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Celeste Silvas

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
Judith Dunning
in 2003

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Family life—born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—parents were from Portugal—father suffered a tragic accident and died in the explosion—hard on her mother when they moved to Hercules—married again to a man who worked in Hercules—describes her mother as a very sweet woman—her mother had lung surgery since she had a tumor on her lung—Pinole's early community description—grew up in a Catholic family—didn't see any racial divides in school—changes in population in Richmond—most people came from the Midwest—worked in the shipyards for four years—didn't allow one to work if you were pregnant—became secretary at Ellerhorst School—her husband left for the military in 1942 and married in 1943—wrote letters back and forth to each other—bought war bonds-- single women had a tough time finding housing—has three children and four grandchildren—doesn't plan on flying to Brazil or Portugal—views on the current war and how fear is instilled in people's minds.

Interview #1: March 31, 2003
Begin Audio File 1

1-00:00:09

Dunning:

Good morning. Today is March 31st, 2003, and we are interviewing Mrs. Celeste Silvas at her home in Pinole, California for the Rosie the Riveter project. And my name is Judith Dunning and I'll be interviewing you today. And on camera is Katherine Stein. So thank you for having us over.

1-00:00:33

Silvas:

You're welcome.

1-00:00:34

Dunning:

And I'm going to start off a little bit talking about family background. And we'll start off with what is your full name?

1-00:00:43

Silvas:

Celeste Barbara Silvas.

1-00:00:46

Dunning:

What year were you born?

1-00:00:48

Silvas:

1924.

1-00:00:49

Dunning:

Where were you born?

1-00:00:51

Silvas:

In Rio de Janiero, Brazil.

1-00:00:55

Dunning:

And do you know where your parents were born?

1-00:00:58

Silvas:

My father was born in Oporto, Portugal. My mother was born in— oh dear.

1-00:01:11

Dunning:

Well, that's okay— .

1-00:01:11

Silvas:

Lígares, Portugal.

1-00:01:13

Dunning:

In Portugal. Not on the islands, just on the continent.

1-00:01:16

Silvas:

No, on the continent.

1-00:01:20

Dunning:

Did your parents ever tell you stories about why they left Portugal for Rio?

1-00:01:26

Silvas:

Well, we had an aunt and an uncle in Rio de Janiero. And they told my grandmother that they wanted someone to come over, and they were going to give her a good job and what have you. And so my mother went to Brazil. They came and got her. And they rode horseback, my mother said, from where they lived in—my mother lived in Lígares, it's called, *Trás-os Montes*. In other words, it's "Behind the Mountains." And so they went by horseback to the ship. And they got on the ship to Rio de Janiero. And my mother thought that this was going to be just a short-term thing. So when she got there, this aunt and uncle put her to work as a maid for them. And so, anyway, while she was there, she met my father. And they were married. And they bought a grocery store and ran a grocery store in Brazil. And then, my mother had a cousin who was working at the Hercules Potter Company here in Hercules. And he said that he wanted them to come to America, because it was much better here than Brazil, and what have you, and he'd have a better future. So they came to Hercules, and lived in Pinole first, and then in Hercules in the village. We came in 1925, and then in 1929, they had the explosion where my father was killed, and so then my mother was left with four little ones. My sister Arlette and I were born in Brazil and came with my parents. And then when they got here, then my sister Stella was born. And then we moved to Hercules, to the village, where all the workers lived, and then my sister Beatrice was born in Hercules.

1-00:03:24

Dunning:

Do you have any recollections of that time when there was the explosion? You were about four years old then?

1-00:03:32

Silvas:

Yes. I remember we were playing in a—I wasn't in school yet. Arlette was the only one, the oldest one, in school. And we were playing in the sandbox, several of us children. And we just heard the horrible noise. It was just really, really loud. And then the women in the village would all run out, because naturally all their husbands worked there. So I went running home, because we were playing next door in Mrs. Randall's yard. Her little son was there too. And she came running out. And so all the kids followed her, and then we didn't know what happened yet. And then this car pulled up in front of our house, and these men came to the house. And then I could

hear my mother screaming, and so we all ran into the house. And that's when we found out that my father had been killed.

1-00:04:28

Dunning:

Do you have many recollections of your father?

1-00:04:33

Silvas:

Very little. I remember him—just very little.

1-00:04:37

Dunning:

Were there stories that your mother passed down to you about your father? I just wonder what, how big a presence he had in your life, you know, after he died.

1-00:04:53

Silvas:

Since I don't remember him, I know that he was born in Portugal, and then he was a bookkeeper and went to Brazil and married my mother and came. And then, I don't remember a lot.

1-00:05:12

Dunning:

Did your mother ever talk about what kind of a man he was?

1-00:05:16

Silvas:

Very gentle. Very gentle man. She said that he was very good to her and very good to us.

1-00:05:23

Dunning:

When I interviewed Stella, your sister, one of her recollections was your father on his payday would bring candy.

1-00:05:33

Silvas:

Oh, yeah. We all got—we all lined up on the steps, and we'd all get a candy bar.

1-00:05:40

Dunning:

Well, how did your life change after your father died?

1-00:05:44

Silvas:

Well, it was hard on my mother because she took in boarders. I think we had two or three men that she would live—well two lived there I think for a while. And then she did ironing for a lot of the men who worked at Hercules. She ironed all their shirts, and what have you. And that she earned money that way. And then, my father came to live as a boarder, my stepfather. And so he was there for quite a while. And then we moved—. The village only allowed—the Hercules Potter Company only allowed my mother to stay I think two years. And then my stepfather

moved with us to a house in Pinole. And then shortly after that, my mother and stepfather were married.

1-00:06:40

Dunning:

Well, do you have more recollections of your stepfather?

1-00:06:44

Silvas:

Oh, yes.

