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Hazel Spittler

Rosie the Riveter
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Javier Arbona
in 2010

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Hazel Spittler

Table of Contents—Hazel Spittler

Interview 1: August 9, 2010

Audiofile 1

Birth and childhood in Bay Point, California, before name changed to Port Chicago—parent's pathways to Bay Point—Family history—raised by her grandparents after mother's illness—father worked in lumberyards—childhood games in Bay Point—names of other families in area—Great Depression closed sawmills in the area—father and uncles lost jobs and find employment, housing, in San Francisco—town name changed to Port Chicago—employment after high school in mid-1930s—husband drafted and relocated to Pomona—additional recollections of first job and experience of women with male employer—elopement in Reno—discussion of husband declining UC Berkeley scholarship for employment opportunity—additional remembrances of elopement and husband's military drafting—additional recollection of name change to Port Chicago and the Van Winkle family properties—commuting to Mount Diablo High School on the train

Audiofile 2

Working for Shell Oil in Martinez, California—discussion of initial marriage proposition during Great Depression while living at home with parents—Economic hardships for her father during the Depression—father sells family house to buy grocery bills; builds a dwelling on brother's property—living in Pomona, California—returning to Port Chicago after husband was sent overseas—recollection of explosion at Port Chicago and damages to the houses—lost memories of town condemnation confused with explosion recovery—her uncle worked as a civilian ammunition loader at Port Chicago after the war—life after the war in Concord, raising a family with two daughters—returning to Port Chicago for religious services and special holidays—on meeting husband Al—discussion of Spittler last name

Interview #1 August 9, 2010
Begin Audio File 1 08-09-2010.mp3

01-00:00:00

Arbona: I'm in Sacramento, California. This is Javier Arbona on the microphone, and I am here with Hazel Spittler. We'll also be joined in a moment by Susan Swettenham, who's her daughter, and we're going to be talking about Mrs. Spittler's life and her experiences in Port Chicago and beyond. So really I think we could start with just talking about where you were born and your childhood, perhaps, and we'll take it from there. How about that?

01-00:00:54

Spittler: All right.

01-00:00:55

Arbona: Why don't you tell me where you were born?

01-00:00:59

Spittler: I was born in Bay Point, California, September 25, 1916.

01-00:01:18

Arbona: And that's Bay Point? The original Bay Point.

01-00:01:20

Spittler: Bay Point, California, which later became Port Chicago, California. And you wish to know what?

01-00:01:42

Arbona: Oh, I started by asking you where you were born, and then maybe we can do this also. Then you can tell us what your parents did or how they came to Bay Point.

01-00:01:59

Spittler: Well, my father was born in Sweden and came to America and landed in Washington. I'm not sure whether it was Louis—some place in Washington where his friends worked in the lumber industry. And that's where Daddy worked until I think the place closed and he moved down to Bay Point, which later became Port Chicago, to work at the Bay Point Lumber Company. What else?

01-00:02:56

Arbona: And how about your mom? Where did he meet your mom?

01-00:03:00

Spittler: Mama was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

01-00:03:08

Swettenham: No, she was born in Minnesota.

01-00:03:10

Spittler: She was born where?

01-00:03:13
Swettenham: In Minnesota.

01-00:03:16
Spittler: Yeah. And she moved to Bay Point because her relatives, the Freids, lived in Bay Point. So she moved out here and, of course, met my father at a boarding house in Bay Point. And they fell in love and were married.

01-00:04:13
Swettenham: And Grandma, didn't she go to grade school in Port Chicago?

01-00:04:20
Spittler: Didn't she what?

01-00:04:21
Swettenham: You told me that she went to grade school, the same school that you went to.

01-00:04:25
Spittler: Yeah, she did. My mother went to a grade school in Bay Point. And, of course, that's a long time ago.

01-00:04:41
Arbona: What were their names, if you remember?

01-00:04:44
Spittler: Ellen Freid and John Lodin.

01-00:04:49
Arbona: John Lodin. Freid, could you spell it out? Is it F-R-I-E-D or—?

01-00:05:00
Spittler: Ellen Freid. F-R-E-I-D. And Lodin was L-O-D-I-N.

01-00:05:12
Arbona: That's John's father?

01-00:05:15
Spittler: John, my father.

01-00:05:15
Swettenham: John was her father.

01-00:05:18
Arbona: John was—

01-00:05:19
Spittler: John Lodin.

01-00:05:23
Arbona: I was only mentioning John just because I also come to you through another John Lodin who's your nephew, would be your nephew. Okay?

01-00:05:33
Spittler: Yeah, yeah. In Concord.

01-00:05:36
Arbona: In Concord.

01-00:05:39
Spittler: Right. And did he give you an interview?

01-00:05:42
Arbona: I think we're going to try to do an interview with him. We haven't been able to schedule it because of his working hours, but I think we might try to do something on a weekend.

01-00:05:58
Spittler: He'd probably remember a lot more than I.

01-00:06:00
Swettenham: Well, but he wasn't alive in this period. Tell him about your brother and sister.

01-00:06:11
Spittler: {Signa?}. Well, Signa was a couple of years older than I, and she was—

01-00:06:30
Swettenham: She was born in Bay Point.

01-00:06:30
Spittler: —born in Bay Point in the same place I was, and she was brought up mostly by, of course, Mom and Dad. But when Mother was expecting my, as it happened to be my brother, my grandma and uncle who lived one lot away from them took me to raise because Mother was ill. She had a goiter, and at that time she couldn't be operated on until after she had had the baby. And she was just not able to take care of us both. So I moved and was really raised by my grandmother and my Uncle Eric.

01-00:07:52
Arbona: And those grandparents were on your mother's side?

01-00:07:57
Swettenham: Yeah.

01-00:07:56
Arbona: On your mom's side. So then your father had come from Washington to Bay Point, and your mother's family goes back another generation in Bay Point then. The grandparents? No?

01-00:08:23
Spittler: Well, Mama was born in Minnesota. My mother. And then she came to Bay Point.

01-00:08:36
Arbona: With her parents?

01-00:08:37
Swettenham: With her mother and brother.

01-00:08:47
Spittler: Brother. Grandma Freid and Uncle Eric.

01-00:08:52
Arbona: Came to Bay Point together.

01-00:08:51
Spittler: Uncle who?

01-00:08:54
Swettenham: Eric.

01-00:08:55
Spittler: Oh, Eric, yeah. God, I'm forgetting my uncle.

01-00:09:00
Swettenham: No, I think you're a little nervous. Don't be nervous.

01-00:09:02
Spittler: Yes, I am.

01-00:09:03
Swettenham: Don't be nervous. Just talk to him like you tell me.

01-00:09:06
Spittler: Okay.

01-00:09:07
Swettenham: Yeah, so they came when Ellen Freid came. Grandma Freid and Eric Freid came from Minnesota.

01-00:09:20
Arbona: What brought them there? Were they working also in lumber or they were—?

01-00:09:25
Spittler: Well, they were a family. Grandma's brother lived in Bay Point. So Grandma came out of here.

01-00:09:50
Arbona: And then when you were growing up in Bay Point, maybe you can tell us a little bit about that. For instance, what the school day was like or what you did in the summers if you worked some odd jobs, or whatever else.

