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Polly Russell

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
David Washburn
in 2003

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Interview with Polly Russell
Interviewed by: David Washburn
Transcriber: Sara Dabbs
[Interview #1: September 22, 2002]
[Begin Audio File Russell 01 09-22-02]

[laughter and discussion of recording equipment]

00:04:13

Washburn:

So this is David Washburn conducting the interview, with—

00:04:16

Russell:

Polly Russell.

00:04:16

Washburn:

Polly Russell. Today is the, 21st?

00:04:26

Russell:

Today is the 21st. September 21st.

00:04:32

Washburn:

Yep, September 21st. September 21st and we are recording in San Pablo California. So, may I call you Polly?

00:04:57

Russell:

Yes.

00:04:57

Washburn:

Polly, we're gonna start off with some basic questions and as things go, you know, what you can and can't remember is fine. And as things go we'll just have a discussion pretty much, between me and you, so don't feel like you are on the spot because it's a discussion between both of us. So, where were you born?

00:05:22

Russell:

In Las Cruces, New Mexico.

00:05:27

Washburn:

And, uh, and can you tell me something about where you were raised and who was in your family?

00:05:35

Russell:

Well, all my family lived there and we grew up in Las Cruces, all my brothers and sisters, you know, that I had at that time. And at that point in time, we were going to school, grammar school. And, we were very fortunate to be able to go to—we went to Catholic School. Holy Cross School. That was the name of the school, Holy Cross School.

00:06:09

Washburn:

And how many generations does your family go back in Las Cruces?

00:06:20

Russell:

Oh, well, there is another—Marcus—. We married, you know, some of my family got married over there too. They're all scattered, I mean, all over. Right there it was just us at that time, and from there we—everybody went different directions when they graduated, you know. That is, I graduated! [chuckles] And I was the oldest. Well, no, I take it back; I wasn't the oldest. But, I was at that time going to grammar school and then I went to high school to [Urada?] Academy and that was a convent. And then I worked. In grammar school, I worked in this beauty shop, you know. And that's where I learned how to work, because she showed me how to work around the people, and everything, and then she's the one who suggested for me to go to beauty school, to take up cosmetology. And, uh, she was responsible for that. [chuckles] Then I took a beauty course after I finished school; I went to beauty college in El Paso, Texas.

00:08:05

Washburn:

Right, which is close to Las Cruces. Did you take a bus there?

00:08:13

Russell:

No, it was every day. It's about sixty miles from Las Cruces, so I had to board over there.

00:08:22

Washburn:

Oh, you did?

00:08:25

Russell:

Yeah, I had to board over there with a teacher. The teacher had a home that she offered to me, you know, to stay there and finish my schooling. After that, then the lady that had employed me to work for her, of course, I went to—. Well, before that, I had to pass my examination. So I passed my examination. All around beauty, cosmetology—I passed the whole thing. And uh, I worked over there until my family decided to come up this way.

00:09:14

Washburn:

How was that decision made?

00:09:15

Russell:

My dad needed some employment, at that time. So he decided to move over here. I don't know, you know—I was working all the time and I was kind of going in and out, you know, and I didn't kind of getting into all the personal things, you know. We were very close to the family, all very close, and whatever they said we did, you know, and that's the way it happened. He moved over here first and located—

00:10:07

Other Voice:

That was 1943.

00:10:09

Washburn:

1943?

00:10:11

Russell:

Yeah, that's the thing. I don't remember the dates, you know.

00:10:15

Washburn:

That's okay. Well, so prior to coming out here, you were working—did you end up working in a salon?

00:10:20

Russell:

Oh yes! With the lady that got me to be interested in beauty college, yeah, in cosmetology.

00:10:28

Washburn:

Who came to the salon?

00:10:31

Russell:

Oh well! She had a beauty salon and it had four employees, and with her it was five. I was one of them, and I had my customers. I enjoyed fixing hair, permanents, at that time. Of course, according to this, you know, at that time, they had the old type permanent waves, with clips, you know. And today they don't have that. They have the cold waves today. They have the other ones.

00:11:22

Washburn:

Was the clientele white or Mexican, or both?

00:11:26

Russell:

Both, both. It was right in the area where—it was all kinds, you know. Mostly, Anglo and Latin. Yeah, it was mixed, you know. There weren't too many other people. Just that, at that time.

00:11:56

Washburn:

So, do you remember, what was your father doing for employment before he moved to the Bay Area?

00:12:04

Russell:

Uh-huh. He was working in [Macia Park?]. And, I think he—

Other Voice:

He was working at the lumberyard in Las Cruces.

Russell:

Well, he came from [Macia Park?] and then he got employment. They were having a difficult time, it was during that time of the—what did they call it?

00:12:30

Washburn:

The Depression?

00:12:32

Russell:

Yes, the Depression. It was the Depression. It was very hard to find a job. There was the problem that he would work here and there. And that's when we went to, he went to—no, I went to El Paso. I was the one who went to El Paso. I graduated there. But, we lived there! What was that time that we went—?

00:13:14

Other voice:

We went to El Paso [cross talk]

00:13:16

Russell:

Yeah, because my dad, for that reason too. He went to El Paso first, to find employment. And, but then that was when I didn't have beauty training yet. Then we went back.

00:13:35

Washburn:

So he came out here in 1943 by himself?

00:13:42

Russell:

Yeah, to find out about the job, yeah.

00:13:44

Washburn:

To find work. Do you remember, he came out here because he heard about the jobs related to the war?

00:13:53

Russell:

Yes, uh huh, yeah. He thought there would be more employment here. And, we came to Brentwood first. And I didn't come with him. I didn't come with him. I stayed over there until they got themselves settled over here.

00:14:10

Other Voice:

Just mom, dad, and I came.

00:14:12

Russell:

Yeah. My sister Mary Lou was the one that came with them. And she went to school over there in Brentwood. She was in grammar school, in that time. And during that time, it was something very unusual for her. She used to tell us this, "Guess what teacher did?" She said. "She put me up there to teach, because I knew everything and the kids didn't know anything." [chuckles] She was really good at her, you know, at teaching, at that time. But, I didn't come until afterwards, until they were settled, then I followed. I came by train.

00:15:03

Washburn:

Tell me about that.

00:15:03

Russell:

I came by train, and, it was a Santa Fe. I came all the way down. Me and my sister Franky.

00:15:18

Washburn:

You guys together.

00:15:20

Russell:

We were together. And then we got established there, in Brentwood, too. We didn't stay there very long. My dad found work at Standard Oil. He was a pipefitter. Then, I had to find a job, because I didn't have my license here in California. I had it for—

00:15:45

Washburn:

Cosmetology license.

00:15:47

Russell:

—New Mexico. But I needed to get a license for California, to go back to my trade. So I needed some money to go to school, here, to get my license. So, I looked around, and the only that thing was here was the shipyards. So that's when I went and applied. And they were taking people, but then they were training them, you know, for different things. They had burners, you know, and welding. Anyway, I took welding. They gave me welding, school for welding. I went to their school. And then they gave me the test after I

finished. Because you have to pass the test, you know. You weld so much, and then they cut it in half and see how it, you know, if it's solid and if it's good, and then you pass and they send you to areas to work. There was ship number 2 and ship number 3. I was number three. They placed me as a tacker. A tacker is where you are underneath the skids, and they have the bulkheads that lay down flat, and then you're underneath with your partner. He held the iron and—I forget now what's the name of it—to hold the plate down, and then you weld it and then he would put the metal nail or big rod. Then he'd hit it with a big hammer, you know. [chuckles] Then he'd bring down the {inaudible}, you know. So you can imagine, boy, that [well?] had to be tied good otherwise it would fall.

After that, then they put me aboard those ships. Right on the ships. I worked in the tanks, in the little tanks that a big person could fit into them. I was very small at that time. I was very small. So I got inside and did all the welding overhead and on the side. And did all the welding for the little tanks. And then, too, on the ship, the whole ship. It's got a bigger rod. It's a great big rod, and just weld the whole, the actual ship. Uh, huh. And I did that, not only on the bottom, but then the side too, the bulkheads on the side. All over the ship, all over the ship.

Before I went up there, you have to set up your own machines. The machine was there; it's all yours; you have to set the temperature; and you had your equipment, which consisted of the cable—long, long cable—wrap it around and put it on your shoulder. You have to have your cap, of course. Because otherwise, if you know about welding, if anybody sees the welding, you get a flash. Your eyes will burn and you can't see for a certain length of time. And so, everybody was—you put your cap down and you start welding over there, outside. I used to work outside in the skids. You get on, and the skids are iron and they have holes. And you took care of your pale, everything, your welding rods and everything. You carried them with you.

It just seemed to be normal to me. I was a trooper at that time and I just jumped all over the thing and, just did my own—everybody was on their own. There was no such thing as just because you're a lady, you know, a girl, anybody helps you. Nobody helps you. And you don't expect anybody to help you. And I didn't expect it either. I wasn't used to it, anyways. I was always self-sufficient, you know.