1-00:06:44

Dunning:

Did you feel like he was your father?

1-00:06:46

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:06:47

Dunning:

What was his name?

1-00:06:49

Silvas:

Antonio Costa—Tony Costa.

1-00:06:53

Dunning:

Where did he work?

1-00:06:55

Silvas:

He worked at Hercules.

1-00:06:57

Dunning:

He worked there too.

1-00:06:58

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:06:59

Dunning:

But you couldn't still live in company housing?

1-00:07:02

Silvas:

No, by then the village was pretty full by then, and there were no homes left. So then we rented a house in Pinole, and then my folks bought a house on Peach Street in Pinole. We all moved there. I think I was eight years old when they were married.

1-00:07:25

Dunning:

What was your mother like? What did she look like? We can start off with her description.

1-00:07:33

Silvas:

She was so sweet. She was just the best little mother in the world. She was so good to us.

1-00:07:47

Dunning:

It must have been pretty rough for her after your dad died.

1-00:07:51

Silvas:

It was, of course. Yes. Well she didn't speak English. In fact, all of us spoke Portuguese. But this Mrs. Randall and then another friend of ours Mrs. Enos, who spoke Portuguese, kind of took care of us. She did everything. She took us shopping, and she did everything for my mother. Because my mother was not well when we were little. She had surgery, lung surgery. Had a tumor on her lung. And, so Mrs. Enos and Mrs. Randall kind of took care of all the children. There were four of us.

1-00:08:28

Dunning:

So it sounds like there was a real sense of community.

1-00:08:32

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:08:34

Dunning:

And it sounds like from the name Randall and some of the other names it wasn't just the Portuguese friends.

1-00:08:42

Silvas:

No, no. And they all were able to talk to my mother, I don't know how. Because my mother didn't speak English at all. In fact, at that time, Arlette and I spoke very little English. And then Arlette started school, and I started school, and I don't remember having any problem. We didn't speak English, but before long we were speaking English.

1-00:09:05

Dunning:

And did your mother learn English?

1-00:09:09

Silvas:

Yes, she did. But, you know, not really—broken English, but she did.

1-00:09:14

Dunning:

Well, what did Pinole look like when you first— ? Some of your first recollections of Pinole? Right now it's pretty built up.

1-00:09:23

Silvas:

Oh, yes. Very small, just a real small town. We had a little post office, and then several homes. And was nothing out the valley. It was just the valley. A few ranches out there. Now it's all homes, as far out as you can go, almost to Martinez. But at that time, it was nothing, just some ranches out there. And then we had the churches, two churches, Methodist and Catholic. And, that was about it. Very small.

1-00:09:56

Dunning:

Was your family very involved in Portuguese social organizations?

1-00:10:02

Silvas:

Oh, yes. Yes.

1-00:10:04

Dunning:

Would you like to tell us a little about that?

1-00:10:05

Silvas:

Well, they had the Holy Ghost celebrations. And my mother and father were very involved in that. And there were the SBRSI and UPPEC, all Portuguese. And they had a lot of Portuguese friends and they went from Holy Ghost to Holy Ghost. Because every summer, you know, you had one. And every city had one, where they had the queen. In fact, Arlette and I were both queens at one time.

1-00:10:38

Dunning:

When you were teenagers?

1-00:10:39

Silvas:

Yes. Well I was thirteen, I think, when I was queen. And so they were very involved in all the Portuguese lodges.

1-00:10:53

Dunning:

There's another Portuguese project going on in our office, so down the road someone might go into more depth about some of those recollections. But it sounds like you had a lot of activity—a lot of social activity. And your family, were they very involved in the Catholic Church?

1-00:11:15

Silvas:

Yes. In fact, one of the stained glass windows, my mother and father donated to the Church.

1-00:11:23

Dunning:

Well, tell me a little bit about your schooling? What was the first school you went to?

1-00:11:33

Silvas:

Oh, that's the Pinole-Hercules School. We called it the old school on the hill. It finally was torn down, but that's where we all went to school. And, well when we first started, they had a kindergarten in Hercules, so the little ones got to go there for kindergarten. And then later on, they had kindergarten in the grammar school, and so the rest of went there. The first grade teacher was Alice Ellerhorst and the principal was Francis Ellerhorst. And she also taught eighth grade. And so, they had a little farm downtown, right in Pinole, right near the Sante Fe station. And our first grade teacher used to—that was our treat. If we were real good, we got to go. She walked us all down there. We got to go see the animals, and then we walk back up the steep hill again. The teachers were really kind of tough on us, but they were good teachers. Then in the eighth grade, the principal rang the bell, and then it was kind of a treat for us if—we kind of watched the clock and when it was time to ring the bell, if she was busy, we could go press the buzzer and ring the bell. That was kind of a treat for us. But excellent teachers—an excellent school. So the school was torn down in '65, I think.

1-00:13:09

Dunning:

Do you remember your classmates? I know that there were a number of Italians living here—Italians and Portuguese, and some Irish.

1-00:13:20

Silvas:

Yes, there were. Irish, Italian, Portuguese, and then there were Mexicans, who worked the, the parent worked on the—the fathers worked on the railroad tracks, and they had little, we called them little shacks. And they were on the railroad track, and the Mexican families lived there.

1-00:13:45

Dunning:

Was there any prejudice at that time? In school?

1-00:13:51

Silvas:

We didn't know anything like that? We were all just friends and all played together. In fact, we had no black children in Pinole at that time. And when I got to high school, we had one black person in high school. We thought that was kind of strange, because my mother used to tell us in Brazil they had—their black people and Caucasion all were mixed, you know. There was no prejudice, you know. And so we weren't taught anything like that. And then in high school, we couldn't figure out why this boy was—nobody seemed to want to be around him, you know, he wasn't very involved.

