:11:47

So in those days, you didn't even have to know a trade, they needed people so badly. Because what occurred was, when Hawaii was attacked by the Japanese, we were so unprepared. If they had continued, we probably would have lost. But [Henry] Kaiser was quite a lifesaver because he had a system where he could produce a ship in fifteen days. We had ways, we had one, two, three, four shipyards and the prefab, and that was just in Richmond. We were producing ships that were seaworthy in fifteen days, and that is quite a record. So we were able to build up our arsenals to go ahead on and fight this war.

3-00:13:00

Here's another thing: most of the people who came here from the South and West, and all over the country, many of them came from farms and country, and they didn't know anything but plowing and stuff like that. So when they came out here, why, they was living so much better than they had lived back home, but the authorities here figured that when the war is over, they was going to go back home. But when you leave a place where you're making fifty cents a hour and working like a horse and come out here and doing nothing, and making three or four times that much, you're not thinking about going back to that. That disappointed them in a way, because in the North Richmond area, they didn't even have sidewalks or streets out there at the time.

3-00:14:06

Furey:

Yeah. It was a shantytown essentially.

3-00:14:08

Robinson:

It was. Hm-mmm.

3-00:14:09

Furey:

Could you talk a little bit about that? Did you ever go out there?

3-00:14:12

Robinson:

Oh, yes.

3-00:14:13

Furey:

What was it like?

3-00:14:14

Robinson:

It was not even incorporated. If you are on the south side of Chesley [Avenue], the Richmond police had authority there, but if you crossed the street, you were in an unincorporated area. So the guys would get onto this side of the street and shoot dice, and talk weird to the police and everything, because they couldn't do anything to them. They had one sheriff working on that entire area.

3-00:14:42

Furey:

That was just county land?

3-00:14:43

Robinson:

It was just county land. Uh-huh. But what had occurred is, they had planned on—after war was over, they were going to develop that and make it a real nice place to live. But instead of those people leaving and going back home, they started buying property out there. In order to try to entice them away from that, they developed what they called—there's another housing development a little further out, I can't think of the name of it right now. But what they did is build all new houses out there, and they went to all of the black churches and got all of the pastors to try to entice their people to move out of North Richmond out there, because they told them they're going to have it just like Playland in Frisco. They're gonna have, just like, you know, in paradise.

3-00:15:48

They named the streets after all of the black pastors, and everything. So they were trying to entice them out there, but some of these people had already bought property and they weren't going to move out there on a promise, see? And then, too, they had a lot of houses that they would show you when you come out there, with people already in it and already furnished, and most of them had white people in them. And some had black in them. But once the thing was all over, there was nothing but black out there. They had no bus line out there, and it's three or four miles from town. No school out there, nothing. They just got them out there.

3-00:16:39

Furey:

A lot of people had to walk really far, didn't they?

3-00:16:41

Robinson:

Oh, really, really. They walked and hitchhiked, and it was really a catastrophe there for a while. But then it eventually worked out to their advantage, because they bought the houses for a little or nothing.

3-00:16:56

Furey:

Yeah, from the county.

3-00:16:58

Robinson:

Yes. And eventually, after a few years, then they began to increase in value and so they benefited in that way. And eventually they started having buses out there. They built a church out there, and it worked out to their advantage.

3-00:17:24

Furey:

Just on North Richmond, one more question. So there was no plumbing? Was there electricity or plumbing or anything?

3-00:17:33

Robinson:

No. There was no plumbing. They had outdoor toilets.

3-00:17:38

Furey:

Did it smell?

3-00:17:41

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Hm-mmm. Yeah, it was terrible. In fact, if you go out there in the rainy weather, you might get stuck, might not be able to get your car back.

3-00:17:51

Furey:

Because it would just get stuck in the mud?

3-00:17:52

Robinson:

Get stuck in the mud. No sidewalks. They had one little area there where they had trailer courts. That little area was a little better than the other houses because they had to have a good foundation to be on those trailer courts. But I mean, you can put only so many people in trailer courts. Eventually, they offered people who owned houses in North Richmond good prices for their houses just to get them to move out. But they kind of combined their forces together and started a sort of coalition—council, they like to call it—and had presidents and officials. Then they would get information from the other people in city hall as to what the planning commission was trying to do. And they had ways of doing this because they have some blacks working in the city hall, and it helped to keep them informed. So they built a big park out there—Mr. Reid's daughters and by himself. He lived right across the street from this vacant lot, so he started working with the children, trying them to keep them out of trouble and teach them games. He got the city to donate so much to help him, and it's a lovely place out there. Now they've got a baseball team and a ball diamond, and it has a volleyball court, and game rooms. So it's really nice. Now, it's incorporated with Richmond, so the police have authority out there too, now. In fact, a fire truck wouldn't even come up there at first. If you had a fire, you just lost your house.

3-00:20:14

Furey:

Burned down to the ground?

3-00:20:22

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. I was fortunate that I lived real close to the shipyard, and streets were already installed there before we moved over there. They had to have it to get equipment to the shipyard, and stuff like that. So I was very fortunate, and I bought a house on South Twenty-third Street after three years of working and saving up my money. A three bedroom MacGregor home. My wife having been so young when we married, and her people were not as educated as my people were—her father couldn't read and write, and her mother didn't even go halfway through school. They didn't have the ambition to try to go over here like my people did. I couldn't get her to help me to do some of things that I saw that I could've done. When I was in insurance business, I ran into a lady who owned a grocery store and she told me, she said, "You know, I have had a lot of people try to sell me insurance." But I'd taken five salesmanship courses and I'd gone to Oakland City College, too, to do a life underwriters training course. She said, "I've never had anyone sell me insurance before," she said, "I can't figure out how you sold it to me." [laughter]

3-00:22:12

Furey:

So you had a knack for that.

3-00:22:15

Robinson:

Yeah. So she said, "I'm in real estate." She had a grocery store and a real estate office. She said, "If you can sell me something with nothing but words," she said, "if you had a house to show somebody, you'd be a whiz." She says, "I want you to come and do business with me." She said, "And an auditor will show you that it's not just a come-on." She said, "I'll sell you my most prime piece of property because I can see where you'd be an advantage to me." She took me and showed me. She had two triplexes facing each other. The front one was a two bedroom, and the next two was each one bedroom, and the same thing over here. So she said, "I don't have any children there, under sixteen." She said, "Everybody there pays their rent on time, and it's brand new," she said, "and it's my most care-free piece of property. To encourage you to come in with me," she said, "I'll sell you that piece of property for seventy-five thousand dollars, five thousand dollars down." So she said, "Can you raise five thousand dollars?" I said, "Sure," I said, "I can get that as equity on my property."

3-00:23:31

So I went and talked to my wife about it. She said, "We don't know anything about real estate. I like the place we have here." I said, "Yes, but we didn't have this, we didn't know about real estate when we bought this." I said, "This is a three bedroom house." I said, "One of the places over there, the two front ones are three bedrooms and two back ones two bedroom." I said, "Three bedroom over there is the same as three bedroom here." I said, "We can move over there so we can watch our property, and rent this out."

3-00:24:07

Furey:

Have good income off it.

3-00:24:09

Robinson:

Yeah, right. So she said, "Well, we don't know nothing about that kind of business." Well, she didn't because she was in eighth grade when we got married.

3-00:24:19

Furey:

Obviously among the African American population in Richmond, your family—I mean, your mother was an entrepreneur, not an entrepreneur but she was a manager and a very powerful woman back in Houston, and your father had a good job. Would you say that your family was probably more educated than most of the African Americans that were living in Richmond at the time?

3-00:24:47

Robinson:

Yes.

3-00:24:48

Furey:

What was the education of most of the black folks that you had contact with?

