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**Goldie Byrd Ruffin**

**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  
Nadine Wilmot  
in 2006

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## **Discursive Table of Contents—Goldie Byrd Ruffin**

### Audiofile 1

Born and raised in Oakland, California—played the piano—father was a mechanic and her mother janitress who would sing classical music—had four sisters and one brother—her mother let her children choose what religion they can follow, some siblings went to a Catholic church while others went to a Protestant Church—Goldie like the Methodist Church—her mother's family believes she married beneath her—after the Prohibition her father began drinking and her mother separated from him—paternal grandmother was Native American from the Blackfoot tribe—rumored that they are related to Fredrick Douglas—communities were interdependent upon one another before the war—sent her mother and her oldest sister on a world tour as their mother had never been out of the state of California—life changed after the war, in that she didn't like the infiltration of African Americans coming—to her, they didn't know how to act or dress properly and the idea of trusting one another disappeared—family moved to Emeryville in a predominantly white neighborhood—all of the girls attended college except for her brother—received her B.A. from UCLA in Public Health—heard about Pearl Harbor on the radio—graduated from nursing school in 1950—white immigrants from Oakland came which increased killings and tensions between different races— relationship with her brother and her

### Audiofile 2

Went to nursing school then the opportunity to go to UCLA opened up—enjoyed life at UCLA, graduated at 24 and moved back to Oakland—Oakland Health Department was her first job and worked there for 5 years—had her first child at the age of 40—moved to North Oakland—Blank Panther Movement—worked as a school nurse in Richmond—regrets not going into law—her mother did not attend college only completed high school.

Interview 1: June 12, 2006

Begin Audio File 1: ruffin 1.mp3

01-00:01:02

Wilmot: So let's see. Good morning to you.

01-00:01:07

Ruffin: Good morning.

01-00:01:09

Wilmot: I'm wondering if we could just start off with where and when you were born?

01-00:01:13

Ruffin: I was born September the 13th, 1926, in Oakland, California.

01-00:01:19

Wilmot: And would you also say your name?

01-00:01:21

Ruffin: Goldie Olivia Byrd Ruffin. R-U-F-F-I-N.

01-00:01:26

Wilmot: So where is your family from?

01-00:01:32

Ruffin: Family's from here, San Francisco and Oakland.

01-00:01:37

Wilmot: And is your mother's family from the Bay Area originally?

01-00:01:40

Ruffin: Yes. I'm fourth generation.

01-00:01:44

Wilmot: Oh, okay. What's your mother's name?

01-00:01:46

Ruffin: Irma Byrd.[spells] Or Irmanz (sp?) Byrd.

01-00:01:53

Wilmot: And your father's name?

01-00:01:54

Ruffin: Harvey Dillard Byrd. [spells]

01-00:02:01

Wilmot: So Ruffin is your married name?

01-00:02:04

Ruffin: Ruffin is my married name, yes.

01-00:02:06

Wilmot: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

01-00:02:11

Ruffin: Well, I grew up in West Oakland. I was born on Henry Street in West Oakland. I moved to Fifth Street, 1570 Fifth Street, and I spent most of my childhood there until about age 15. Then we moved to North Oakland.

01-00:02:30

Wilmot: Do you remember that house on Henry Street?

01-00:02:33

Ruffin: Oh, very well, very well.

01-00:02:35

Wilmot: What was that Henry Street house like?

01-00:02:36

Ruffin: No, no. Not Henry. Oh, Henry Street, I don't remember. I was born there, and it was a two story. It was a flat, and it was upstairs. We lived upstairs. But I don't remember too much about it, because I was only—

01-00:02:52

Wilmot: An infant.

01-00:02:53

Ruffin: —about 18 months old when my mother moved to Fifth Street, and that was a glorious time we had. We had a wonderful time at Fifth Street.

01-00:03:01

Wilmot: Tell me about the Fifth Street house.

01-00:03:04

Ruffin: Well, let's see. There was—

01-00:03:05

Wilmot: It was Fifth Street and what?

01-00:03:07

Ruffin: —two bedrooms, and Mama had one bedroom and the six of us—well, six of us were in the other bedroom. Sometimes someone would sleep in the dining room, you know. It was a house of pleasure because we didn't have much money, and so we made all our recreation at the home and at the New Century Community Center, which was close by. That's another story in itself. And we—Mama, Friday night, played the piano, or I played the piano, and we would sing songs, religious as well as modern songs, and we had a wonderful time. Wonderful.

01-00:03:59

Wilmot: What kind of—sorry?

01-00:04:01

Ruffin: And we had a phonograph that we wound up, and we'd play Caruso records and all sorts of things like that. And we had a real good time.

01-00:04:14  
Wilmot: What kind of work did your parents do?

01-00:04:17  
Ruffin: Oh. Well my mother, I just—well, my father was a mechanic. A mechanic. He was quite a good mechanic, and my mother was—did what she did, you know, what she could. She worked as a janitress. She worked—well, she sang with Beth Eden Choir. Hold on. Cut, cut, cut. She sang with a choir. I can't remember the name though.

01-00:04:49  
Wilmot: That's fine.

01-00:04:51  
Ruffin: Well, anyway. And she would make an income that way. But she worked.

01-00:04:55  
Wilmot: So she was a singer. She was a professional singer.

01-00:04:57  
Ruffin: Mother had a beautiful contralto voice.

01-00:04:59  
Wilmot: Wow.

01-00:05:00  
Ruffin: Yes. She had beautiful—yeah. She had the [legionale](sp?), cantatas at school, you know? I mean at church, Cooper AME Zion Church, she was soloist there, and you know, a lot of things like that.

01-00:05:18  
Wilmot: So she was a vocalist. That was her training.

01-00:05:22  
Ruffin: No. Mother—no. She was—she was from a middle-class family, and music and everything was, you know, part of the family, and so she learned—her piano and her voice was part of her family tradition, and when she married, which my mother said—my grandmother felt she married beneath her, but she still could sing. She still could play the piano, but it just was a cultural thing, not a professional thing.

01-00:05:57  
Wilmot: Do you remember what kind of music she used to sing?

01-00:06:00  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. Classical.

01-00:06:01  
Wilmot: Yeah?

01-00:06:02  
Ruffin: Yeah. Strictly classical. I don't remember all the songs, but you know, it was all classical. We loved classical music.

01-00:06:10  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

01-00:06:11  
Ruffin: You know, we didn't know the difference. We just, you know, just liked music, all of us.

01-00:06:16  
Wilmot: So how many brothers and sisters were there?

01-00:06:19  
Ruffin: Well, we had five girls and one boy.

01-00:06:21  
Wilmot: And you're the youngest.

01-00:06:23  
Ruffin: I'm the youngest. Yeah.

01-00:06:24  
Wilmot: Okay, go ahead. Can you tell me the names of your brothers and sisters?

01-00:06:28  
Ruffin: Yes. My oldest sister is Mildred, then Nadine, then Dora, and then Elva, and then Harvey, and then myself, Goldie. The six of us.

01-00:06:44  
Wilmot: Did you ever—did your parents ever tell you kind of how you came to be named Goldie?

01-00:06:51  
Ruffin: A friend of mother's named Mrs. Dickerson didn't have any children and so when Mama was pregnant after having had five kids, she didn't mind what she named me, so I was born and Mrs. Dickerson was there for the birth, and she says, "Irma, you promised me. You promised me." And so I became Goldie.

01-00:07:22  
Wilmot: Hmm. I'm just going to play with the sound for a minute. [pause] It's fine. Hmm. Did any one of your brothers or sisters—your brother or sisters—did any one kind of become the singer like your mother? Was anyone else really talented in that way?

01-00:07:51  
Ruffin: Yes. Dora. Dora was talented, but she didn't—you know, she just sang. [laughter] We'd tell her to shut up.

01-00:07:57  
Wilmot: Uh-huh.

01-00:07:58

Ruffin:

But she sang all the time, you know. But she didn't go into it professionally, and none of us sang in the choir or anything like that. We went to church every Sunday and we listened to Mama and we sang with the chorus—with the congregation, but that's all.

01-00:08:16

Wilmot:

And this church, where was it located?

01-00:08:20

Ruffin:

It's Cooper AME Zion on Filbert and Sixteenth, I think. It's still there, so—that's on Filbert Street. And we all—well, three of us were Catholic and three Protestants, and the reason that came about—mother let us choose what religion we wanted to follow, so she took us as young children to her church, and then after about three or four—about five, I guess—then three of three—three sisters decided to become Catholic because their friends were Catholic, and then three of us stayed with Mama. I stayed with Mama because I was the youngest. I liked the Methodist church.

01-00:08:19

Wilmot:

Hmm. You had mentioned that your mother's mother felt that she had married beneath her. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

01-00:08:29

Ruffin:

Well, it's a long story, but it seems that Mama wanted to leave because she felt that her father was mean to her, and so Daddy came along, and she married him. You know, without her parents' approval, because he was just a mechanic, and you know, they didn't feel that was up to their standard. And so that's how she got married.

01-00:08:56

Wilmot:

Where was her family homestead in Oakland?

01-00:09:00

Ruffin:

Everywhere. [laughter] Everywhere. She lived so many places, I can't begin to describe them. Because Daddy was a brilliant mechanic. He really was very good. In fact, it was rumored by my mother that he dreamed—he dreamt of a self-starter because he was tired of cranking the car himself, so he put a self-starter on his car before it even came out. Just to show, you know, he had capabilities. And then Mother said he was fine until Prohibition started, and then he began to drink. He was fine up until that time and then he just drank, and she couldn't take it any more, so she just moved—moved off and I was born. You know, I was 18 months old, I think. She separated.

01-00:09:50

Wilmot:

And they broke up?

01-00:09:52

Ruffin: Mm-hmm. And the rest is history. But Daddy stayed just two blocks from us—three blocks from us, and I'd see him periodically. But he never came in the house, you know. So—.

01-00:10:09

Wilmot: And then your grandmother—your mother's family—where did they live in Oakland?

01-00:10:17

Ruffin: Well, my mother's mother lived in San Francisco at first, and they—my grandfather was considered as a porter with the Owl Drug Company for 26 years. But he did everything, he filled prescriptions, he did everything in there. And so Grandma was over there until 1906 when the earthquake and fire started, and they stayed there until they got their selves together, and then they moved to Berkeley—Folger Avenue.

01-00:10:55

Wilmot: And they became a Berkeley family.

01-00:10:58

Ruffin: What do you mean?

01-00:10:59

Wilmot: They became a Berkeley family as opposed to San Francisco or—

01-00:11:02

Ruffin: Well, yeah. Yeah, because my grandfather even changed his religion and went to a Baptist church, because he had been Methodist previously. I don't know why.

01-00:11:14

Wilmot: And your father's family—do you know where they were from in Oakland?

01-00:11:18

Ruffin: Daddy's—all I know of my—well, I know two sisters lived in Virginia of my father's, and then his mother was an Indian with long braids, and—

01-00:11:32

Wilmot: Do you know what tribe she was?

01-00:11:33

Ruffin: Yeah. Blackfoot. Blackfoot Indian. And that's all I know. I mean, I don't know his history as far as work or anything else.

01-00:11:44

Wilmot: Hmm. When you say “My family is from here since 1850—“

01-00:11:52

Ruffin: 1849.

01-00:11:53

Wilmot: —1849, is that your mother's side of the family or your father's?

01-00:11:56

Ruffin: My mother. Maternal.

01-00:11:58

Wilmot: Maternal.

01-00:11:59

Ruffin: Yeah. My grandmother—great grandmother—came from New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1849 around the Horn with a Quaker family, and she settled here. It is rumored—

01-00:12:17

Wilmot: What's her name?

01-00:12:19

Ruffin: I don't know. I don't remember. It is rumored that we are related to Frederick Douglass. He was a fifth or sixth cousin to my mother's cousin that came here. Anyway, he's supposed to be a cousin, and supposedly she got letters from him when he was going to Europe. He'd married a white woman, and they moved to Europe, and he said that this would be the last letter from him. But naturally, their letters and paraphernalia burned up in the earthquake and fire. Everything. They saved a little family Bible and a few things like that, but very little was saved.

01-00:13:07

Wilmot: Mm-hmm. So she came out with the Quaker family, found someone, married, had children. And that would be your grandmother who she had?

01-00:13:17

Ruffin: Yes.

01-00:13:18

Wilmot: Great grandmother.

01-00:13:19

Ruffin: Yeah. Great—my great grandmother had my grandmother, yes.

01-00:13:21

Wilmot: Okay. [crashing noise] I'm sorry for that noise.

01-00:13:25

Ruffin: That's all right.

01-00:13:26

Wilmot: That's my headphones making that noise. Wow. That's really impressive. That's a long history here.

01-00:13:34

Ruffin: Long history.

01-00:13:36

Wilmot: So you were a West Oakland family growing up—

01-00:13:37

Ruffin: Yes.

01-00:13:38

Wilmot: —on Fifth Street. What was that neighborhood like?

01-00:13:42

Ruffin: Mostly first generation Americans. We were—we and one other family were the only black families in the whole five or six block radius, and they were Portuguese, Italian, Mexican—you name it.

01-00:14:06

Wilmot: Who was the other black family?

01-00:14:08

Ruffin: Pansy Firse. She was a beautiful woman. I don't know what—her reputation was questionable before, but she lived next door to us, and she was real sweet. Loved her. Loved her. Pansy, P-A-N-S-Y, Firse, F-I-R-S-E—Firse.

01-00:14:30

Wilmot: So you grew up with having her very close to you.

01-00:14:32

Ruffin: Very close, and she would, you know—she would sort of be a mother hen to us. You know, she loved kids, and we—my Mama never let us stay there overnight, but she always looked after us. You know what I mean?

01-00:14:46

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

01-00:14:47

Ruffin: In case Mother had to go someplace or something. She looked after us.

01-00:14:52

Wilmot: And who were—tell me about your friendships—your early friendships when you were little.