That's where I worked, and used to take the lunch at break time. Oh, that's where I had my ears pierced. [laughs]

00:21:14

Washburn:

Hmm, hmm. Tell me about that. Where?

00:21:15

Russell:

Oh, this girl, you know, cutting up. "Oh," she says, "I can pierce your ears." She would do it for the girls. And I said, "Okay, you can pierce my ears." That's where I had my ears pierced, at the shipyards. [laughs]

00:21:38

Washburn:

You didn't have your ears pierced before. Well, why not?

00:21:42

Russell:

No. We weren't used to that. Well, it wasn't the thing to do back home. We weren't exposed to that, you know.

00:21:51

Washburn:

In Las Cruces?

00:21:53

Russell:

In Las Cruces, yeah. When we came over here, there was a lot of things going on, you know. And during the time, I was twenty-years-old. I was just—you know, when you're young. And then, Las Cruces was nothing. Over here, it was really during the war, during the time when there was a lot of action, a lot of activity. And all the forces were here—the navy, the army—you would see them all around here. And for entertainment, there was the dance halls. There was a place called Sweets in Oakland. And everybody, the big name bands were there—Benny Goodman and all that. I got to see them. Gene Kupra. They're all famous. You don't know them.

00:22:51

Washburn:

No, I do know them. Gene Krupa, the drummer and Benny Goodman, clarinet player.

00:22:56

Mary Lou:

Henry James.

00:22:57

Russell:

Henry James. Yeah, all of them.

00:22:59

Washburn:

What are some other entertainment spots that you remember?

00:23:04

Russell:

Oh, well, actually, I was working in San Francisco, at that time, you know. I went to school. I finally got out of the shipyards. While I was in the shipyards, I even worked in the canteens. And then I got some money to get my license. So, that's what I did all during that time, in '45. Yes, I was twenty-years-old and it was '45, I think.

00:23:42

Washburn:

Well, let me ask you some specific questions about the shipyards. Your story has been fantastic so far. Well, let me ask you first about the ear piercing, because it seems like it

was a neat time. Did all the ladies out here, did you notice that they had their ears pierced?

00:24:10

Russell:

It kind of spread around, yeah, at that time. I think that was where it started, people piercing their ears. Most of the girls did get their ears pierced, because they did it there, you know.

00:24:27

Washburn:

Was it a group thing? Can you describe how it happened?

00:24:30

Russell:

No. Yeah, well everybody would kind of get together at lunch time and talk. It was kind of a thing that they would do there, you know. In fact, they had some rings made out of metal. Everybody would have a ring. It was steel. They had access to all this stuff. Of course, there were a lot of things that—well, let's see what can I tell you about there—?

00:25:11

Washburn:

Well, do you remember who pierced it?

00:25:13

Russell:

No. I remember the lady, you know, and I can picture her, but I can't remember her name.

00:25:17

Washburn:

Well, what did she look like?

00:25:19

Russell:

She was white. She was a white woman. She's probably remember that too, cause she was the one who did all the piercing. And I was the one that she pierced, my ears.

00:25:35

Washburn:

So she pierced a lot of people's ears?

00:25:37

Russell:

Oh, a lot of girls, at that time. They were all real young at that time, too, you know. So they had their ears pierced by her. Otherwise, I don't know how long it would have been after that that I would have had—because I was working. I was always working. I worked at the canteens. Aboard ship, aboard ship. That's where the canteens were, right on the ship. They had a canteen where all the service—it was navy, all navy and they would come by to get their soup or candy or whatever, that they would buy. Like they say, practice makes perfect and I was really good at it, you know. [laughs]

00:26:35

Washburn:

Why did you move from welding to the canteens and what was your job there?

00:26:44

Russell:

At the canteens? Well, cashier and give the items that they asked for. That was after I got away from the welding. I got away from the welding and I came to work at the canteens.

00:27:04

Washburn:

Did you choose to do that?

00:27:06

Russell:

Yes. Then, there was a big restaurant on shipyard number three. I forget what's the name of it, but it was well known at that time. The buses the transit, the buses would go over there from Richmond with the workers to the shipyards, because the shipyards were located over there, so there was a lot of activity on the buses. That's the way I got there, by bus, everyday.

00:27:50

Washburn:

Did they serve liquor on the canteens or this was just for lunchtime?

00:27:54

Russell:

No, that was just for lunchtime. There was no liquor.

00:27:59

Washburn:

So all the shipyard workers came in there?

00:28:04

Russell:

Well, there was stray ones, but it was mostly navy people.

00:28:09

Washburn:

Soldiers?

00:28:11

Russell:

Well, not soldiers, just navy. Strictly navy, aboard the ship. Yeah, they were all navy.

00:28:18

Washburn:

Were they in uniform?

00:28:19

Russell:

In uniform, in uniform, yeah.

00:28:22

Washburn:

Were they younger or older or—?

00:28:25

Russell:

They were young. They were all young. I got to meet Kaiser. [Henry J. Kaiser]

00:28:37

Washburn:

Oh really? Tell me about that.

00:28:39

Russell:

Well, you know how it is. At that time, they were all businessmen or whatever it is, and so I am cruising around and you just saw him and I said, “Oh okay.” I got to see him, Mr. Kaiser.

00:29:00

Washburn:

Do you remember, was that an exciting thing to see him?

00:29:05

Russell:

At that time, I didn't realize just how important he was. We were so involved with the shipbuilding. Got to see a lot of ships being sent off, right into the water. It was quite an occasion when they did that. Everybody would stand by to see it launched in the water. They were launching them quite fast, at that time. That was very interesting. Now that I think back—I keep skipping around—because when it happens you don't give it any thought, because you're right there and it's just part of your job. But now when you're —

00:30:02

Washburn:

Meaning what happens?

00:30:04

Russell:

All the activity. To go back and think, oh what happens? And how did they launch them, and how did it look, and pay more attention, you know. But it was interesting. I got to see all that. I was part of it.

00:30:31

Washburn:

Tell me, because people are interested in knowing how people interacted, and the canteen is an interesting place cause you had all these different people together. So, was there businessmen, navy, and also shipyard workers or was it strictly navy?

00:30:48

Russell:

It was strictly navy. And they were all happy at getting their lunch. They were all real, real happy people. Everybody was very happy. There were no outsiders. Where I was working, it was just the navy, the navy personnel.

00:31:17

Washburn:

Was it mixed race also?

00:31:21

Russell:

Yeah, it was mixed. It was mixed.

00:31:28

Washburn:

Did black soldiers sit just with black soldiers or do you remember it being mixed?

00:31:35

Russell:

They would come and buy. After that I don't know.

00:31:43

Washburn:

Actually sitting down and eating?

00:31:45

Russell:

No, I never did see that. No. I was just serving them and they would take off, wherever they had their lunch.

00:31:55

Washburn:

So there was no sitting arrangement?

00:31:56

Russell:

No, no, no, no, no.

00:31:58

Washburn:

It was just kind of an in-and-out place?

00:31:59

Russell:

That's why I said there was a big restaurant, outside of there, where everybody went. That's where they gathered, down at the big restaurant. This was just for the people aboard the ship. That's when I would catch the bus back and forth.

00:32:28

Washburn:

Describe a little bit, where did you live?

00:32:31

Russell:

I lived at 4111 Hubert. Hubert and Cutting.

00:32:46

Washburn:

Can you describe a little about moving into your home and what it was like and you know, that kind of thing?

00:32:57

Russell:

During that time the people who came over here to work in this area, they had housing for them. It was built. Most of it, it was all new. We were able to get right in, because it was for the particular people working here in this area. We were very lucky and we got this apartment. Very nice, very nice apartment. They were all new, at that time.

My brothers and sisters—well, I was the one that came, that was already working. My other sisters they were going to school.

00:34:03

Washburn:

In Richmond?

00:34:04

Russell:

In Richmond. And I remember they tried to get me to go to the recreation. They had recreation for the young ones, after school. It was open for them for recreation. I would go with them once in a while. But I was working, you know what I mean, in San Francisco!

00:34:29

Washburn:

This is after?

00:34:31

Russell:

Yeah, but when I come home, I says, “Oh, let’s go to the rec [recreation hall].” I did go, sometimes, you know, with them to the recreation hall, which, it was really nice that they had at that time. They had a lot of activity for the youth, the students. Everybody would gather together and it was really nice. They had a lot of activity and dancing—

00:34:58

Washburn:

Was this new in your area?

00:35:01

Russell:

That was in our—yeah, where we lived they had this area for certain districts. And I mentioned there were others. But, there was a very good thing that they had at that time for the youth. They kept them busy doing things, especially during this time.

00:35:26

Washburn:

Did your father find this house, the apartment you lived in?

00:35:29

Russell:

Yes, yes, yes.

00:35:32

Washburn:

So you moved from Brentwood down to this apartment. Do you know how he found the apartment?