3-00:24:54

Robinson:

Well, most of them came from farms, you know. Most of them raised some pigs, and plowing, and stuff like that. Of course, they were living good, because they didn't have to buy a lot of stuff—most of the stuff they had, they produced it themselves. That was all right for there, but it was no good for here. So, when the thing went down when the war was over, they didn't have any ambition to go back there and start all over again, especially on such a low level after they had came out here and lived in better surroundings.

3-00:25:41

But one thing about my mother, she had told me, she said—my father was half Indian and half African and his father and mother were both slaves. And so my mother told me, she said, “Nobody in my family has ever graduated from high school.” She said, “I only went to the fifth grade.” She said, “But I'm determined that somebody is going to graduate from high school. Since you're the oldest boy, I'm going to teach you all I know up to the fifth grade and by that time, you should be able to catch on for yourself.” So she started teaching me to read and count when I was three years old. When I was four, I started school because I could read and count. She had to pay the school board, because, you see it was a particular situation. School starts in September, my birthday is New Year's Eve, so that means that I wasn't five years old in September, so I couldn't go. She had to pay them to let me go. [laughter]

3-00:26:47

Furey:

A little bribe?

3-00:26:49

Robinson:

Right. [laughter] So that means that I started school when I was four and I graduated when I was sixteen. By that time, she had gotten the playgrounds established. Because she had playgrounds around Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards. And junior high schools were allowing her the privilege of using those institutions from the time school was out until nine o'clock at night. She's getting volunteers from the college to come and help her. I was helping her too. I stayed there with her all the time, helped with the things that she didn't understand, because by that time I was in high school and I would make out her reports for her. And I could estimate, you know. Take, for instance, they had a question: how many people played ping pong today? How many people played basketball? How many played this game? It's got to balance out to how many people were there. Well, she couldn't do that, but I could. So I'd make out her reports for her every night. But she had a lot of gumption, you know, and she knew how to talk to people. She knew the right people to talk to so she'd get the jobs, and I'd help her with them.

3-00:28:27

Furey:

She must've been proud of you.

3-00:28:28

Robinson:

Well, she was.

3-00:28:31

Furey:

How did she do? Because she came out to Richmond a little after you did—

3-00:28:36

Robinson:

She came herself. She came before me.

3-00:28:37

Furey:

Oh, she came before. Can you talk a little bit about your mother's experience in Richmond, coming to Richmond and how she felt during that period, World War II?

3-00:28:45

Robinson:

Well, what occurred is my two brothers had been in CC Camp. When they got eighteen, well, you know they automatically boot you out. Well, they were very adventuresome. They'd heard about California; they caught a freight train and came out here. They didn't know anything about it, but they knew they could make it anywhere they went because they didn't—there were no limits to what they'd do to make it. So anyway, they came out here and they managed to get that apartment under the telephone building and fix it up. So then, they contacted my mother and father and told them to come out here. And they came out here and they all lived in the same place.

3-00:29:37

But I was still working for the railroad company. I had a wife and three kids and I couldn't see myself venturing to a state I don't know anything about, nobody there, until I got something or somebody ahead of me to establish something I could get my teeth in. So I stayed a year until they were pretty well established, and then when I found out that they were pretty well established, and people were coming all the time—Kaiser was putting people on a train and bringing them out here free. And you didn't have to know any trade. You could come out here and say, "I'm a welder." They'd teach you how to weld. Say "I'm an electrician;" they'd teach you how. Anything you say you could do, whether you could or not, it didn't make any difference. They'd put you in the union and train you how to do it. Some of them weren't too good, because some of the welding, they'd have chewing gum in it [laughs] because it would break down, and all that stuff.

3-00:30:49

But nevertheless, that worked out to my advantage, because my father had taught me how to paint when I was younger. When I came out here, I was learning more and more and more. I enjoyed it. You know, when you got a job you enjoy, well, you can be much better at it than you got one where you hate to get up in the morning. So I did very well on the job. My brothers went into the merchant marine, and my father, too. They got me far enough to get my picture for my passport. But I never did get the passport. I told them, I said, "I'm twenty-five years old, and my wife is twenty-two," and I said, "I cannot see myself at sea six months at the time and my

twenty-two-year-old wife running around.” So I wouldn’t go. I never did go. I’m the only male in my family who was not a merchant seaman.

3-00:32:03

Furey:

So they were all at sea during the war? And they were in the Pacific?

3-00:32:08

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. All over.

3-00:32:09

Furey:

Because the merchant marine is pretty dangerous. It had the highest death rate of all sectors.

3-00:32:15

Robinson:

It was. Hm-mmm. Because they couldn’t defend themselves. They didn’t have anything to fight with. My father went around the world seven times. My brothers went around once or twice. They were very adventuresome. One of my brothers, he had piles when the ship reached India. The ship was not going to sit there and wait for him to get an operation, and they couldn’t operate on him on the ship, so they put him in a hospital in India, where he didn’t know a single soul in the whole country. [laughter] When he finally recuperated and they put him out, he didn’t have no home, no job, no income, or nothing. We got in touch with the Matson Line and asked them where my brother was. I said, “We haven’t heard from him in six months now. Not even a letter.” He couldn’t write; he didn’t have no money to get no pens or nothing. He couldn’t speak the language. He was really in a destitute condition. He said a maharajah came—I may not be pronouncing that word right.

3-00:33:37

Furey:

Maharajah. Yeah.

3-00:33:38

Robinson:

He weighed about six hundred pounds, and the country had to give him his weight in jewels every year.

3-00:33:46

Furey:

He’s an Indian king, right? An Indian prince.

3-00:33:49

Robinson:

Right. Hm-mmm. Now, he’s living in extreme luxury. Six blocks from him, there’s garbage trucks coming along picking up the dead bodies off the street every morning where people are starving to death. He said that when he got out of the hospital, people would come to him and ask him, “Alms, alms.” He didn’t know what to do, because he had a little money, but he didn’t have much. Because, you know, he had no income, and the only money he had was what he had when he got off the ship. He said it was dangerous to gave the kids money and dangerous to not

give them money, because those big guys would stand back there and send the little kids out there and tell them to ask you for money.

3-00:34:40

Furey:

Yeah, I've been to India.

3-00:34:42

Robinson:

If you give them some money, they figure, "Why, you got plenty more; we'll take it all." And if you don't give no money, "you're mean, so we're going to kick you anyway." [laughs] So anyway, he said he saw sometime when they pick up the bodies in the morning on the trucks, they'd take them and burn them.

3-00:35:06

Furey:

Cremate them, yeah.

3-00:35:07

Robinson:

He said, sometimes the women would jump in right behind their husbands. They started taking them up on the mountain and letting the buzzards and things do away with them. It was over six months when he walked in the door one day. We had given him up for dead. We were so glad to see him, and that was my baby brother, too. I think that was very unfair for Matson Line not to let us to know that they had let him off in India.

3-00:35:43

Furey:

Yeah. That's the shipping line he was with?

3-00:35:46

Robinson:

Yeah.

3-00:35:48

Furey:

That's quite a story though—the guy from the South, in the middle of India.

3-00:35:55

Robinson:

Yeah, and don't know not a human being in the whole country.

3-00:36:00

Furey:

But you're saying that he met the maharajah, the prince?

3-00:36:05

Robinson:

Yeah, he saw him, but he didn't know him personally. But he happened to be around where—he ran across some people who were friendly to him.

3-00:36:16

Furey:

India, at that point, it was falling apart. It was right before the British left.

3-00:36:21

Robinson:

Right.

3-00:36:21

Furey:

So, you know, you had the transition after, where people went to Pakistan and India. Muslims went to one country and, you know, a couple of million people were killed. So at that time it was a pretty unstable place to be.