01-00:10:12
Spittler: No, I never worked any odd jobs in the summertime. I just played. When we were kids, my father made some sleds because we had hills behind Bay Point. The weeds that grew there, the kids used to go up and slide down those things on their sled. So Daddy made us some sleds and we had many, many good times up on those hills. That's mostly what we did. And then another game we

played was Annie Annie Over, with a ball and throwing the ball over and trying to get around and get it before it landed. Whatever it was. It was a game. And the kids in Bay Point all gathered in the evening in the summertime, and we'd play Run Sheep Run, where we'd have two groups and they'd try to hide from the other group and they'd run and play all summer long. And I can remember walking barefooted. We had wooden steps or walkways and many a sliver I had to get out of my foot walking on those. And on the hot cement. That was another thing. You'd go skipping along as fast as you can. [Interruption]

01-00:12:59

Swettenham: Tell him the story why you don't know how to swim. Why you never got to go to the slough and learn how to swim.

01-00:13:08

Spittler: Oh, well, yeah!

01-00:13:08

Swettenham: This is from her childhood.

01-00:13:11

Spittler: Oh, yeah. Well, we had these—what did you call them? Little canals?

01-00:13:22

Swettenham: The sloughs.

01-00:13:23

Spittler: Sloughs that went out to the Bay. And the boys always went down there to swim in the summertime. It was hot. And each kid when he was probably graduating from grammar school, they took him down there and threw him in the slough, if you can imagine, and said 'Swim'. And every one of them learned how to swim. [laughs]

01-00:14:06

Swettenham: And why didn't the girls go?

01-00:14:08

Spittler: Oh, the girls couldn't go down there because they called it Bare Ass Slough. They were naked, of course. [laughter] And none of the girls were allowed to be anywhere near. Of course, we might have tried but I never made it.

01-00:14:36

Arbona: So do you remember what slough that was, by chance? That one that they called Bare Ass Slough?

01-00:14:41

Swettenham: Where was it?

01-00:14:44

Spittler: It ran alongside the Bay.

01-00:14:52
Arbona: The Straits?

01-00:14:53
Spittler: I don't know why the slough was there and what it was for, actually. But there was always that slough that ran alongside.

01-00:15:09
Swettenham: You didn't mention that your brother's name was Frank. You said your sister's name was Signa. But you didn't mention that your brother's name was Frank.

01-00:15:20
Spittler: I didn't mention Frank?

01-00:15:22
Swettenham: No, you skipped that part. But that's okay. I just wanted to get that in there.

01-00:15:28
Arbona: Sometimes those things will come in in conversation.

01-00:15:36
Spittler: I didn't mention Frankie?

01-00:15:38
Swettenham: Yeah, you did. You just didn't say his name.

01-00:15:41
Arbona: By name.

01-00:15:44
Spittler: Oh, my brother Frank. Yeah. Frankie we called him. What else do you—?

01-00:15:55
Arbona: Well, maybe you can tell me a little bit more about what this was like. You just mentioned how the boys would go to the slough to swim but the girls couldn't go. This was, I imagine, reflected in the same way within your own family, then, where your brother learned to swim and you didn't learn to swim that way?

01-00:16:15
Spittler: No. In fact, I never learned to swim.

01-00:16:20
Arbona: But Frank did?

01-00:16:21
Spittler: Oh, like a fish. Yeah. No. I never, ever learned to swim. Even out here. There's a pool out here. And I think if I really set my mind to it I'd be able to.

- 01-00:16:45
Swettenham: And when the guys were out swimming, what would you do? What would the girls do when the guys were out swimming?
- 01-00:16:50
Spittler: What did the girls do?
- 01-00:16:52
Swettenham: What'd you do when they were out swimming?
- 01-00:16:55
Spittler: Oh, when we were younger we'd play paper dolls. We got out the catalogue and then have the models in the catalogue, we'd cut out these things and then we'd try to dress them with whatever we could. What else did we do? Shoot.
- 01-00:17:36
Arbona: Well, it sounds like with these lumber yards, too, would it be accurate to say that folks like your father, in a sense, brought something like the sled which one associates with cold climates or winter times, but it became this toy in a place like California? Were there other games like that that I'm assuming were imported into the place and these toys were made there?
- 01-00:18:13
Spittler: You mean my father?
- 01-00:18:16
Arbona: Well, I guess I'm wondering where the sled idea came from. It's almost something that one associates with the cold or winter places.
- 01-00:18:26
Spittler: Well, there really wasn't too much to do, and those hills were there. We used to go up there and pick bluebells and poppies. There were lots of poppies. And then Daddy just made us a sled. I don't know why but he did.
- 01-00:18:54
Swettenham: Was it a one-person sled or two-person sled?
- 01-00:18:58
Spittler: It was a one-person sled. Whoever got it first got it. And we had many a good time. Sometimes there was two of us on it. And we had many a scrape, I'll tell you. And we used to go for poppies and bluebells and stuff. The hills were full of flowers at the time. So pretty. And we'd bring them home to Momma.
- 01-00:19:48
Arbona: What was school life like when you went to school? Can you describe that a little bit?
- 01-00:19:57
Spittler: What was school like?

01-00:19:58

Arbona: Classroom sizes, maybe boys and girls, how they also got along in there.

01-00:20:06

Spittler: Yeah, we had our little desks that opened up and had little places for stuff inside. And each classroom had an anteroom where you could take off your coat and hat and put them in there if you wanted to during the winter, of course. In the summer it was too blasted hot. And we took our lunch to school every day. Of course, we played in the school grounds after school a little bit, too. What do I want to call them? What do you call those things that go across?

01-00:21:17

Swettenham: Were they monkey bars or jungle gym? Was it monkey bars or a jungle gym?

01-00:21:22

Spittler: Yeah. Sort of like monkey bars. They had a slide and, of course, the girls played hopscotch. That was our thing. You'd throw a piece of glass or whatever you had and then you'd hopscotch. Now I can't remember what the flipping point of that was. But anyway, we played hopscotch.

01-00:21:57

Arbona: Do you remember some of the other families or the kids that you played with?

01-00:22:08

Spittler: Well, I remember Katherine McDonald. She lived right next door to us for a while.

01-00:22:15

Arbona: Were some of the other families also of Nordic background? You're mentioning also an Irish last name. What was some of the community makeup like?

01-00:22:27

Spittler: Well, there were the Powell's and the {Scheidlers?} and the {Kristens?} and the {Fogensteins?}, the Nystroms. There was a lot of Swedish. And the Powells.

01-00:22:58

Arbona: Are you looking at maybe a photo there?

01-00:23:02

Swettenham: That's her class. Come here! [calls dog]

01-00:23:03

Spittler: Oh, yeah.

01-00:23:07

Arbona: Like a class photo. We can actually get that recorded. At the end I can at least take an image of that, too, for reference.

01-00:23:19
Spittler: Dorothy Dalton.

01-00:23:22
Swettenham: And Laura.

01-00:22:23
Spittler: And Laura, of course. And the Sabas. They had a store in Bay Point.

01-00:23:39
Arbona: Saba. It almost sounds like it could be a Latin last name.

01-00:23:47
Spittler: A what?

01-00:23:48
Arbona: Like a Latin or a Mexican family?

01-00:23:51
Swettenham: Saba. Do you know where they were from? Their family?

01-00:23:54
Spittler: No, I don't. The Sabas.

01-00:23:58
Arbona: It could be even an Italian last name.

01-00:23:59
Spittler: It sounds like Greek to me.

01-00:24:03
Arbona: Yeah.

01-00:23:03
Spittler: There was a lot of Greeks in Bay Point.