00:35:40

Russell:

I think they must have had an office—

00:35:43

Washburn:

He was working with Standard Oil, you said.

00:35:46

Russell:

He went right to work to Standard Oil as a pipefitter. There must have been a place, probably the employment office and they were directing them different places. He went to Standard Oil.

00:36:08

Washburn:

Did your whole family live in the house?

00:36:11

Russell:

Yes, all my brothers—yeah! We were all—my mom and dad and all my brothers and sisters. No, I take it back. My brother, one brother, back in Las Cruces, joined the army. He was sixteen. Of course, you know, very young, yeah. Not only that, my dad was taken into the service back in Las Cruces. He went into the service.

00:36:59

Washburn:

During the war?

00:37:00

Russell:

During the war. Because, I'll tell you why he went. He had all these children, right? And they told him, since it was time they were gonna vote, they told him, they says, "Now you vote this way," and he says, "No, I'm gonna vote the way I want to." And they says, "If you don't vote our way, we're gonna have you drafted." He says, "I don't care," and they had him drafted, at that age.

00:37:29

Washburn:

The sixteen-year-old?

00:37:29

Russell:

No! My father.

00:37:30

Washburn:

But who said this to him?

00:37:34

Russell:

Politics.

00:37:35

Washburn:

Politicians?

00:37:36

Russell:

Politicians. Yeah, they told him, “You either vote our way or we’re gonna have you drafted.”

00:37:43

Washburn:

Wow. And he stood up?

00:37:47

Russell:

And he stood up—

00:37:51

Washburn:

They made him go back to New Mexico?

00:37:56

Russell:

He was drafted, into the service, into the army! He shouldn’t have had to go! Because you didn’t take people with family. And they could do that, see. But going back to my brother. Now, my brother went into the army and he retired in the army. He was right here, Sergeant Major. He went up to Sergeant Major. And he got a lot of commendations, a lot of metals, signed by—well, it was Nixon.

00:38:43

Washburn:

Later on?

00:38:44

Russell:

Yeah. He went to the war. He went all in action. Vietnam.

00:38:55

Washburn:

Let me ask you. I wanted to go back to ask you about coming out to California. Las Cruces was mostly Mexican American where you lived, right?

00:39:10

Russell:

Well, they were all Latin. There was a lot of Latin people, but I wouldn't say Mexican. There was no real-

00:39:200

Washburn:

Well, Mexican American, I should say.

00:39:22

Russell:

Yeah, because now, here in California, you do find Mexicans. Mexican people come from Mexico. The Spanish speaking people, a lot of them, like me, we're born here. So, when you say Mexican, there were really no Mexicans. They were Latin, I might say, Spanish speaking, Hispanic, mixed Anglo and Spanish. If you ask me about colored people, we didn't see them at all.

00:40:07

Washburn:

In Las Cruces?

00:40:08

Russell:

But they were there. But we didn't see them, because they were not allowed in the town. You would see them; if they would come, they would come around the back. If they did have to come to the restaurants or something like that, they would come around the back. I wasn't aware of this at that time. I didn't know why and I didn't ask questions. We just weren't exposed to all the things that I know now. But at that time, I understand that they lived in another part of the town. And until when we came over here, I still didn't get to see them very much, even at the time that we came over here. And as far as Mexican people that you're speaking about, there was a district that was Mexican, but we weren't aware of it, because we ended up moving in the area where there was no Mexican people. And, not until we went to church at St. Mark's, then we see that the whole church was full of Mexican people. You know, I says, "Oh, okay." They're still there, even today. They are still concentrated in that area. But they're kind of spread—now you see it all over. Now they're moving all over.

00:41:47

Washburn:

You guys found housing where they put you, but in your neighborhood, you didn't interact with any other Hispanic people?

00:41:56

Russell:

No. Right. There was nothing.

00:42:01

Washburn:

There was none. Did you make any effort to search out other Hispanic people?

00:42:10

Russell:

No, cause we weren't used to looking for them. You know what I mean? We were comfortable with the—like back home. We weren't concentrated in one district. You know what I mean? And when we come out here, we thought it very natural.

00:42:29

Washburn:

So, in your neighborhood in Las Cruces, it was mixed Anglo and Hispanic?

00:42:37

Russell:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:42:39

Washburn:

Did you ever remember speaking Spanish in the neighborhood?

00:42:43

Russell:

No. Just at home.

00:42:47

Washburn:

But when you —

00:42:48

Russell:

But, of course, my mom, they mixed it to, you know. They spoke two languages.

00:42:57

Washburn:

Your mother spoke Spanish and English?

00:42:58

Russell:

And English, yes.

00:43:00

Washburn:

So she was born in Las Cruces?

00:43:02

Russell:

Yeah, well. We were all, you know, from this area.

00:43:09

Washburn:

So your mom was born in Las Cruces?

00:43:11

Russell:

No, she wasn't born in Las Cruces.

00:43:12

Washburn:

She was born in Mexico?

00:43:14

Russell:

No. No. No.

00:43:17

Washburn:

Where were your parents born?

00:43:17

Russell:

Well my dad—well we go back to Colorado. I mean, I don't want to go that far back, because I don't remember. Las Cruces—

00:43:30

Washburn:

Were there more Hispanics in Las Cruces that you remember than in Richmond when you first arrived?

00:43:39

Russell:

Well they were all Hispanic, but they didn't speak—in public, nobody would speak Spanish. Even when I went to school, even though I could speak it, you did not speak it. You didn't even converse with your schoolmates in Spanish. That's the way it was, you know? When you went home, if your family speak that language, or if they didn't, we mixed it. She knew the Latin and my dad knew—they both would speak to each other—naturally we had to understand them, because they were both Latin. You can't forget something that you're born with, you know what I mean. You just remember it, and when you go to school and if you start learning English, in school, you learn it! You're young and you learn it automatically. Because all around your neighborhood it was spoken anyway. So you learned, you just grew up with both languages.

00:45:04

Washburn:

Do you remember it, when you moved out here, do you remember thinking to yourself, "Where are all the other Hispanic people?"

00:45:14

Russell:

That's what I'm saying.

00:45:15

Washburn:

Did you ever feel like maybe an outsider, a little bit, in your neighborhood?

00:45:21

Russell:

Well, I'm gonna tell you speaking for myself. No. We weren't used to segregation. We thought it very natural where we were. We didn't think that there was anyone else—we didn't look out for them until we came across them at church. Then we said, "Oh there is more people here, that's really is fluent Mexican people." Which was very uncomfortable for us, because they thought we were very offish because we couldn't converse in Spanish. We would butcher it up, kind of. That's how bad it was.

00:46:12

Washburn:

So you said you butchered it up?

00:46:14

Russell:

The Spanish. So, I, speaking for myself, I forced myself to learn more, to be able to speak more fluent Mexican, you know, so that I could mingle with them. Because the words that came out of my mouth were automatically English, and they thought it very offish that I didn't want to use my language, but that wasn't it. It was just that I wasn't used to it. And then, when I worked at the {Cannery, FMP?}, that's about all there was, Mexican people and English speaking people. But there was a lot of Mexican people there. Like I said, you know, I tried to get in with them, to talk. That's where I picked up more Spanish, more Mexican.

00:47:23

Washburn:

That's interesting. Do you remember when you first went to St. Marks how you felt when you saw all these other people speaking Spanish that looked like yourself?

00:47:35

Russell:

Oh yeah, well it was interesting.

00:47:37

Washburn:

How did you feel?

00:47:38

Russell:

I felt, "Oh well, where were they? I guess they live over here on this side." Because we wouldn't see them where we lived. We knew there must be a district of all these Mexican people. Because we weren't looking for them, but we came across them. You know what I'm saying? At that time we discovered where they were. But we weren't looking for them.

Mary Lou:

But we did wonder, "Where are they? Where are they?"

00:48:24

Washburn:

Do you remember, did you make friends at the church and then start to go over to peoples' houses maybe for birthdays?

00:48:35

Russell:

Well, no, no. We lived too far. It was too far.

Mary Lou:

In El Cerrito, closer to El Cerrito.

Russell:

We were in El Cerrito. It was closer to El Cerrito, and St. Marks' in Richmond is way on the other side of town.

00:49:01

Washburn:

So why did you guys go to that church, if it was so far away?

00:49:03

Russell:

Because it was the only church. It was the only church. We walked over that way. We walked!

00:49:10

Washburn:

It was the only church in Richmond?

00:49:11

Russell:

It was the only church in Richmond.

00:49:13

Washburn:

Or was it the only church for Hispanics?

00:49:15

Russell:

It was the only one. It's still there. No, even today it's the only church there. Cornelius is over here. They weren't built.

Mary Lou:

Well there was Cornelius, but it wasn't built then.

00:49:31

Washburn:

So if it was the only church, did White and Black people go there also?

00:49:42

Russell:

St. Mark was the only church and it catered to whoever came to the church, and there was more Hispanic people.