3-00:36:33

Robinson:

It was very unstable. It had no value for lives at all.

3-00:36:39

Furey:

Yeah. What I'd like to ask you a little bit—your mother's experience. Your father goes away on the—

3-00:36:50

Robinson:

On the ship. But you see—

3-00:36:52

Furey:

And what does your mother do when—?

3-00:36:54

Robinson:

You see, my father, he was sending the money back to help us, because he didn't pay no rent and he didn't have to buy any groceries or nothing. Besides, with me staying there with her, well, I was the man of the house at that time. I was working and the boys were sending money back too, so she didn't have a problem about money.

3-00:37:16

Furey:

She was well taken care of.

3-00:37:17

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Yeah.

3-00:37:18

Furey:

So she just took care of the house?

3-00:37:21

Robinson:

That's right. She just cooked and cleaned and take care of us, but we took care of all the money part.

3-00:37:31

Furey:

Did you have sisters as well?

3-00:37:33

Robinson:

No, my only sister died at child birth. It was just three brothers. Well, actually, I say four brothers, because I had a foster brother. In fact, he just died last year.

3-00:37:46

Furey:

He was in Richmond with you at that time working?

3-00:37:49

Robinson:

Yes.

3-00:37:50

Furey:

He was working in the shipyard?

3-00:37:51

Robinson:

No, he was a merchant seaman. All the males in my family were merchant seaman.

3-00:37:54

Furey:

Oh, okay.

3-00:37:55

Robinson:

I'm the only one that was not a merchant seaman. But he had worked in the shipyard before I got here. He was the reason that I got the spray job, because he had been a spray painter. When they saw me with his clothes on, they thought I was a spray painter. [laughs]

3-00:38:12

Furey:

But your mother, did she like Richmond? Was it hard for her at her age to come?

3-00:38:21

Robinson:

We weren't living in Richmond then. We were living in San Francisco, in Chinatown.

3-00:38:25

Furey:

And then she got a house in Richmond, and then you moved in with her. And then you got your own house?

3-00:38:30

Robinson:

Yes.

3-00:38:31

Furey:

How did she like it? Did she have a community here, of people that she knew from her hometown or did she feel—?

3-00:38:36

Robinson:

Not really, but what happened is she was a missionary and the church in North Richmond was the same denomination as she was. So she associated with them and she had a lot of friends there. She started working there—working with the children before she got working with youth, anyway.

3-00:38:57

Furey:

Okay. She would take care of the kids while the parents were away, went to work?

3-00:39:01

Robinson:

Right.

3-00:39:02

Furey:

Which might lead into—obviously, your wife took care of the kids.

3-00:39:07

Robinson:

My kids.

3-00:39:08

Furey:

Yeah. But what happened with your friends? What did people do with kids, say if the woman worked and both people were working? Were there any childcare places that you knew about?

3-00:39:21

Robinson:

No. They just sort of worked it out and, like if they had a larger child, oldest child, would just have to fill in.

3-00:39:30

Furey:

Take care of the kids?

3-00:39:31

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Yeah.

3-00:39:36

Furey:

And your wife? Did she enjoy California? Did she work?

3-00:39:41

Robinson:

Well, I wouldn't say she enjoyed at first, because all she had to do was cook and clean up and take care of my kids until I got home from work in the evening. And then they weren't making cars during that period of time, so we would take a walk in the evening and go out, have a bite to eat. Of course, we'd eat at home, because it's cheaper that way, but maybe we'd go out and have some refreshment like some ice cream or something like that, and walk around and look at the neighborhood and see what it was all like. One day I was walking down Twenty-third Street and I looked at a house, and I said, "You see that house right there." She said, "Yeah." I said, "I'm gonna own that house some day." She said, "You'll never own that house." She said, "No black people own a home on that side of Portrero [Avenue]." I said, "I'm going to own that house." And she's living in that house right now. I just glad I got it on the GI Bill of Rights.

3-00:40:48

I'm glad that I came to California, because so many of my people have prospered so well. My oldest son—like my mother was about me, I felt the same way about my oldest son. I wanted to make him progress as much as he could. He was going to Boys Club, and it was only two blocks from our house. One day, I got a notice that all the boys from Boys Club were going on a two-week vacation. I was assuming that, you know, they was all mixed up, so I said, "Well, I'm going to see to him going." And I sent him and he went somewhere, I don't know if it was in this state—all I know, it was a long ways off.

3-00:41:49

Furey:

On a camping trip, or something?

3-00:41:50

Robinson:

Yes, for two weeks. He wrote me and told me, he said, "Having a good time." When it was almost over, he told me, he said, "I was there fourteen days and I won thirteen fights." [laughter] So I said, "What happened?" He said, "I was the only black there." [laughs] I said, "Well, I didn't know that. I thought it was going to be mixed people." Then at that period of time where, you know, it wasn't too much mixing at the time—this was back in the early forties. But it was a good experience for him, because when he went to school, and he got in the reserves in El Cerrito High. He was in the naval reserve. When he graduated in June, in July, they inducted him. So he didn't have time to get involved in anything.

3-00:43:10

They sent him to Treasure Island, and then they gave him an aptitude test. They wrote me from Washington and they told me, they said, "Your son will have to spend twenty-two months swabbing decks. When he come out, he will have lost the continuity of his education, and also he can't make no money swabbing decks. But he has a very high IQ, and we have a proposition for you." They said if we were willing to send him to Treasure Island and if he passed this course—he said, "but he'd have to sign up for six years before we will send him to Treasure Island. Because if he pass the course, we are going to spend \$10,000 on him. We're going to send him to

college for two years and we are going to put him on an aircraft carrier and let him work in the radar department. The reason we want to do it this way, is because if he do the two years swabbing decks, when he comes out, he has nothing going for him. But if he go for the six years, when he come out, he has a trade. But if we going to put that much money into him, we want to get some back too. So we want him, but there's only one catch to it. When he goes to Treasure Island to take his course, when he finishes it, if he passes, then we will put him in college in Pennsylvania for two years. Then we will put him on the aircraft carrier, so he can learn electronics," and whatever was going on that period of time.

3-00:44:52

So they said, "Now, we want you to decide whether you think it would be worth him taking this risk or not." I said, "Well, you just met him and you think that much of him; I've known him all his life." And I said, "I know he can pass it." So they sent him to Treasure Island and he passed with flying colors. They put him on the USS *Boxer* aircraft carrier and he stayed on there for two years. And then they put him in college for two years in Pennsylvania and then they let him put the last two years back on the *Boxer*.

3-00:45:32

Furey:

This is in between Korea and Vietnam?

3-00:45:37

Robinson:

Yeah.

3-00:45:38

Furey:

So it wasn't wartime in between.

3-00:45:42

Robinson:

No. This was before Korea.

3-00:45:44

Furey:

It was before Korea?

3-00:45:45

Robinson:

Yeah. Let me see. This was—

3-00:45:48

Furey:

When was your son born?

3-00:45:50

Robinson:

He was born in 1938.

3-00:45:52

Furey:

He was born in '38. Okay, so then he was eighteen years old in 1956. Yeah, so it was right before Vietnam. In between Korea—Korea was in '51 and '52. What has he gone on in his career to be?

3-00:46:18

Robinson:

Oh, yes. What happened is he served his six years in the service in the radar department. When he came out, he went to Silicon Valley—well, actually, they didn't call it Silicon Valley, at that time—Palo Alto, and he went to {_____?} electronic plant and he got started there. He worked there for couple of years, then he went to another one. It was higher class. Then he just continued into that field. He never had but one job in his life and that was electronics. He was making about \$75,000 to \$80,000 a month when he quit, when he retired.