1-00:14:37

Dunning:

You don't by any chance remember his name, do you?

1-00:14:39

Silvas:

If I think about it, I can.

1-00:14:43

Dunning:

Harry Williams?

1-00:14:44

Silvas:

No.

1-00:14:46

Dunning:

There weren't too many black families at that time.

1-00:14:49

Silvas:

No.

1-00:14:50

Dunning:

There was a Graves family, and Ellisons.

1-00:14:54

Silvas:

Ellison, that sounds familiar.

1-00:15:00

Dunning:

Well, what you're telling me rings true for a lot of people that I interviewed quite a while ago, that they really didn't notice prejudice in the schools or in the stores or anything until the big shipyard era came.

1-00:15:17

Silvas:

Yeah, that's when it all started. And then we had—a lot of black people came from other states, and all this happened, you know. They put them in one section of Richmond, and that's where they lived. And that's where they stayed. And we hardly ever saw them.

1-00:15:39

Dunning:

Well, before we get into the shipyard era, I'm going to ask you a little bit more about school. You attended in the Pinole area for eight years.

1-00:15:52

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:15:53

Dunning:

Did you have favorite subjects?

1-00:16:02

Silvas:

Let's see. Oh, gosh. I think I liked every—I loved school. In fact, in high school, I hated to graduate because I just liked school, you know. And I thought, oh geeh, what's going to happen now? I knew my parents couldn't afford to send me to college, so in fact, six months before I graduated I stopped the college course, and then I took shorthand and typing and book keeping so that I could, you know, get a job. But I just loved school. I liked everything. I can't think of anything I didn't like.

1-00:16:38

Dunning:

When you were a teenager, do you remember some of your ambitions? Things that you wanted to do in your life? Did you think along those lines?

1-00:16:51

Silvas:

Well, I'm trying to think if I did or not. I can't think of anything special.

1-00:17:00

Dunning:

Well, looking back now, is there any training that you think you would have liked had the era been different?

1-00:17:17

Silvas:

Well, by the time I got to high school, I thought I'd like to be an interpreter or something and go to different countries. But I knew it would never happen. But I always thought about that.

1-00:17:29

Dunning:

Now, do you remember at what point in your life people stopped treating you as a child, or when you considered yourself a grown-up?

1-00:17:43

Silvas:

I think about sixteen. Until then, I think we were just kids, you know. I don't know. My mother let us wear a little make-up, and we could wear long stockings. I don't think I dated until I was almost seventeen. It was a group of kids that just had a good time. And I went on a couple of dates when I was almost seventeen I think.

1-00:18:16

Dunning:

And would you, sort of socialize with your sisters? You had four sisters within six years age. Or did you all have separate friends?

1-00:18:28

Silvas:

We all I had separate friends. We all knew each other's friends, but we had separate friends.

1-00:18:36

Dunning:

Do you have any particular memories of your childhood that you find yourself reliving? Any special times, or special people?

1-00:18:55

Silvas:

If I had had any of these questions before I could have thought about it. Now I can't.

1-00:19:00

Dunning:

That's okay. Even if you think of it tomorrow, you can give me a call. Did you save many things from your childhood? Any, you know, scrapbooks or toys?

1-00:19:16

Silvas:

Well, we did have a lot of things in our basement at the home we lived on then, the one that my parents bought. Then one time my stepfather cleaned. In fact, it was when my oldest sister was going to be married, and we were going to have a big party at the house. And so he cleaned out in the basement and every place, and he threw away so many things, we found out later. Old photos and things. He just really cleaned. [laughs] So I think a lot of our things were in there, you know, in that. But I can't recall anything that I had that was a toy of mine.

1-00:19:59

Dunning:

Well, I'd like you to tell me if you had an idea about Richmond, what Richmond was like before World War II. Would you go into Richmond to do your shopping?

1-00:20:11

Silvas:

Yes, we did.

1-00:20:12

Dunning:

And so you were familiar with Macdonald Ave.?

1-00:20:16

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:20:18

Dunning:

What did it look like?

1-00:20:20

Silvas:

Well, there were a lot of stores, and they had clothing stores and hardware stores. That's where we did most of our shopping, unless we got on the bus and went to Oakland, then we'd shop at, like, Hale Brothers and the old Capwell's. And then my parents used to buy—there was a big market down there, and we used to go in and buy different things in that big market. I remember that.

1-00:20:54

Dunning:

We know Richmond's image today. What was its image at that time? This would be in the thirties, early forties.

1-00:21:10

Silvas:

Just old stores. We only went on that one avenue. We didn't know anybody there. We just shopped. We shopped on Macdonald Ave.

1-00:21:22

Dunning:

And would you take a bus there?

1-00:21:24

Silvas:

Well, my parents had a car. But if we went alone—they had a theatre, the Fox theatre, way down in Richmond, and we'd get on a bus on a weekend, and just—we'd get off on, I think it was about Twenty-third and Macdonald, and walk all the way down to Tenth Street or Ninth Street to go to the theatre. And when we were through, we'd walk all the way back to the bus depot and ride the bus back to Pinole. All by ourselves, little, little kids. Nobody worried about anything.

1-00:22:03

Dunning:

And when the population grew at the beginning of the war from 23,000 to over 125,000, were you aware of this rapid change?

1-00:22:15

Silvas:

Oh, yes.

1-00:22:16

Dunning:

When did you first start noticing it? That things were really different?

1-00:22:25

Silvas:

Well, a lot of people, you know. A lot of people in cars, and there were crowds. You know, you could go before and you'd meet a few people walking in the streets. But then it got very crowded, and we kind of stopped going in that area after that because things got a little rougher.

1-00:22:48

Dunning:

And you were in high school at the time. What was it like to be in Richmond High School, during those war years, especially when the boom was happening in Richmond?