00:49:50

Washburn:

But it was a Catholic Church?

00:49:51

Russell:

Catholic Church.

00:49:53

Washburn:

So Black people probably wouldn't go there for that reason.

00:49:57

Russell:

Right.

00:49:58

Washburn:

Because they're not Catholic. But, hmm. Were there other places where you interacted with other Hispanic people? Were there markets or restaurants? Entertainment places? Dances?

00:50:27

Russell:

Entertainment. Dancing, that's the only place.

00:50:36

Washburn:

Let me put it this way, where else do you remember seeing people that you saw at St. Marks? Did you maybe run into them at restaurants or while shopping?

00:50:49

Russell:

Well, like I said, I was working. And I worked in San Francisco, so I didn't have time to mingle here much. Because I would go to work and then come back, and then my sisters would be going to the recreation halls and maybe I might go with them. But as far as making friends with—like at church, and meeting people—no. Because we were too far from them and I couldn't meet them anywhere, because they stayed mingling in that area. We were too far, you know to—at that time there was only, what?

Transportation was the buses and the Richmond town, was the one that everybody used. Richmond was the main drag there on Macdonald. And that's where everybody would go shopping. They had the big stores there, in Richmond.

00:52:08

Sister:

It was a beautiful town.

00:52:10

Russell:

It was a very active town, they had Macy's.

00:52:12

Washburn:

Yeah, tell me about the downtown, they had Macy's?

00:52:15

Russell:

Yeah they had Macy's, they had JC Penny's. I went to work in the beauty shop in JC Penny's. They had the big stores, you know, big name stores:[Travellini's], Breuner's It was a nice.

00:52:37

Washburn:

When were the big shopping days? Were Saturday and Sunday, did the street fill up?

00:52:42

Russell:

Oh, they were filled up all the time.

00:52:44

Washburn:

Not just Saturdays, but all the time?

00:52:46

Russell:

Just packed all the time. It was a very active. They had theaters. Very, very active, you know. In fact, that's where I met my husband. Well, that's where he made it a point to locate me.[chuckles] Because he knew I was going to take the bus to the shipyards. See? And I would come and wait for the bus.

00:53:18

Washburn:

On the corner?

00:53:19

Russell:

Yeah, and he found out where I lived. You're not going to believe this, he happened to be my neighbor.

00:53:28

Washburn:

And he didn't know it?

00:53:30

Russell:

Well, he knew it. I didn't know it.

00:53:32

Washburn:

But you didn't know it?

00:53:33

Russell:

Well, I kind of knew it. It's a long story to it. My sister kept telling me, because he was in the navy. He was in uniform, you know. And he had brothers who were in the navy, too. They were all in navy uniforms. My sister kept telling me, "You've got to meet this guy. You've got to meet this guy." I says, "I don't want to meet anybody here." I was over there, you know, in the city! I didn't want...

Well, come to find out they were my neighbors and she says, "There he is!" at the house, "There he is!" And I says, "Oh God," and I thought he was so sarcastic. He was Anglo. He just walked real cocky you know, real straight. Their family walked really straight. I says, "Oh God," and at first I says, "No way." No, he found out where I used to get off the bus. So he made sure to come over in the car and says, "Oh, can I give you a ride home?" Being that he was my next door neighbor. "Oh yeah, catch a ride to the house instead of waiting for the bus." "Sure!" So he made it a point to go pick me up and come bring me home. So that's the way we met. It took, I think—'45, '46, '47, '48—it took three years before I married him. Around three years.

00:55:21

Washburn:

So I want to ask you about the JC Penny and the cannery? So you worked doing what at JC Penny?

00:55:28

Russell:

They had a beauty shop.

00:55:29

Washburn:

JC Penny's in Richmond, correct?

00:55:31

Russell:

JC Penny's in Richmond. It's a beauty shop in the back, {Mr. Kiel's?}Permanent Wave Studio.

00:55:39

Washburn:

Permanent Wave Studio?

00:55:40

Russell:

Uh huh. Yeah, I remember the name.

00:55:42

Washburn:

Tell me about your job there and who came in?

00:55:49

Russell:

Well, the clientele was mixed. It was mixed. And, like I said, it was a permanent wave studio. It was just permanents, you know. And by that time it was cold waves. You know, cold waves.

00:56:07

Washburn:

So it was mixed? It was Mexican, Hispanic and white and black also?

00:56:12

Russell:

And black.

00:56:14

Washburn:

So all white and black and Hispanic?

00:56:15

Russell:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. See, now here was where everything was all mixed.

00:56:25

Washburn:

At the salon?

00:56:27

Russell:

Yeah, at the salon. It was really nice. They were very—

00:56:36

Sister:

Blacks were very kind to us, very nice people.

00:56:39

Washburn:

Describe to me what went on at the salon. How many people came in?

00:56:46

Russell:

Well, you can imagine. You can imagine, JC Penny's. They have a lot of activity, a lot of customers. We were booked. We were booked solid with people.

00:57:04

Washburn:

Let me ask quickly, this is at what time? After the war?

00:57:07

Russell:

After the war.

00:57:08

Washburn:

What year, do you remember?

00:57:12

Russell:

I think in '47.

00:57:18

Washburn:

So it seemed like a lot of people are still going to the stores? Did you notice that people were spending a good amount of money?

Sister:

It was very flourishing, a lot of money was around at that time.

00:57:23

Russell:

Oh yes, yes. Oh, very, very active, very active. The town was flourishing. It was always full with people.

00:57:51

Washburn:

Tell me about the salon. You would see women, regulars would come in all the time?

00:58:00

Russell:

Uh huh. Yeah, okay. You want to get into that? I worked at a wig shop right there on MacDonalds too. It was {Chinda's Wig Shop?} for four years. I don't know if you want to ask me who came in there. [laughs]

00:58:21

Washburn:

I want to ask you about the salon. How long did you work at the salon?

00:58:26

Russell:

At the salon? Oh I think I was there not too long. I think it may be months, just months. Then I got interested in—I was working nights at the cannery.

00:58:54

Washburn:

So you were working days in the salon and nights at the cannery? Whose hair did you do at—if you said there were whites and Hispanics and blacks—?

00:59:03

Russell:

Mostly whites. Yeah, because it's a permanent wave studio. You don't have, unless they needed their hair [chuckles], but no, there weren't too many blacks because their hair is naturally curly.

00:59:18

Washburn:

But black folks did come in to the salon?

00:59:22

Russell:

Well, if they came in, they came through the JC Pennys store, you know, for whatever reason they had there, but to the salon? No I wouldn't say. No, but they would come into the store.

00:59:42

Washburn:

Oh, but not into the salon? So when you were saying it was mixed, you were saying in the store, in JC Penny's there was a mix of races in the aisles?

00:59:54

Russell:

Yeah, like I said, it was a very nice—a very, very, the quality was very good. JC Penny's, the quality was the best you could find. Macy's, Breuner's and {Travellini?}, you know those are well-known names and they were very, very good over there. People did all their shopping over there. There was no shopping center anywhere at that time.

01:00:33

Washburn:

No mall, huh?

01:00:37

Russell:

There was no such thing, so everybody would do their shopping in Richmond. That was the place to go.

01:00:46

Washburn:

So do you remember, when you were in JC Penny's, if you're seeing different people—I don't mean to focus too much on race, but it is kind of interesting—do you remember, could you tell when people were walking around—obviously you can see this person was Black and this person was White—but do you remember saying, “Well I can see that this person is Hispanic?” Do you remember noticing who was and wasn't Hispanic walking around while shopping?

01:01:14

Russell:

No, you couldn't tell, because you can't tell by their color. I can be speaking to you and you be fluent Mexican, because they have Mexicans have blue eyes and blonde hair.

01:01:32

Washburn:

But aren't, for the most part, markers of someone who is Hispanic, darker complexion and darker hair?

01:01:41

Russell:

Not necessarily. You'd be surprised. Even now, in this day and age, if you look around or if you talk to them, they're very light complexioned. Very light. You never know if you are talking to a Mexican or an Anglo person, even today, you know. And at that time, when you saw a Latin person, they wouldn't be that dark either, and they didn't even speak it, anyway. They would all speak English. The ones that I saw at the store would be able to speak English.

01:02:33

Washburn:

So you wouldn't know if they were Hispanic or not?

01:02:35

Russell:

Yeah, because at that time, because they didn't have nobody catering to Mexican people.

01:02:43

Washburn:

What about like a nametag? You would just put Polly, but if you had a Spanish surname, you wouldn't put it on the—you know?

01:02:52

Russell:

Not that I wouldn't put it, it just wasn't required. Now, I am kind of touchy about it, because then they start talking to you, like, in Spanish or something like that, and I might butcher it up. You know what I mean? There is some Mexican people who talk very good Mexican, you know, Castilian is very good. And sometimes, when you speak the slang—which I do, I speak the slang—and I may mean something and they mean something else.