3-00:47:09

Furey:

Seventy-five thousand a year?

3-00:47:11

Robinson:

A year, when he retired and he bought a house. His first wife was a nurse at Stanford University. Stanford Hospital. She was working in the intensive care ward, and she was making a pretty nice salary. She was a couple years older than him. So when he came out and started working in electronics in Silicon Valley, and she was working in Stanford, well, they had very good incomes. So they moved to Cupertino; they were the only black family in Cupertino and they sent their children to private school. They got a very good education. In fact, when they became in high school, they were high school age, he had worked, moved—throughout the course, what do they call that? San Jose. So he bought a house in San Jose, a beautiful home. And his wife had an aneurysm—she had just left my house on my birthday—and died. Actually, she was on one of those machines for two or three days. I finally told my son, I said, "That's not doing any good," I said, "I can't tell you what to do, you have to make the decision, but I wouldn't let my wife go through that." So she died. He was the pastor at the church at that time in Sunnyvale. Since he was working in Silicon Valley, most of the people he knew were members of his church. He had about two hundred members.

3-00:49:26

Furey:

Was it a mixed church?

3-00:49:28

Robinson:

Mmm. It was an advantage to him, because if he had an all black church, it wouldn't have had much money. But by being mixed, even the black folks in Silicon Valley, they had money. So he started out off in a little real estate office about twice big as this room. Actually, he started in his living room. Then he got this little real estate office, then he got a place about four times as big as this house, and he did real well in it.

3-00:50:05

Furey:

I'd like to go back to a little bit about the social life during Richmond during the war. Now, I know you were a hardworking man. You had, you know, a wife. But what were some of the—like the nightlife scene? Because I heard there was a big—was it Schwartz Ballroom? Was it Schwartz? I can't remember. But there were quite a few—there were dances all the time?

3-00:50:33

Robinson:

Oh yes, on the weekend especially.

3-00:50:36

Furey:

Can you talk a little bit about that, like the bands that would come? What kind of dancing you'd do?

3-00:50:39

Robinson:

Jimmy McCracklin. He was one of the favorites, and Minnie Lou was out of North Richmond. She had a bar out there and she served food, and most of the youngsters would meet out there and dance, have a bite, and have fun, you know? Then there was another one on Chesley [Avenue], I can't think of the name of that one, but well-known musicians would come out to those places, too, sometimes. Most of the best ones would come to San Francisco, because even at the Golden Gate Theater, I remember seeing many outstanding musicians.

3-00:51:25

Furey:

Benny Goodman? Louis Armstrong?

3-00:51:27

Robinson:

Yeah. In Oakland, on Eighth Street, they had what they called {_____} Club. Upstairs, there would be dancing, and downstairs they had a photographer studio where they'd take pictures of people who were there. Then they had food, and it was very interesting. They had so many interesting places. Slim Jenkins' was about the most popular one on Seventh Street. He was pretty wealthy, and he had dancing and had about the nicest club in the black community there. But here in Richmond, Minnie Lou had the best one in North Richmond, and the Brown Derby. They had so many of them.

3-00:52:23

Furey:

What kind of dancing was there?

3-00:52:27

Robinson:

Whatever happened to be popular at that time. I remember they used to have one called Funky Chicken and Camel Walk, and all that.

3-00:52:41

Furey:

But it was partner dancing, right? And you'd do lots of twirling? Swing kind of dancing?

3-00:52:45

Robinson:

Swing, had that too. In fact, that was what was going on when I first came here. And then they was wearing those zoot suits, sixteen inches around here. Thirty-six inches. It was something! [laughs] It was not as violent as it is now. You know, people, they had their bad times. But it wasn't like it is now.

3-00:53:18

Furey:

You wouldn't get into a fight with a guy and expect him to pull out a gun?

3-00:53:21

Robinson:

No, no.

3-00:53:21

Furey:

Maybe a knife?

3-00:53:23

Robinson:

If you've whipped him, it was over. One night, he might come back with a Uzi. [laughter]

3-00:53:35

Furey:

So were these clubs, the Mary Lou and—what was the other one you said?

3-00:53:40

Robinson:

The Brown Derby.

3-00:53:41

Furey:

Were these mixed clubs, or were these all black?

3-00:53:44

Robinson:

Well, they were black clubs, but we had a lot of white patrons, too, especially the ones in Oakland. At Minnie Lou's, there wasn't too many whites over there, because that was a place that had been recently incorporated—it had been all black over there. In fact, the police didn't even go over there. So therefore, when she opened her club, she got all the black business over there. She made out very well. But the way she got started was, there was a guy named Fred, who was a pimp from Louisiana, he brought three women with him: Mary Lou, Miss Ford, and the third one I can't remember. But anyway, he had been pimping them back in Louisiana, and when he brought them out here, they worked for him for about three or four years and made him pretty wealthy. So he figured they were getting past the age for that then, so he set each one of them up in business. He put Mary Lou, Minnie Lou, in a nightclub—I mean a restaurant and bands and bar. And he put this other one I can't remember, he opened her up a grocery store, and he married the third one. [laughter] So I knew them all.

3-00:55:33

Furey:

He set them up with a retirement program.

3-00:55:35

Robinson:

Right. [laughter]

3-00:55:38

Furey:

Wow. Was there much dating? Did you see much interracial dating? Did you see white guys coming in these clubs and dance with black girls, or the other way around?

3-00:55:51

Robinson:

Well, actually, there was a lot of it in Berkeley and in San Francisco, but it wasn't too much in Richmond. Once in a while, you might see them in the club together, but not walking down the streets together. But in Berkeley, it was common, and in San Francisco, too.

3-00:56:13

Furey:

What part? In the Fillmore [District] in San Francisco, or would you see them more in the—what neighborhoods would you see interracial?

3-00:56:19

Robinson:

Well, mostly around the—

3-00:56:24

Furey:

The waterfront?

3-00:56:26

Robinson:

No. The one I named a few minutes ago. Where the hippies hung out.

3-00:56:30

Furey:

Oh, Haight-Ashbury.

3-00:56:32

Robinson:

Haight-Ashbury.

3-00:56:32

Furey:

Around there, yeah.

3-00:56:32

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Then out on the beach was really a nice place, too, at that time. They had all type of entertainment.

3-00:56:43

Furey:

The Playland, out near Cliff House?

3-00:56:46

Robinson:

Right.

3-00:56:47

Furey:

Yeah. You know, they just closed down—remember the arcade that they'd have at the Cliff House?

3-00:56:51

Robinson:

Yeah.

3-00:56:52

Furey:

Even in the last couple of years, we'd go there and they'd have the old games. They just closed that one down and took out all the old arcade. Because they are going to put in a restaurant, you know, make more money.

3-00:57:03

Robinson:

I see. The North Park used to be pretty popular too.

3-00:57:07

Furey:

Pardon?

3-00:57:07

Robinson:

North Park area, they called it. It wasn't too far from the Cliff House.

3-00:57:12

Furey:

Oh, the Golden Gate Park?

3-00:57:13

Robinson:

No, no, no. They called it North Park, because it's where the kids would go out there in their cars—

3-00:57:24

Furey:

Above the Cliff House, or down below the Cliff House?

3-00:57:27

Robinson:

Above the Cliff House.

3-00:57:28

Furey:

Oh, kind of near where Lands End is, where you can walk, and it goes out to the Presidio. Yeah.

3-00:57:35

Robinson:

Yeah. I worked at Fort Mason, which was right by Presidio.

3-00:57:42

Furey:

How about at the shipyards? Did they have any social events that the shipyards would organize? Because I know that they had a newspaper and everything. Would they have dances, or holiday parties where you could bring your family?