01-00:14:56

Ruffin: Oh, God. All Caucasian. All Caucasian, and they were fun. I didn't realize that I was black, to tell you the truth. I'll tell you a story first. When Grandma was in San Francis—

01-00:15:12

Wilmot: I'd ask you to just watch when you do that. [referring to hand movements in vicinity of microphone]

01-00:15:15

Ruffin:

When Grandma was in San Francisco [laughter], a black woman came up to her—she's about five or six or something—and was so happy to see a black person, she embraced her, says, "Oh! Oh darling, it's good to see you," and she scared Mama to death. Mama ran home and told her mother that a black lady touched her. She didn't know—when I say we didn't know the difference, my mother—I mean, my family wasn't white. I mean, they were brown, naturally, but she didn't know the difference between white and black and all that business. We grew up that way. The kids that Mama took care of, they were white. You know what I mean? They stayed at—over—overnight, and you know, everything. They were just one family. We were just one happy family.

01-00:16:14

Wilmot:

Where'd you go to elementary school?

01-00:16:16

Ruffin:

Prescott—

01-00:16:18

Wilmot:

Prescott.

01-00:16:19

Ruffin:

—Elementary and Prescott Junior High, across the street. Loved every minute. And I still remember my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. [Keir] [sp?]. She was wonderful. I mean, you know, just—I—I had to stay in kindergarten for two years, not because I was dumb, but because I was not the right age. I was too young to go on, so the second year I ran the kindergarten. I put the phonograph records on. I served the graham crackers and milk and everything. It was just great. I loved it. That's why I remember Mrs. Keir, I guess. She was so sweet, and she wore a nurse's outfit as her—as her, well, I don't know, I guess that's the way they dressed. But she wore a nurse's outfit.

01-00:17:14

Wilmot:

When you say Fifth Street, what was the cross street of Fifth Street?

01-00:17:18

Ruffin:

Campbell and Willow. Fifth Street ran this way and Campbell and Willow ran that way.

01-00:17:20

Wilmot:

Okay.

01-00:17:25

Ruffin:

Mm-hmm.

01-00:17:29

Wilmot:

Were there any—do you recall any other black families who were there before the war in Oakland?

01-00:17:40

Ruffin:

Let's see. Mrs.—yeah, there was one other. Well, yeah. There was more than one. I don't remember their names though. But I know they were—they came in after the war. But the reason we moved, because I did—I—there's so many stories about West Oakland, but—

01-00:18:08

Wilmot:

I'd love to hear them.

01-00:18:10

Ruffin:

[laughs] All of them?

01-00:18:11

Wilmot:

Mm-hmm.

01-00:18:12

Ruffin:

No. Well, where we lived—Fifth Street. 1670 Fifth Street is the site where the post office is now—and our house and the backyard was about 20 feet, and then there was a lot right behind our house that was the same size as our house, 20 feet. And we would climb the fence and go over to Seventh Street. In other words, we had access to Seventh Street from our house, like, just jumping two fences. And we spent many, many fine moments there. I remember on Saturday night they used to have—this is the rough side of West Oakland. They used to have a bar. And then they had—well, they have a big time drinking and smoking and all that stuff. Mama warned us don't go near the bar, you know, but we always stood about a block away and watched because Saturday night there were—they would cut—you know, expose their viscera—somebody would, and that was big stuff, because the ambulance would come and take them to the doctor.

01-00:19:27

Wilmot:

They would fight?

01-00:19:28

Ruffin:

Yeah. Fight. Big fight. We were in the background, but we'd watch. Boy.

01-00:19:33

Wilmot:

And these were these Italians and Portuguese?

01-00:19:35

Ruffin:

No, no, no. These were blacks. I don't know where they came from but—they were mixed, you know, but mostly black. That was when Slim Jenkins was there. Slim Jenkins had every famous person—every famous black person that came to Oakland went to Slim Jenkins, and it was quite famous. That's another story in itself. And Sil's [sp?] Restaurant. [Sil's] is another place where all the blacks went. My sister Elva got his autograph when he was really in prime—you know, prime Joe Lewis. It was just fun. I mean, I don't regret one minute of having been poor and having been in West Oakland. I loved it. I loved it. It was just beautiful.

I mean, I'm glad—I knew we had to move. Mama, you know, had five girls and one boy, and she knew we had to move because it got so rough, you know? And then the people started coming in, and I remember I was commenting about all the blacks and how ignorant they were and blah, blah, blah, and these and those and that, and Mama said, "Let me tell you something, Goldie." She says, "You don't own Oakland." And that shut me up for a while, you know, but I really resented the idea of them coming—people coming into Oakland, especially black people. Call me prejudiced, but I did.

01-00:21:18  
Wilmot:

Mm-hmm. That's just where you were.

01-00:21:19  
Ruffin:

Yeah.

01-00:21:20  
Wilmot:

I have a question, which is were Portuguese and Italians considered white people or were they kind of ethnic others or...

01-00:21:28  
Ruffin:

Eh, they were considered white, but they didn't act white—I mean, those that lived around us, because we were interdependent on each other. I mean, we watched their kids. They watched our kids. We cooked for them. They cooked for us. You know? It was just a—every once in a while, you know, a word would be used that—a bad word, you know, or something. My brother would come home, you know, in a big fight. But it was rare. It was rare. It was just one family. That's all. And even some of the kids that I grew up with. I mean, I saw them 20 years later. It was just like family again. You know, they're just so loving.

01-00:22:17  
Wilmot:

And your social life when you got into high school at University High, which became—I believe it became Merritt Community College at one point—

01-00:22:28  
Ruffin:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

01-00:22:30  
Wilmot:

So that—you would've been going to high school in the wartime. Is that right?

01-00:22:38  
Ruffin:

Yeah. About. Well maybe in—yeah.

01-00:22:44  
Wilmot:

So who did you go to school with? Was this an integrated school?

01-00:22:49  
Ruffin:

Uni was a private school—a private girls' school until about five years before I got in there. My oldest sister was the first one—first group of children that integrated that made it a public school.

01-00:23:09

Wilmot: Okay.

01-00:23:10

Ruffin: Okay. I don't know. What did you ask me? I forgot.

01-00:23:15

Wilmot: I asked you who went to school. Was it integrated as a—?

01-00:23:18

Ruffin: It was integrated, but definitely, that was the first real sign of segregation that I encountered. You know, the kids that went to that school before it became public school still went there. Their chauffeurs didn't bring them any more, but they came anyway. And then they—

01-00:23:45

Wilmot: They had chauffeurs?

01-00:23:46

Ruffin: Oh, yes. It was a real exclusive private school.

01-00:23:49

Wilmot: Where were they from? Where did they live?

01-00:23:51

Ruffin: Piedmont and around. Yeah. But Uni was—and anyway. Anyway, it was academic when I was there, and there were few blacks. There were, you know, a handful of blacks, and mostly white, and so it was—and the kids that I went with, they were from North Oakland and Berkeley and et cetera, and they were high achievers, you know. So. But it was different. I mean, it was different. I had to have a whole new philosophy. I still wasn't prejudiced, but I mean, it was definitely—you felt that you were another—the other person—and others, you know?

01-00:24:42

Wilmot: How were you—how did you—how were you made to feel that or how did you feel that?

01-00:24:47

Ruffin: Just the attitude of teachers and students, and I happened to be a very good student, so you know, I was tolerated, let's say, and so—but the attempt at integration was not there—I mean, with the white kids, you know. They were still upper-upper-middle-class, but I don't know. The black kids just seem to segregate themselves, and the white kids segregated themselves, and that's the way it was.

01-00:25:28

Wilmot: At that time, then, how did—like, for example, your social life and dating, what did that look like?

01-00:25:38

Ruffin: Very little. I didn't date, I mean, too much. You know, I had crushes, but I didn't date, you know. You know. And then when senior prom came, I went to the senior prom with my girlfriend's brother. You know, there's nothing there.

01-00:25:59

Wilmot: Who were your friends? Who were your dear friends during that time?

01-00:26:03

Ruffin: Well, let's see. [Keri Adams](sp?) was one, and [Viola Streed](sp?) was another, and they were from North Oakland, and they were very good friends.

01-00:26:16

Wilmot: Where—

01-00:26:17

Ruffin: And Virginia, too.

01-00:26:18

Wilmot: Virginia. And where were their families from?

01-00:26:20

Ruffin: They were from North Oakland and Berkeley.

01-00:26:23

Wilmot: And they'd been before the war?

01-00:26:24

Ruffin: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I was the only one from West Oakland though. [laughs] And so, yeah. We had fun though.

01-00:26:39

Wilmot: Well what kind of fun did you have? What did you do?

01-00:26:45

Ruffin: Well, I mean, you know, we participated in the school activities, you know. We knew where we shouldn't go, but we went anyway. And it was just fun. I mean, the sports. You know, we went out for sports, and singing and—I mean, everybody sang. You know, it was just a lot of fun.

01-00:27:09

Wilmot: Did you ever go to San Francisco as a group or hop on the train and go over there?

01-00:27:13

Ruffin: Oh, no, San Francisco was like going to the moon to me. It was only the—let's see, '39, the bridge was built. Let's see. Well, we didn't have a car, you know, and you could go on the boat or something like that, but you know, it was special, very special, to go to San Francisco. So.

01-00:27:36

Wilmot: Did you ever go away to the country, like up north or...

01-00:27:41

Ruffin:

Well, yeah, the first time I saw snow, I was 14, and a friend of my sister's took us to Truckee to see snow. Oh, it was just marvelous! I have a picture of it, and we were—real snow, you know. We'd lived here all our life and never saw snow. My mother had never seen snow.

Oh, about my mother. Mama had never been out of the state of California, and so after we—well, we were still home, but we were working and doing pretty well. We sent her on a world trip—she and my oldest sister, Nadine, went on a world tour. And we didn't know if she was going to like it or not because, you know, she'd never been out of the state, she'd never been on an airplane. And she loved it! [laughs] She loved every minute of it. Yeah. Yeah. We loved our mother very much.

01-00:28:45

Wilmot:

What was her personality like? What type of person was she?

01-00:28:49

Ruffin:

Mama was non-combative. She'd talk to us about what we did, but Mama could just look at us—just look. Just look. And we moved. Yet—but I did remember one spanking that I got. That's because I stayed over this girl's house, stayed later than I should, and then my mother was called on the phone and she told me to come home, and I didn't come home. I wanted to stay. The reason that she objected was that, you know, there was so much tuberculosis and et cetera going around, she was afraid that one of us would contract it, you know, by staying overnight. But she didn't explain all that to us. [laughs] But anyway, she came and got me, which was about eighteen, twenty blocks away, she had to walk. And I got spanked all the way home. I never did that again.

But my mother was loving, caring. I can't explain how much we loved her, because she was always giving, you know, of herself.

01-00:30:09

Wilmot:

Even with six kids.

01-00:30:11

Ruffin:

Just always, always.

01-00:30:16

Wilmot:

What about—let's see. We already talked a little bit about dating. I want to just ask you a little bit about, for example, Betty Reid's family, Betty Reid Soskin's family? Did you know her in that amount of time?

01-00:30:37

Ruffin:

No. I didn't. They were older than I, but I knew where the Reid Record Shop was, and everybody went there, you know, to get records and have fun—well, get records mostly—and you met a lot of people there, but I didn't know them personally, no. My sister did, but I didn't.

01-00:30:58

Wilmot: Were there any other places during high school that you used to go that everyone used to go?

01-00:31:01

Ruffin: And hang out.

01-00:31:02

Wilmot: Did you ever go to Lake Merritt ? Was Lake Merritt a destination at that time?

01-00:31:06

Ruffin: No.

01-00:31:07

Wilmot: Movie theaters or—?

01-00:31:10

Ruffin: Well, I'd go to the Paramount Theater and the Orpheum Theater occasionally, when I had the money, and I saw Judy Garland there, you know, when she was a star and things like that. But mostly our recreation centered around the New Century Community Center, which was a center where they had a live-in director, Mrs. Iverson. I'll never forget her, either. She was wonderful. Her name was Hopkins first, and then she married Iverson, but they were both—well, she was a resident director. Then when he married her, he became a resident director. They had art. They had music. They had sports, softball, racquetball, war ball—you know, where they throw the ball straight at you. And then in summer we went to camp, two weeks of camp, and Mama had six of us, and it was kind of expensive, but you know, they'd pay for three, and she'd pay for two, and so everything was busy all the time at the park.

01-00:32:26

Wilmot: Where was this?

01-00:32:28

Ruffin: New Century Community Center was just on Peralta and Third, below our house.

01-00:32:37

Wilmot: So it was right there.

01-00:32:39

Ruffin: Right where the post office is—tore down that beautiful center.

01-00:32:44

Wilmot: And were the Iversons African-American?

01-00:32:49

Ruffin: No. No. No. She's buried right at Mountain View. But no, they were Caucasians, but they were just like parents to us. I mean, they were loving and giving and everything. And strict, but, you know, still just great. I sound like I just loved my childhood, but I did.

01-00:33:12

Wilmot: I'm glad.

01-00:33:13

Ruffin: I did. I did. I loved it. I loved it.

01-00:33:16

Wilmot: That's good to hear. Can you talk to me—one of the things, and this is one last question in this area, which is one of the things I've heard from people who have been here, you know, since before the war—from African-Americans who lived here before the war, about how there was a kind of closeness between young white and black people that changed as adolescence came into the picture, and people felt that there was a concern around interracial dating.

01-00:33:43

Ruffin: Well.

01-00:33:45

Wilmot: Did you experience that at all?

01-00:33:46

Ruffin: Well, yes. Because when we left the ninth grade and went to high school, most of us just went all different ways, so naturally, there was not the camaraderie that we'd had in the ninth grade—I mean, up to the ninth. I went through from kindergarten through the ninth grade with the same group of 30 kids. Same group. We were just—well—very close. But I was the only one of the total group that went to Uni, so I didn't see the kids.

01-00:34:20

Wilmot: Where did they all go?