01-00:24:09
Swettenham: Now, was that your class? That was only your class or was that a mixture of grades?

01-00:24:17
Spittler: God, it looks like a mixture of grades because there's Angelina.

01-00:24:27
Swettenham: Angelina who?

01-00:24:30
Spittler: Lombardi .And Laura Pacini and Lorraine Saba, Katherine McDonald. I don't know. That could have been Frank. It could.

01-00:24:58
Arbona: What class year are we looking at there in that photo? What would that be?

01-00:25:03
Spittler: God, I don't know.

01-00:25:04
Swettenham: How old do you think you were?

01-00:25:12
Spittler: Nine. Eight or nine. Something like that. Louis Lombardi.

01-00:25:24
Arbona: Lombardi's another name that I recognize.

01-00:25:25
Spittler: Who was that? Does that look like—?

01-00:25:30
Swettenham: That's your brother.

01-00:25:31
Spittler: Yeah. Frankie.

01-00:25:32
Swettenham: Frankie.

01-00:25:35
Arbona: So then were you in the same classroom with your brother? Was the school a certain size?

01-00:25:42
Spittler: No, I think this was it.

01-00:25:46
Arbona: That was it for the whole school?

01-00:25:46
Swettenham: For the whole school?

01-00:25:48
Spittler: Well, it couldn't have been.

01-00:25:50
Swettenham: How many classrooms do you remember being in this school?

01-00:25:53
Spittler: Eight.

01-00:25:56
Swettenham: Eight grades.

01-00:25:57
Spittler: Yeah.

01-00:26:00
Swettenham: But did you have a classroom for each grade?

01-00:26:05
Spittler: Yeah, mostly. It wasn't a big school.

01-00:26:12
Arbona: So this might be—

01-00:26:13
Spittler: But it seemed big to me.

01-00:26:17
Arbona: This would be in the 1920s, this photo. Am I right?

01-00:26:21
Swettenham: She was born in '16.

01-00:26:24
Arbona: Sixteen.

01-00:26:24
Swettenham: Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one.

01-00:26:25
Spittler: So that couldn't be me then.

01-00:26:27
Swettenham: That's you, Mom.

01-00:26:29
Spittler: Yeah, I know. But I must have been six or something.

01-00:26:39
Arbona: Could be.

01-00:26:40
Swettenham: First grade or second grade or third grade maybe. Because Uncle Frankie looks kind of young there.

01-00:26:48
Spittler: Was that Uncle Frankie?

01-00:26:50
Swettenham: That's him.

01-00:26:56
Spittler: What was he, six or seven?

01-00:27:11
Arbona: Well, let me ask you this. I was wondering if the school grew, or did it get smaller as the Great Depression approached? Was the population or the class sizes increasing?

01-00:27:33
Spittler: I don't think it grew too much.

01-00:27:45
Arbona: You remember it more or less the same?

01-00:27:47
Spittler: Yeah. Port Chicago. It grew a little bit but not a whole lot.

01-00:28:10
Arbona: Now, could you tell me what it was like to experience the Depression? What was it like when that hit?

01-00:28:20
Spittler: Well, it was bad because I remember Daddy lost his job. And the lumber mill closed.

01-00:28:32
Swettenham: Do you remember the name of the lumber mill?

01-00:28:35
Spittler: Coos Bay Lumber. It was tough for a while. But my uncle was working in San Francisco at the time at the Holmes Planing Mill. He was very good at setting the knives, like the back of a pew, you know how it goes? He would set the knives, and that piece of lumber would come out like they wanted. And he got a job in San Francisco, and then when Daddy lost his job he got a job in San Francisco at the Holmes Planing Mill because he could set the knives to do what—

01-00:29:48
Swettenham: Now, is that uncle or your dad?

01-00:29:50
Spittler: Daddy. No, Uncle set the knives. Daddy was the one that shoved through a thing.

01-00:30:01
Arbona: He had to then start commuting to San Francisco on a daily basis?

01-00:30:05
Spittler: Yeah, yeah. Weekly.

01-00:30:10
Swettenham: Weekly.

01-00:30:11
Arbona: Weekly, oh.

01-00:30:12
Spittler: Yeah. They stayed at hotels. Hotel Henry. It was on Third Street way down. Not too nice a place but it was inexpensive, and they came home over the weekend so they could stay there during the week.

01-00:30:41
Arbona: Both your father and your uncle?

01-00:30:42
Spittler: Both Daddy and my uncle. And Uncle was like a daddy, because like I said, Grandma and he really took me in and raised me. And then he bought a home on Division—was it Division Street? Was it?

01-00:31:08
Swettenham: No, it was on the main Port Chicago Highway.

01-00:31:09
Spittler: No, it was the Port Chicago Highway.

01-00:31:09
Swettenham: The main thoroughfare that went—

01-00:31:13
Spittler: Yeah. That went through to Nichols and Pittsburgh. And that's where I grew up.

01-00:31:24
Arbona: Was that a little bit outside the main town downtown or the main street where that house was?

01-00:31:31
Spittler: No. You come around from Clyde and you go around across the railway tracks and go straight down.

01-00:31:42
Swettenham: Came past the Knox's Boxes that were—

01-00:31:47
Spittler: Yeah, yeah. Where they used to have—what do they call them?

01-00:31:57
Arbona: Those were like barracks?

01-00:31:59
Spittler: Barracks for the—

01-00:32:01
Swettenham: Barracks.

01-00:32:04
Spittler: Who was it? Was it the Army?

01-00:32:06
Swettenham: Probably the Navy.

01-00:32:07
Spittler: Navy, yeah.

01-00:32:09
Arbona: But those may have been built during the war or after. I think the Knox's Boxes happened in—

01-00:32:18
Spittler: Gee, I don't know. During the war, I guess.

01-00:32:26
Swettenham: They built them?

01-00:32:30
Spittler: Yeah. Then they took them away after that.

01-00:32:37
Swettenham: But that was the street that your house was on. You drove past them. Stayed on that.

01-00:32:43
Spittler: Yeah. If you came from Clyde, went around and came down that road. We lived on that road. And that same road went on to Nichols. So it was really the main thoroughfare through Port Chicago.

01-00:33:10
Arbona: When you moved to the Port Chicago highway, I'm assuming this would be after the name change? So this is after Bay Point has become Port Chicago.

01-00:33:32
Swettenham: Tell him what you remember about the name change.

01-00:33:34
Spittler: Huh?

01-00:33:35
Swettenham: Tell him what you remember about the name change. When they wanted to change the name.

01-00:33:40
Spittler: Oh. Well, Mr. Van Winkle had one of the stores in towns. It was sort of like a hardware store. He decided or thought that if we changed our name from Bay Point to Port Chicago, that it would bring in business and we'd grow like Chicago. Well, they changed the name and it didn't happen. We were still little Bay Point. But the name was Port Chicago.

01-00:34:37
Spittler: Do you remember how old you were, approximately? Were you in grade school or high school? Do you remember when that was?

01-00:34:46
Arbona: Well, the name change happened, I believe, in '37 or '38 I think was when the name was changed. Late thirties if I'm not mistaken.

01-00:35:06
Swettenham: So she was just out of high school.

01-00:35:07
Spittler: I graduated.

01-00:35:14
Swettenham: I think 1935.

01-00:35:15
Spittler: That's what I thought.

01-00:35:17
Arbona: What did you do when you graduated from high school?

01-00:35:24
Spittler: I got a job in Pittsburgh working. No, I guess it was Antioch working at the rubber mill.