3-00:57:57

Robinson:

Occasionally, on special occasions there'd be—most of the time—now, for instance, the Boswell Sisters sang out there at the shipyard. And we'd have different entertainers who would come out there sometime at lunchtime and sing for us and entertain us. But there wasn't too much for families to do, because they were so busy trying to get those ships together. Because, you see, we were behind. We really were not prepared for that war. So they were really working; they worked twenty-four hours a day.

3-00:58:38

Furey:

What kind of things would they do to motivate you to work harder? Because obviously there was a lot of patriotism going on: we need to go, you know, help those boys—

3-00:58:50

Robinson:

That's right.

3-00:58:50

Furey:

—get this stuff to the boys. What are the kinds of—?

3-00:58:55

Robinson:

Well, you see, one thing about it is that you know if we don't win this thing, then we're going down the drain. Because we were on the verge of it when they hit Pearl Harbor, and we really weren't ready. Everybody knows the effect. We had blackouts; we didn't have no lights on at night.

3-00:59:17

Furey:

Yeah. I remember my grandfather—you know, because you can't walk on the Bay Bridge at all, but he was going across the Bay Bridge, coming into or coming back from the city at night, one time, and there was a blackout. You know, where they had put the sirens on. They stopped all traffic on the bridge, because you turn your lights off and stop. He was really happy though, because he got to walk around on the bridge as they stopped the traffic.

3-00:59:48

Robinson:

Right. Yeah, it was very interesting. I learned because, you see, I was just at the age where I had a lot of energy. I was twenty-three when I came here. I had just retired from fighting, you know, so I was in very good shape, so I never got tired. [laughter] I used to stay at work all day and stay up half the night. You know, you'd be surprised at some of the places that were in Chinatown, in San Francisco. Like, I lived on 555 Pine Street. Now at night, you see all those tall office buildings, not a light no place. But if you knew, you'd go downstairs and if you knew the secret knock, then they open that door and you go in. There's a whole nightclub on the bottom basement floor, a band, and a bar, girls, everything. Looking at it from the outside, it's so drab you wouldn't think there was anything in there.

3-01:01:01

Then on the {_____ at Post?}, that was a touchy place to go though, because the sailors liked to go there. See, what had happened, I remember my two brothers and I, we were all fighters, we went down there one night to have some drinks. These sailors come in, and say, "Well, we're leaving in the morning and we may never come back, so we're taking over tonight. Everybody get out." I asked the manager, I said, "Is that the way business is going to be conducted here tonight?" He said, "Well, I can't whip 'em all." There was quite a few Chinese in there, too, at the time, because we were just two or three blocks from Chinatown. So my brother and I, we said, "Well, we are going to leave, because there's no point in us staying here and getting in trouble, because I know somebody going to get seriously hurt." So we started off, and in the middle of {Duckton?}, here come about two hundred Chinese with machetes, and them sailors were jumping on people's cars, on the hood of the car, getting away from there. They was talking about running everybody else out and they got ran out of Chinatown. [laughter]

3-01:02:25

I really used to love to fight. My brothers and I did. If I took a drink and my brothers and my wife and I were going out to dance, my wife wouldn't go if I took a drink, because she knew I was going to get in a fight before I got back. We had the A Train. We lived in San Francisco and they had Count Basie showing at Oakland Auditorium, and he was one of my favorites. They didn't sell whiskey to civilians, because it was for servicemen, but you could get gin or vodka and something to get high on. So—am I running out of time?

3-01:03:06

Furey:

Yeah. How about we take a little break here and we'll come back to Count Basie, because it's about to run out anyway.

3-01:03:15

Robinson:

Okay.

3-01:03:20

Furey:

It's pretty funny—two hundred Chinese guy chasing these—

3-01:03:23

Robinson:

Yeah. They had machetes and they was coming—they had guys jumping onto the hood of a car to get out of the way.

[Interruption while tape changed]

3-01:05:34

Furey:

Hello, hello. Here we are again.

3-01:05:36

Robinson:

I had a big family and since I was in good shape, I always kept two jobs.

3-01:05:43

Furey:

Okay, so let's keep going. You were telling about Count Basie coming to town.

3-01:05:50

Robinson:

Oh, yes. This particular thing here, this was when I first came to California and we were living at this, under this telephone company place. So anyway, there was no alcohol. I mean, there was alcohol but not whiskey. What happened, where they got a fifth of tequila and my father, my three brothers, and I, we started drinking and having a good time. We said we were going to see Count Basie and we were going to catch the A Train. My wife had got dressed too, and when she saw me take a couple of drinks she started taking her clothes off. She said, "No, no. I'm not going. I know he's going to get in a fight." They're saying, "He's not going to get into a fight. We'll look out for him." So we talked her into coming along. We got on the A Train going across the bridge, and they have an emergency cord you could pull if something happen, you know. They had this car be a smoking car and the next car a non-smoking, like that. I was pretty well tanked up by this time, and this guy in front me was smoking, so I said, "Would you put that cigarette out?" He said, "This is a smoking car." I said, "I didn't ask you what car it were. I said put the cigarette out." [laughter] My brother said, "Roscoe, don't do that. You'll get thrown out of the car" He said, "He got a right to smoke here." This other guy said, "Well, if he's going to be like that," he said, "I'll put my cigarette out." So he put his cigarette out. By that time, I got sick in the stomach, so I pulled the emergency cord and the train stopped right in the middle of the bridge.

3-01:08:04

Furey:

In the middle of the bridge? The Bay Bridge.

3-01:08:07

Robinson:

Yeah. [laughs] So the man come up there, the conductor back there, he said "Who pulled the cord?" I said, "I did." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because I want to throw up, and unless you want me to throw up in here, you gonna have to open that door, so I can throw up outside." He said, "Well, I'm gonna do that this time," he said, "but don't do that no more." So he opened the door and I went outside and threw up. We come on back in and we rode—and you know where you

pay the bridge toll? Well, we were coming from San Francisco. At that time, there was nothing but waves all around there. By the time we got there to the place where they pay the bridge toll, I pulled the cord again. He come back there, he said, "Not you again." I said, "Yeah." He said, "You know I'm going to put you off, don't you?" I said, "No, you're not." I said, "I pulled the cord so I can get off." He said, "There's no streets and no sidewalks or nothing here." I said, "I didn't ask you for that. I want to get off." [laughs] I was crazy when I got drunk.

3-01:09:15

Everybody's all dressed up in their new suits and everything, and here we got to get off and all of these waves are knee-deep, and we got to walk at least a mile till we get to a civilized neighborhood. [laughter] My wife and my brothers were so mad at me, so they got to where they could get a taxi, and they took me to the { _____? } Club on Eighth Street. And when they got there, they told the taxi driver, said, "We are going to pay you to take him to San Francisco." They said, "We are going to fool him and tell him that we're going somewhere else. But when we get in, we are going to close door, and you take off." I don't even remember that part of it. The next thing I remember was the next morning I woke up in bed with all my clothes on. I asked my wife, I said, "What happened?" She said, "You acted the fool so we sent you home." [laughter] But they went on and had a good time at the club.

3-01:10:20

I would always get in trouble. I remember one night, on the same night when those Chinese ran those sailors away, we went to Fillmore then. I said, "I'm hungry." So we went there and I ordered some food, and they ordered some. My wife wasn't with us, that time. She had left us. I said, "I'm hungry." So I put some money in the juke box and I said, "Y'all getting mighty slow getting the food ready. I'm hungry." They said, "Well, we are doing the best we can." I said, "I tell you what we'll do just for entertainment." I said, "I'm not mad at anybody, but I just want to do something." I said, "Would somebody care to step outside and go a couple of rounds with me? I'm not mad with you, I just want a fight." [laughs] So my brothers told me, "Sit down, don't you say anything, you are crazy." There weren't nobody paying attention, no way. Finally, they got the food ready, and they wouldn't even let me eat. They fixed it to go and took me on away from there. We went to another place. I got into it. They started saying, "We are going home now." So they took me on back home.