1-00:23:00

Silvas:

Well, a lot of our friends started going into the service, and that seemed kind of strange. And—I don't know.

1-00:23:20

Dunning:

Did you notice many new students?

1-00:23:24

Silvas:

Yes, we did.

1-00:23:25

Dunning:

Right in the high school. And where were they from?

1-00:23:29

Silvas:

Just all the Midwest. Mostly the Midwest.

1-00:23:33

Dunning:

You didn't notice too many from the South at that time?

1-00:23:38

Silvas:

No, we still didn't. In fact in my graduating class of 1942 we had no black students.

1-00:23:49

Dunning:

Well, how was it to graduate in 1942? What was it like? Graduate from high school, there's, you know, major war going on.

1-00:24:02

Silvas:

I know. I didn't want to graduate, because I'd just was having such a good time. I just loved school. You know, I had good friends, and I had a good time. And then, all of a sudden, we were graduated and then we had to think about a job. So my sister Arlette was working at the shipyard at the time, and she told me that there was going to be an opening in the accounting department. So she talked to her boss, and he said, well have her come down. So I went to our dean of girls, who was good friend of all—she was good to all the girls. And I told her about it. And she said, "Well you have enough credits to graduate, so why don't you start down there?" This was about maybe two months before we graduated. So she said, why don't you just go ahead, and you'll be all set to graduate with your class, and we'll, you know, come back measure you for your gown and everything. And so I got to start a little bit earlier. So I got a job at the shipyard, and I stayed there from '42 to '46.

1-00:25:09

Dunning:

Okay, so you were there for quite a while. What shipyard were you in?

1-00:25:14

Silvas:

I was in Number Two.

1-00:25:20

Dunning:

Well, tell us about that. How was that job? And did you have a training?

1-00:25:28

Silvas:

No, we just went right in. And they just showed us that day what to do. And we had all the purchase orders. Everything they purchased for the shipyards was—all the orders came into our office. And then we had to write everything in big ledgers. They were huge. And we had to list all the companies, and how much the check was, what it was for, what part of the shipyard. And then we would have to write the checks, type the checks. And then we put them on a big machine, and then we would pull a lever—you know, we had to put in the total of the checks—and then pull this big lever, and then it would print the amount on it. And then we had to give it to another group in the office. They had to compare the purchase order with the check to make sure the amount was right, and then it went off to be signed and sent away. And it was tons—there were about fifteen or twenty of us working on that all the time. Naturally, they were building about what, two or four ships a month, and so there were a lot of purchase orders.

1-00:26:46

Dunning:

Now the rest of the shipyard was on a twenty-four hour schedule. How about the offices?

1-00:26:53

Silvas:

No, we were on an eight-hour.

1-00:26:54

Dunning:

Oh, okay. After you left in the afternoon, no one else came on?

1-00:26:59

Silvas:

No.

1-00:27:02

Dunning:

It was just an eight-hour. What other people were in the office?

1-00:27:06

Silvas:

There were people who had come from other places. A lot of people from the Midwest. Then, there were a few from Pinole—some girls from Pinole were in the office. One girl who came with her friend from Missouri. They just, you know, packed a bag and came. So anyway, they rented a little place in Berkeley. And this friend of hers got a boyfriend very soon after they arrived, but this other one, Lucille, didn't. After—they were there a few weeks—I asked her what she did on the weekends, and she said she just sat in the house and read. And I thought that was terrible. So I asked my mother if I could bring her, have her come on the weekends. And she said, of course. So she would come on the weekends. And then we would take the bus and go to Oakland, and we'd go to a show, and we'd go shopping at Capwells. And then we get back on the bus and come back. And then she'd ride to work with us on Monday morning, and then work

all week. But once in a while, she'd have something else planned for the weekend. But most of the time, she'd come and stay with us. And then, she had a teaching credential back there, but she couldn't use it in California. So then she started taking classes so that she could get her teaching credential up to date. So when the shipyard closed, then she became a teacher and worked at the Montalvin Manor school here in Pinole. And then she got married and had a son. And then the son went to Tahiti and got married. So she and her husband flew to see him in Tahiti. They were there a week, and at the end of the week, they were coming home. They got on the plane, and the plane got up, I don't know how many thousand feet, and it burst into flames, and she and her husband were both killed. This was long after the shipyard, but that's what happened to her. Just a real nice person.

1-00:29:20

Dunning:

Through those years, did you have contact with her?

1-00:29:24

Silvas:

Yes, oh yes.

1-00:29:25

Dunning:

She was a good friend of yours.

1-00:29:27

Silvas:

Because I worked at the school district. I worked for twenty-six years for the Pinole-Hercules school district, and she was teaching in one of the schools. So, yeah, it was sad.

1-00:29:39

Dunning:

And when did that happen? When was the plane explosion?

1-00:29:43

Silvas:

I wish I could remember. I was working at Ellerhorst School, and that was after 1965. So it must have been in the seventies, probably in the seventies—late-seventies.

1-00:29:53

Dunning:

That's a sad tale. Well, when I asked your sister if she had friends that came from other the parts of the country that she met in the shipyard office, she didn't really have too many. And so this is nice to hear that you did.

1-00:30:15

Silvas:

Yeah, there were several girls. You know, we used to have little parties. And then a couple of them would get married, so we'd have showers. And then we had a blanket club when we were at the shipyard, and every month we'd all put in so much money. And when we had enough in there for these blankets, we would get these beautiful blankets. So I'd always bring one to my

mother, and she was tickled to death to get a blanket. In fact, I think when she died, she had a new one there that she had never even used. Let's see, what else.

1-00:30:55

Dunning:

Well, did you have much contact with other people in the shipyard?