01:03:39

Washburn:

Yeah, I understand.

01:03:40

Russell:

So, I speak the slang. We weren't fluent. We know enough to live with it, but if I got into a place of business or something like that, I probably wouldn't even know what—

[chuckles]

01:04:02

Washburn:

Well, you said you noticed when you went to St. Mark's all the Spanish being spoken and Hispanic folks there, do you remember when you were working the shipyards, other Hispanic women or men that you would see there?

01:04:21

Russell:

I imagine so there were. Oh yes, yes. They came from all over the world, all over the country.

01:04:28

Washburn:

Why do you imagine so that they were there?

01:04:29

Russell:

Oh because there was no work. It was during the Depression and they knew that the shipyards were going strong here in this area. That's what brought the people over, the shipyards.

01:04:44

Washburn:

How could you tell maybe, if they were from Oklahoma or from New Mexico or were Hispanic, did you notice?

01:04:53

Russell:

Well, like I said, at that time, no I didn't notice, but now if you think back, it's just common sense.

01:05:03

Washburn:

Seems obvious. Yeah.

01:05:07

Russell:

But at that time I never gave it any thought. I was too busy working. [chuckles.]

01:05:11

Washburn:

But when you were on the shipyards, did you meet any other women who were Hispanic?

01:05:17

Russell:

If they were Hispanic, they surely didn't speak it. I imagine there was. Let me think very hard, if I can picture somebody that—but like I said, if they did, they were there, but I never concentrated on speaking the language.

01:05:53

Washburn:

So if there was somebody like Franklin Dullis, who I may see later, you wouldn't have known that he was working there just by running into him or seeing him and saying, "Oh, there's—he's Hispanic?" You wouldn't take note of it?

01:06:07

Russell:

No I wouldn't be able to tell, unless he spoke to me first in Spanish or something.

01:06:15

Washburn:

And that didn't occur?

01:06:17

Russell:

No, that didn't occur at work at all. If there is anything else you want to ask me in reference to that, but I just seem to be repeating myself.

01:06:32

Washburn:

That's true, but you said it did change when you went to the cannery, though?

01:06:39

Russell:

Now, that really was a drastic change for me.

01:06:42

Washburn:

Tell me about that.

01:06:43

Russell:

Because I was in the middle of all these people that spoke only Mexican. I mean, they didn't even speak English. They just spoke Spanish and, of course, when you have lunch, you sit with somebody or something, you know. And, if you didn't get to converse with them, they would think, "Why not? Why doesn't she speak or something?" I tried to say something, but that's when I found out that they were fluently, you know, Mexican people, see? And that's when I forced myself to talk some more, or learn. That's what happened at that time. That's where I really mingled with the Mexican people.

01:07:37

Washburn:

Tell me about the cannery. Where was it and what did you—?

01:07:40

Russell:

F and P? F and P was at the foot of Tenth Street and that's very close to the shipyards. Felice and Perelli, it's a very famous label.

01:07:56

Washburn:

Describe where you worked and what you did.

01:08:03

Russell:

During that time, they didn't have any machinery. You know, machines like they have now. We had to use the knife to cut the fruit, just cut it, and of course, once you got the hang of it or did it you—. Then I'm still working there when they brought the machines, and I was one of them to work on the machines. In fact, they brought a photographer, because this particular picture I understand they sent it to foreign countries to show them

how we have machinery to work on the fruit. It came out in the paper for standing with the machine where they took the picture of me working on the machines. During that time, because it was something very new, something very new, and they wanted to publicize it. That was quite interesting.

01:09:14

Washburn:

Where were the workers? I mean, did you work right next to people?

01:09:18

Russell:

Okay. There was an assembly, and of course I started from scratch, you know, from cutting to assembly—I did everything around the cannery—to take out, sort the fruit. From there to the machines. When you put in the machines, then you sort. They are coming real fast and then the sorters do it. Well, I did that and I did this. Then I ended up being [chuckles] a government inspector. I ended up in quality control. I ended up—wore in the white thing, and checking the fruit and everything. You had to figure out and you had to see if something was really bad, you know, then you'd make them get rid of all that load. And get some good fruit in there so it won't be so bad. I ended up in there. I started from the bottom and went up to quality control. That was interesting.

01:10:53

Washburn:

How long did you work at the cannery? Approximately?

01:10:55

Russell:

Well. I retired. [laughs] I worked there so long that I was able to get retirement, but I worked at the beauty shop. Even today this lady that is still alive, she says, "You should have gotten it." Well I says, "Well I don't need it. I'm working." And then from there I went to work, like I said, between the cannery, the beauty shop, and the wig shop. I worked in the wig shop, then I went to work for Beckman which is soldering. I soldered.

01:11:39

Washburn:

Where is Beckman?

01:11:40

Russell:

Beckman, it was a big industry that's well-known all over. Beckman Instruments, and they did a lot of electric computers and I worked on the computers part, soldering. And, at that time, going to the moon was a big thing and they were contracted to make some part that was going to go to the moon and I worked on it with the computer thing. So I was involved in that, when they sent it up to the moon.

01:12:28

Washburn:

That's neat.

01:12:30

Russell:

Yeah, and I worked there as a soldering. I was a solderer. Then for a little while I was instructor [laughs], showing them how to braid—there is a certain way that you have to braid the—

01:12:49

Sister:

The {inaudible} circuits.

01:12:50

Russell:

You know when you see—this is very unique you know, very high tech, computers and things. There is a braid that you have to make that's got to be done a certain way so it won't come undone. You just learn how to do that and I had to teach the girls how to braid, this one specific thing. Then after that, then everything started to progress. The freeway had to come through and then they had to—

01:13:35

Washburn:

In Richmond?

01:13:37

Russell:

Yeah, in Richmond. And they were going to go right through Beckman. Beckman had to move, get away from there and I don't know where they went. I don't know if they are in existence, right now, but Beckman Instruments. Then I had to find another job, because they were closing that one down.

01:14:11

Washburn:

Mary Lou, do you have to go soon?

01:14:13

Sister:

No, I'll give you some more time.

01:14:17

Washburn:

Well, I need to actually go to the bathroom here, so we are going to stop.

[Interview Interruption]

02-00:00:06

Russell:

—might have done something about the segregation, I don't know. Might have been something there too. Could have been something.

02-00:00:17

Washburn:

Thinking back, do you feel like you've felt any discrimination?

02-00:00:28

Russell:

I knew that he was from a higher you know, and I knew that they didn't—

02-00:00:28

Washburn:

I'm recording that, do you want me to stop?

02-00:00:30

Russell:

No, that's fine. So, I didn't cater to him, even if their parents, you know, brought someone else to meet their—I thought, "Hey, that's great, you know." But it was his parents. That's the thing that a lot of times the young ones—it's the parents that sometimes create the segregation.

02:01:00

Washburn:

That's what I wanted to ask you. Do you think, because some of these things you said, you didn't notice race so much, it seems you didn't notice race so much. Do you think that was because of your age?

02-00:01:12

Russell:

No, my age didn't have anything to do with it.

02-00:01:15

Washburn:

But you were saying that it's the older folks who you think created the segregation more or paid more attention to it.

02-00:01:20

Russell:

Oh, I mean the parents. I was very young at the time. No, I'm very proud of my age. I'm very proud. I'll tell it to you at the end of the session.

02-00:01:35

Washburn:

No, I don't mean your age now. I mean your generation then. Meaning, his parents' generation thought of things differently than yours.

02-00:01:44

Russell:

Yes, differently. Yes, yes. Here. Here. They had that animosity towards, towards, you know—.

02-00:01:56

Washburn:

Towards who?

02-00:01:57

Russell:

Probably towards race. I wasn't aware of it at that time, because I wasn't brought up like that. And I just, even today, well, everybody mingles here now in this day and age, but at that time they were very segregated, probably. But, when they were employed, they'd take anything, anybody during the war. They don't care who you are.

02-00:02:31

Washburn:

I'd like to talk to you more about the shipyards. You were saying that they took in everybody and that in Las Cruces you didn't mix with many Black people.

02-00:02:43

Russell:

There was no Black people.

02-00:02:43

Washburn:

Was the shipyards one of the first times you intermingled with Black people?

02-00:02:49

Russell:

Well, the first time, yeah in this area, in Richmond. It was the first place, but not back home.

02-00:02:57

Washburn:

Not back home.

02-00:02:59

Russell:

Nothing.

02-00:03:01

Washburn:

What did you think when you were intermixing with different races in Richmond?

02-00:03:09

Russell:

I kind of adjusted to it. I adjusted to it, but then I realized that there was segregation and I thought it was so ridiculous. That was my attitude. I didn't see why. Why should there be that? We weren't used to it, to not to accept anybody else. We accepted. In our faith, my faith—.

02-00:03:59

Washburn:

Catholicism.