01-00:35:51
Swettenham: No. That's when you were the typist, remember? That you were a typist with the man you said if women made mistakes he got real upset with them.

01-00:36:08
Spittler: Well, wasn't that before I went to work at Shell?

01-00:36:13
Swettenham: Right. And who was that man that you went to work for as a typist and you decided that you had to leave because he was mean.

01-00:36:21
Spittler: You mean at Shell?

01-00:36:21
Swettenham: No, before Shell.

01-00:36:25
Spittler: It's Mr. Miller. But what was his first name.

01-00:36:33
Swettenham: You didn't work for him very long though.

01-00:36:35
Spittler: No.

01-00:36:37
Swettenham: Tell him why.

01-00:36:40
Spittler: That was the rubber mill?

01-00:36:47
Swettenham: I thought you worked at the rubber mill later.

01-00:36:50
Spittler: Now I can't—

01-00:36:49
Swettenham: I thought he was a title company or something like that. A banker or something.

01-00:36:58
Spittler: Yeah, it was.

01-00:37:01
Swettenham: Yeah. Not the rubber mill. That was later.

01-00:37:05
Spittler: Contra Costa County Title?

01-00:37:08
Swettenham: I don't know the name of it.

01-00:37:10
Spittler: Oh. No, that was Martin {Keenan?} before I went to work for Shell.

01-00:37:15
Swettenham: That's what I thought.

01-00:37:17
Spittler: Oh, he was a slave driver. His name was Mr. Miller. [laughter]

01-00:37:26
Arbona: So you graduated from high school and went to work for Mr. Miller?

01-00:37:33
Spittler: I guess so. I think so. And he was such a slave driver. [microphone static] If one person made one little error in the typing and he caught it, he would ream that person up and down. And I couldn't stand that. I thought that was the most cruel thing. Instead of taking him into his private office, although there was glass around so he could see outside, at least they couldn't hear. And I got so angry at that I quit and I went to work for Shell Oil Company. And I became secretary to Frank {Cose?} who was personnel manager there. I worked there. [microphone static]. Oh, no. I worked up in a—How did that happen? Why did I quit?

01-00:38:55
Swettenham: Didn't you move to Pomona with Daddy? Didn't you stay there until Daddy was drafted?

01-00:39:00
Spittler: Yeah. Oh, that's why. I left to go with my husband down to Pomona, He was at the Pomona Ordnance Base until he left for overseas, then I came back to Bay Point/Port Chicago and then I went to work for—wasn't the Shell Oil Company. What was the name of it? There in—

01-00:39:50

Arbona:

Can I go back a little bit to Mr. Miller for a moment. If we go back to the title company. I just wanted to learn more. It sounded from what you were describing that you had to type up titles, and I wanted to know more if that's what everybody was doing in the office, was generally typing up titles, or was this more of like a larger real estate operation? Or what it was.

01-00:40:22

Spittler:

No. It was mostly legal work on titles and stuff like that. Like I say, when he read it, everything had to be perfect on there. You better not make a mistake.

01-00:40:43

Swettenham:

Obviously they were all women typists. How many women did you work with? Do you remember? Were there lots or three or four?

01-00:40:53

Spittler:

Oh, a lot. God, it seemed to me at least thirteen or more people working, typing away.

01-00:41:03

Arbona:

All women? How did you find that job?

01-00:41:23

Spittler:

Probably looking in the paper or something like that. I can't remember. Laura Pacini worked at the Bank of America in Martinez. So I don't know whether she may have told me. I can't remember. But I applied for the job and had to take a test, and I got it. Like I said, I would have stayed there but I couldn't stand Mr. Miller reaming out these women. Oh, it just killed me. I thought, "I can't stand this." So I put in my application at Shell and got a job as a typist on the top floor with I don't know how many others. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen other typists. And why I was chosen to go down to be Mr. Cose's secretary I don't know. But I always was very happy that he chose me.

01-00:43:14

Swettenham:

And is he the one that gave you a lot of dictation? She took shorthand.

01-00:43:20

Spittler:

I took dictation but it seemed hours. It was hot and he smoked cigars. Although he had a fan there that he would turn on. If an employee came in to talk to Mr. Cose, the minute he left, "Bzz. Come in." Go in there and take dictation on what happened in that little talk he had with the employee. What did it entail? And it went into his GS-10, which is everybody in the plant had a personnel folder. I would have to type up what he told me and put it in his GS-10.

01-00:44:45

Arbona:

Was this the Shell plant in Martinez?

01-00:44:47
Spittler: It was in Martinez. Why did I quit? Oh, I quit to go with my husband down to Pomona.

01-00:45:04
Arbona: Just to interrupt for one moment. Tell me when you got married, in between all of that. At what point you got married.

01-00:45:14
Spittler: Oh. We eloped.

01-00:45:21
Swettenham: After they dated for fifteen years. Almost.

01-00:45:24
Spittler: Yeah. We went to Reno. My uncle and my mother were with me. We went to a justice of the peace in Reno in 1941.

01-00:45:43
Swettenham: Forty-one. October 25, 1941.

01-00:45:47
Spittler: Yeah. Twenty-fifth?

01-00:45:51
Swettenham: October 25.

01-00:45:55
Spittler: 1941.

01-00:45:58
Swettenham: You're interested in what my father did?

01-00:46:00
Arbona: Oh, yeah!

01-00:46:01
Swettenham: Tell him what Daddy did during that time when you guys graduated and he was waiting for you to graduate. Daddy worked. Tell him about Daddy.

01-00:46:13
Spittler: Well, he worked. He got a job at Tidewater Oil Company.

01-00:46:19
Swettenham: And what did he turn down to take that job?

01-00:46:24
Spittler: What? What did he turn down?

01-00:46:26
Swettenham: Yeah. What could he have done when he got out of high school with his baseball? I think it's always kind of—.

01-00:46:39
Spittler: He was a baseball pitcher and he was offered a scholarship to UC Berkeley for four years. He would have a job every summer at the plant. And he would have that education even if he lost his ability to pitch. He turned it down. I cried. I sighed. I tried everything, and he wouldn't take it.

01-00:47:35
Swettenham: So what did he do instead?

01-00:47:39
Spittler: Well, he worked at the plant as a welder, and he became in charge of the three shops they had there.

01-00:47:58
Swettenham: That was at Tidewater Oil Company.

01-00:47:59
Spittler: Yeah.

01-00:48:00
Arbona: Tidewater Oil Company. That's also another shoreline Martinez company?

01-00:48:04
Swettenham: Yeah.

01-00:48:04
Spittler: Yeah.

01-00:48:05
Swettenham: It was Associated Oil.

01-00:48:07
Arbona: Oh, yeah. Associated Oil.

01-00:48:10
Swettenham: And he pitched ball for them. Tell him about the refinery.

01-00:48:15
Spittler: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he pitched ball. He was a [microphone static] pitcher. And that's when he was offered these scholarships. He didn't take them.

01-00:48:28
Arbona: What made him decline it?

01-00:48:32
Spittler: I don't know. To this day I don't know. I hope to hell it wasn't me.

01-00:48:39
Arbona: But you were dating since high school, then. It sounds like you were high school sweethearts.