01-00:34:21

Ruffin: [Oakland] Tech and McClymonds, but mostly Tech. But I went to Uni because Nadine went to Uni and it was academic, and so I went. But I liked it. You know. But I never saw them any more after that. That's the reason. Well, I guess other reasons, too, but then we had our 20-year reunion, and that was like oh—like old home week, like your family was coming back together again, all the kids.

01-00:34:55

Wilmot: What did you learn from your mother about being a woman? It's a hard question.

01-00:35:01

Ruffin: Let's see. Well, Mama, first of all, taught us that you don't take anything from a man. That you set your standards very high. And keep your dress down.

And so we did, most of us. [laughs] No, we did. Well, I guess most of us.

01-00:35:31

Wilmot:

And then what's the other thing? I wanted to ask kind of about learning about being beautiful and that kind of power as a woman.

01-00:35:44

Ruffin:

No, Mama always, even when we were dirt poor, Mama always was in a stiff, clean apron, a clean dress, and her hair is fixed, and her, you know, makeup is right. Just by example, we—at least I did—everybody!—well, no—most of us—at least I emulated my mother, whatever she—. And she never talked about being beautiful or, you know, being glamorous and all that. No. She didn't. She didn't. She just showed us. She was very pretty, and so she showed us by example. And so she'd have a hat on. She just wore any kind of hat, she looked beautiful, you know. And so I say she was our inspiration. And movie stars, too, for me. Oh, boy. You know, real hot, you know, you fix this and then fix that and then do your eyebrows and all that.

01-00:36:55

Wilmot:

Who were the big movie stars when you were in high school?

01-00:36:58

Ruffin:

Gee, I don't remember now. Well, Bette Davis. She was ugly, but she was good.

01-00:37:03

Wilmot:

Uh-huh. [laughs]

01-00:37:05

Ruffin:

Let's see. Who else? Oh, Rita Hayworth. Oh, I don't know who else, but anyway.

01-00:37:22

Wilmot:

How did the war change your life?

01-00:37:27

Ruffin:

[pause] It changed my life in the sense that we moved from where we were, in a happy, quiet—a quiet, you know, in a sense—but anyway, it moved our life from there to a more urban setting, and more you're aware of people, you know. You—I don't know how to say it. The infiltration of African-Americans was so great. I'd never seen that many African-Americans in my life. And so you know, it was all right, but it was just strange to me, and so it changed my life in that sense. I wanted to get away, you know, from that type of African-American. Type meaning that they were ignorant—and I'm using generalizations because that wasn't all of them—and they were boisterous and didn't know how to talk and didn't know how to act I thought. And even though we were poor as dirt, we didn't act like that, and so it changed my life in that sense, and then I moved to North Oakland and you got to a point where you couldn't trust your neighbor. You know, a lot of things like that. I mean, I don't know.

01-00:38:59  
Wilmot: Moving to North Oakland, was that while you were in high school that your family moved or was that after?

01-00:39:04  
Ruffin: I think it was after. I think.

01-00:39:09  
Wilmot: Where did you move?

01-00:39:10  
Ruffin: We moved on Herzog Street, 59th and Herzog.

01-00:39:15  
Wilmot: What's now called Emeryville.

01-00:39:17  
Ruffin: Yes. Emeryville.

01-00:39:19  
Wilmot: Yes.

01-00:39:20  
Ruffin: You know, I don't think so, because it's on the other side of—here's San Pablo, and then this side is Emeryville and this side is Oakland.

01-00:39:28  
Wilmot: So it was right by Downs Memorial Church?

01-00:39:30  
Ruffin: Yes. Yes. Near about three blocks from Downs Memorial Church.

01-00:39:37  
Wilmot: And what was that neighborhood like? Why did you move there? Why the move?

01-00:39:41  
Ruffin: Well, it was a good buy. It was a good—it was two bedroom.

01-00:39:46  
Wilmot: Were you renting before?

01-00:39:46  
Ruffin: Huh?

01-00:39:47  
Wilmot: Were you renting before or did you go get—?

01-00:39:48  
Ruffin: Oh, yeah. Rent. Everything was rent.

01-00:39:50  
Wilmot: So this was the first house you owned?

01-00:39:51

Ruffin: Yes. The first house—

01-00:39:52

Wilmot: Your family owned?

01-00:39:52

Ruffin: —we owned, and it was—the neighborhood was all white. I mean, there was—our neighbor, Mrs—oh, what's her name? I can't think of her name. I hated her—but she, you know, she didn't think we were good enough to be in the area, but, you know, and she went around with her nose up in the air, and so we went around with our nose up in the air, and so—but her husband was wonderful. He was wonderful. And pretty soon, it got to a point where she depended on us for everything, you know. The Byrds—everything she wanted us to help her with it. I mean, she—in other words—

01-00:40:36

Wilmot: Where was she from?

01-00:40:37

Ruffin: Huh?

01-00:40:37

Wilmot: Where was she from?

01-00:40:39

Ruffin: Here. I guess. I don't know where she was from, to tell you the truth. Her husband was Jewish, but I don't know whether—she wasn't, though. You know. Anyway. It was interesting. It was nice. It was lovely. The neighbors were good. You know, a neighborhood like in Oakland—in West Oakland, but it was nice. It was nice.

01-00:41:02

Wilmot: What had changed in your family that you were able to own rather than rent a home? Was it because the older children were now working or what happened?

01-00:41:08

Ruffin: Oh, yeah. Nadine was working, and everybody was. My brother was in the army, and I was just finishing school, so we had—you know.

01-00:41:22

Wilmot: Were you thinking about college? Was that something that was on your horizon?

01-00:41:27

Ruffin: Was I? Oh, yes. From the word go, you know, all of us. It was just understood that we would go to college, you know, and they used to say—they'd ask me in high school where I was going to school, and I'd say, "Well, I'm going to college." "We don't even have, you know, paper in your shoes. How are you going to go to college?" "I don't know, but I'm going!" You know. And so we

all went. Well, everybody except my brother. He drove a truck and now—now in his late, late years, he wishes he had gone to school.

01-00:42:02

Wilmot: Is he still here in Oakland?

01-00:42:03

Ruffin: Oh, yeah. He lives on 93rd Avenue. But all of us went, and my older sister—

01-00:42:10

Wilmot: So all the girls went?

01-00:42:12

Ruffin: Yes. My older sister, she went, but she had some very abusive husbands. Two of them were very abusive, and so she—she had a rough time. But anyhow, when she finally got out of that situation, went back to college, and was doing well, she just—she was straight A student, and she was at Kaiser Hospital, and she had an aneurism and she died.

01-00:42:38

Wilmot: I'm sorry to hear that.

01-00:42:40

Ruffin: Yes. One of those things.

01-00:42:43

Wilmot: And were you working at all in high school? When was your first job?

01-00:42:49

Ruffin: Oh, kindergarten. No, I worked when I was on Fifth Street. Miss Moore, you know, the lady I said of ill repute, she would bring her clothes, her negligees and that sort of thing, and I would iron these pretty things. I'd go to the store for her and things like that. But I never went in the house. Right at the steps, I'd exchange goodies. I worked as a recreation director for the Oakland Recreation Department. I worked as a typist for the Oakland Army Base. I worked as a typist there.

01-00:43:37

Wilmot: This was in high school?

01-00:43:38

Ruffin: Yes.

01-00:43:40

Wilmot: Oh.

01-00:43:41

Ruffin: And then I worked at Boyle Manufacturing Company in Alameda riveting—riveting cans or something. I don't know—where you put the handles on. I had so many jobs.

01-00:43:53  
Wilmot: This is all during high school?

01-00:43:55  
Ruffin: Well, yeah. Yes. And then college I worked too, recreational department.

01-00:44:05  
Wilmot: How did you decide to go to UCLA?

01-00:44:08  
Ruffin: Well, after I finished—I finished at San Francisco State. I finished.

01-00:44:13  
Wilmot: Okay, so you went to finish high school, and then you went to San Francisco State for—

01-00:44:18  
Ruffin: Four years.

01-00:44:20  
Wilmot: So you got your B.A. from SF State?

01-00:44:21  
Ruffin: Wait a minute. No. I went to City College first—City College. Then I got my A.A. Then I went to State and got my A.B. in liberal arts, and then I got a scholarship from the state and I—so they gave me a scholarship to UCLA, and I got my bachelor of science in public health. And so—

01-00:44:54  
Wilmot: So you had many years of college education?

01-00:45:00  
Ruffin: Many, many, many years, I assure you. I've got a whole stack of things. Yeah.

01-00:45:11  
Wilmot: Do you remember—I was going to spend some more time with the war before we move on to talk about college.

01-00:45:16  
Ruffin: Okay.

01-00:45:17  
Wilmot: Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

01-00:45:21  
Ruffin: Mm-hmm. I heard it on the radio. Yeah. It was very, very traumatic. We just—we assumed that they were coming over here, and every time you saw a plane, you know, you'd think it was Japanese kamikaze or something. Yeah. It was very traumatic, and we were glued to the radio listening to what was happening at Pearl Harbor. Yeah. Yeah. I didn't have any friends or acquaintances there, but I remember very brilliantly Dory Miller, the black

mess boy, who became a gunner and shot down three or four planes. He was quite a hero to us then.

01-00:46:08

Wilmot: He was at your high school with you?

01-00:46:09

Ruffin: No, no, no. He was on television.

01-00:46:11

Wilmot: Oh, oh. Sorry.

01-00:46:12

Ruffin: Dory Miller. He was on the ship and he saved—

01-00:46:17

Wilmot: Okay. He was famous.

01-00:46:18

Ruffin: Yeah. Famous. Yeah.

01-00:46:20

Wilmot: What did you know of the internment of the Japanese at that time?

01-00:46:27

Ruffin: Well, a lot of my friends, you know, went to the internment camp. [Akeiko Iriki](sp?)—she's still very good friends. She lives in Berkeley on Blake Street. She went and her family had to just suddenly move—you know, give up their store. They had a store on 14th and Peralta. They had to give up their store. They had to give up their house, and they had to move. And it was very, very traumatic—very traumatic. But you know, you hardly had time to say goodbye. They just left. You know.

01-00:47:07

Wilmot: Did you have any other friends who were interned?

01-00:47:09

Ruffin: Yes. [Saburo Yokizowa](sp?)—oh, a lot of them. I can't think of all their names now, but I remember about five or six at least.

01-00:47:24

Wilmot: Was there a sense that this was okay or was there a sense that this was wrong?

01-00:47:28

Ruffin: Oh, no. We thought it was wrong. We thought it was wrong and you know, you'd hear people making excuses for it, but I still thought it was wrong. And they say, "Well, how can you tell?" You know, "You can't tell who's Japanese." And I said, "You can't tell anyway, you know?" I mean, between Chinese and Japanese and Korean and all that business, why pick them? You know. But at any rate—and to no avail. But they—I remember.

- 01-00:47:56  
Wilmot: Do you remember when they came and returned from the camps?
- 01-00:48:00  
Ruffin: They what?
- 01-00:48:01  
Wilmot: Did you remember when they returned from the camps after...?
- 01-00:48:02  
Ruffin: No. I don't. I don't remember. I don't know where I was, but I don't remember.
- 01-00:48:08  
Wilmot: And the property. Do you remember what happened to people's property?
- 01-00:48:12  
Ruffin: It was just gone up—just left. They didn't have time hardly to sell it. You know, they either gave it away or to their friends to trust—you know, “Here, take my property. I trust you.” Well, you know, that was a big mistake, and a lot of them just abandoned their residence and everything else. It was really bad, very bad, and we felt bad about it, but there was nothing we could do.
- 01-00:48:51  
Wilmot: Did you know of what was happening in Europe with the Holocaust and the Germans and the Nazis?
- 01-00:48:58  
Ruffin: Oh, yeah. That, that, that.
- 01-00:48:59  
Wilmot: Did you hear anything about that at the time, or at the time was it kind of mysterious or secret?
- 01-00:49:03  
Ruffin: Well, we just heard of them burning up all of these Jewish people, and we couldn't understand it. You know, it didn't make sense to me. Why would you—why would they do that? And then I saw Hitler, you know, on television and etcetera. I just thought he was a crazy man. You know, why didn't they do something about it? But that's all. I mean, I didn't—. You know, I just felt helpless. You know? I mean, nothing I could do.
- 01-00:49:35  
Wilmot: And then also lastly when the bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, do you remember that happening?
- 01-00:49:43  
Ruffin: I thought that was terrible.
- 01-00:49:44  
Wilmot: At the time did you think it was terrible?

01-00:49:46

Ruffin:

Oh, I thought it was terrible. Terrible. But then on the other hand, I thought of all the thousands of GIs that were being killed and murdered—I mean, killed. Both sides were killing each other. And I thought, well, maybe there was nothing else they could do. That was my conclusion, but I did feel bad about it.

01-00:50:06

Wilmot:

But did you know the extent of what was happening there at that time?

01-00:50:09

Ruffin:

No. No. No. No. I just knew they were bombing and killing thousands of people with one bomb and all that, you know. And then you'd see the pictures on, you know, TV, and all of the burns and it was just horrible, you know. I was just helpless again. You know, I was one person, and I could only say how sorry I was, but what could you do?

01-00:50:40

Wilmot:

So tell me a little bit more about wartime in the Bay Area. Was your family—did you have rations? Rationing stamps?

01-00:50:50

Ruffin:

Oh, yes. Yes. I remember that. Yes. You'd have a red one for meat and a something else—I don't know, but I remember that when we were very—had to be very careful with the stamps, you know, in order to eat properly—to eat. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Just rationing. And stockings, you know, when they had the silk stockings. Well, I didn't wear them then. My older sisters did, and we had to get stamps for that and, you know, we would be exchanging stamps with other people. You know, it was really interesting.

01-00:51:31

Wilmot:

Did you travel to Richmond at all? Was Richmond part of your world?

01-00:51:36

Ruffin:

No, not really. Richmond was a swamp. You know, when we—mother told us about Richmond. I mean, Richmond was nothing. It was just swamp and sort of ended right at the line, but Richmond was nonexistent practically.