02-00:04:00

Russell:

You live and you accept and everybody is your brother. That's the way we were brought up, exactly the way we were brought up. In fact, I went to work at this one place and this

Mexican person was so used to being—I guess he had a lot of incidents where they were segregated. Discriminate! That’s the word I wanted to say. They discriminated. He thought that I had that feeling too. I didn’t have that feeling of being discriminated. I never did. I never treated, discriminated. He says, “Don’t mingle with them, because they don’t consider you in their class.” I said, “No! I am going to act the way I am.” I says, “I feel the same, same area, same class and everything as everybody else here.” I says, “Why should I lower myself or think any different?” And he -

02-00:05:31

Washburn:

Where did you meet this person?

02-00:05:32

Russell:

Well, I’d rather not mention it.

02-00:05:36

Washburn:

This was in the 40s or in the 50s?

02-00:05:42

Russell:

This was in the 70s. No, I never felt myself discriminated, although, I had a touch of it, maybe, now. Now! Can you believe it? I wasn’t used to that. I can tell, I’m not being discriminated. But I have had a little touch of it and I can imagine how they feel, that’s awful, to be discriminated against. It is in full force in this day and age. You think it is less? No. It is getting worse. It’s getting worse. Especially, with the Black people. They say that this and that, you know, is this. But the thing is that yes, they have gone up to the top, a lot of them, but they don’t have the money or the facilities and if they do have them, they kind of keep them from furthering themselves. I’ve seen it. I’ve been right next to the situation and they have really not given them any opportunity to—the people that hasn’t had any knowledge, and if they have tried to be there, even if they get out of school or anything, the ones who have made it to the top, they have made it. But still, there is not that open thing for them to further themselves, like—

02-00:08:09

Washburn:

Opportunity.

02-00:08:10

Russell:

—like being free and say treat them like everybody else. They still have a hang-up on that situation and I think that is what is really holding them back. It has to do with the companies, you know.

02-00:08:28

Washburn:

Well Polly, since we don’t have too much time, I’d like to ask you some specific questions, I guess. Do you remember joining the union at the shipyards?

02-00:08:42

Russell:

Yes.

02-00:08:43

Washburn:

And what was the whole process? How were you introduced to the union and what did they ask of you? Can you describe that?

02-00:08:56

Russell:

The AF of L.

02-00:08:57

Washburn:

The AF of L.

02-00:08:59

Russell:

It was the shipyard builders of America. I was going to go to work as a welder, right? So you had to be in the union. So they would take your picture. I have the picture, if you want to see it, the badge.

02-00:09:27

Washburn:

I'd love to at the end.

02-00:09:30

Russell:

And the badge that I had from the shipyards, my number, I still have it. They would enroll you. I think it was in February, and I was twenty years old, with the Boilermakers.

02-00:10:00

Washburn:

Did they tell you about the union, what they were going to do and what they were not going to do?

02-00:10:08

Russell:

They were interested just that you belonged to the union. That's all. I was never aware—they didn't have any specific incidents or nothing.

02-00:10:23

Washburn:

You mean like strikes or something?

02-00:10:25

Russell:

Nothing, no! Because it was during the war.

02-00:10:27

Washburn:

Well, why do you say that that's just what you did? Why do you say that you had to join the union?

02-00:10:33

Russell:

Because that was the thing to do! You have to belong to the union, if you are going to work. That was part of the routine. You just automatically belonged to the union and you paid your fee.

02-00:10:47

Washburn:

Do you remember what you paid each month?

02-00:10:50

Russell:

No, I don't remember. But, it was in '45. That was one thing that I did.

I forgot to tell you, when I worked in the little tanks? It was little, little tiny tanks. You had to have a blower, because of the fumes. You had the blower going in, and every time they would put the blower in to get the fumes out while you were welding. I just put that in there, because you just didn't go in there and weld because hey!

02-00:11:39

Washburn:

It seems like you remember a lot about going into these tanks.

02-00:11:43

Russell:

Oh yeah.

02-00:11:47

Washburn:

Why do you remember it so vividly you think?

02-00:11:48

Russell:

Because I was so little! Nobody could do it unless you were little. They picked somebody who was little, because it was little tiny tanks. No big person could go in there. Other than that I remember skipping around the skids with all my gear on. Now I think back, I says, "How did I do it?" Evidently I was young and capable and I carried all my gear. I used to be very proud of my welds. I did them just perfect. The men, they just weld, boom. They don't care; it was a good weld, but messy. I was very particular. Just go real nice, real neat. Then if you took up that—well you don't do that—if you take it up you could see the beautiful weld.

02-00:12:54

Washburn:

I've seen you take off the, what's that called, the black and brown stuff, to clear it off?

02-00:13:01

Russell:

From the rod, yeah. If you look underneath, you can see the weld, how it is. You don't go around taking time to do that, but I know that you did that at school to see how good it is. I used to be real proud of my welding.

I did the tanks and I did the bulkheads, the floor, the real big rods, and the tanks was the overhead. That's unusual to have to do the overhead and the sides. And on the outside you just did whatever came around. I worked welding all around aboard the ship.

02-00:13:55

Washburn:

For instance, you mentioned the difference between your weld and the messier weld the men did. What other differences do you think there were between women workers and the men workers?

02-00:14:06

Russell:

Women seemed to be more conscientious in the job that they do. The men do it, but it's the rough, real— they do it in that same length of time, but messy.

02-00:14:40

Washburn:

You seem to think that the women paid more attention than the men do?

02-00:14:42

Russell:

Yeah, they're more specific, more conscientious. They're better. They're really good. Of course, there's exceptions.

02-00:14:52

Washburn:

Do you remember speaking with other women at the time about being a better worker, about the differences between you and the men?

02-00:15:03

Russell:

No, but we could see. We were workers. At that time we were getting the ships out. When you were working, we worked.

02-00:15:22

Washburn:

It was busy?

02-00:15:23

Russell:

It was busy. Really, you were in charge of your machine and I don't know if you know anything about welding, but you have to set that machine at the right temperature. So you can weld, so it'll be a good weld. And if you don't, your rod it's gonna stick or it's gonna jump.

02-00:15:47

Washburn:

Yeah, I've welded before. I know a little bit about it.

02-00:15:51

Russell:

Well, you know now! You have to set the machine at the right electrical temperature. We did that. I did that. I can't believe that I did that!

02-00:16:04

Washburn:

You said that you worked in cosmetology and then welding. That's a big difference. One seems more feminine and more delicate, and the other seems much more industrial and rough. How did you feel working the two different jobs?

02-00:16:26

Russell:

I was excited. I thought I was very good at everything I've done. I've never left a job unless it closed down. Every job I have had, they have gone out of business or something. I worked for Del Monte cannery in Oakland and the only reason I left it was because they closed down. Besides, it was just temporary. It was seasonal. The fruit is seasonal. While I was working at—I'll say this real fast—the cannery was over, right? They closed down. F and P closed down, out of business. I went to Del Monte. They closed down. While I was working at Del Monte, in Oakland, I'd get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and go to work at 10 o'clock at night. At 10 o'clock at night—

02-00:17:39

Washburn:

Graveyard shift.

02-00:17:40

Russell:

Graveyard, okay. When I would get up at 6 o'clock, then at 7 o'clock I'd go to another job, the present job that I have. In between time, I had another job, at the cannery, and I worked for social service, and the job that I have now. I had three jobs going. I went to the cannery to 6 o'clock in the morning and then I'd get off from there, then go to work where I am working now. It was part-time. Then I'd work there at this job. Then I'd get off from this job and go social service—take care of people, drive them to the bank and all that stuff, social service. So I had three jobs going at the same time.

02-00:18:38

Washburn:

This is during what period?

02-00:18:40

Russell:

That was in the '70s.

02-00:18:45

Washburn:

Tell me about how you ended up leaving the shipyards.

02-00:18:50

Russell:
It was over!

Sister:
The War was over.

02-00:18:52

Washburn:
It ended?

02-00:18:55

Russell:
It ended, yeah, because I say every job I've had —

02-00:18:57

Washburn:
It seems interesting that there was all this work going on and here comes the end and it's very abrupt. Tell me how you—

02-00:19:08

Russell:
Well, I was so anxious to go to the beauty—I was only working there because I needed the money to get my license.

02-00:19:18

Washburn:
Oh, for cosmetology school. Right.

02-00:19:22

Russell:
As soon as I got this money, then I went to school, passed the test, got my license, then went to work. While I was working, then I still worked at the canneries at night. I got married in '48. I got married and had my children. That's why I had to be working at night. My husband and I kind of —

02-00:19:56

Washburn:
Switched?

02-00:19:57

Russell:
Yeah, so I had my children. Right now my son works on the Internet. He is an Internet person. He has contracts with Rhino. My daughter works in Walnut Creek and she is the head of—they take care buildings. I don't know the—they call her company if they need something in the buildings and stuff like that. Real good job.

02-00:20:45

Sister:
Building Management.