- 01-00:48:46
Spittler: Yeah. So I said, "Take it." What I think really is that he thought that he didn't have the smarts to go to college.
- 01-00:49:02
Swettenham: Which he did.
- 01-00:49:03
Spittler: Which was stupid, because he was very smart, and he could have did it. Like they said, somebody would have done his work for him. [laughter]
- 01-00:49:17
Swettenham: He would have gotten tutors you mean.
- 01-00:49:20
Spittler: Yeah.
- 01-00:49:23
Swettenham: I think, too, he felt that he did have a job with Associated Oil, and he was pitching ball for them. I think he was probably a little leery of giving up his job to go to school when he had a job. Don't you think?
- 01-00:49:44
Spittler: Yeah, but I couldn't understand it. I forget what the guy's name was that was in charge of Associated at that time. He said to Al, "If you take that, you'll have a job every summer. No problem." He still wouldn't take it.
- 01-00:50:16
Swettenham: He made a good living at the plant for forty-three years.
- 01-00:50:18
Spittler: Yes, he did and we got married and were very happy. What more can you ask? And had children, too.
- 01-00:50:35
Arbona: I was going to ask about eloping. Why you took that decision and how that came about.
- 01-00:50:45
Spittler: How what?
- 01-00:50:46
Arbona: How you decided to elope after fifteen years of dating. What happened?
- 01-00:50:52
Swettenham: Maybe it was ten years. Yeah. From when she was a freshman to twenty-five.
- 01-00:51:01
Spittler: Well, we just decided it was time.
- 01-00:51:10
Swettenham: Daddy got drafted.

01-00:51:13
Spittler: Yeah. And I wanted to go with him, too. So we went out to Reno. Like I said, I wish we had done it sooner.

01-00:51:34
Arbona: How old was he when he got drafted? More or less.

01-00:51:40
Spittler: Twenty-five, six.

01-00:51:46
Swettenham: I think he was more like twenty-seven.

01-00:51:47
Spittler: Twenty-eight.

01-00:51:48
Swettenham: Because it was '41 and he was born in 1913.

01-00:51:53
Arbona: Okay. Do the math.

01-00:51:55
Spittler: What did he say?

01-00:51:58
Swettenham: Daddy was born in 1913 and it was 1941. He was old. Pretty old to be drafted.

01-00:52:07
Spittler: Well, he was.

01-00:52:08
Swettenham: Right. Because you were twenty-five. He had to be twenty—

01-00:52:14
Spittler: And what we were waiting for I don't know.

01-00:52:22
Arbona: It looks like we're actually—

01-00:52:23
Spittler: Out of time.

01-00:52:24
Arbona: No, we're not out of time yet. There's a little bit more on that tape, and I just thought one important question. I just wanted to go back a little bit because I remembered I didn't ask you about sentiments around the name change and I was curious. Were you in favor or opposed to the name change?

01-00:52:43
Spittler: Hated it. No, we were not in favor of it. And why it ever went through. Port Chicago. It was always Bay Point to us. So that was one thing.

- 01-00:53:07
Arbona: And among the community the sentiment was pretty negative that it should stay the same.
- 01-00:53:11
Spittler: Yeah. But he pushed it through, and we became Port Chicago. Well, I guess it's all right. I can't think of anybody that said, "Oh, that's great." But maybe some did. Not any of my friends.
- 01-00:53:38
Arbona: I've read that for a time they wanted to simply call it Chicago, just like the big city in the Great Lakes.
- 01-00:53:44
Spittler: Well, that might have been a thought. Yeah.
- 01-00:53:51
Arbona: But you don't remember—
- 01-00:53:52
Spittler: But then they put Port on it.
- 01-00:53:53
Arbona: But do you remember people calling it just Chicago for any period of time?
- 01-00:53:59
Spittler: No. No.
- 01-00:54:02
Arbona: As I've read, the Post Office master simply said that you can't call it Chicago because the letters are not going to get there, so they just put "Port." But I've never quite understood the period of time.
- 01-00:54:19
Spittler: Well, that could have been. I never heard that. It could have been. But I think Mr. Van Winkle was a big pusher on that.
- 01-00:54:34
Swettenham: And did he also own the electric company?
- 01-00:54:37
Spittler: Yeah.
- 01-00:54:39
Arbona: The Van Winkle's were very—
- 01-00:54:40
Spittler: Lived in a huge house on the hill. Well, I guess he thought it was going to be something. That was his opinion. I didn't like it.

01-00:55:03

Arbona:

Well, now that you say you didn't like it, did people pretty much go along with it, or was there any other kind of activism or any mobilization? That people tried to write letters or something else to try to stop it?

01-00:55:17

Spittler:

I don't really remember that. If there was opposition, which I'm sure there was, they didn't press. They didn't go for it to say, "No, we're not. We don't want it." They let him go ahead, and we became Port Chicago.

01-00:55:47

Arbona:

I've heard that the name Bay Point was often also used to talk about a larger school district or like a larger region beyond just the town of Bay Point. Would you agree with that, or did you always just think of Bay Point as that town itself?

01-00:56:11

Spittler:

What was the first part of it?

01-00:56:13

Arbona:

I've heard from other people, and I've read in some places, that Bay Point was often used as a term not only for the town but was a place of a larger area in a school district. Is that accurate in your recollection? In your mind, Bay Point has been just the town?

01-00:56:42

Spittler:

That's right. I don't recall anything.

01-00:56:46

Swettenham:

If people said to you they were going to Bay Point, it was always to the town. It wasn't to that general area. There was Clyde, there was Bay Point, there was Nichols.

01-00:56:57

Spittler:

Nichols.

01-00:56:57

Swettenham:

There was West Pittsburgh. Nobody said Bay Point and kind of included that whole area to you?

01-00:57:02

Spittler:

No, no. No, there was distinct: Nichols, Clyde, Bay Point.

01-00:57:13

Arbona:

Just another quick question. You showed us pictures of the elementary school class. Your high school, was it also in the town of Bay Point, or did you then start going somewhere else?

01-00:57:27

Spittler:

Went to Concord—

- 01-00:57:30
Arbona: Concord.
- 01-00:57:34
Spittler: —on the ONA, they called it. The Sacramento Northern that came through Port Chicago. Picked us up and took us into Concord and dumped us at—there was a name for it—Higgins Corner or something. Mrs. Higgins had a can shop right across from where the train stopped and we got off, which was fortunate for her because she got a lot of business from kids. And then we just walked a little bit across an empty lot and into Mount Diablo.
- 01-00:58:32
Arbona: Mount Diablo High School.
- 01-00:58:36
Spittler: And then we went back the same way. Got the train and, of course, it was a long walk for me but it didn't hurt.
- 01-00:58:48
Arbona: Was that the train that also stopped in Clyde? I've seen the train tracks there.
- 01-00:58:52
Spittler: Yeah, the train stopped in Clyde for the kids there. And many a kid was thrown off the train. Oh, the conductor there—Auggie, I think his name was—boy, did he throw some of those kids off. They were just boys and boisterous. Whatever. So he'd had enough sometimes; he'd just throw them off. They'd walk.
- 01-00:59:33
Swettenham: He'd stop the train to make them get off?
- 01-00:59:35
Spittler: Yup.
- 01-00:59:36
Arbona: He could just stop it anywhere and just kick them off?
- 01-00:59:41
Spittler: Well, mostly they had to stop in Clyde, and then he'd get rid of them. Say, "Walk the rest of the way."
- 01-00:59:48
Swettenham: Probably sometimes your brother, huh?
- 01-00:59:52
Spittler: Oh, probably. [laughter] Over the hill they had to go. They had a long walk there. If they came to school. That's the other problem.
- 01-00:60:07
Arbona: Well, it looks like we're going to just be out of time here, so let me just pause it right there.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 08-09-2010.mp3

02-00:00:00

Swettenham: Mr. Graham helping everybody by loaning us tape and groceries from the store.