1-00:31:00

Silvas:

Not out of our office. No, only when every once in a while, we'd have a Portuguese person who would come to work there and didn't speak English. And so they'd call me from the office, and I'd have to go over and interpret and explain things to them about the health plan and how they were going to be paid, and all that.

1-00:31:27

Dunning:

Well I learned that you were a flower girl for one of the ship's christenings and saw a picture. Can you tell us about the circumstances of your being chosen as a flower girl?

1-00:31:41

Silvas:

Well, they ask me. I don't know whether my boss put in my name or what for the first one. But they asked me to be a flower girl, so I said okay. So I went, and my mother and father came and Mrs. Enos—you know we had Mrs. Enos all the time—they brought them down. So I was flower girl. And then on the second one, they were christening a ship, I forgot what the name of it was. I do have the names here But anyway they were coming from Brazil, and someone knew that I was born in Brazil and spoke Portuguese. So they called me and asked me to be flower girl again for this other ship. And so, I went and then I was able to speak with these people. So that's why I got to be flower girl for the second time.

1-00:32:36

Dunning:

Well, that was quite an honor.

1-00:32:38

Silvas:

Yeah, oh yes.

1-00:32:40

Dunning:

Were many of the other young women in the office, were they flower girls?

1-00:32:44

Silvas:

Not that I know of. None, no.

1-00:32:50

Dunning:

Well, when you were right in the shipyard, did you have a sense of, sort of, the feeling that it was really incredibly busy?

1-00:32:58

Silvas:

Very busy, very busy. We worked very hard. It was a busy office. And then, the secretary to the chief accountant was leaving, so they needed someone, and they asked me if I would like to be promoted to secretary of the chief accountant. And I was the only one in the whole big group that took shorthand. So I got that job, and still stayed in the same office. Then I was promoted from having to do the check business. I would just take letters and things like that. And then towards the end, about 1940, the end of '45, the shipyards were going to be closing around '46, '47. So then there was an opening in the office manager's office. Then I moved there and was secretary to the office manager.

1-00:33:58

Dunning:

So you were able to promote, to rise up there.

1-00:34:03

Silvas:

But the thing is I have my slip. When they were closing, so they were laying people off. And on my slip, I was getting a dollar twenty-eight an hour, after all those years.

1-00:34:16

Dunning:

Do you remember what you started at?

1-00:34:17

Silvas:

I can't remember. But I know it was a dollar twenty-eight, and I thought I was making tons of money.

1-00:34:27

Dunning:

Well, you mentioned something about the health care. Were you part of the Kaiser health plan?

1-00:34:33

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:34:35

Dunning:

And did you use the services?

1-00:34:37

Silvas:

I never had to use the service. I was never sick. I was very fortunate, very healthy.

1-00:34:45

Dunning:

And at that time, was the main hospital right on Cutting?

1-00:34:50

Silvas:

Yes, we had a hospital there. But I don't recall ever having to go there. Well, I guess I didn't—I can't remember.

1-00:35:01

Dunning:

Well that's good. Well, what was the atmosphere when the shipyards were closing? When I've spoken to some shipyard workers who were actually building the ships, they didn't have much notice at all. Basically the war ended, and they didn't come to work the next day.

1-00:35:24

Silvas:

Yeah, they just told us, you're getting your lay-off slips, because we're going to close. They were open for awhile after that, but they didn't have anything going. They weren't building ships by then. So that was it.

1-00:35:40

Dunning:

But you must have stayed a little bit longer after the war ended.

1-00:35:44

Silvas:

I stayed till '46. Then my husband came from the service. So then in 1948, I went to work for the school district. I can't remember how long I worked there. It wasn't very long, a couple of years. Then I got pregnant. They didn't let you work when you were pregnant in the school district.

1-00:36:11

Dunning:

Nobody could work? Even if you were in the office?

1-00:36:16

Silvas:

Oh, yeah. So I told the principal, and she said, well you know you can't work if you begin to show you can't work. So that was the end of that job. And then I stayed home until my husband lost his job in 1955 I think it was, 1954. So anyway, then he started over in another job, while Ms. Collins who was the superintendent by then. She used to be principal on the hill, not my principal but the next one. So she called me and asked me. She says, "I know Harold's out of work." She had taught both of us in the third grade, had taught all my kids, and she said, do you want to come work for awhile until he gets on. And I said, "Sure, I will." So I was there for twenty-six years.

1-00:37:17

Dunning:

And what was your job?

1-00:37:18

Silvas:

Secretary. First I was purchasing agent down at the Pinole-Hercules school, down at the Collins school. And then when the school unified with Richmond—Pinole-Hercules unified with Richmond School District, they wanted me to go to purchasing in Richmond, but I didn't want to

go out of town I wanted to stay here where my kids were. So there was an opening at the Ellerhorst School, so I went out there and then I was secretary out there for sixteen years. And I was ten years there at Collins.

1-00:37:47

Dunning:

So you really got to see a lot of the schools. And did you see the changes in the schools? In terms of the ethnic composition? Did people move from Richmond out to the Pinole area?

1-00:38:00

Silvas:

Not very many, no. They bussed them in—bussed in other children much later on. But at Ellerhorst School where I was, way out in the valley, there were no other children.

1-00:38:20

Dunning:

So you didn't see the same changes that they were seeing right in Richmond proper.

1-00:38:25

Silvas:

No.

1-00:38:27

Dunning:

Which was pretty big. (pauses) Well, I'd to go back a little bit to your high school period because you had a boyfriend, is that your husband? Was that your husband that left for the military?

1-00:38:39

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:38:41

Dunning:

And did he leave while you were in high school?

1-00:38:43

Silvas:

No. I graduated in '42, and he left in '42.

1-00:38:52

Dunning:

Oh, okay. Right after you graduated.

1-00:38:55

Silvas:

And then, he didn't come home until '46.

1-00:39:01

Dunning:

At what point were you married?