3-01:12:01

I just could not stand to drink alcohol. If I got alcohol in me, I was really active. And I never did believe in mistreating anybody. I was kind to people. I wouldn't steal, or wouldn't do nothing wrong. But I just loved to fight. So that was what was going on. When we moved to Richmond, they had a few playgrounds, two or three. I went up to one, I told him, "I want you to teach me how to box." And so they looked at me. One of them said, "You want to teach him?" He said, "No." He said, "Do you want to teach him?" He said, "No." [laughs] I was young, but I was weighing about a hundred and ninety, and I was very active. So they wouldn't teach me, nobody wouldn't put the gloves on with me. I never was mean or nothing like that, but I just liked to get into something, you know, I was active.

3-01:13:14

I started thinking about what I'm going to do when this shipyard thing is over, whether I wanted to go back to Houston. So I said, "I'm going to go to school until I'm fifty-five years old. Every year, I'm going to night school." And that's why I said I wouldn't trade for all those schools I

went to. I went to so many different schools and I studied so many different courses. I didn't intend to be into those things, but I wanted to know something about everything because I figured some of it would come in handy sometime, and some of it did. The painting itself was really an asset to me because I used to paint in Marin County and Terra Linda and those people were very wealthy over there. They didn't mind the entire price. So I would get off from work at Hamilton Air Force Base and go to work over in Terra Linda, and make a lot of money. While I'm doing this lady's house, her neighbor would come in and say, "I'm next on the list." I just kept jobs all the time. So my family, they thought we were rich. My kids did, because we were taking them to Disneyland, Yosemite, and wherever I could take them. I had two cars—I had a station wagon and car. On a Saturday, we'd stock up the station wagon, pick out a place on the map and take off.

3-01:14:55

I always took them to church and taught them to treat people like they wanted to be treated. Not to mistreat anybody. So I brought them up in the right way, the way my mother had brought me up. But as far as what I would have liked to have done is, I would like to have been able to invest in real estate the way I wanted to. Like the lady who offered me those places for \$75,000. If I had that place right now, it's worth a quarter million dollars. I could've bought it for \$75,000, brand new. Just think of the stepping stone I could've made from that. [laughs]

3-01:15:43

Furey:

Yeah. But as they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty.

3-01:15:48

Robinson:

That's right. Like a Monday morning quarterback.

3-01:15:51

Furey:

Now we can kind of go into the part about how Richmond was declining. You know, it was a boomtown and then it really declined. Before we kind of get there, I'd like to touch a little bit on one hand—or the Kaiser Hospital. You said that one time you got injured, you went there. I want to know what your memories of that care was like?

3-01:16:19

Robinson:

Actually, inside the shipyards, they had what they called area houses. They was about one fourth the size of this room. In case someone got bruised, and not bruised too bad, they could handle it there. If they had to, they sent them to the hospital.

3-01:17:01

I could run pretty fast too, so when we got off from work in the afternoon, we used to race for the gate. It was about, I guess, about a block. This guy, every evening, he would get all the bricks out. Somebody would get in front of me, and I knew I could outrun him. So when they called me to come to [Draft] Board 80 in Berkeley to be inducted, I told him that even—I turned around and I said, "You know what, you've been beating me to the gate." I said, "But you're not going to beat me today." I said, "I'm going to outrun you." He said, "I bet you five dollars you don't outrun me." I said, "That's a bet." So I gave somebody the five dollars and we started off. I got

about four lengths in front of him and I looked back, I said, “Robert, you going to lose your money.” And when I turned back around, well this little lady was passing in front of me. I saw I was going to hit her, so I turned sideways like this to keep from hurting her too bad, and hit her on the side and knocked her unconscious. But we were right in front of the dispensary, and I picked her up and carried her onto the dispensary. I said, “I hurt this lady.” I said, “Work on her and whatever the bill is, I’ll pay it. Whatever time she lose from work, I’ll pay her salary until she’s able to go back to work again.” I said, “I’m sorry this happened.” I said, “But I was being foolish and I just have to suffer the consequences.” So every Friday, I’d go down to her house, and pay her. She was making fifty-two dollars a week, and I’d give her fifty-two dollars a week.

3-01:18:41

Furey:

They didn’t have any kind of workers’ disability there?

3-01:18:45

Robinson:

Yeah, they had it, but I think they kind of wanted to punish me. [laughs] When I came out, when I took her into the dispensary, when I walked out—wait a minute. You didn’t ask me that. You asked me about the climbing.

3-01:19:06

Furey:

I was just asking about Kaiser, or the hospital they had.

3-01:19:10

Robinson:

Oh yeah, there was a hospital. This was part of Kaiser. That’s why I was trying to figure how I got into this. So when I came out, there was three guys there, standing out there, and they said, “If I had him down in Georgia, see, I know what I’d do with him.” When he said it, I dropped him, and the other two left. I hurt my best friend, Kelly Wong. I think I told you about when I blew that air hose in his eye. Where he had to go onto that thing, and to that place, too. And when I fell through that hole, they wanted to take me there, but they knew there was nothing that they can do for me in First Aid there. They sent me to the hospital. But they had those area houses, which came in very handy for small, not too serious, incidents. On Fourteenth and Cutting they had the hospital, and they would take you down there right quick and take care of you, and that was the most convenient place for anyone who got hurt here at that time. They had Blue Cross, they had Blue Shield, and I think there was another one.

3-01:20:38

Furey:

Hospitals?

3-01:20:38

Robinson:

Yeah, in Oakland. A lot of people was talking down on Kaiser; they didn’t like Kaiser. But Kaiser wound up, come up ahead above all of them really. I got into Kaiser in ’43 when I first got into the shipyard. But when I went in service, well then I wasn’t in Kaiser any more. When I came out, and started working for the contractors, I had their insurance. But when I started working at Hamilton Air Force Base, then they put me back in Kaiser again. Since I had had

experience selling life and disability insurance, I knew the value of the insurance. They told us, “You can either take one plan A and it’ll only cost you sixteen dollars a month, or you can take Plan B and it’ll cost you twenty dollars a months.” I said, “I want plan B,” because I knew the value of insurance. I knew if they would charge me more for it you was going to get more service. And if I get sick, I want the best I can get. Everybody was getting plan A, because it was cheaper, but I said, “This don’t make sense, getting it because it’s cheaper. I want it for when I need it.” So I got it and I still have it. I had an operation in 1996 cost \$80,000; it didn’t cost me anything.

3-01:22:20

Furey:

So you’ve been a Kaiser member for sixty years?

3-01:22:23

Robinson:

Well, I would say except for when I went in service.

3-01:22:28

Furey:

Because you got it through the government?

3-01:22:30

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Then, when I came out, and went back work for Hamilton Air Force Base, then went back into it. Yessir.

3-01:22:40

Furey:

Did your family receive benefits of the medical coverage?

3-01:22:46

Robinson:

Yes, they did.

3-01:22:47

Furey:

When you worked in the shipyards?

3-01:22:49

Robinson:

Yeah, when I worked in the shipyards.

3-01:22:50

Furey:

So they could go and get care at the hospital? Okay. One more subject I’d like to touch on before we get into the part where Richmond sort of—the end of the war in Richmond. Do you remember when they took all the Japanese away and interned them in camps? Do you have any memory of that period?

3-01:23:15

Robinson:

Actually, I have memories of the period, but it wasn't in this area, that I knew of. Most of that, I understood, was in Southern California.