01-00:51:56

Wilmot:

Did that neighborhood in North Oakland on Herzog—did that change while you were there? Did it become less of a white neighborhood, or was it always white while you were there?

01-00:52:04

Ruffin:

I think it always stayed white. Yeah. It stayed white, because of most of the people own their own homes, and there was no invasion, and so they kept—you know. It pretty much stayed the same.

01-00:52:21

Wilmot:

Mm-hmm. During the war, what kind of work did you do?

01-00:52:31  
Ruffin: During the war? I wasn't—well, I was in nursing school. I was in nursing school for three years, you know? See I graduated in '50.

01-00:52:44  
Wilmot: That was after the war. Okay.

01-00:52:45  
Ruffin: Yes, after the war.

01-00:52:46  
Wilmot: So during the war you were still a young person. Now, you were—

01-00:52:49  
Ruffin: Yes, I was—

01-00:52:51  
Wilmot: —20. You were about 20.

01-00:52:52  
Ruffin: Yes.

01-00:52:53  
Wilmot: You were about 20 years old. So you were just working some during high school—probably that work you told me about.

01-00:52:57  
Ruffin: Yeah. I just, you know, just worked—mostly summers when I could work, and then I'd save my money for fall.

01-00:53:10  
Wilmot: And was there any kind of social life for you or your sisters around A, the military presence, or B, was there a social life around the new migrants who would come?

01-00:53:22  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. We did. I did. I—ooh, boy, they'd have the USO dances and oh, that was fun, you know? And go to Capitola and all over. Yeah, yeah.

01-00:53:38  
Wilmot: And so this was when you were in late high school probably—

01-00:53:40  
Ruffin: Yes.

01-00:53:41  
Wilmot: —and you were just going. And you would kind of meet soldiers and dance.

01-00:53:43  
Ruffin: Yeah.

01-00:53:46  
Wilmot: What kind of music was playing then? Do you remember?

01-00:53:48

Ruffin: Boogie woogie, I guess.

01-00:53:50

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

01-00:53:51

Ruffin: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then there were two groups of girls that used to go. There were the nice girls—aah—and then there were those other girls, you know, and the other girls would go for, you know, whatever, but we were really there to dance, you know. And I met some nice fellows, but nothing, you know, lasting—navy. Let's see. Donald—yes. Donald. And a few things. I don't know. I was—my brother told us—you know, he was in the service then—"Don't you ever become a whack," you know, that's a war woman. "Don't become a whack." You know, that was the female soldier. And for whatever reason, they were all supposed to be—as far as he was concerned, they were all prostitutes. That was my brother's—"Don't you ever become a whack. I won't speak to you again." And so this USO thing, my brother was, you know, very cautious about that, too. I guess because he was such a devil himself, you know, but he didn't approve too much of that, you know. Unless I, you know, see him or something like that.

01-00:55:19

Wilmot: It's hard to be one brother with five girls.

01-00:55:21

Ruffin: Oh, yeah. We—

01-00:55:22

Wilmot: With four girls.

01-00:55:23

Ruffin: Everybody thought he would be all effeminate. Ha, ha, ha. Just the opposite.

01-00:55:27

Wilmot: So you mean he'd always be the one who's trying to guard all the—

01-00:55:35

Ruffin: No, because my four older sisters, they bossed him. They ruled him, and I was the only one that he could—

01-00:55:43

Wilmot: Boss.

01-00:55:44

Ruffin: —bother. And I got the scars to prove it. See that scar?

01-00:55:50

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

01-00:55:51  
Ruffin: He did that to me when I was a child.

01-00:55:58  
Wilmot: Let me just try to move this down so I can see it. Oh. Wow. I see that.

01-00:56:07  
Ruffin: Yep.

01-00:56:09  
Wilmot: Yep.

01-00:56:10  
Ruffin: Because he was jealous of me. I was—you know, had been mother's pride and joy until I came along, and then—well, anyway. But I still love my brother. But I bore the brunt of his disgruntled self. Hmm.

01-00:56:29  
Wilmot: Hmm. So let's move over to—you mentioned that, you know, there was all these—did your social life expand? Like, did you become friends with young people who had just moved from the South? Young African-Americans who had moved from the South? Or white people? Just new people to the Bay Area?

01-00:56:57  
Ruffin: Frankly, no. I don't know. I don't know. I am the kind of person—I didn't date. I didn't date a lot. I didn't date at all, hardly at all. I mean, I was friendly, and I had fun with the kid, but I didn't date. I didn't. I don't know. I just didn't. And usually if I started going with this kid, Oscar—I went with him for six years. You know, I—I—however I just didn't. I didn't date. My sisters didn't date either. Dora did, but I didn't.

01-00:57:36  
Wilmot: Okay. But was there—outside of dating, but were you friends with people who came from the South—the migrants?

01-00:57:49  
Ruffin: I don't know, because the people that I knew that came to our house and everything else were people that had been here. We just grew up together, and so they still came—continued to come, but the new people, I don't remember. I really don't.

01-00:58:06  
Wilmot: And you—

01-00:58:08  
Ruffin: The new people, I mean.

01-00:58:11  
Wilmot: The new people.

- 01-00:58:11  
Ruffin: The immigrants from the South.
- 01-00:58:12  
Wilmot: And you mentioned that the boisterous behavior of the black people from the South, but were the white people from like Oklahoma and Arkansas, were they—?
- 01-00:58:29  
Ruffin: Poor—my brother says I shouldn't use this word. No. They were poor whites. They carried their culture with them.
- 01-00:58:37  
Wilmot: And what did that culture look like?
- 01-00:58:40  
Ruffin: Oh, just like—just like—well, slavery, you know, and the N word and all that sort of thing—
- 01-00:58:48  
Wilmot: So they brought their racism?
- 01-00:58:49  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. Their racism. Mm-hmm. Yes.
- 01-00:58:54  
Wilmot: So did that make for increased kind of tensions?
- 01-00:58:57  
Ruffin: Yes. Yes.
- 01-00:58:57  
Wilmot: Did you witness that around you?
- 01-00:58:59  
Ruffin: Well, not us so much, but there was a lot of that, a lot of that. And that's when the killings started and you know—
- 01-00:59:07  
Wilmot: Killings?
- 01-00:59:08  
Ruffin: You know, they—well, they'd shoot them. You know, and they'd kill them or they'd beat up or whatever.
- 01-00:59:16  
Wilmot: Who would they beat up, and who's they?
- 01-00:59:18  
Ruffin: Well, black—if you get a poor white, you know what I mean, let's just say from Oklahoma, and he addressed a black person as an N word, and he was likely to get a fistful of knuckles, you know?

But I don't know. You know, it was funny, because the whites from Oklahoma or the South, they were in a melting pot. They were here, and before they had been like this, and they were here now. They all worked in the shipyards. They all did the same job, so they were integrated, whether they liked it or not. You know, if you're going to work, you're integrated. So it was interesting. It was a mix. It was a mix. And some of them integrated well, just beautifully—and wondered what they had been missing all these years, and others still stuck to their ways.

01-01:00:14

Wilmot: What killings did you hear? Were these killings of black people or white people? Who—

01-01:00:18

Ruffin: Everybody.

01-01:00:20

Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:00:21

Ruffin: I—you know, you never—well, rarely you heard of a killing or anything like that in Oakland, but you heard it when they mixed—when so many people came and so many different people, different varieties of people.

01-01:00:38

Wilmot: Who was Oscar?

01-01:00:40

Ruffin: Oscar?

01-01:00:41

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

01-01:00:42

Ruffin: Oh, he was my boyfriend.

01-01:00:42

Wilmot: Mm-hmm. For six years?

01-01:00:43

Ruffin: For six years. Yes.

01-01:00:45

Wilmot: Where was he from?

01-01:00:46

Ruffin: Here. Berkeley. You know. He was crazy though. [laughs] Crazy. I don't know why, but anyway. He's nuts. [laughs]

01-01:01:00

Wilmot: Do you still know him?

01-01:01:01

Ruffin: No, he died. He died about a year or two ago. Just to show you—well, no. No. But he's dead anyway. He's dead. My husband is dead, too—Walter. He was an architect. He's from—well, originally from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, but he spent most of his time in Washington State with his uncle. And he married. He had two kids—two girls—and divorced, and then they came here, and that's when I met him. I was friends with his sister, and he was a good guy—good guy. So.

01-01:01:44

Wilmot: Well, let's stop for a minute while I change our recording media.

End Audio File 1 Begin Audio File 2: ruffin 2.mp3

[While looking at a family album.]

02-00:00:06

Wilmot: So maybe we should start here with these birth certificates of William Wilson Vaughan.

02-00:00:15

Ruffin: It's his birth or his death certificate?

02-00:00:19

Wilmot: That is a death certificate.

02-00:00:22

Ruffin: It's a death certificate on my grandmother.

02-00:00:25

Wilmot: Melinda.

02-00:00:26

Ruffin: Melinda. And then the Anderson Vaughans.

02-00:00:34

Wilmot: And that was in 1861 when she died.

02-00:00:40

Ruffin: 1876 was when she was born.

02-00:00:47

Wilmot: She died in 19—

02-00:00:49

Ruffin: She died in—

02-00:00:50

Wilmot: —29. He died in 1920, so she outlived him by a little bit, and you actually knew her very briefly.

02-00:01:01  
Ruffin: What?

02-00:01:02  
Wilmot: Did you know Melinda briefly?

02-00:01:03  
Ruffin: It was three years. I still remember her just being in the house by that door, you know? And I still remember her grave. You know. That's all I remember of her. Don't you dare. [laughs]

02-00:01:18  
Wilmot: Don't I dare what?

02-00:01:20  
Ruffin: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I'll tell you later. Yep. She lived—well, till I was three years old.

02-00:01:34  
Wilmot: Should I come over there and look at these other images you have out?

02-00:01:37  
Ruffin: Oh. You want to look at these?

02-00:01:39  
Wilmot: Sure.

02-00:01:41  
Ruffin: What do you want? What do you want?

02-00:01:43  
Wilmot: What are those images of [inaudible]? Okay.

02-00:01:52  
Ruffin: So here's some old photos. Here's my daddy and my mother—

02-00:01:57  
Wilmot: Here I come.

02-00:02:03  
Ruffin: —when they were courting. They're at the beach in San Francisco. There was a beach house there.

02-00:02:16  
Wilmot: Let me see.

02-00:02:19  
Ruffin: They took that picture.

02-00:02:21  
Wilmot: Being an Indian.

02-00:02:23  
Ruffin: Well, Daddy, just, you know—

02-00:02:24  
Wilmot: Cowboys and a flapper—was that her dress or—?

02-00:02:28  
Ruffin: Yes. This is Mommy and Daddy.

02-00:02:40  
Wilmot: So handsome. They're both so beautiful.

02-00:02:43  
Ruffin: Yes. Daddy was quite a guy, even though he was—I don't know. Maybe he was handsome, but he—dig those hats...

02-00:02:55  
Wilmot: And it looks like—what's this picture right here?

02-00:02:59  
Ruffin: Nadine and the dog. Now what's his name? I forgot. I forgot.

02-00:03:06  
Wilmot: And who's this?

02-00:03:08  
Ruffin: This is my brother, Harvey, and this is Nadine and her classmates at State. Ruth—Ruth is—I can't remember her last name. This is my uncle George. He's my famous uncle. He was a big shot in Oakland at Berkeley.

02-00:03:28  
Wilmot: What was his last name?

02-00:03:30  
Ruffin: Vaughans. Attorney Vaughans.

02-00:03:32  
Wilmot: George Vaughans. Was he part of Men of—

02-00:03:34  
Ruffin: Yeah.

02-00:03:35  
Wilmot: The Men of Tomorrow and—

02-00:03:38  
Ruffin: Yes.

02-00:03:39  
Wilmot: —and East Bay Democratic club?

02-00:03:40

Ruffin: Yes. He's in everything. My mother's brother. He was the one that told us don't buy that house. You know, people are going to go back home.

02-00:03:53

Wilmot: People are going to go back home? What did he mean?

02-00:03:55

Ruffin: Well, there were these people that came from the South that worked in the shipyards. They were going back home after the war was over, and “don't buy a house because real estate's going to go down and all that.”

02-00:04:07

Wilmot: Well it sounds like little did he know.

02-00:04:09

Ruffin: Good thing Mama didn't listen to him. Yeah. And that's—

02-00:04:14

Wilmot: And that's George? That's your uncle?

02-00:04:17

Ruffin: Yes. George. When he was a young boy. He went to Saint Mary's College, you know, finishing law. Yep. What's this? Well, I don't know what this is—I don't know. Where's my glasses? Can't see without my eyes. Oh. My mother used to sing with [Keaton's?] Choir—very famous during the WPA and all that, you know? They had this choir that used to sing, and they used to go all over the country, and my Mama used to sing with that.

02-00:05:07

Wilmot: Did she travel?

02-00:05:10

Ruffin: Oh, yes. But just, you know, just overnight sort of things.

02-00:05:14

Wilmot: Who are these two men right here?

02-00:05:15

Ruffin: Here?

02-00:05:16

Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

02-00:05:17

Ruffin: Bill Vaughans. It's my uncle Bill here. I don't know who it is.

02-00:05:23

Wilmot: So your mother—

02-00:05:24

Ruffin: This is a Bill.

02-00:05:24  
Wilmot: —came from a family of brothers?

02-00:05:26  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. She had one sister, Dora. Here's her sister.

02-00:05:33  
Wilmot: That's her sister.

02-00:05:33  
Ruffin: Dora Vaughans.

02-00:05:34  
Wilmot: And where is this picture taken?

02-00:05:35  
Ruffin: Berkeley.

02-00:05:38  
Wilmot: In her yard?

02-00:05:39  
Ruffin: Folger Avenue, I think.

02-00:05:40  
Wilmot: And that was her yard?

02-00:05:43  
Ruffin: Yes. [pause while shuffling through papers] This is Mama again. All through the stages.

02-00:06:03  
Wilmot: And she was very young.