1-00:39:06

Silvas:

In 1943, on one of his leaves.

1-00:39:13

Dunning:

Well, how was it? You worked in the shipyards, yet you were a military wife.

1-00:39:19

Silvas:

Not in the shipyards. Well, yes, I was. That's right, I went back. We were married in '43, and I was still working at the shipyard. In 1944, I went to Texas—he was in Texas at the time. And I went to Texas for almost a month. I took the train, scared to death. Just absolutely scared to death. Took the train, and stayed about three weeks I guess, and then I came back and went back to work at the shipyard.

1-00:39:58

Dunning:

And was he overseas? [knocking] Oops. Maybe we should put that on pause. Somebody's at the door.

1-00:40:08

Stein:

And we're back again, and back on the camera.

1-00:40:11

Dunning:

Okay, we had another pause, but we're really going to go for it this time. Did your husband go to Europe during the war? Did he see action?

1-00:40:21

Silvas:

He went to Germany. Well he went to several countries. I have everything here on his life story—where he was. And then after the war over there—well it was right towards the end of the war—he took his accordion. He plays accordion. So he took his accordion with him, and one day they asked him to play someplace, I don't know, some big thing. And he did, and they asked him if he could to join this army band. So it was called Yanks a Million, I think. Then he did that until he was shipped home.

1-00:41:10

Dunning:

Now, did you still live with your mother and stepfather during that time?

1-00:41:15

Silvas:

Yes.

1-00:41:17

Dunning:

Now was it pretty common at that time? Was some of your other friends married as teenagers too?

1-00:41:25

Silvas:

Yes, there were a couple who were married. We all stayed with our parents until our husbands came home.

1-00:41:34

Dunning:

Did you worry much about your husband?

1-00:41:36

Silvas:

Oh yes. I did. It was hard. We wrote tons and tons of letters. Then they'd come home on a leave, and then we'd have to take them back to the train to get on. And we'd cry all the way home. It was a sad time.

1-00:41:59

Dunning:

Well, was there a real feeling of patriotism in the area?

1-00:42:04

Silvas:

Oh yes. I remember we had air raid signals, you know, and then everybody had to turn all their lights off at night. You couldn't have any lights on. And my stepfather asked several men in different areas of the town to be air raid wardens, I think they called them. And they put a black band on their arm, and then when they signal would come, and the lights would all have to be turned off, then he would go outside and he had to tour around the block and make sure all the lights were out and everything. I remember that. And then we all planted our victory gardens, I guess you know about those.

1-00:42:47

Dunning:

Did you have one at your mother's house?

1-00:42:49

Silvas:

Yes, we all did that. Tons and tons of vegetables, and we raised our own chickens and rabbits. Everybody was very patriotic. And we all bought war bonds. Tons of war bonds. Every payday we bought a war bond. That was very important. Everybody did that.

1-00:43:15

Dunning:

And what about the rationings?

1-00:43:18

Silvas:

We had sugar and butter. My husband's sister and brother-in-law owned a grocery store in Martinez, and so they would call us at the end of every month when they would get their butter supply in, and they'd give us butter. And our nylons. You know in those days, we didn't wear pants. Everybody wore skirts and nylons and heels. And so we'd go anyplace to get nylons. If they had a store in Oakland, or Macy's someplace, we'd all go line up early before the store even opened, all these women. It was amazing, just to get a pair of nylons.

1-00:44:07

Dunning:

And how many pairs were you allowed to buy?

1-00:44:09

Silvas:

Sometimes two. Sometimes if we were lucky, you know, they might give us three. But two was the most we'd ever get.

1-00:44:17

Dunning:

Did all the sisters go and do that?

1-00:44:19

Silvas:

Oh yes. The whole time I worked at Collins school, the ten years, we all still had to dress up and wear nylons after the war. And then in 1965, when we unified and I went to work at Ellerhorst, then it was around the late-sixties, early-seventies, that we finally got a notice from the district saying that the teachers could wear pants. And then we were wearing pants instead of skirts and our nylons.

1-00:44:54

Dunning:

Did you feel that it was a good change for you?

1-00:44:57

Silvas:

No, I didn't at the time, because some of the young teachers who were coming-in were just coming-in in sloppy jeans. And I thought, gee, they look so horrible, you know. They just came looking so awful, I thought. But maybe it wasn't. I don't know.

1-00:45:17

Dunning:

Well, a number of people have told me about the lines. Now I know you waited in line for nylons. Did you wait in line for other things?

1-00:45:31

Silvas:

I think nylons was the big thing.

1-00:45:33

Dunning:

And did you smoke at the time?

1-00:45:35

Silvas:

No.

1-00:45:35

Dunning:

No, okay. Because I've heard of long lines for cigarettes.

1-00:45:38

Silvas:

Yeah, they had those.

1-00:45:39

Dunning:

Especially in the shipyards.

1-00:45:40

Silvas:

Yeah, but I wasn't smoking.

1-00:45:43

Dunning:

When you were in Shipyard Two, would you go to one of the main cafeterias to eat?

1-00:45:51

Silvas:

We usually took our lunch, but once in a while we'd eat in the cafeteria. But the cafeteria was far, not far, but it was, well, a little walking distance from our office. So most of the people in the office just all sat around, you know. We'd kind of move our chairs around, sit around the desks, and just talk and eat our lunch. And so, we took our lunch.

1-00:46:14

Dunning:

Did you ever consider having a job of building the ships?

1-00:46:19

Silvas:

No.

1-00:46:21

Dunning:

That didn't appeal to you?

1-00:46:23

Silvas:

No. Not at all. Harold's sister worked out in Shipyard Number Three, and she was in the—I think it was the payroll department. So she would clock the men in and out, and that type of thing. But nobody else that I knew did any of the labor, the hard labor.