3-01:23:26

Furey:

Yeah. I think there were some Japanese people who were—there was a decent size Japanese community in the Bay Area. I don't know about in Richmond.

3-01:23:38

Robinson:

No, there weren't in Richmond, but they may have been in San Francisco. But see, by that time, I had moved to Richmond, so I didn't know about the Japanese community then.

3-01:23:50

Furey:

Okay. So what are your memories of—see, you were in the service right after the bomb dropped?

3-01:24:05

Robinson:

Yeah. Well, actually the bomb dropped about a week after I got in the service, because if the bomb had dropped before I got into service, they would not have inducted me. See? But after I was already in, there was nothing they could do about it.

3-01:24:26

Furey:

When you came back from your service, you came back to Richmond.

3-01:24:30

Robinson:

Yes.

3-01:24:31

Furey:

Okay. Did you notice any change over that four-month period?

3-01:24:37

Robinson:

Yes, I did.

3-01:24:38

Furey:

What were some of the things you noticed?

3-01:24:40

Robinson:

Because there wasn't as many jobs, and there was still a whole lot of people here. See, there was so many people here until—in the theater that stayed open twenty-four hours a day there was people sleeping, in theaters. And people sleeping in—in fact, like this couch here. I could rent this couch out to somebody from eight o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the evening. And when that one leave, another one come on from four o'clock in the evening to twelve

o'clock at night, and then another one come on from twelve o'clock at night to eight o'clock next morning. I mean, it was just so hard to find a place to stay at that time. I remember that there was still a lot of people here, but there wasn't enough work to keep them all occupied. So they started traveling and going to the harvest, working in the fields, and doing whatever they could. The money was dwindling away, and some of them was going back to their hometowns.

3-01:25:48

Furey:

So a lot of people went back to—did you know any? Your brothers were still merchant marines at that time.

3-01:25:54

Robinson:

Yeah, they were merchant marines. Nobody from my family left.

3-01:25:59

Furey:

Wasn't there a merchant marine strike around that time in '46?

3-01:26:03

Robinson:

Yes. Actually, what it was, was Marine Cooks and Stewards [Union] was in charge of the employees that worked in the cooking department. And they had another group, I can't remember the name of that other group that came in and take over. They are in charge now, but I can't remember the name of it now, it was so long ago. They did have a strike there.

3-01:26:32

Furey:

All the merchant marines were on land, were on shore at that point, right? That flooded the job market even more.

3-01:26:43

Robinson:

That's right. They did.

3-01:26:45

Furey:

Then you have the boys coming home from war.

3-01:26:47

Robinson:

That's right. It was really rough around here at that time. If you could get on unemployment compensation, you were doing good. But I was fortunate enough that I had learned enough about painting until I didn't have to work for nobody. I could get my own jobs. Hm-mmm.

3-01:27:12

Furey:

At that point in '46, after you came back from the service, you didn't have any problem finding work?

3-01:27:20

Robinson:

No. No. The only problem I had was they were supposed to take me back on my job that I had when I went in. And when I went in, they didn't want to give it back to me.

3-01:27:33

Furey:

The job at Hunters Point?

3-01:27:33

Robinson:

Yeah. At Bethlehem Steel. Remember, that's where I was inducted from, and when you come back, they are supposed to give you your job. When I came back, the union told me that I could've come through the window and got my—I showed them my—every quarter, you got a ticket showing that you paid, and I had all of mine for two years. And they are going to tell me that I could have climbed over the counter, go back in there, and get me a ticket every three months for two years? What kind of place of business would that be? So that's when Gerry Brown told me—

3-01:28:19

Furey:

Pat, his father. Pat Brown.

3-01:28:21

Robinson:

Yeah, Pat Brown.

3-01:28:21

Furey:

Yeah, talk about that. So you went into his office?

3-01:28:24

Robinson:

Yeah. I talked to him about it.

3-01:28:28

Furey:

He became governor.

3-01:28:29

Robinson:

Yeah. He told me, he said, "If I was you, I wouldn't even go to nobody. I'd get me a shotgun and blow their brains out, if I went off, leaving my wife and four kids and take a chance on getting killed to protect them, and then come back and they don't want to give you your job back." He said, "If they don't come back here in the morning at nine o'clock with you reinstated, just let me know." But when I got home that evening, this black contractor from Berkeley had heard about it and he had called and told me to come over there, and he had a better job paying more money. So that's what I did. Working with him, I continued to get better and better, because he was quite an artist himself.

3-01:29:24

I always had a system of whatever I'm in, I try to go to school to learn a little bit more about it so I can have this little edge on the others, you know. So I was going to night school—Contra Costa College was over here on Canal Boulevard at that time. They called it Contra Costa Junior College, and I was studying interior decoration over there while I was working at Oakland Army Base in the daytime. So I learned quite a bit about it, and I loved it. When you're working in the job that you like, well, it's no strain. But the economy was dwindling. It was. And it was in a place where people—because most of them was renting anyway. They weren't buying their homes and then the government started tearing down those temporary houses.

3-01:30:24

Furey:

Up in North Richmond?

3-01:30:26

Robinson:

They had some on the other side of Portrero. Actually, in North Richmond, they hadn't done anything.

3-01:30:39

Furey:

You mean, right up here, on this side of Portrero, or on—?

3-01:30:58

Robinson:

It was down around Twenty-third Street. Everything on this side of Portrero was black. Everything on this side was white. But all of these were temporary housing—what they called—what do you call them?

3-01:31:00

Furey:

Bungalow or—?

3-01:31:01

Robinson:

It was like eight families could live in each building, and they had about forty of them over there. So when they started tearing those down, that was really taking away a place to stay in what was already a bad place. So people started going back to their hometowns. But I had paid—I was buying me a home by that time, so I wasn't going anywhere.

3-01:31:35

Furey:

I guess it's kind of like, sort of similar to the boom that happened in the Bay Area in the '90s. You know, you had—they flooded the area with all these jobs. People coming from all over. I think the difference is that after this last one, everyone went home after this last one in the '90s. But here in Richmond, people just stayed around, behind.

3-01:32:01

Robinson:

That's right.

3-01:32:05

Furey:

How about the clubs? Did a lot of the clubs shut down?

3-01:32:08

Robinson:

Yes, a lot them shut down. In fact, I had managed one myself. I had one on Second and Ohio, the Flamingo Club.

3-01:32:17

Furey:

The one that Lee set you up with?

3-01:32:18

Robinson:

Yeah.

3-01:32:19

Furey:

That's later on. But right after the war, did the clubs shut down immediately or—?

3-01:32:26

Robinson:

Not really. It was gradually, because some people had saved up quite a bit of money. Some of them were working in two shipyards. They'd go to work eight o'clock in the morning and get off at four. And at four thirty, they'd go to work at the next shipyard. So they weren't having any time to spend their money; they was just saving it and banking it. So they had enough money to last them for a while. It didn't just collapse all at once. They were holding onto it, figuring something was going to happen before they run out of money. But they could see it was coming on, so they went back home.

3-01:33:15

Furey:

So you worked as a contractor, or you worked on a contract basis for your painting business?

3-01:33:21

Robinson:

Yes, I was a subcontractor. See, Mr. {Vernon Dunn?} that I worked for in Berkeley, after I left him and I was working at Hamilton Air Force Base, that's when the people started seeing my work and wanted me to work over in Marin County. But I couldn't work over there, because I wasn't in the union. So I talked to {Vernon Dunn?} about it. He told me I could use his license, so I'd just stick his stick up in the yard and they wouldn't bother me. I worked as a subcontractor under him. Of course, I had to give him a little pinch for using his license, but, I mean, I was making so much money, that was minimal. Besides, I had a full-time job at Hamilton Air Force Base. In fact, it was strange how I—I don't know whether I told you how I got this job at Hamilton.