02-00:06:05  
Ruffin: Yes. And this is—oh, Tomkins Elementary School. This is where—oh, lord, 18-something Avenue. I don't know. They had Dora as a little—let's see. Where is she? There she is. Here. Dora. This was Tomkins Elementary School in West Oakland, years ago. Here. And that's Aunt Dora.

02-00:06:49  
Wilmot: How beautiful.

02-00:06:52  
Ruffin: And this is—oh, Uncle Georgie died in '76, but his obituary. He, you know, he—[inaudible].

02-00:07:09  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm. May I look at it?

02-00:07:11  
Ruffin: Oh sure.

02-00:07:12  
Wilmot: Thank you. I'll look at it in a minute.

02-00:07:20  
Ruffin: What's this?

02-00:07:21  
Wilmot: Actually I wanted to just like spend a moment with the obituary. May I? I just turned it off.

02-00:07:29  
Ruffin: Oh.

02-00:07:30  
Wilmot: May I look at the obituary?

02-00:07:31  
Ruffin: Where do you want that?

02-00:07:33  
Wilmot: I want to read it.

02-00:07:34  
Ruffin: Oh. [laughter] Okay. I thought you read it—

02-00:07:37  
Wilmot: Uh-uh.

02-00:07:38  
Ruffin: —and you're a fast reader. There you go.

02-00:08:04  
Wilmot: Their son George was a second-generation descendant of Frederick Douglass.

02-00:08:08  
Ruffin: Yep. That's what they tell us.

02-00:08:16  
Wilmot: Oh, he was part of the Trans Bay Federal Savings and Loan Association.

02-00:08:19  
Ruffin: Yes. He founded it.

02-00:08:21  
Wilmot: That's major. There was no—there was very few lending agencies that would finance black mortgages.

02-00:08:33  
Ruffin: That's why he owned it.

02-00:08:38  
Wilmot: And it looks like he was a Mason.

02-00:08:43

Ruffin: He was in everything.

02-00:08:48

Wilmot: Yeah. Alan Broussard. He was the generation before Lionel Wilson and Alan Broussard and—.

02-00:08:53

Ruffin: They were all his protégées. I mean, we came to his office. He's the only black attorney in Oakland, California, and they all had to come to his office to finish their internship—all of them. Lionel and...

02-00:09:12

Wilmot: And here are the pallbearers, who were Tom Berkley, Judge Broussard, Clinton White, and Lionel Wilson. Amazing. [pause] Amazing. Thank you.

02-00:09:34

Ruffin: Yep. That's Uncle Georgie. Georgie Porgie. What's this?

02-00:10:02

Wilmot: We just looked at those.

02-00:10:04

Ruffin: Yeah. This is when they prepare the formulas for their babies at Highland. This was a long time before the [inaudible] came. Oh, I'm sorry.

02-00:10:15

Wilmot: It's okay.

02-00:10:16

Ruffin: Oh, this is my nephew. He just graduated from college. This is Nadine, and this is her classmates. And these are just friends. This is Mama getting ready to go on a trip with the Keaton Choir. See, this is their bus. I don't know who that lady is. And what's this? Birth certificate. Oh, Mildred, my oldest sister, her birth certificate. And this is Mildred and Mildred, Mildred, Mildred—my older sister. This is her, too. You don't want that.

02-00:11:28

Wilmot: She's beautiful.

02-00:11:31

Ruffin: Yes.

02-00:11:34

Wilmot: Sorry. I can't really see too much here.

02-00:11:37

Ruffin: This is her first husband, Leon Roberts. He was real nice. He was a private cook on the railroad. I don't know. Somebody who was president at that time was his car. One was a chef. But anyway. This is Nadine and her dogs.

[laughs] No, no, no, she loved those dogs like she loved children, you know? Enough of that.

02-00:12:06

Wilmot: Okay. You had mentioned that your Uncle George—I was just looking at his obituary, and he was one of the founders of the Trans Bay Savings and Loan, and he was an attorney, who actually was a mentor to Judge Alan Broussard—

02-00:12:22

Ruffin: All of them. All of them.

02-00:12:23

Wilmot: Clinton White, Lionel Wilson.

02-00:12:28

Ruffin: Yes. Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. Yes, indeed. They all came by his office. Oh dear me, I was so sophisticated there. I guess I was going some place doing something.

02-00:12:42

Wilmot: You were a smoker then, huh?

02-00:12:44

Ruffin: Huh?

02-00:12:45

Wilmot: You were a smoker then?

02-00:12:45

Ruffin: Yes.

02-00:12:47

Wilmot: Who's this? Is that Nadine?

02-00:12:50

Ruffin: Yes. That was her bachelor of arts degree over here.

02-00:13:03

Wilmot: What's this one about?

02-00:13:04

Ruffin: Hmm?

02-00:13:06

Wilmot: Oh, this is the Highland Hospital.

02-00:13:07

Ruffin: Nursing school class.

02-00:13:08

Wilmot: Graduating class.

02-00:13:10  
Ruffin: Yes. [pages flipping] And this was when she was in New York and getting her master's in biological science.

02-00:13:30  
Wilmot: So she traveled.

02-00:13:31  
Ruffin: Huh?

02-00:13:34  
Wilmot: She went to New York. Did she have a family?

02-00:13:38  
Ruffin: She never married. No. She had a lot of guys interested, but she wasn't interested. So. Yeah.

02-00:13:59  
Wilmot: She was getting prizes as a nurse.

02-00:14:00  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. She was it. You know, she was third, I think, third black nurse to go to nursing school in Oakland.

02-00:14:11  
Wilmot: Really? Do you remember who the first two were?

02-00:14:13  
Ruffin: Uh-huh. Let's see. I can't remember. I'll think of them.

02-00:14:24  
Wilmot: And why did all—ooh, who's this?

02-00:14:27  
Ruffin: That's Nadine.

02-00:14:29  
Wilmot: Oh, she looks different there. What a wonderful face. Why was nursing the choice for you and your sisters?

02-00:14:48  
Ruffin: Well, I wanted to be a lawyer, as you can tell by my big mouth, but Mama thought, you know, we should choose something else that we would be sure of a position, so we went into nursing. And Elva didn't want to be a nurse, but she didn't want to be anything else either. I mean, she didn't know what she wanted to be, so she went into nursing. I have a bit—wait a minute—school of nursing.

02-00:15:21  
Wilmot: Is that your graduation?

02-00:15:23

Ruffin: No, this is Nadine's. Nadine's.

02-00:15:25

Wilmot: Nadine's. Okay. Is that a place where people would go and actually live there at the nursing school?

02-00:15:35

Ruffin: Well, it's interesting. Nadine was the first black student to move into nursing school, and the reason she was was because the white students complained, "How come Nadine gets to go all the way out?" So they changed the rules. But they didn't know it was because she was—her skin was brown that she had to go home. They just—you know, they just thought she got privileges and they didn't, so she stayed at Highland. And after this is Nightingale Hall. This is where I lived for three years.

02-00:16:11

Wilmot: When you lived there.

02-00:16:12

Ruffin: Yeah. Yeah.

02-00:16:13

Wilmot: So you went to nursing school before or after you went to UCLA?

02-00:16:16

Ruffin: Before.

02-00:16:19

Wilmot: And then the opportunity to go to UCLA opened up. I'm going to hear about that. I'm going to come sit down and talk to you about that.

02-00:17:31

Wilmot: Okay. What are these images of? This is a high tea when you're—

02-00:17:36

Ruffin: They had a tea every year—annual tea at the nursing school. This is a nursing school, and we were serving that day. We were serving the tea. It was for all the doctors and the nurses and et cetera and their families. So. [pause] And this is Dorothy and Jane and I. We're good friends still, nursing school buddies.

02-00:18:21

Wilmot: You stay in touch with all the nurses?

02-00:18:22

Ruffin: Oh yeah.

02-00:18:24

Wilmot: Was there a special kind of nursing that you did? What was your specialty?

02-00:18:29  
Ruffin: Well, I worked in the operating room for two years—for two years, and then I decided I'd like to do public health to prevent people from having to come to the hospital, so—

02-00:18:40  
Wilmot: How did that happen?

02-00:18:42  
Ruffin: How?

02-00:18:43  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

02-00:18:44  
Ruffin: I was just—you know, I was working, and I just thought about it, and then it seemed that, you know, there was a bigger way.

02-00:18:51  
Wilmot: Which hospital were you working on in the operating room?

02-00:18:54  
Ruffin: Kaiser. Two years.

02-00:18:57  
Wilmot: Were you part of a union?

02-00:18:58  
Ruffin: Union?

02-00:18:59  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm.

02-00:19:00  
Ruffin: I don't know about union. No. I didn't know. There wasn't any union that I know of. So...

02-00:19:13  
Wilmot: Who's Donald?

02-00:19:15  
Ruffin: My boyfriend at one point. Some boy I used to go with, but not long.

02-00:19:32  
Wilmot: Handsome guy.

02-00:19:34  
Ruffin: That's in Mexico. That's all. No.

02-00:19:50  
Wilmot: You want to see the images?

02-00:19:52  
Ruffin: No. [laughs] No. No. No. No.

02-00:19:55  
Wilmot: What's this one? What are these?

02-00:19:58  
Ruffin: [laughs] That's when I was about 15 or so.

02-00:20:02  
Wilmot: You're a cutie.

02-00:20:05  
Ruffin: Mmm. These are all just to show you the kids that we went around with, these are our friends. My brother and I and Elva. This was at [Fleischacker?].

02-00:20:25  
Wilmot: [Fleischacker?].

02-00:20:26  
Ruffin: At a picnics, and they show a picnic. Oh, this was when I was—this is Bobby. He was my buddy, and Rex, a dog.

02-00:20:54  
Wilmot: Wonderful.

02-00:20:57  
Ruffin: And my picture of baby Patrick. See?

02-00:21:12  
Wilmot: Wonderful.

02-00:21:16  
Ruffin: What's this? Oh. My daughter was a debutante [laughs]. Don't mention that to me. But anyway.

02-00:21:30  
Wilmot: Here in Oakland?

02-00:21:31  
Ruffin: Yes. Don't you remember the Links and the Debutantes?

02-00:21:35  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm. You didn't enjoy that?

02-00:21:42  
Ruffin: I was president for two years, but I'd rather not talk about it. [laughs]

02-00:21:48  
Wilmot: Okay. So tell me a little bit more about when you made the decision to go to UCLA. How did that come about? What year was that?

- 02-00:22:16  
Ruffin: Oh. '51, '52—something like that. I applied for a scholarship through the state of California, so it came through. You know, I got it.
- 02-00:22:38  
Wilmot: What kind of scholarship was this?
- 02-00:22:40  
Ruffin: Academic scholarship to UCLA. And the provision was that you stayed five years after you finished in the field that you chose, so I did. [pause] And UCLA was fun. Really fun.
- 02-00:23:07  
Wilmot: Tell me about it. What happened? How old were you when you went?
- 02-00:23:08  
Ruffin: About 21, 22—something like that.
- 02-00:23:15  
Wilmot: Were you older than most of the undergraduates?
- 02-00:23:16  
Ruffin: Yes. About two years, but still, you know, it didn't matter. It was the first time that I had gone to school in my life that I didn't work, and it was wonderful. I could go to all the baseball games, all the football games—all everything, you know? And yet I still had to maintain a B average, you know, to qualify for my scholarship, but it was fun. It was really, really fun.
- 02-00:23:44  
Wilmot: Tell me about your social life.
- 02-00:23:47  
Ruffin: Yeah. Well, I went with Strick, Strickland Presley, he was a music major, and we went out, you know. We had a good time. You know, it was just fun. And I lived in a living quarters called Stevens House, you know? We lived there. There were 12 of us girls, 12 girls living in the house, and we—it was right near campus. I had a car. Oh, gosh!
- 02-00:24:22  
Wilmot: What kind of car did you have?
- 02-00:24:23  
Ruffin: Oh, just a raggedy old—well, it wasn't raggedy, but it was old, but it was, you know, good shape. I don't know what it was to tell you the truth, but we had a good time. We rode in it.
- 02-00:24:35  
Wilmot: Did your family come visit you there?

- 02-00:24:38  
Ruffin: No. No. Oscar did, but not my family. Oh, why did I go with Oscar? Well, anyway [laughs], I was going with Strick, too.
- 02-00:24:48  
Wilmot: kay. Why did you choose not to join any of the African-American sororities?
- 02-00:24:59  
Ruffin: African-American what?
- 02-00:25:00  
Wilmot: Sororities.
- 02-00:25:02  
Ruffin: Because they were a bunch of phonies—phonies, phonies, phonies. When I went to a rush party at Cal—University of California Berkeley—and two girls, you know, were grinning at you as you came in, and one looked at me, and the other one, you know, went, "Blah, blah, blah, blah,"—you know, something. And then they checked my label—probably J.C. Penney—but they checked my label on my coat, and then this other girl nudged her and said, "Oh, no. That's George Vaughans' niece." "Oh, really?!" And then I was really it. I was George Vaughans' niece. Because he was the biggest thing in Oakland at that time. After that, they could take the sororities and shove them up their nose as far as I was concerned. And then when my older sister, Nadine—she was AKA. She was going to pledge for them. They couldn't come to her house for meetings because she lived in West Oakland. So, you know.
- 02-00:26:15  
Wilmot: Was the idea like it wasn't a good place to go be in or why couldn't they come to her house?
- 02-00:26:19  
Ruffin: Well, it was just the snobbery.
- 02-00:26:21  
Wilmot: Was this West Oakland or North Oakland?
- 02-00:26:23  
Ruffin: North Oakland. I mean West Oakland.
- 02-00:26:26  
Wilmot: Okay. So she had her own house?
- 02-00:26:29  
Ruffin: No. No. She lived with my mother. But I mean, you know, they have the different houses—different meetings. So it turned her off completely to them, and I guess it just trickled down. But no.
- 02-00:26:46  
Wilmot: And academically, how did you find your life at UCLA?