02-00:00:07

Arbona: This is tape number two, August 9, 2010. Javier Arbona speaking into the microphone right now. I'm here with Hazel Spittler, and helping us along is Susan Swettenham. So we were just having a little off-camera conversation about the Great Depression and about when your husband first asked you to marry him. So could you tell us a little bit more about that and what happened?

02-00:00:38

Spittler: Well, yes. Al asked me to marry him but my father was out of work, and I worked at Shell Oil Company at the time. And I lived at home so I, of course, paid them something for my keep. And I told Al, no, I couldn't marry him at that time because I needed to keep working to help Momma and Daddy during the Depression.

02-00:01:26

Arbona: What would it have meant to get married then at that point?

02-00:01:29

Spittler: Pardon?

02-00:01:30

Arbona: What would it have implied to get married? Because you told him that you needed to keep working. Does that mean that you would have had to stop working if you got married?

02-00:01:42

Spittler: Well, not exactly but Mom and Daddy would probably not think it was right that I had married somebody and worked for them.

02-00:02:01

Swettenham: You mean and paid them.

02-00:02:02

Spittler: Yeah. It just wasn't working. So I told him, "No, not at this time." So we put it off. It didn't hurt us. We didn't separate. We still were lovers, friends, pals forever. What else do you want to know?

02-00:02:48

Arbona: I was wondering, too, was maybe a larger social expectation that you'd have kids right away as soon as you got married?

02-00:03:02

Spittler: That it was my feeling?

02-00:03:07

Arbona: Or larger. Maybe your parents or a greater society expectation.

02-00:03:13

Spittler: The parents had nothing to do with our putting it off. I just decided that I couldn't do it. It was during the Depression. They needed what I gave them for my keep until Daddy could get a job. Then he finally got a job as a beer delivery—working for the {Millers?}, who had that beer distributorship around the area and particularly Camp Stoneman. My father used to tell us how happy those sailors or those soldiers who were going to be sent overseas were to see him in his beer truck. “Oh, John, we're so happy.” And he'd unload his beer there at Camp Stoneman, and I don't think it took him very long to down it. Other than that, about us, we just put off getting married because of that Depression.

02-00:04:52

Swettenham: And then how about where people borrowed money to stay eating. Mr. Graham. Tell him that story.

02-00:05:01

Spittler: Oh, yeah. Poor Mr. Graham. He had a grocery store, and he extended credit to everybody who wanted it. And poor Mr. Graham, when the Depression hit and they closed Port Chicago. I think my father was the only one that paid him. But he went to Concord and opened up another little store and managed to survive. But there were a lot of Bay Point, Port Chicago, that never paid their grocery bill.

02-00:05:50

Swettenham: And how did your parents pay their grocery bill? What did they do to pay it?

02-00:05:58

Spittler: Well, they probably borrowed it from Uncle.

02-00:06:02

Swettenham: No, but I mean ultimately. You've told me that they sold their house.

02-00:06:08

Spittler: Oh, yeah.

02-00:06:09

Swettenham: So go ahead.

02-00:06:11

Spittler: Yeah. They owned our little house on Harris Avenue where I was born. And Daddy was adamant that he pay for his groceries. And the only thing that he had of value that he could sell was the house. So he sold his home to pay his grocery bill, which I always thought what a great guy he was. Then we went to live with Uncle and Grandma on Division Street. Port Chicago Highway. I

keep saying Division. Port Chicago Highway. And Daddy built, and Uncle built, a house in a little place in the back that had two bedrooms and a bathroom in the back so that we could all fit in the house in Bay Point.

02-00:07:49

Arbona: It sounds like then your father was a man of his word in terms of paying this debt back.

02-00:07:58

Spittler: Absolutely.

02-00:07:59

Arbona: Not to do it.

02-00:08:00

Spittler: He couldn't stand not paying Mr. Graham. But thank god Mr. Graham went to Concord and opened up a place and did well there. Of course, still owed a lot of money, I bet.

02-00:08:22

Arbona: Like a lot of people still owed him from the Depression?

02-00:08:26

Spittler: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I don't think he ever got half. So that was too bad. But people did what they had to do. I don't know.

02-00:08:44

Arbona: Your father and your uncle then built from scratch this other building in the back of the other house.

02-00:08:52

Spittler: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

02-00:08:55

Arbona: Was that very common that people would sort of add to lots? Add to a property? To then put another house in the back?

02-00:09:04

Spittler: Well, people next door, the Gustafson's, had a little place for Grandma Gustafson in the back of their place. See, there was an alley in the back that you could come in through.

02-00:09:17

Swettenham: That's how you got to the garage.

02-00:09:22

Spittler: And we had a garage back there. So they just added on to the garage. And then there was still property. They had big lots.

02-00:09:35

Arbona: I'm curious if anybody grew anything. Was growing like a lot of vegetables or anything else to get through these tough times.

02-00:09:44
Spittler: Oh, yeah, we did. Vegetables.

02-00:09:47
Arbona: Like what?

02-00:09:50
Spittler: Oh, carrots. I don't know what else.

02-00:10:00
Arbona: What about animals? Did anybody keep animals?

02-00:10:06
Spittler: We had, yeah. Grandma had an old dog.

02-00:10:10
Arbona: But for—

02-00:10:08
Swettenham: Any farm animals?

02-00:10:12
Spittler: Oh, no, no, no. No farm animals.

02-00:10:18
Arbona: What I gathered from the first part of the interview, we were talking about before, is that when the war broke out—do you remember when the war broke out in '41? That's right before you eloped. Am I capturing that correctly? No? Is that when—

02-00:10:40
Spittler: Forty-two, wasn't it? I think '42.

02-00:10:46
Swettenham: When you got married? Well, Daddy was drafted before you got married.

02-00:10:53
Arbona: In '42?

02-00:10:56
Swettenham: No, they got married in '41.

02-00:10:59
Spittler: Well, he went away in '42.

02-00:11:03
Swettenham: In '42. Had the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? Do you remember when that happened? When Pearl Harbor was bombed?

02-00:11:13
Spittler: Oh, no.

02-00:11:16
Spittler: You don't remember that?

02-00:11:17
Spittler: Oh, yeah, I remember it, but—Pearl Harbor—

02-00:11:27
Arbona: Did you get it from the newspaper or the radio or how did you first sort of know that something had happened?

02-00:11:34
Spittler: I'm getting mixed up with the ammunition ship that blew up.

02-00:11:40
Arbona: Oh, yeah.

02-00:11:41
Swettenham: Yeah, right. You have to talk about that. But do you remember Pearl Harbor?

02-00:11:53
Arbona: Were you in Port Chicago at that time?

02-00:12:01
Spittler: Pearl Harbor. Where was I?

02-00:12:04
Arbona: Just before you got married, it seems like.

02-00:12:11
Spittler: Yeah, I think I was in Port Chicago. Well, Al was overseas, wasn't he?

02-00:12:18
Swettenham: No, no. He was overseas when the explosion happened.

02-00:12:21
Spittler: Oh. Yeah. I get those two mixed.

02-00:12:24
Swettenham: Because you said that your father thought that when the explosion happened, he thought the Japanese had bombed Port Chicago. So obviously Pearl Harbor had happened.