3-01:34:23

Furey:

No.

3-01:34:25

Robinson:

See, I had worked ten years for the federal government, for the navy. And this insurance company had come to me and asked me to work for them. I told them, I said, “Well, I got a wife and kids, and I got a job for life working for federal government.” I said, “I don’t know anything about insurance.” I said, “I couldn’t take a chance on putting my family at risk like that.” This was the president of the company, who came from Los Angeles. I don’t know who sent him up to my house. He and his assistant. So he said, “We know that you could do it.” He said, “We got reliable information that you could handle it.” I said, “Yeah, but that’s your reliable information, it’s not mine.” I said, “My family’s looking to me.” So they said, “What we’ll do, we’ll put you on a salary for a certain period of time. Then we’ll stop and recapitulate, and see whether you earned that much. If you did, then we’ll keep on going.” So I said, “Yeah, suppose I don’t. I can’t go back over there and tell them I want my job back.” And so I told them, I said, “I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll work for you on a part-time basis for two years after I get off from work over here.” And I did. I was selling more insurance on a part-time basis than some of the men who worked on a full-time basis. So when I saw that I could make it, then I quit. Because they were not giving me a fair break at Mare Island. They had men, paying them much more than I was—doing easier jobs—but not half as qualified as I was. Because I had studied interior decoration and I had twenty years’ experience painting before I studied interior decoration. So I just quit and went into the insurance business.

3-01:36:39

Furey:

This is around the 1960s?

3-01:36:42

Robinson:

It was ’54.

3-01:36:43

Furey:

In ’54?

3-01:36:44

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. I quit the insurance business in ’61. Well, I quit that particular company, because I opened an agency of my own.

3-01:36:53

Furey:

You weren’t at all homesick for going back to Texas?

3-01:36:57

Robinson:

Never.

3-01:36:58

Furey:

No?

3-01:36:59

Robinson:

I went back one time since I left there. I left there in '43 and I went back in '69. I never been back since.

3-01:37:07

Furey:

Because all your family came over.

3-01:37:11

Robinson:

Hm-mmm.

3-01:37:13

Furey:

So you worked in the insurance business from 1954 to in the 70s?

3-01:37:22

Robinson:

Well, I worked for one company from '54 to '61 and that's when I went back to work for the federal government. Then I decided to work, go in business for myself in insurance, so I had an agency of my own. But I worked for several companies. I had an office in Walnut Creek, and I had one called Pierce National [Life Insurance Company]—I leased, they had a big old peanut on top of the building. You could see it from the freeway. I worked there at Pierce National for a few years. In fact, I won a contest for being one of the top fifty agents two years in a row, and they gave me a plane trip for my wife and I to go down to—on a vacation. They paid for everything.

3-01:38:28

Furey:

You had seven kids by your wife?

3-01:38:35

Robinson:

I had eight by her, but one died. My oldest girl died.

3-01:38:41

Furey:

In what year did you divorce?

3-01:38:44

Robinson:

In '70.

3-01:38:45

Furey:

1970.

3-01:38:51

Robinson:

Well, it was a particular situation. Actually, that's when I got injured at Hamilton Air Force Base when I was on a ladder rope and I fell sixteen feet, and a small part of my back hit on the ladder

like this—hit on the table. I was in the hospital in Pinole, and they told me I'd never walk again. That's when my wife came up to the hospital, and when she heard I wasn't ever going to walk again and told me that she was going to have to ask for a divorce. She heard that some woman had a baby for me seven years ago. I said, "It's just now beginning to worry you since I can't walk again? I often wondered what would happen if I ever got to a place where I couldn't support you." So I said, "But I don't give up. So I'm going to get you a divorce." She asked for separate maintenance, which mean I take care of all of her bills but I don't stay in the house. I said, "I got a better idea than that; we're going to get a divorce." [laughter] She did ask me to come back several times since then, but I told her, "Too much water gone under the bridge."

3-01:40:15

Furey:

In what year did you retire?

3-01:40:19

Robinson:

I retired in '70. From Hamilton Air Force Base.

3-01:40:24

Furey:

From after the injury?

3-01:40:28

Robinson:

Hm-mmm. Well, actually, the injury occurred in '65, but they kept on trying to keep me on payroll to see if I could recuperate, because they were training me to take the foreman's job. All I had to do was sit in the office and dispatch the men to jobs, let them know how many man-hours they had on the job, and stuff like that. And material. But I couldn't lift anything, and so I just got to the place where I just didn't feel like I was earning my money, you know? Every time I go some place, if I got to take a bucket of paint, I couldn't even carry a bucket of paint. Somebody had to carry it for me. So I said, "This don't make sense. You could go ahead and do that yourself." I was fortunate that I ran into a gentleman on the job who told me, he said, "Listen!" he said, "I'm going to contact somebody and they are going to contact you." He said, "I don't want to ever see you on this base again." He said, "I want you on permanent disability for life; you should've been on it five years ago." And so I went on and did what he said to do.

3-01:42:10

I got a letter in the mail telling me that {Jim Lymann?} was retiring from foreman and since I have been training for the job, they wanted to talk to me. So I went up to the employment office and they said, "We want you to go to talk to {Lymann?} and see if he's really going to retire, and if he is, you can have that job of foreman. And this gentleman, out of all the people on the base, walked into the office just as I was fixing to go downstairs. He says, "What are you doing on this base?" I said, "Well, I got a letter telling me that they wanted me to come to go talk to {Lymann?}." He said, "Look, I want you to get in your car right now, go home, don't ever come to this base again, because they are trying to trick you. If you go down there and work five minutes, they could fire you and you can't get a job nowhere." He says, "Go home now and don't ever come back to this base again for nothing. I don't care what they're saying." And I've been on permanent disability for thirty-three years.

3-01:43:04

Furey:

Well, that's good advice. So is there any sort of closing remarks you'd like to say about your experience coming to Richmond? How you liked it? Because, obviously, it was a major turning point in your life, a big change.

3-01:43:20

Robinson:

It was. It was.

3-01:43:23

Furey:

Otherwise you would've continued working as—

3-01:43:27

Robinson:

That's right. In menial jobs, not making enough money to support my family properly. And not being able to—because I'd be so tired when I got home in the evening, all I could do was eat and bathe and get enough rest to go back the next morning. And we were just barely making it. So it was a blessing to me to come out here, because I have never had to want for anything. And I've been retired thirty-three years and I have never had to want for anything. So I think it was wonderful for me. I have no complaints, and I'm eighty-three years old. Not many people eighty-three years old are in as good a shape as I am. [laughs] I have many, many relatives. I got—let me see. Forty grandchildren, seventy great-grandchildren—that's 110—and now I got some great-grandchildren who are pregnant. [laughs] When you get enough fifth generation, I mean, they spring up so fast. My oldest daughter had twenty-one grandchildren.

3-01:44:55

So I feel that I had a blessed life, and I have no complaints. I know we all got to go some day, so I won't have no complaints when I go. A lot of people didn't make it this long. God's been good to me. And I just hope I can help somebody else to let them know that if they're trying to make it the wrong way, it's not going to work. I know people who are trying to make it the wrong way. There's only one of three ways that it's going to end. They are either going to go crazy, they are going to jail, or they are going to get killed, if they live the life that I was living. So I just thank God for bringing me out of it, and maybe be able to help somebody else.

3-01:45:56

Furey:

Well, thank you. I appreciate you talking.

3-01:45:59

Robinson:

Well, I appreciate you, because I enjoyed your company, and I hope that something I said helps somebody.

[End of interview]