1-00:46:44

Dunning:

Well, your sister Stella told me that she would have to collect the time cards some afternoons. And she just said it was so noisy, it was unbelievable. She also remembered lots of particles in the air, that later when she thought about it, she thought maybe it was asbestos.

1-00:47:07

Silvas:

We didn't know. Once in a while, they'd just say close all your windows in the office. And we thought, oh okay, we'll close all our windows, you know, there's something flying around out there. But nobody ever dreamed of asbestos. In fact, when we were at grammar school on the

hill, we had in our basement nothing but huge, for our furnaces, these pipes were all wrapped in asbestos. And in the winter, that's where we played. We played in the basement. And we had these little balls that we'd bounce around, and we'd throw them. The boys especially would try to hit these pipes and hit the asbestos, and nobody thought anything. None of us ever had any lung trouble.

1-00:47:53

Dunning:

Oh, okay.

1-00:47:55

Silvas:

That I know of. But they were asbestos.

1-00:48:03

Dunning:

Have you heard about many lung problems with any friends in the area?

1-00:48:11

Silvas:

No.

[End Silvas01 03-31-03]

[Start Silvas02 03-31-03]

2-00:00:07

Dunning:

Well, did you ever meet Henry Kaiser?

2-00:00:09

Silvas:

No. No.

2-00:00:13

Dunning:

Because your sister mentioned that, I think it was when she was at Shipyard Three, occasionally he would come around, but mostly they would know he was in the building.

2-00:00:22

Silvas:

Well, everybody would tell us that he was there, and then we had all the chauffeurs and many limousines, so I guess all these people were chauffeured around from place to place.

2-00:00:33

Dunning:

There were limousines by the Shipyard two?

2-00:00:35

Silvas:

Oh yeah. Well, they were in all the yards, but mostly— . I think I have it here.

2-00:00:43

Dunning:

Now, who are the limousines for?

2-00:00:47

Silvas:

Just the big shots, we used to call.

2-00:00:50

Dunning:

The top brass?

2-00:00:51

Silvas:

Yeah, the top brass. They all were chauffeured around every place. I have another thing here.

2-00:00:57

Dunning:

Well, that's okay. Now do you remember any of the war housing?

2-00:01:05

Silvas:

I remember it was there, but I can't remember anybody who lived in any of them. All around Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Street in Richmond there were a lot of war housing. And we used to drive by them, but I didn't know of anybody who lived there.

2-00:01:28

Dunning:

How about the trailer parks? Did you see more trailer parks?

2-00:01:34

Silvas:

I don't remember that.

2-00:01:38

Dunning:

Well, I'd heard that a single woman couldn't get into war housing even if she worked in the shipyards. It had to be her husband. A husband had to rent. Were you aware of those kinds of regulations?

2-00:01:49

Silvas:

Yeah, we heard all that, but I still didn't know anybody. We were told that. That's why these single girls who came out from Missouri, they found a little apartment in Berkeley, because they couldn't get into the housing because they weren't married.

2-00:02:10

Dunning:

And so a single man who wasn't married, he couldn't get into housing either?

2-00:02:18

Silvas:

Well, I don't know about that. I don't know. I know that women had a problem with that.

2-00:02:23

Dunning:

Well, the whole issue about the enemy aliens, and your sister told me the story of Junko Mayeda, who was in her class at high school that was interned. And your sister also mentioned that some of the Italian neighbors and some German neighbors or people that she knew were quite nervous about having to be interned.

2-00:03:00

Silvas:

Especially the Italians here in Pinole. Some of those had to be. But we had to register my mother and Arlette and I—myself—and my stepfather all had to because we weren't naturalized then. And we had to register every year. In fact, I don't know where it is, but I have a copy of that too that I could show you. So every year we had to register as aliens. But they didn't have us move. But some of the Italians they did. I don't know why.

2-00:03:37

Dunning:

Do you remember any of those, were they neighbors or people who lived in Pinole?

2-00:03:42

Silvas:

Yes.

2-00:03:43

Dunning:

And when did they go to—did they have to go to some of the camps?

2-00:03:47

Silvas:

Yes, but I don't remember where now. There were a few Italian families that I knew that had to leave. We just had to register every year.

2-00:04:02

Dunning:

Well, did that make you and your parents nervous?

2-00:04:06

Silvas:

Yes. Especially since my mother came from Brazil, and my stepfather was in the navy very young, and when he came to the United States— . He was on a—what do you call it? He worked on the ships. But anyway they docked in Jacksonville, Florida, and he and a friend jumped ship to stay in the United States. And they went to a relative in Massachusetts and stayed there awhile. Then they heard about the Hercules Potter Company in California, so they came out here and got a job. So my father was always afraid that they'd find out that he jumped ship, and that he'd have to go back. So that was always a fear. And then when my mother and my father—my real father—when they came from Brazil they had to say that they were born in Brazil in order to get a visa to come to the United States. And so they did that. My mother didn't know it. My

father lied and said that they were both born in Brazil. So they always had this fear that someone would find out that they weren't born in Brazil they were born in Portugal. So that was another thing my mother worried about.

2-00:05:44

Dunning:

And when did they become citizens? And when did you become a citizen?

2-00:05:50

Silvas:

I became a citizen in 1950s, I think it was, forties. It's here someplace. Let's see, I had to go to Martinez to do that. (shuffles papers) It was November 9, 1949 in the Superior Court of Martinez. And that's when I got my naturalization papers. Until then I never worried about it, but then I got my papers then. That's when I started telling my story.

2-00:06:35

Dunning:

Well, I'll be really curious to read that. I'll look forward to it. Did you know any Japanese American students in your high school that had to leave?

2-00:06:47

Silvas:

No. Not in my class. I don't remember any.

2-00:06:56

Dunning:

Do you see Richmond as a historical place?