02-00:12:40
Arbona: So let me see if I have these events straight. You were in Port Chicago. The war broke out. You and your husband got married, went to Pomona for a while. Was he sent—?

02-00:12:59
Spittler: Pomona. He was sent down to Pomona before he was sent overseas. He was there with that—what was that guy's—the commander. They were out in the desert there, and he used to make all of the soldiers button up. They could not open there. He was at—

02-00:13:47
Arbona: Was this during drills or training?

02-00:13:50
Spittler: Yeah. And what was his name?

02-00:13:55
Swettenham: It'll come to you. Just keep talking.

02-00:13:59
Spittler: It will?

02-00:13:59
Swettenham: Sure.

02-00:14:03
Arbona: So where did you live in Pomona?

02-00:14:06
Spittler: Where did I—?

02-00:14:08
Arbona: Where did you live when you were in Pomona? When he was sta—

02-00:14:12
Spittler: I lived in a mobile home park in Pomona.

02-00:14:20
Arbona: You had to rent or was that like an Army or Navy property that they were putting—

02-00:14:26
Spittler: Oh, no, no. We rented it. Yeah. Well, I stayed there, and when he could get leave, of course, he came home.

02-00:14:38
Swettenham: Did you work at all in Pomona, or did you just wait for Daddy to come home?

02-00:14:46
Spittler: I waited for Daddy to come home. I'd had enough working. Yes.

02-00:14:57
Swettenham: How long were you down in Pomona? About?

02-00:15:04
Spittler: Couple years.

02-00:15:06
Swettenham: Do you think it was one year or two years?

02-00:15:07
Spittler: Huh?

02-00:15:08
Swettenham: One year or two years?

02-00:15:11
Spittler: I would say about a couple of years. But it's been so darn long I can't remember it.

02-00:15:23
Arbona: So your husband Al was sent overseas from there?

02-00:15:28
Spittler: Yes.

02-00:15:30
Arbona: And did you stay in Pomona at that point or then you came back to there?

02-00:15:35
Spittler: No, I came home then.

02-00:15:35
Arbona: I see. And then is that when the explosion happened, when you were back from Pomona?

02-00:15:46
Spittler: The what?

02-00:15:47
Arbona: When the Port Chicago explosion happened, was that just as you had come back from Pomona?

02-00:15:52
Spittler: Yeah. After I came back. I was staying at the {Mellor?} home there with my friend Laura Pacini. What was her married name?

02-00:16:12
Swettenham: McJunkin.

02-00:16:15
Spittler: McJunkin. Laura McJunkin.

02-00:16:17
Swettenham: Yeah. Pacini-McJunkin.

02-00:16:22
Spittler: And the Mellors were in Yosemite. When the explosion happened I was at the Mellor house alone. Laura was down buying some cigarettes for herself and I was alone in this house. But it had a big window overlooking the port. I thought a water heater or something, a furnace, had exploded right outside my window. It was that bright. Holy moly. And I hurried up, put on something and went to the front door. And do you know I was so discombobulated that when I went out the front door I kept trying to lock it, to close it. It was off its hinges, but I was off my hinges. Oh. So then finally I realized that I'd never

get that shut, so I ran across the lot, the empty lot, and then pass the old hotel there and across the street to where my folks were. And there were the Gustafson and Uncle and everyone was out on the lawn there. And I said, “What is it? What happened?” Daddy said, “I think the Japanese bombed us.” So what did he do? He went in, opened up the cedar chest and brought out his bottle of whiskey and we each had a snort, which we needed. Oh, it was cold, too. But they closed. It just demolished the house. The doors were off the hinges. The Venetian blinds were a mess and the windows were out. So—we did the best we could, and then they closed Port Chicago. Huh?

02-00:19:29

Swettenham: Go ahead.

02-00:19:31

Arbona: Did you have to move out of the house for a while?

02-00:19:33

Spittler: Pardon?

02-00:19:34

Arbona: Did you have to move out of the house for it to be repaired?

02-00:19:38

Spittler: No, we stayed but it was open. We did the best we could, but then the government decided to close Port Chicago. It was not to be. So Patty bought a place in Pittsburgh, which she didn't really want. But Pittsburgh was a little less expensive than Concord.

02-00:20:14

Arbona: You're referring to when the town was shut by the military later on? Sort of during Vietnam?

02-00:20:24

Spittler: The what?

02-00:20:25

Arbona: Are you talking about when your father was evicted from his home completely and couldn't come back? So a few years later during the Vietnam War?

02-00:20:39

Spittler: No, they closed the town.

02-00:20:41

Swettenham: But that was during the Vietnam War. Not when you were young.

02-00:20:48

Spittler: Not the what?

02-00:20:51
Swettenham: They closed Port Chicago after Grandma died. I was in high school or just graduated. Not during the war, World War II. Because you stayed there.

02-00:21:07
Spittler: After the explosion?

02-00:21:10
Swettenham: Yeah. You went on working. Think about it.

02-00:21:121
Spittler: They didn't fix up the house after the explosion.

02-00:21:26
Swettenham: Yes, they did. You're getting confused now.

02-00:21:31
Spittler: Not that I remember.

02-00:21:33
Swettenham: Mom, I went there every Sunday as a little girl. That's the house I used to play Grandpa's accordion in when you were in church. They had their fiftieth wedding anniversary in that house.

02-00:21:50
Spittler: Well, why did they shut it down?

02-00:21:53
Swettenham: That was during the Vietnam War.

02-00:21:56
Spittler: Oh.

02-00:21:58
Arbona: Well, we can come back to that part. I'm almost more interested in going back to that very same night. You mentioned that it was cold. I imagine that it was dark. Maybe all the streetlights and everything had gone dark. Can you describe that a little bit more?

02-00:22:21
Spittler: Yeah. At least dusk. I forgot what time it was.

02-00:22:30
Arbona: At least as I've read it, because of course I can't talk about firsthand experience, but it was at 10:20, more or less, at night.

02-00:22:43
Swettenham: It was at night.

02-00:22:43
Arbona: So it was at night.

02-00:22:45
Spittler: Yeah. Well, like I say, Laura had gone for cigarettes, and I was in the house. We're talking about the explosion now.

02-00:23:01
Swettenham: The explosion.

02-00:23:03
Spittler: I couldn't imagine what it was. Like I said, I ended up running back to my folks home. Lucky I wasn't hit by a shell or something. It landed all on the hillside in the back. But anyway—

02-00:23:36
Arbona: I've read about sometimes people even finding unexploded munitions around their houses after the ship exploded, because everything was rained on the town. Did you ever hear stories or have any firsthand experiences of that?

02-00:23:56
Spittler: No. No, I didn't.. Al was overseas then, too.

02-00:24:17
Swettenham: And he was overseas—

02-00:24:28
Spittler: Daddy and Momma, they closed Port Chicago.

02-00:24:33
Swettenham: But that was much later.

02-00:24:36
Spittler: Yeah, because I couldn't have—

02-00:24:39
Swettenham: Yeah. And didn't Daddy have to contact the Red Cross?

02-00:24:47
Spittler: Well, I worked for the Red Cross.

02-00:24:51
Swettenham: I didn't know that.

02-00:24:52
Spittler: Yeah.

02-00:24:55
Arbona: Were you working for the Red Cross when the explosion happened?

02-00:25:00
Spittler: Afterwards I went and helped them because I could type and do whatever they wanted. And so I sent a telegram or something to Al. I don't think he ever got it.