- 02-00:26:51  
Ruffin: Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. I just liked it so much, and I could spend time in a library. I could do all those things that you normally read about students doing, and it was fun. It was fun. Yeah. Yep. Yep. Yep.
- 02-00:27:11  
Wilmot: So you finished up when you were around 26?
- 02-00:27:13  
Ruffin: No. I wasn't that old. About 24. 24. Something like that.
- 02-00:27:19  
Wilmot: That's when you got your B.A. in public health?
- 02-00:27:23  
Ruffin: B.S.
- 02-00:27:24  
Wilmot: B.S. A bachelor's of science in public health.
- 02-00:27:28  
Ruffin: In public health. Yeah.
- 02-00:27:30  
Wilmot: And did you ever think of staying in L.A. after that? Did you want to stay in Los Angeles?
- 02-00:27:34  
Ruffin: Oh, no. I hated L.A.
- 02-00:27:36  
Wilmot: Why? Why?
- 02-00:27:39  
Ruffin: L.A. is—again, I guess I don't like snobs, yet I come across as a snob. But I didn't like it. I just didn't like L.A. I didn't like the—I liked where I lived in Westwood right near campus. It was fine, you know, but I wanted to come home—Oakland. Home. Yeah.
- 02-00:28:09  
Wilmot: And when you came back, did you live again with your mother or—
- 02-00:28:14  
Ruffin: Uh-huh.
- 02-00:28:15  
Wilmot: You moved back in with her.
- 02-00:28:16  
Ruffin: Poor Mama had to kick us out practically. She wanted to get rid of us. No.
- 02-00:28:22  
Wilmot: You weren't trying to move, huh?

02-00:28:24  
Ruffin: No. No. No. No.

02-00:28:28  
Wilmot: Where did you get your first job?

02-00:28:32  
Ruffin: At the Oakland Health Department—Oakland City Health Department.

02-00:28:37  
Wilmot: How long did you work there?

02-00:28:38  
Ruffin: Five years, yeah.

02-00:28:42  
Wilmot: And when did you get married?

02-00:28:44  
Ruffin: I can't remember. I can't remember. It's terrible. 19—I don't know. I don't know. It's terrible. I could look it up, but I don't remember.

02-00:29:01  
Wilmot: Do you remember how old you were?

02-00:29:03  
Ruffin: Yes. I was about 29—28, 29, something like that.

02-00:29:14  
Wilmot: And you remember—how old were you when you had your daughter?

02-00:29:18  
Ruffin: Almost 40. Yeah. Because you know, I was so busy finishing school and doing this and doing that, I was too busy to have children I thought. I thought. And so when I did get ready to have a child, I guess I was about 37—36, 37—I couldn't have one. I mean nothing happened, you know, and I went through all the tests and everything, and there was nothing wrong with me, so the doctor said, but I couldn't have a baby, so I gave up. And I just said, "Oh, too bad," you know. And then we were over at my mother's house one night, and I don't know whether you know Dr. Coleman? Dr. "The Grand" Coleman? He is a friend of the family's. But he was sitting having dinner or something, and I was talking to him, and I said something—I didn't feel well or—I wasn't feeling too good, so doctor says, "Well, of course you don't. You know you're pregnant." I looked at him, and I said, "Oh, you're crazy. How do you know? You know, you might be a doctor, but you're not that good." And he said, "You go to the doctor and see if I'm right," and he was. I was pregnant. And I cried, you know. [laughs] I couldn't believe it, because I had stopped trying, you know, a long time ago—well, a year ago, and I was pregnant. So I went through an uneventful pregnancy, but at time of delivery, I had a Cesarean. I didn't care what I had, just give me my baby, you know. So that's what happened.

- 02-00:31:03  
Wilmot: It's a wonderful story. Why'd you pick Shellae as the name for your daughter?
- 02-00:31:09  
Ruffin: I don't know. I liked it, and I wanted to spell it differently—A-E rather than Y or I-E or something so everybody calls her “Shellé.” [laughs] She says, "My name is Shellae."
- 02-00:31:24  
Wilmot: That's so funny.
- 02-00:31:26  
Ruffin: So. Oh, and Havis. Shellae Havis Ruffin. My husband never had any boys, you know, and I was discussing what I could name her, and I said, well Shellae—and then Marie was a very good friend of mine. She was a public health nurse. I said, "Why can't I name her Shellae Marie Ruffin?" And he says, "Well, what's wrong with Havis?" And I said, "Oh, I didn't think about that." So I named her Shellae Havis Ruffin. Havis is his middle name. So.
- 02-00:32:00  
Wilmot: So he wanted to have some input there.
- 02-00:32:02  
Ruffin: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So.
- 02-00:32:05  
Wilmot: Well after the war you pretty much—you did more school—San Francisco Junior College, San Francisco State—then you went to UCLA, came back, worked for five years, probably went to school again. Tell me. During this time, after you got married, where did you live?
- 02-00:32:43  
Ruffin: Oh. Well, we were engaged. See, coming from a poor family and renting all my life except, you know, in that new house, I was determined in my mind never to rent from anybody. So we found a flat in North Oakland.
- 02-00:33:04  
Wilmot: Where?
- 02-00:33:05  
Ruffin: On 59th Street, 59th and just below Grove, which is now some kind of Way—but 59th and Grove.
- 02-00:33:14  
Wilmot: Martin Luther King Junior Way?
- 02-00:33:16  
Ruffin: Yes.
- 02-00:33:17  
Wilmot: Right by your old Uni hall.

02-00:33:18

Ruffin:

Right. Right near Uni. And we bought the house. We bought the house on 59th Street. And my husband being an architect, well, he did a lot of work on weekends, and I helped him on weekends to build—make this big house into a duplex. We were going to live downstairs. So it took us a year, and we finished it. We bought that house, and then we bought the lot next door to it, and—.

02-00:33:51

Wilmot:

It's okay. I'm sorry. I just want to let the camera know that I asked that Mrs. Ruffin not put her hand on the table because it makes a loud noise in the microphone, and so now she's reacting to that. I just want you to know that. Okay.

02-00:34:06

Ruffin:

And so we bought the lot next door, and that was our beginning. And then after that we just bought, you know, things we couldn't afford, but we bought them anyway—bought a lot over at Muir Beach and then we bought a lot up in Clear Lake.

02-00:34:26

Wilmot:

You both were working?

02-00:34:27

Ruffin:

Yeah. Mortgaged to the hilt. And then we bought a ranch in Napa. We still have that. I still have that. So we, you know—.

02-00:34:40

Wilmot:

When did you move here from North Oakland?

02-00:34:43

Ruffin:

Oh, eight years after. We lived there for eight years, and then we moved here, and sold it. Then we moved her. Been here ever since.

02-00:34:54

Wilmot:

Tell me a little bit about the—you know, you mentioned that your uncle was a powerful force politically in Oakland. He was very well connected and fostered a lot of young politicians in Oakland. How did you watch the kind of power structure in Oakland change over the years?

02-00:35:20

Ruffin:

Well, I really wasn't into it too much except, you know—well, Dick Spees, I worked for him. But I don't know. I can't put my finger on how it was changed, but I remember when Uncle George would run for office, you know, for different things. It was difficult for a black person to get on the ballot—on any ballot—and because George was so well known, he was in this. He was in that. He got backing of white politicians, so that's the only reason he got on the ballot, but it was still, you know, touch and go, touch and go. He never won, but it was difficult. And then I can't remember why it changed. I guess because of the number of blacks that came into the area. They began to feel

that the black vote was going to be important to them to get in, them being Caucasians, and so it kind of began to change a little as the population increased.

02-00:36:29

Wilmot: Is that in the 1960s or seventies? Do you remember?

02-00:36:32

Ruffin: More like the seventies. Yeah.

02-00:36:39

Wilmot: Do you remember when—let's see—Elaine Brown, I think, she ran for mayor. Do you remember that?

02-00:36:49

Ruffin: Elaine Brown is familiar, but I—

02-00:36:51

Wilmot: She was a member of the Black Panther Party.

02-00:36:55

Ruffin: Oh, yes. Yeah. But she didn't run in Oakland, did she?

02-00:36:58

Wilmot: I think she did, but it wasn't—I'm not sure if she actually ran for mayor. I have to go get my history correct, but in any event. And then the Black Panthers supported Lionel Wilson to get into office in the early seventies. Do you recall? Do you remember—

02-00:37:13

Ruffin: I don't remember the Black—

02-00:37:14

Wilmot: —especially being where you were in North Oakland, you might have kind of witnessed the birth of the Black Power—the Black Panther movement. Do you—?

02-00:37:21

Ruffin: Oh, I was all for the Black Panthers. I was really gung ho, you know. I didn't join them or anything, but I thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened since white bread, you know? Sliced bread or whatever you want to call it. Yeah. They were a powerful force. They did some, you know, rather shady things, but I think they made a difference. A difference. Really a difference.

02-00:37:45

Wilmot: Did you know young people who were in the Panthers when you were living in North Oakland?-

02-00:37:50

Ruffin: No. No. But I knew of them, and I read everything I could about them.

02-00:37:57  
Wilmot: Would you like donate to their campaigns at all or—

02-00:38:00  
Ruffin: No. I didn't join anything [chuckles] but I supported them.

02-00:38:05  
Wilmot: And Lionel Wilson's campaign for mayor. Do you remember that?

02-00:38:08  
Ruffin: Yes.

02-00:38:10  
Wilmot: Were you working?

02-00:38:11  
Ruffin: Lionel I used to play tennis with all the time.

02-00:38:14  
Wilmot: Really?

02-00:38:15  
Ruffin: And Dorothy. And he was older, but you know. We all played tennis together.

02-00:38:22  
Wilmot: You were socially—

02-00:38:23  
Ruffin: Yeah. But not—no. Not socially. See half of Lionel's family passes—well, did pass at that time—for white, but Lionel didn't. He, you know, “take me as I am,” both white and black, and so I don't know. What did I say? I forgot what I was saying.

02-00:38:48  
Wilmot: You didn't know him. I said, "So you were socially connected."

02-00:38:52  
Ruffin: Yes. I knew him very, very well.

02-00:38:54  
Wilmot: —and then you said, "Well, half of his family passed for white, but he wasn't one of those people who passed so he—"

02-00:38:59  
Ruffin: No. No. And Harold, the youngest one, is my age. He didn't pass. He didn't say he was white, but he was like Lionel in a sense. He socialized both sides, you know. And the girl he married, Marty, she looked like white, but she was real sweet. You know, she was form back East some place. And she got killed in a robbery at the drug store she worked at. They found her dead in there and the pharmacist also. They never solved—well, they arrested some black boy, but they don't believe he did it.

02-00:39:43

Wilmot:

I remember this case. This was something that was reported on. It was over on—actually, in West Oakland, I believe. [ed. This was the 1949 trial of Jerry Newson who was accused of this murder, more about this in an interview with Walter Green, reporter for the *Daily People's World*.]

02-00:39:50

Ruffin:

On Adeline and Seventh.

02-00:39:53

Wilmot:

Yes. And there was a young man who was accused of the murder, and it wasn't him. I do recall this case. I didn't realize that that was Lionel Wilson's brother's fiancée.

02-00:40:07

Ruffin:

Oh yes. It was his brother's wife that was killed, Marty. And Harold was her husband. No one ever—that was an awful iffy case, you know. I don't know.

02-00:40:24

Wilmot:

So did you grow up with the Wilsons? Did you grow up kind of knowing them?

02-00:40:28

Ruffin:

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. But Harold was the only one that I—well, when I went to Uni that I met Harold. And then Kermit. I love Kermit. He was a dentist, and I went to him on my—well, from the time I was a teenager.

02-00:40:45

Wilmot:

Was he a brother to the Wilsons, too?

02-00:40:46

Ruffin:

Yes. Yes. He married a so-called black girl, but you know, she looked like white, too. Ella. I knew all them, and Kermit and Harold the best of all. And then the other brothers, you know, they definitely passed. They married white girls and everything.

02-00:41:16

Wilmot:

What's that like when you see someone who you know is passing? Do you just—like, do you not greet them or what do you do?

02-00:41:21

Ruffin:

More power to 'em.

02-00:41:23

Wilmot:

But do you like not speak to them or do you say hello to them?

02-00:41:24

Ruffin:

No. I didn't know him well enough that I cared. You know, I didn't know him. I didn't care.

02-00:41:31

Wilmot:

But I'm saying, like, what happens when you see someone on the street that you know is passing. Do you say hello or not say hello or—

02-00:41:38

Ruffin:

Not say hello, unless they say hello to me. Doesn't bother me. I mean, I feel if that's what they want, that's what they want, you know? And it's different now. You know. But then, I mean, you know. We used to talk about them all the time, you know. "Neh, neh, neh, neh, neh," but I never would say anything to them openly. I mean, passing on the street if he crossed on the other side of the street, I wouldn't care, you know. But that's the way it was, and sometimes it had to be. I mean, they felt it had to be in order to get ahead, and so they did. But Kermit didn't. I mean, Kermit could be white or black, but he chose to be international, shall I say, and he had his office in North Oakland on market street, and he had black and white clients, and he married this girl—Creole or something from New Orleans—and they had three daughters, real pretty girls, and that's all.

02-00:42:58

Wilmot:

Were there other families that you can think of that you grew up with in Oakland? Like the Wilsons? That you knew of?

02-00:43:07

Ruffin:

No. Most of them were individuals. You know, I mean—no. No. The Wilson family and the Byrd family, you know, it was interesting, because you'd go through school and they'd come to me and say, "Oh, another little Byrd." You know. Another Byrd, another Byrd, another Byrd, until we got to my brother—oh, God! "This couldn't be your brother! This couldn't be your brother," you know.

02-00:43:38

Wilmot:

Why didn't they think he could be your brother?

02-00:43:40

Ruffin:

Harvey was terrible in school. He was smart, but he was just bad. He was bad. He wasn't bad. He would put tacks in the teacher's seat. He would throw chalk in the room. Anything. He was just in trouble all the time. Mother would go to school all the time to see about Harvey—keeping him in school—keeping him in school, and she'd spank him good, and he still would be in, you know, more trouble.