02-00:20:49

Russell:

Right. And then right now, I'm working full-time, finally. Now, I don't have no social service, no nothing. I am working full-time, 8 o'clock in the morning, eight hours a day. I could work overtime, if I wanted to, but it's eight hours. That's what I am doing now. I'm working.

02-00:21:13

Washburn:

Since leaving the shipyards, it seemed like not a very long period compared to all these other jobs, but do you remember—?

02-00:21:23

Russell:

That was the first job I got here, in California. Yeah, it was the first job that I came to. That was the only thing there for me to go to work on. That was really fascinating for me to go to work there and be able to earn money for what I wanted to really—I wanted to go back into my trade.

02-00:21:48

Washburn:

Do you remember what you were paid a day?

02-00:21:50

Russell:

You know, it wasn't very much at that time. Of course, at that time it was probably reasonable.

02-00:22:03

Washburn:

For instance, do you remember having money to buy close, to spend on shopping?

02-00:22:11

Russell:

Yeah, I had enough to go shopping and be able to pay for my school. Yeah, it worked out fine, it worked out really good. I've been very fortunate, though. I have been very fortunate in all the things I have accomplished.

02-00:22:43

Sister:

This is what's fascinating, when she tells about what you look forward to after work. Tell about the dances!

02-00:22:47

Washburn:

Yeah, tell me about that. Thanks for bringing that up. You befriended people on the job, did you at the shipyards?

02-00:23:00

Russell:

Yeah, well I told you that that we went for entertainment that we'd go with friends that we worked with. Well, my entertainment was going dancing and that was at Sweet's.

02-00:23:19

Washburn:

In Oakland?

02-00:23:20

Russell:

In Oakland, Sweet's. That was a very famous place, big ballroom dancing and they had the big name bands there, all the big name bands at that time that existed.

02-00:23:35

Washburn:

Did you go with your friends, your girlfriends from work?

02-00:23:37

Russell:

Uh huh. Yeah. We didn't have dates. We didn't like to have dates, because you could dance with everybody. [laughs]

02-00:23:48

Washburn:

In couples or just in a group?

02-00:23:51

Russell:

No, they'd come and ask you to dance!

02-00:23:55

Washburn:

Men would come and ask you to dance?

02-00:23:56

Russell:

Yeah, it was during the war. It was just full, packed with servicemen. All kinds of servicemen—navy, machine, army, navy, everything. And if you were with somebody, naturally, you're just with that one partner. But, if you go just on your own, you are able to dance with anybody. And I loved to dance with everybody, different ways of dancing. Then we didn't have to—at that time you could go and come on your own. We'd catch the bus. Can you believe it? We would catch the bus and we never did leave with anybody.

02-00:24:50

Washburn:

You mean late at night?

02-00:24:52

Russell:

Late at night. We would never be with anybody.

02-00:24:58

Washburn:

So you felt safe?

02-00:24:59

Russell:Yeah, it was safe. We'd catch the bus. I mean, it was safe.

02-00:25:05

Washburn:

When you say "we" who are you talking about?

02-00:25:07

Russell:

My friends who I went to the dance with.

02-00:25:10

Washburn:

These were friends that you worked in the shipyards with?

02-00:25:15

Russell:

Yeah, they did. They happened to live in my area, too. We would go and we'd come home together. It was late at night and never, no incidents. It was safe at that time to be catching the bus late at night, usually at 2 o'clock in the morning. [laughs]

02-00:25:40

Washburn:

Let me ask you two specific questions. What do you think was most important for you making friends when you first arrived: was it the people you met in the shipyards or was it the people that you lived with in your neighborhood?

02-00:25:55

Russell:

I got attached to the people, to the shipyard. This one friend, or friends. Around my neighborhood, in my age, there was nobody that I could mingle with. Now my sisters—I'm older. My sisters were—they've got fantastic stories with their friends, but my friends were from a different—

02-00:26:28

Sister:

Trades.

02-00:26:30

Washburn:

Different trades or were you [to Polly] going to say different neighborhoods?

02-00:26:36

Russell:

No, I was going to say they were from the city. The servicemen, they weren't confined to the area where I lived. They would be in either stationed someplace—

Sister:

Treasure Island.

Russell:

—and they were all concentrated here in Richmond, because here is where the action was. Richmond was where the action was, and Oakland. The entertainment. That's where everybody would come. And that's where we would go and find entertainment. And, like I said, it was safe at that time to go out and come back. Now you couldn't do that. I would never, never do that. No way.

02-00:27:36

Washburn:

It seems interesting that you describe when you were at the shipyards all this equipment and clothings you had to wear—

02-00:27:44

Russell:

Well, that's interesting for me even now.

02-00:27:46

Washburn:

—And then you'd obviously go out in your nice clothes when you went to the dance. What was that like for you and your girlfriends to be at work together with your more industrial clothing and then go home and put makeup on and put your dress on and then go out and be in totally different kind of clothing? What was that like?

02-00:28:05

Russell:

I don't know, it just happened. What can I say? It was just part of the—you just take off your gear and everything and then change and then go. It was just normal for me to do that.

Sister:

Just transform into a beautiful person.

02-00:28:26

Washburn:

Do you remember what you guys would say? Would you laugh about the clothes you wore or—?

02-00:28:30

Russell:

No, it was just normal for us. We did the job and it's over with and then all we were interested in was getting dressed and go to dance. [giggles] We'd have a lot of fun.

02-00:28:54

Washburn:

Did you and your girlfriends ever talk about being uncomfortable in the clothes that you worked in?

02-00:29:00

Russell:

No, it was comfortable wearing it. It was comfortable. And you had to wear it, because you have to. When you're welding, if you weld, you know you don't want to weld without any—not only a jacket, we had to wear the pants! You wear the pants and the jacket and the hat.

02-00:29:33

Washburn:

The visor.

02-00:29:35

Russell:

Right, so you were all covered. And your gloves, what about your gloves? You had your leather gloves on, great, big, you know. I must have looked really funny, because I was so little and they probably had to find the smallest thing they could find [laughs] and all that equipment wrapped around me. That was quite an experience with me being a welder. Now I think back, "Wow." It remained with me for a long time, the welding. I said, "Oh you know, I could go get a job as a welder afterwards." I says, "If wanted to."

02-00:30:33

Washburn:

Instead you went to cosmetology school?

02-00:30:36

Russell:

Well, sure.

02-00:30:37

Washburn:

So why didn't you get a job welding?

02-00:30:38

Russell:

That's what I'm saying, because I was aiming for my trade. I'm thinking, now, way after, I says when I would see, maybe at the cannery somebody would be welding, I'd say, "Oh I could do that."

02-00:30:57

Washburn:

Why didn't welding become your trade then? Why did you decide after having all this experience, not doing welding and going back to—?

02-00:31:05

Russell:

I don't know. Maybe it wasn't that easy for a woman to get a job. After the shipyards, I don't think it'd be easy for a woman to get a job someplace else. There was too many men looking for another job too. Have a lot of competition to really think that way. And besides I had my trade, which it was much more glamorous.

02-00:31:34

Washburn:

Do you remember what you and any of your girlfriends said once you ended work? What people were going to do afterwards? Maybe you talked to your girlfriends about going to cosmetology school. Do you remember what everybody else was discussing?

02-00:31:48

Russell:

No, they all went after different directions. They got married. They never did find no hardship or anything, because they got married. I, myself, got married, so there was no space there for me to wonder about anything. Because I was busy all my life. I've had jobs all my life, all kinds of jobs. Especially, that tail end of it, the social service and the cannery and what I have now.

02-00:32:34

Washburn:

It seems like you speak about that as a fun time. You and all your girlfriends are working. You're single. You have money. You're going out dancing. Then afterwards, you stop working and you get married. What was that like being single and working?

02-00:32:54

Russell:

It was a lot of fun.[laughter] Being in that space there that you're single, it was exciting. For me, at that point in time, it was a time where there was a lot of people or friends were all out there. We would mingle and it was fun. It was really fun. We never did talk about—as far as segregation or anything like that or prejudice or anything, there was nothing—

02-00:33:44

Washburn:

You mean sexism?

02-00:33:46

Russell:

No, it was all just an area where everybody was a brother to you, just happy to be with each other, to come together after the war, really. We weren't divided. We just looked forward to enjoy ourselves. People, their lives went on in different directions. It was all done in the time when everybody was very happy. That point in time where everybody mingled and they were very happy. After that, then I noticed things falling apart. Then is when I started—or they would bring it to my attention about segregation and being discriminated and all that. I couldn't understand. I was never, you know. Well, other people, they probably experienced it, especially the Black, but I really didn't get the full impact until now. Until now! I get the full impact about—

02-00:35:24

Washburn:

—What was going on at the time.

02-00:35:25

Russell:

What was going on. That's right, because I was very close to it. I've been very close to it and can understand the problem that's going on. But myself, personally, I have no problems with segregation.

02-00:35:45

Washburn:

Do you mean discrimination?