2-00:07:07

Silvas:

Not really. We don't go down there anymore.

2-00:07:13

Dunning:

When did you stop going down there?

2-00:07:20

Silvas:

I know it was after my husband got back from the service, because my mother and I used to go down and shop at Macy's. There used to be a Macy's on Tenth Street, I think. And we went down there and shopped a lot, and that was after the war. So I can't remember the time period.

2-00:07:42

Dunning:

Are there things that you think Richmond should be remembered for?

2-00:07:49

Silvas:

Well, the shipyards for one thing. (pauses) I can't think of anything right now.

2-00:08:02

Dunning:

Have any of the changes in Richmond impacted your life?

2-00:08:07

Silvas:

No.

2-00:08:11

Dunning:

Has your life pretty much been in this Pinole area? Pinole-Hercules.

2-00:08:15

Silvas:

Yeah. When they closed all the stores down there. You know everything closed. Macy's went out, and Penny's, and the Dollar Store—the National Dollar Store, it was called. And all the little restaurants where we used to eat—the little soda fountains and everything. Everything closed, and then that was the end for us. We never went back. Then things started getting kind of rough. We never had to worry about anything before that. Nobody had a key to the door. Doors were always open. We came and went, you know. We'd walk under the dark trestle going from the bus station downtown to the show. All these girls by themselves. But now you don't dare to do that. I mean, things have really changed. So then we just stopped going to Richmond. We don't go anymore. Kind of sad, but that's the way it is.

2-00:09:21

Dunning:

Well, anything else you'd like to add?

2-00:09:28

Silvas:

Well, let's see. Did I write anything down here? (shuffles papers) I guess you've asked me all of this.

2-00:09:50

Dunning:

Well, if at later time, any details or new stories come out, just give us a call. And, you know, you can either write it down, and we'll add it. Or we could come out again. Do you have any special plans now in your life?

2-00:10:13

Silvas:

No, I don't think so. Just to stay healthy. That's about it.

2-00:10:18

Dunning:

So how many children do you and your husband have?

2-00:10:21

Silvas:

We have three.

2-00:10:22

Dunning:

Three children.

2-00:10:23

Silvas:

We have four grandchildren.

2-00:10:26

Dunning:

And everyone's pretty local?

2-00:10:28

Silvas:

Yes. My daughter Christine—she's a nurse practitioner—she has two children. Michael is a machinist. And Kathy works for Pacific Bell. And they're in their thirties. Michael was married last year. Kathy's not married yet. And then my daughter Cynthia has no children. She's been with Chevron, in the library, for thirty-five years. Edward, our son in Vallejo, he works for the Orinda Unified School District, and he has two sons. One is in college, and one is in high school in Benicia. So that's our family.

2-00:11:13

Dunning:

And have you and your husband been to Rio?

2-00:11:16

Silvas:

No.

2-00:11:17

Dunning:

Have you ever been back to Brazil?

2-00:11:19

Silvas:

No. I talked to my cousin there, and that's about it. She's afraid to fly, and I'm afraid to fly. So I just know that I won't ever see her probably. And then I talked to a cousin in Portugal all the time. She passed away last year. So I don't talk to anybody there anymore?

2-00:11:49

Dunning:

Did you ever go to Portugal?

2-00:11:50

Silvas:

No. Just talked to them on the phone.

2-00:11:55

Dunning:

But you've been pretty active in the Portuguese organizations?

2-00:11:59

Silvas:

No. After our generation, we didn't do that, you know.

2-00:12:13

Dunning:

Well, I'm just going to add a couple of questions at the end. A lot is going on in the world now. You know, we have a war against Iraq. Does it feel different than it did during World War II?

2-00:12:35

Silvas:

Well, I'm afraid now. I didn't have that terrible fear, I guess because the war was far away. But now, you know, you just I think everyday, gosh are we going to be bombed here now, you know. And that frightens me. And I think about my grandchildren, and what it's going to be like for them. Because I have a grandson who is going to be twenty-one in May. And I think if they have a draft, he might be called, and, you know, that it worries me. It just seems like it's closer now, you know. When World War II, nothing was happening here. We didn't have that terrible fear. It's like it's here now. I don't like war, and I don't think we should be there, but since we are there, we just have to hope that our servicemen aren't killed. And it's happening a lot now. That's a terrible thing. I'm really worried.

2-00:13:49

Dunning:

Let's hear your feeling about the Homefront National and Historical Park in Richmond.

2-00:13:57

Silvas:

I haven't been down to see this thing they did for Rosie the Riveter. I haven't been down there yet, but I would like to go down there. Yeah, I would like to do that. But I haven't done anything about it.

2-00:14:15

Dunning:

Well, down the road when there's a visitor center, and if your pictures on the wall or something, you'll go to it. Well, thank you so— .

2-00:14:25

Silvas:

I was going to say, when we came over to this country, and we came through Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty and all, it was Iacocca, was it Iacocca who did the— ? Well anyway, my sisters and I put in money, and we had our name—my father's and mother's—our names put on the wall at Ellis Island. So that I'd like to see someday too.

2-00:15:01

Dunning:

Well, anything else you'd like to add?

2-00:15:06

Silvas:

After you leave, I'll probably think of a lot of things. It's hard. You know, you try and try to remember.

2-00:15:14

Dunning:

Well, you remembered a lot of things. This is great. We really enjoyed it.

2-00:15:19

Silvas:

Oh, I hope so.

2-00:15:19

Dunning:

And I hope it wasn't too bad for you. I know you had some misgivings about it.

2-00:15:25

Silvas:

Yeah, I did. Because I know I can't remember everything I'd like to.

2-00:15:30

Dunning:

You did great. Thank you so much.

2-00:15:36

Silvas:

Okay, it was fun.