02-00:44:16

Wilmot:

He was just a wild one.

02-00:44:16

Ruffin:

And I remember he and Junior Brooks went to San Francisco all dressed up. Oh, they were sharp, boy. And the police picked them up for loitering, they say, because he wasn't doing anything, but just standing on the corner. He and my uncle went and got them out, you know, the next day. He said, "Let them stay one night and he'll get enough of that," so he got them out and that's when

Harvey and my uncle parted ways, because my uncle told him he had to straighten up, you know, and act like a man and blah, blah, blah, and my brother didn't like him, so. But anyway, he was something else. He got through school. Thank goodness for all his sisters—you know, considering all his sisters were so bright and so good. We were goody two shoes, you know. But Harvey—oh, terrible. Just—I don't know why. I mean, he wasn't—why he was rebelling or what, but he—and he's fine. You know, he grew up into a—probably the army helped him, but you know, he grew up into a fine young man, and two daughters and divorced, and then he married again. He's been married for 40 years, so. Yeah.

02-00:45:38

Wilmot:

Well, I'm trying to think of what else I want to ask you today. I feel like we've covered so much. Why did you move up here from North Oakland?

02-00:45:55

Ruffin:

I liked the house. You know, my husband—well, he's an architect, naturally, and my sister looked at this house first because she was moving from North Oakland.

02-00:46:06

Wilmot:

This is Nadine?

02-00:46:07

Ruffin:

Nadine. And my mother. She lived with my mother, and they were looking at houses, too, and it seemed like a nice area and everything, so my husband came up after Nadine didn't want it—just, we'll look at the house on Butters Drive, and so we checked the foundation. [laughs] He didn't even look at the house. He checked the foundation and thought it looked pretty good, so we got it, and the rest is history. You know, and then Shellae was born and so.

02-00:46:46

Wilmot:

Have you—currently are there any organizations that you're active with?

02-00:46:51

Ruffin:

Am I what?

02-00:46:52

Wilmot:

Are there any organizations that you're active with?

02-00:46:55

Ruffin:

Not now. I used to be in the Jack and Jill. You know, that was quite the thing, and I was in for several years, but I didn't—I guess I just didn't fit in that group. I just didn't. You know. I don't know. I was in it for ten years, 11 years, 12 years, something like that, and I was president for two years, but I always felt like you had to put on a special front, you know, and show them what you had and what you—yeah. I didn't like it. So. Let's see. I haven't belonged to many organizations. No. No. I don't.

- 02-00:47:56  
Wilmot: Are you involved in politics currently?
- 02-00:47:58  
Ruffin: No. No.
- 02-00:47:59  
Wilmot: Are you involved with like—
- 02-00:48:00  
Ruffin: I was with Dick Spees for some time and got him elected, and then the superintendent of schools—I can't remember his name, but I got him elected. I mean, I worked on a winning team, and—
- 02-00:48:14  
Wilmot: And with Jerry Brown? Did you work on that at all?
- 02-00:48:17  
Ruffin: No. I got sick of politics, too, you know. I mean, you get into something and then you realize it's not all that it's cracked up to be.
- 02-00:48:26  
Wilmot: What made you sick of politics?
- 02-00:48:30  
Ruffin: Well, being on the inside. You know, there's calling. Well, hey, you know, don't forget me, you know, and I contributed so much to your campaign and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, it just went on and on and on and I just—no. I didn't like it. I just didn't like what these politics told me. It was all a big show, and they tell you anything, you know. They're going to build you the moon. Take you to the moon. Oh, yeah. You're what the person wants you to be.
- 02-00:49:08  
Wilmot: When did you retire?
- 02-00:49:12  
Ruffin: From nursing? '97. I don't know.
- 02-00:49:28  
Wilmot: Okay. So you were—
- 02-00:49:30  
Ruffin: I was in school nursing.
- 02-00:49:32  
Wilmot: What did that mean?
- 02-00:49:34  
Ruffin: Well, see I finished my five years at the Health Department, and then I wanted to go into school nursing, and then I finally got a job in Richmond Schools as a school nurse, and you know, I had really big ideas and plans, and I thought it

was going to be the thing. Again, I don't know. I guess I go in thinking one thing, and it turns out to be something else, and then it really turns me off. Like I shouldn't say this, but I disrespected the teachers in Richmond for this reason: they had auxiliary help—nurses, psychologists, speech therapists, et cetera—to help them with their job—make their job easier. They didn't see it. All they could see was, well there's two cents. “I want it all. I'm not going to share with them.” So I went through 20 years of this.

02-00:50:36

Wilmot: Of working in Richmond?

02-00:50:38

Ruffin: Mm-hmm. And first of all, my respect for teachers went way up. Then as I learned more, it kept going down, down, down, down, down. Not that they weren't good teachers, but just because of their greed and their shortsightedness on what these people could do for you. You know, what a psychologist, what a nurse, what a speech therapist—they could help you with your job, but they couldn't see that. All they thought about was that buck, you know. They wanted that dollar. “We want it all. We don't need a nurse. We don't need a this. We don't need that.”

02-00:51:17

Wilmot: What children were they working with?

02-00:51:18

Ruffin: Oh, elementary. High school.

02-00:51:22

Wilmot: In Richmond?

02-00:51:23

Ruffin: Yes.

02-00:51:23

Wilmot: And were you circulating to different schools in Richmond or—

02-00:51:27

Ruffin: Was I soc—

02-00:51:28

Wilmot: Were you circulating from different schools in Richmond or were you at one school only?

02-00:51:28

Ruffin: Oh, yes. Different schools. So I got a good—you know.

02-00:51:35

Wilmot: Were they good? Did you feel that the teachers did good work with those kids? Were they careful?

- 02-00:51:41  
Ruffin: They seemed like some of them were good. Some of them weren't so good. I mean, that's just the way it is. Some were excellent. Some were lousy. But I mean, that's the way it was. So.
- 02-00:51:56  
Wilmot: Did you work directly with the children as a nurse?
- 02-00:52:00  
Ruffin: Oh, yes. Well, I was there one day a week, and so one day I was doing vision screening or audiometric screening or I was doing—there was cases. You know, I had casework like crazy, you know. Kids have problems, and there's no social worker there, so I was it. I was social worker, teacher, nurse and everything else, you know, in that one day. It was pretty rough.
- 02-00:52:31  
Wilmot: Why Richmond and not Oakland?
- 02-00:52:34  
Ruffin: Why I worked in Richmond? Well, because it was a job available, you know?
- 02-00:52:42  
Wilmot: So you retired from Richmond School District?
- 02-00:52:44  
Ruffin: Yes.
- 02-00:52:46  
Wilmot: So which schools did you work with there?
- 02-00:52:49  
Ruffin: Oh, God. So many of them. Practically all of them, you know, because I was there for 20 years, and you change your assignment all the time, you know. And it was elementary and then junior high and then high school.
- 02-00:53:04  
Wilmot: Were there changes there that you made that you feel proud of? Things that you introduced to the nursing?
- 02-00:53:11  
Ruffin: No. Well, you know, one little girl I diagnosed as having a brain tumor, and she did, and the doctor checked her out with my findings, and she was in the operating room the next day with a brain tumor. And I saw—well, it was gratifying. I saw her in junior high the next time. She was in third grade then, but I saw her in junior high, and she thanked me so much. so much. I mean, little things like this, you know. The teacher sent her to the nurse because she was having difficulty seeing. You know, she thought it was a vision problem, but after many, many times—I think I saw her seven times. I did every test in the book, but I couldn't determine what was wrong. Her eyes, you know, what was wrong. And then one time I had my light, my flashlight, and I flashed it in her eyes, and instead of the pupils constricting, they dilated. I did it again,

dilated. Well, that told me that probably there is a neurological problem. So I called her mother that day that time at work and told her, "I'm only a nurse, but—" and I gave her the symptoms. I said, "When you go to the doctor, tell him to test her eyes—look at her eyes with a light." And she did. She came right down, took her to the doctor, and it was a brain tumor.

02-00:54:59

Wilmot: And she had a successful operation?

02-00:55:01

Ruffin: Successful. Beautiful. Came out smelling like a rose.

02-00:55:06

Wilmot: Good.

02-00:55:07

Ruffin: She was in junior high when I saw her the next time.

02-00:55:10

Wilmot: Are there any other case you can think of that were remarkable to you?

02-00:55:13

Ruffin: Oh, gee, a lot of little things—you know, getting glasses for them when they had poor vision, and some of the kids would come in because of case—behavior problems probably, and then, you know, after you talk to them—I mean, it takes time, but you talk to them. You act as a psychologist, and you find out there are problems at home. One little girl came with a—talking about child abuse. She came to my office all bruised up where you couldn't see, you know, and I asked her. Oh, she fell down the stairs or something, you know. And two or three times she was referred to me, and I come to find out her father used to beat her—throw her up against the wall and everything—and he was a policeman in Richmond, so.

02-00:56:05

Wilmot: Was this a little—

02-00:56:07

Ruffin: Little girl. You know, a girl. And he said, "Well, you're supposed to be a nurse. You're not supposed to be a policeman." I said, "Well, you're a policeman. You're not supposed to be a child abuser either." So we got into it, but anyhow, the police were called, and he had to answer for it, you know. But every week she'd come bruised. He threw her against the wall.

02-00:56:34

Wilmot: How old was she?

02-00:56:35

Ruffin: Oh, she was about fifth grade, I guess. Ten years old.

02-00:56:38

Wilmot: Ten years old.

02-00:56:40

Ruffin: Yeah. Just for no reason. He'd just be frustrated and throw her against the wall. And naturally, the teacher—"Well, she doesn't feel well. She's got bruises, and well, I don't know what's wrong with her. Go to the nurse." So it took me seven weeks coming back and forth and back and forth to find out, you know, what was wrong. She finally told me.

02-00:57:02

Wilmot: Did you feel that your work was supported under different school administrations?

02-00:57:06

Ruffin: No. No. School nurses are not supported, and many of them—I have to say this without any reservations. Many of them were excellent, excellent nurses. They could've done so much for that school, and they did all they could, but they wouldn't let them. They wouldn't let them! I don't know why, but nurses were not held in high regard.

02-00:57:32

Wilmot: Were there doctors on staff as well?

02-00:57:35

Ruffin: No. Just a—they called—they had—Dr. Jones is consulting a doctor. He's in his office, and if you had a problem, then you'd call him. One for 52 schools? You know, what he's going to tell you: "Give an aspirin and call me in the morning." It's about all.

02-00:58:01

Wilmot: Were you—

02-00:58:02

Ruffin: I sound bitter, don't I? Go ahead.

02-00:58:03

Wilmot: No. It's—you know, some things—

02-00:58:06

Ruffin: But it's reality.

02-00:58:06

Wilmot: —it's really okay to be bitter about them. No need to censor yourself. But I think the thing I'm wondering is were you allowed to do preventative things such as nutrition? Were you allowed to have input in that area of the children's lives?

02-00:58:21

Ruffin: Well, yeah.

02-00:58:24

Wilmot: Or was that kind of a different department?

02-00:58:25

Ruffin:

Well. There's no nutritionists there. There was no social workers. So the nurse did all of this, all of this, all of it! You know. And we went into the classrooms at various times, only if the teacher saw fit, you know. She'd ask you to come in and do a talk on something. But we did a menstruation film and all the information about menstruation when they were, oh, sixth graders, I think. Sixth graders. But as far as an ongoing—we couldn't have an ongoing thing, because we're only there one day a week. We had all these other things to do. If we went into the classroom every week we came, we wouldn't get anything done.

02-00:59:19

Wilmot:

What about sex education?

02-00:59:21

Ruffin:

Sex education. Yes. We did that. We did it once a year for all the fifth and sixth graders. Fifth graders, I think we had to get permission form the parent. If they were ready for that, you know, with the parent. Sixth graders it was okay. We sent home the notes and they—but fifth graders were special.

02-00:59:43

Wilmot:

When you think about teaching sex education, how did you learn about sex? How were you told about it?

02-00:59:53

Ruffin:

How did I? Oh, me? Well, girlfriends, you know. And then I had four older sisters, so I learned from them.[laughs] I was the one that had to go to the store for the supplies and that sort of thing, you know. It didn't mean anything to me. I just bought it, you know. But mostly—

02-01:00:17

Wilmot:

From them?

02-01:00:18

Ruffin:

Yes.

02-01:00:13

Wilmot:

Interesting. Okay. What agencies did you work with as a school nurse? So far you've mentioned you coordinated with the doctor. You coordinated with the police if you needed to on child abuse.

02-01:00:40

Ruffin:

Oh, we didn't coordinate with the—well, we were—

02-01:00:43

Wilmot:

Who would you—who were your resources if you—if there was a situation that came up outside of this?

02-01:00:46

Ruffin:

We had a whole book about this thick of resources, you know.

- 02-01:00:51  
Wilmot: But who did you actually rely on? Like did you ever call on parents?
- 02-01:00:54  
Ruffin: I didn't rely on anybody. Social workers, yes. Protective services, yes. Yeah. Protective services and social workers. We, you know, called them quite a bit, but no one you could rely on. They were as overworked as we were.
- 02-01:01:012  
Wilmot: And Richmond schools at the time that you were there, which I'm thinking was about mid seventies through the nineties, were these children primarily African-American? Were they white? Were they Mexican?
- 02-01:01:27  
Ruffin: It's according to what area you work at. If you were in the ghetto, you had black schools. If you were in the other part of town, you had white schools.
- 02-01:01:35  
Wilmot: Like Point Richmond versus—
- 02-01:01:36  
Ruffin: They were—they were segregated according to where they lived. That's all. There's no segregation, of course, but there's a black school. There's no segregation, of course, but there's a white school, and blacks can't get in it, because they don't live here. So.
- 02-01:02:11  
Wilmot: Do you want to tell me who your role model or who was a hero to you? Just to close out, if you can think of that.
- 02-01:02:18  
Ruffin: I don't have many heroes. (laughter)
- 02-01:02:19  
Wilmot: I know. Right. It's a funny question.
- 02-01:02:21  
Ruffin: Yeah. [laughs] After all my blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. No.
- 02-01:02:27  
Wilmot: Do you want to tell me your favorite book?
- 02-01:02:31  
Ruffin: No.
- 02-01:02:33  
Wilmot: Okay.
- 02-01:02:34  
Ruffin: I like fairy tales. I mean going way back, and Rumpelstiltskin was my favorite. My sister used to tell me that story over and over again. I loved it all. But as I grew up, *Wuthering Heights* I liked very much. *Jane Eyre* I liked. I

mean, I liked—I don't know. I read a lot of books like biographies of—gee, I can't think of their names. Biographies, anyway, of several black—Bessie Smith, you know, who was a singer, and Sidney Poitier. I read his biography. Sammy Davis, Jr. Who is that author? *The Fire Next Time*?