02-00:35:46

Russell:

Discrimination, right. Although, there might be some point in time where somebody wants to discriminate towards me, but I'm not aware of it. Maybe they tried to, but I just don't think anything of it. But, I know how they feel, because I've seen the other people how they—very obvious what they do.

02-00:36:22

Washburn:

Do you remember what went on with the Japanese in Richmond at the time?

02-00:36:33

Russell:

Just from what I hear. I never did see any Japanese. Never.

02-00:36:42

Washburn:

After the war ended and Japanese started coming back to Richmond, do you—

02-00:36:48

Russell:

Then it was known through the news media and all that what was going on. That's when I was made aware of it, what went on. I didn't know it was that bad. Although, back home, the lady that I worked for, for the beauty shop, her husband was in the death march.

02-00:37:11

Washburn:

Death camps.

02-00:37:12

Russell:

A death march

02-00:37:13

Washburn:

A death march? What's that?

02-00:37:16

Russell:

Well, there was a death march in the war, during the war. They got all this army personnel and they walked them until they died.

02-00:37:30

Washburn:

Who did that?

02-00:37:32

Russell:

The Japanese. They just walked them and they call it “the Death March.” You should look into it, it’s part of history. “The Death March.” And if it isn’t there, hey, they’re missing something. That was very sad, because everybody knew about the Death March. That’s where he died. My boss back there, her husband was in the Death March. Like I said, you know, there are some things that happened during the war that I don’t remember that I forgot that come out.

02-00:38:07

Washburn:

You describe it as a happy time when you were living in Richmond, yet there was all this death in the war. Why is that?

02-00:38:17

Russell:

You know why? We didn’t get the paper. We didn’t get the paper. Like I said, I was aware of it, later when it was on television. Then television came on during that time and that’s when we were exposed to more things that were going on, television.

02-00:38:44

Washburn:

How did you hear about news at the shipyards?

02-00:38:48

Russell:

At the shipyards? Like I said, there was no news, just what was happening. There was a war was on! We were just building and the war was on. We had to build the ships and that was it. As far as things that was going on behind the scenes, nobody even knew what was going on, not until it came out in the open through television and people that were interested more in world affairs and all that. I didn’t know anything about the camps that were going on for the Japanese. I didn’t know it was that bad at that time. I knew it was going on, but I wasn’t aware of it.

02-00:39:37

Washburn:

You never remember reading *The Richmond Independent*?

02-00:39:40

Russell:

Not until much, much later. I know, there is a lot of stuff that—I know that if you’re in Richmond and you talk to people that really can remember, they’ll be very interesting for you. But all I know is that I went to the shipyards when I came, became a welder, and I went back to my trade. I worked at the cannery and I went into social work and the present job today. And I specialized in wigs for four years. That was very interesting and I could tell you something off the record. [laughs] Because some people from your area

came to see us, doctor, lawyers, you name it. They came back and showed me how they looked. They says, “What do you think?” I says, “I think you look great.”

02-00:41:04

Washburn:

With the wig on?

02-00:41:05

Russell:

Everything, purse, heels, everything. They’d come in and say, “How do I look?” because I would sell the wigs to them.

02-00:41:13

Washburn:

To women?

02-00:41:15

Russell:

No. To men.

02-00:41:16

Washburn:

Oh really, you’d sell wigs to men?

02-00:41:17

Russell:

I’m telling you—oh yeah, to women too, but mostly were people from doctors, lawyers.

02-00:41:27

Washburn:

Is this in San Francisco?

02-00:41:29

Russell:

No.

02-00:41:30

Washburn:

This was in Richmond. So it was transvestites who came?

02-00:41:32

Russell:

There we go.

02-00:41:34

Washburn:

Interesting. They were white men who were lawyers and doctors?

02-00:41:41

Russell:

Oh yeah. At first they’d come in and say it was for their girlfriend. I was very good at selling and then they’d get comfortable talking to me and they says they want to try it on.

They try it on. I says, "It looks good, really good!" They got so comfortable that they would come back and show me how they'd look with the whole outfit on.

02-00:42:08

Washburn:

With a dress?

02-00:42:09

Russell:

Everything. They they looked fantastic.

02-00:42:14

Washburn:

What did you think about that? When was this? What years?

02-00:42:18

Russell:

That was between '60 and '70. Right in there. I knew a little bit about it, see, because we weren't exposed to that back home. We didn't know a thing about it. Mom never did mention nothing like that.

02-00:42:37

Washburn:

Homosexuality and transvestites?

02-00:42:39

Russell:

But when I was at the shipyards, it's where, on the bus, the girls would tell me, "Be careful with that girl." It was a girl that was, you know, that she was catering to me. She says, "You be careful. She isn't what you think," or something. I couldn't understand what! Because I wasn't exposed to it. That was during the time going to work at the shipyards. I learned a lot of stuff going to the shipyards, stuff like that, personal stuff like that, you know, sex.

02-00:43:21

Washburn:

So they thought she liked you.

02-00:43:23

Russell:

Yeah.

02-00:43:24

Washburn:

She was a lesbian?

02-00:43:25

Russell:

Right. She says, "Be careful with her."

02-00:43:27

Washburn:

Did she ever try and ask you on a date?

02-00:43:33

Russell:

No, she was very nice. And when they warned me, I didn't know what they were talking about so they had to explain it to me.

02-00:43:43

Washburn:

What about that? Were there a lot of women who started to date other women at the shipyards?

02-00:43:53

Russell:

Oh, I imagine so. Like I said, I wasn't aware of this. I imagine there was, because there was this, you know, people there that my friends knew about. They were probably here longer than I was. I had just gotten into Richmond and I was exposed. All of a sudden, here I am in—Las Cruces was just a little town and we weren't exposed to a lot of this stuff. Come from a little town into the big city, and there is a lot there going on. That's one of the things that I learned about that. So, what I was getting to was that when I went to work at the wig shop, I already knew this. So it was no—

02-00:44:55

Washburn:

That there were lesbians and homosexuals in the area?

02-00:44:57

Russell:

Yeah, so it was okay. That was my job. Really, really good.

02-00:45:11

Washburn:

Why do the people on the bus, your girlfriends, thought she was—?

02-00:45:16

Russell:

They didn't think she was.

02-00:45:19

Washburn:

The didn't think she was what?

02-00:45:20

Russell:

She was a —

02-00:45:22

Washburn:

Lesbian.

02-00:45:23

Russell:
Lesbian.

02-00:45:24

Washburn:
They did or did not?

02-00:45:24

Russell:
They did know.

02-00:45:25

Washburn:
They did know?

02-00:45:26

Russell:
Oh yeah, that's why they warned me. Evidently she must have made a pass at them. They wouldn't have anything to do with her, but then I wasn't aware of it, so they warned me.

02-00:45:39

Washburn:
Was that the only time when you were at the shipyard that that came up?

02-00:45:44

Russell:
Yeah, that was the only time and then that's when I started learning and looking out, you know, to be careful. Gradually, I started beginning to know how it was out there.

02-00:45:58

Washburn:
Hmm, that's interesting. Okay, so I think we have to end.

02-00:46:06

Russell:
Okay.

02-00:46:07

Washburn:
Thank you very much Polly Russell.

02-00:46:10

Russell:
[chuckles] You probably want to have nothing to do with that there.

02-00:46:14

Washburn:
No, you had some excellent stories.

02-00:46:20

Russell:
I am very glad or honored that you had me narrate this.

02-00:46:29

Washburn:

It was my honor to listen to the story.

02-00:46:31

Russell:

I know it wasn't too much maybe of what you wanted, but all of the things that I have done have been very interesting and I have been very happy doing what I ever I have been—I have never been forced to do a job that I didn't like and there's a lot more, you know. I didn't drive until it was in the '70s.

02-00:47:01

Washburn:

Yet you did all these other difficult things, but you still didn't drive.

02-00:47:07

Russell:

Yeah. And I was born in 1924.

02-00:47:09

Washburn:

Born in 1924 in Las Cruces.

02-00:47:11

Russell:

Las Cruces. Right. And you already know this, because you got it from—did you get that?

02-00:47:21

Washburn:

I'd like to, if I could—

02-00:47:24

Russell:

You can have this. You can write my name on it on the back so you can remember where you got it, because that's my birthday: ten, fourteen, twen—

02-00:47:35

Sister

Next month she turns—

02-00:47:37

Russell:

Twenty-four.

02-00:47:40

Washburn:

[chuckles]

02-00:47:45

Russell:

So that makes me, how old?

02-00:47:48

Washburn:

Twenty-four...seventy-eight. Fantastic.

02-00:47:58

Russell:

Right about done. [laughs]

02-00:48:02

Washburn:

I would love to get a photograph of your union badge and stuff like that. Did you bring it?

02-00:48:09

Russell:

Is my purse out there?

02-00:48:10

Washburn:

I'd love to get a photograph of that. That'd be great.