02-01:03:43

Wilmot: James Baldwin.

02-01:03:44

Ruffin: James Baldwin. I read three or four of his books. They were very depressing.

02-01:03:46

Wilmot: Yeah. I love him. I love him. They are depressing, but he has a lovely voice.

02-01:03:50

Ruffin: Yes. He has a good voice, and oh, various other things. I read so much in college that I just stopped reading. I didn't stop reading, but I just select what I read very seldom.

02-01:04:06

Wilmot: Okay. Well, thank you for your time today. I think we're done. If there's anything else you want to say, let me know.

02-01:04:12

Ruffin: Well, I want to give you—I want to show you these.

02-01:04:15

Wilmot: Okay.

02-01:04:17

Ruffin: Then you're going to get an idea of what I was doing. Go ahead.

02-01:04:26

Wilmot: This is your degree from SF State. [going through papers]

02-01:04:29

Ruffin: State.

02-01:04:39

Wilmot: [Enhancement?] Program. This was your master's that you received. Oh, this was in 1961. This is your master's in social work?

02-01:04:54

Ruffin: No. Guidance and counseling.

02-01:04:56

Wilmot: Guidance and counseling. And oh, what a beautiful way you spell your name. Olivia.

02-01:05:16

Ruffin: Olivia. Yeah.

- 02-01:05:17  
Wilmot: Olivia. This was 1951. This is your bachelor's of arts from the Department of Education at San Francisco State University. So that was 1951.
- 02-01:05:32  
Ruffin: Yes.
- 02-01:05:34  
Wilmot: So after the war, you were just busy in school, nonstop.
- 02-01:05:37  
Ruffin: It was school. School, school, school, school. But I loved it. I loved school. I just couldn't get enough of it.
- 02-01:05:44  
Wilmot: In 1947, you got your City College of San Francisco associate degree, A.A. So did the Bay Area settle down after the war? Did all of those people who had come in, did they—?
- 02-01:06:00  
Ruffin: Oh, no. It just fulminated, fulminated. It just—I mean, not only did they come, but they sent for their families—
- 02-01:06:11  
Wilmot: Right.
- 02-01:06:13  
Ruffin: —and ugh! It was really quite a—
- 02-01:06:17  
Wilmot: You become an RN in 1950. Amazing.
- 02-01:06:26  
Ruffin: There's another one.
- 02-01:06:28  
Wilmot: And here's—
- 02-01:06:29  
Ruffin: And it was funny. You know when we would get a degree or a diploma, you'd bring it home to Mama because we—you know, Mama worked so hard for all of us, and for us to be able to give her degrees in everything.
- 02-01:06:50  
Wilmot: Had she gone to college?
- 02-01:06:51  
Ruffin: Hmm?
- 02-01:06:52  
Wilmot: Had your mother gone to college?

02-01:06:54  
Ruffin: No. My mother didn't go to college. She finished high school, but she didn't go to college.

02-01:07:00  
Wilmot: Do you remember where she went to college?

02-01:07:02  
Ruffin: Hmm?

02-01:07:03  
Wilmot: Where she went to high school?

02-01:07:05  
Ruffin: Tech.

02-01:07:06  
Wilmot: Tech. She went to Tech.

02-01:07:06  
Ruffin: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

02-01:07:08  
Wilmot: 1950. This is your Highland School of Nursing degree. Nonstop.

02-01:07:18  
Ruffin: Yes.

02-01:07:25  
Wilmot: A major certificate.

02-01:07:27  
Ruffin: See, I mean, this—it doesn't mean anything. It's all these last degrees.

02-01:07:32  
Wilmot: Well, they mean something to you. It was important to you to do this.

02-01:07:36  
Ruffin: At the time. At the time. At the time.

02-01:07:37  
Wilmot: Yeah.

02-01:07:38  
Ruffin: But not now. I wish I—I should've gone into law. That's what my calling was, but I didn't. So.

02-01:07:47  
Wilmot: And you didn't because you didn't think you could or—?

02-01:07:51  
Ruffin: That—see, this is University High School.

- 02-01:07:54  
Wilmot: It's your—[shuffling noises] Oh, that's your diploma. 1944, you finished up. How wonderful.
- 02-01:08:10  
Ruffin: I just—oh, I missed the album. Let you see the white influence—or the Caucasian influence. These are all the—those are the [photos from] high schools.
- 02-01:08:24  
Wilmot: This is at Prescott?
- 02-01:08:27  
Ruffin: That's my class.
- 02-01:08:35  
Wilmot: Oh, what beautiful children. Such beautiful children. Amazing.
- 02-01:08:44  
Ruffin: And the teachers were so conscientious. You know, at that time, unlike today, all the best teachers, the best teachers. I mean the very best were sent to Prescott.
- 02-01:09:03  
Wilmot: Where are you here?
- 02-01:09:05  
Ruffin: And—where am I? Where am I? Where am I? Okay. Gosh, I can't find it. Oh, here I am. Here I am. [points herself out in the class photo]
- 02-01:09:23  
Wilmot: There you are.
- 02-01:09:26  
Ruffin: There I am.
- 02-01:09:27  
Wilmot: That was a very diverse group of folks.
- 02-01:09:30  
Ruffin: Yes.
- 02-01:09:30  
Wilmot: There was a lot of Asian children. It looks like there were some Mexican children as well.
- 02-01:09:35  
Ruffin: Yes, and most of them spoke—you only spoke English when you went to school, but you spoke your native language when you went home, and the reason I found that out—I would go over to my girlfriend's house and—one girlfriend, Spanish—and when Daddy came home, she stopped talking in

English. That's the way it was. When you're at my house, you speak Spanish. No hablas ingles.

02-01:10:07

Wilmot:

I mean, very many people were Mexican American it looks like. This is beautiful. So what are you going to do with these things? You need to get them to a place where they'll be safe.

02-01:10:24

Ruffin:

I know. I tried. Just getting them together was something.

02-01:10:48

Wilmot:

Yeah. There's someone here called Willard Broussard.

02-01:10:50

Ruffin:

Willard Broussard. Yeah.

02-01:10:53

Wilmot:

Who was that? Was he related to the Broussards?

02-01:10:55

Ruffin:

No. No.

02-01:10:58

Wilmot:

And there's someone here named [Otrice](sp?).

02-01:11:01

Ruffin:

Hmm?

02-01:11:02

Wilmot:

There's someone here named Otrice.

02-01:11:05

Ruffin:

Oh. Otrice Williams?

02-01:11:07

Wilmot:

Yeah.

02-01:11:09

Ruffin:

Oh, I don't know who. He was in another room—another class. I mean, he graduated with us, but I mean, he was in a different room.

02-01:11:16

Wilmot:

And then there was Thelma Parker—

02-01:11:17

Ruffin:

Otrice Williams. He became something. I don't know what.

02-01:11:21

Wilmot:

And then there was Thelma Parker and—

02-01:11:22

Ruffin:

Sports.

- 02-01:11:23  
Wilmot: —Leonard Attid. Attid. Who were your friends among this group of people?
- 02-01:11:30  
Ruffin: Well, they were all friends. They were all friends.
- 02-01:11:33  
Wilmot: Oh, okay.
- 02-01:11:33  
Ruffin: Keiko was my best friend, Keiko Iriki. She isn't in here though. She left before we graduated, but all of them were good friends. You know, Gloria, and—
- 02-01:11:45  
Wilmot: I want to take a picture of this. I have to—
- 02-01:11:49  
Ruffin: Tilly. You remember the [Damees?]  
—Tilly the [Damees?]. They have a pharmacy on eighth in downtown Oakland?
- 02-01:11:56  
Wilmot: Mm-hmm.
- 02-01:11:57  
Ruffin: Well, they were there for years and years. The family was a—
- 02-01:12:04  
Wilmot: It looks like a reunion photo.
- 02-01:12:07  
Ruffin: Let's see. Oh, yeah! This is a reunion photo. This is—oh, wow. I forgot I had this. Mrs. Smith, she was like a second mother. All of these were second mothers to me. We went and formed—what—I remember we could get to go and see her down in Southern California. She was at a retirement home, and she played the piano for us. She used to play the piano and blow the—and play the harmonica at the same time you know? Oh, that was big stuff. But she lived to be 101, I think. Mrs. Smith. Gosh darn. These are all—see, this shows. There's Helen Chin. Helen Lee. Mabel Lesser. Stanley Chow. All these are—
- 02-01:13:22  
Wilmot: Among these are children whose families were interned? Now this is 1941.
- 02-01:13:28  
Ruffin: Keiko Iriki.
- 02-01:13:32  
Wilmot: So I'm wondering, for example, there's—
- 02-01:13:34  
Ruffin: No. There were—

- 02-01:13:42  
Wilmot: Actually, I don't see any—
- 02-01:13:43  
Ruffin: Keiko was gone by that time.
- 02-01:13:44  
Wilmot: I see [Aiko Kitamata?].
- 02-01:13:45  
Ruffin: [Aiko Kitamata?]. Yes. I'm sure she was. I don't know.
- 02-01:13:50  
Wilmot: And [Saburo Yoshisawa?]. I see that. You mentioned that person's name already. And yeah. And you have all these interesting—you have some Portuguese names in here like [Olga Kunya?].
- 02-01:14:03  
Ruffin: Mm-hmm. Both of them—I tell you, English was their second language. All of them.
- 02-01:14:11  
Wilmot: All of the children you went to school with?
- 02-01:14:14  
Ruffin: Everyone except the blacks, but I mean, every other child was—English was a second language, and they spoke beautifully, you know, both languages.
- 02-01:14:24  
Wilmot: That's very interesting.
- 02-01:14:25  
Ruffin: Yeah.
- 02-01:14:26  
Wilmot: I see that.
- 02-01:14:27  
Ruffin: You know, and this is the Prescott Press—we had a daily press, and we would put it out.
- 02-01:14:37  
Wilmot: Beautiful. We've got to get this into a—and this is from 1941, too, so it's actually the same group of children.
- 02-01:14:49  
Ruffin: Remember Mrs. Jackson? Ida Jackson.
- 02-01:14:51  
Wilmot: Ida Jackson? Mm-hmm.
- 02-01:14:52  
Ruffin: She was my teacher.

02-01:14:54

Wilmot: She was?

02-01:14:55

Ruffin: Yes, and she was a good friend because she was very strict, very strict, especially with the black kids, but she was an excellent teacher, excellent. And I used to help her. After school, I'd go and I'd vacuum for her. I'd press clothes for her, whatever. But she was really a wonderful person. My sister hated her. Hated her guts! I don't know why, but she did, but I liked her very much, and we had—oh, Caesar and all the classics in her class. I mean, she was just wonderful. I don't care what they say. And then I saw her before she died, of course. And she lived up on Lakeshore, but Ida Louise Jackson, yes. And I remember—talking about role models—I remember her dressing, and she'd wear Shenanigans, you know? They used to lace. Well, maybe you don't remember, but they were a special kind of shoe, and they would lace up and—heel about that high—and she had every color in the rainbow, you know, and clothes to match. And she'd change her Hudson or whatever she drove about every other year, but she was really, I thought, tops. But lot of kids didn't like her because, well, she was just hard on you. She expected—she had expectations that were very high, and she expected you to meet them.

02-01:16:36

Wilmot: And higher for black children than the other children?

02-01:16:38

Ruffin: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. But only because, I think, she was interested in helping black children, but they took it as being prejudice.

02-01:16:49

Wilmot: Oppressive. Yeah.

02-01:16:51

Ruffin: Yeah.

02-01:16:54

Wilmot: And she was your what grade teacher?

02-01:16:56

Ruffin: She was junior high, seventh grade. Seventh grade teacher.

02-01:17:02

Wilmot: Listen, Goldie Byrd Ruffin on today, June 12th, 2006, thank you.

02-01:17:12

Ruffin: You're welcome. [laughs] You're welcome, Nadine.

02-01:17:14

Wilmot: Thank you.

02-01:17:15

Ruffin:

I won't forget your name. I mean, there's so many things that have happened in our lives and our family and surely but slowly they're dying off, and need to be told. But my family has always been very quiet and into themselves. You know, we went to church and all that, but we weren't joiners. We weren't that kind of family, and we never blew our own horn, never. Never. And Nadine, God, with all the things that she did, she should've blown her horn, so anyway. C'est la vie.

02-01:18:02

Wilmot:

Why do you think that is? Why do you think your family's that way?

02-01:18:07

Ruffin:

Well, Mama—well, maybe because of Mama's background. You know, Mama being middle class and the family rejecting her until Grandpa died and Grandma was okay. We knew we were bright. We didn't know what bright meant, but you know, we could do the schoolwork, and we didn't need anybody. That's the way I felt, anyway. But our mentors were many—many mentors, and the black one was Ida Jackson. But the Hopkins was a mentor. All of our teachers—Mrs. Smith was a mentor. I mean I can't begin to tell you. I guess we looked to adults to be our mentors rather than kids. I don't know. I don't know.

02-01:19:13

Wilmot:

Well thank you.

02-01:19:14

Ruffin:

You're welcome.

[End of Interview]