02-00:25:22
Swettenham: But you sent a telegram that you were okay.

02-00:25:25
Spittler: Yeah. And he read it in the Stars and Stripes or something overseas.

02-00:25:31
Arbona: He learned about the explosion in the Stars and Stripes?

02-00:25:33
Spittler: Yeah. So, of course, he called. "What happened? Are you all right?"

02-00:25:42
Swettenham: Did he call?

02-00:25:44
Spittler: Well, he sent a telegram, I think. Yeah.

02-00:25:50
Arbona: Did you manage to talk to him? Do you remember how long afterwards the explosion happened that you got the phone call, that phone call from him?

02-00:25:58
Spittler: Oh, you mean from Al? That telegram?

02-00:26:00
Arbona: Yeah.

02-00:26:03
Spittler: Oh, it wasn't too long. Maybe a couple of days or something. I was thinking of, you know, doing something. But he read it, like he said, in the Stars and Stripes. "Are you okay?"

02-00:26:27
Swettenham: He sent a telegram.

02-00:26:29
Spittler: "Yeah. I am."

02-00:26:32
Arbona: Can you tell me more about what the Red Cross had to do or what types of duties you were taking care of?

02-00:26:38
Spittler: I don't remember. That's the problem. Well, whatever they wanted me to do, I did. Where did they set up? I don't know. I guess it was the school. Either there or the American Legion Hall. We may have worked out of—I've forgotten. God, how old can you get that you can't remember.

02-00:27:27
Arbona: Did any of your friends have injuries?

02-00:27:29
Spittler: Huh?

02-00:27:30
Arbona: Did any friends of yours suffer serious injuries?

02-00:27:34
Spittler: Oh, like any serious injury. No, not that I can recall. We were lucky.

02-00:27:45
Arbona: Did it ever occur to you before that the base could have an accident or an explosion of that sort?

02-00:27:57
Spittler: You mean with the ammunition ship?

02-00:28:02
Arbona: Yeah.

02-00:28:07
Spittler: No, I don't think we ever really thought of that. My uncle, like I said, he worked down there on the pier unloading.

02-00:28:21
Swettenham: Who did?

02-00:28:22
Spittler: Uncle.

02-00:28:24
Swettenham: He did?

02-00:28:24
Spittler: But this happened in the evening. He had the day shift. But it could have been.

02-00:28:36
Swettenham: I didn't know that.

02-00:28:37
Arbona: Your uncle worked there during the war itself?

02-00:28:42
Spittler: Um-hmm.

02-00:28:44
Arbona: And he was an enlisted personnel or he was a civilian employee of the military?

02-00:28:51
Spittler: He was a civilian employee. Yeah. He helped unload the ammunition ships that came up to Port Chicago, Bay Point, and they unloaded their ammunition. What they think is one of those slings broke and exploded and killed all those sailors. They were mostly black sailors, too. It was terrible. Awful. They have

a placard there in Port Chicago, but you can't go down there. I don't know if they opened it up on Memorial Day or what. I don't know. But I thought, "What is the sense of having a memorial to them when you can't even go down and see it?"

02-00:30:01

Arbona:

You mentioned the black sailors that died in the explosion. Were they often in the town itself, or did you see them around a lot?

02-00:30:13

Spittler:

No. I don't know where. A lot of them came from back East. We didn't have a lot of black people in Bay Point.

02-00:30:32

Arbona:

I've heard that at least one family had a restaurant that served the black soldiers. When you say not many, do you remember even any at all?

02-00:30:49

Spittler:

Any at all?

02-00:30:50

Arbona:

Any black families that ran any businesses? Even a handful?

02-00:31:02

Swettenham:

I don't think so.

02-00:31:06

Spittler:

I can't remember. I can't remember any black families in Bay Point.

02-00:31:18

Arbona:

Did it change after the war? That you know of.

02-00:31:26

Spittler:

Well, they closed Port Chicago after that ammunition ship.

02-00:31:36

Swettenham:

No, Mom. See, this is where she gets confused.

02-00:31:39

Arbona:

Yeah. But that's okay. I guess one thing I wanted to jump to, and tell me if you want to go back to anything else about the explosion. But then I thought we could kind of go back to a little bit more of your personal life and how your life changed after your husband came back from the war. How did your life change after your husband came back? What did you do?

02-00:32:16

Spittler:

Well, it changed a lot for the better. [laughs] Yeah.

02-00:32:22

Arbona:

Tell me about that.

02-00:32:28
Spittler: We decided that we wanted a home. We had an apartment in Bay Point above the pool hall, I think it was. Somewhere down that area. And we stayed there very shortly. I remember I had dinner there once with company. And then we decided were we going to have a home, raise children. So we chose Concord. So we bought a home in Concord.

02-00:33:21
Spittler: On Sycamore Street.

02-00:32:22
Arbona: Sycamore Street.

02-00:33:24
Spittler: On Harris Avenue.

02-00:33:24
Swettenham: No, no, Sycamore.

02-00:33:25
Spittler: Huh?

02-00:33:26
Swettenham: Sycamore. Harris was—

02-00:33:28
Spittler: Sycamore, yeah. Sycamore Avenue. That's right.

02-00:33:33
Arbona: How did you pick Concord?

02-00:33:35
Spittler: Pardon?

02-00:33:37
Arbona: How did you decide on Concord as a place to go settle?

02-00:33:44
Spittler: Well, because Daddy never liked Pittsburgh. I guess that rubbed off on me. And I didn't want to buy a house in Nichols, and I didn't want to buy a house in Clyde, so Concord was the closest choice for us from Bay Point, my home.

02-00:34:16
Swettenham: And had Daddy went back to work at the refinery at that time?

02-00:34:22
Spittler: Oh, yeah. He got his job back.

02-00:34:27
Arbona: Where he had been a welder?

- 02-00:34:30
Spittler: Yeah. And he eventually became head of the welding shop and two other shops. He did very well. Provided well for his family.
- 02-00:34:45
Arbona: Tell me really quick what eliminated Clyde and Nichols in your mind as places to live.
- 02-00:34:58
Spittler: Well, shopping, for one thing. It wasn't that it wasn't a nice place and everything. You want to be able to go down and go to a grocery store or something and it really didn't have that in Clyde. You'd have to get in the car, go over to Concord and so what was the point. So we decided. And the school was right across the street. The grammar school. Perfect.
- 02-00:35:42
Arbona: So you were getting ready to have children?
- 02-00:35:44
Spittler: Oh, yeah.
- 02-00:35:45
Arbona: And thinking about the school.
- 02-00:35:49
Spittler: How many children did you eventually have?
- 02-00:35:52
Arbona: Two girls. And I lost my Jean.
- 02-00:35:56
Spittler: Jeanie, who passed away.
- 02-00:36:01
Arbona: Susan and Jeanie.
- 02-00:36:03
Spittler: Yeah. Susan and Jeanie. But I still got my Susan.
- 02-00:36:12
Arbona: What was it like to raise two girls in the 1950s, I think it's—from what I gather from talking to Susan.
- 02-00:36:25
Spittler: It was easy. They were good girls. They did what we told them. They minded us. We had no problem. I miss my Jeanie, of course. She developed multiple sclerosis. How, I don't know. I don't know what causes that kind of an illness.
- 02-00:37:03
Arbona: I'm not positive the scientists know either. I'm not entirely up on all the literature.

02-00:37:11
Swettenham: It just happens.

02-00:37:16
Spittler: Well, anyway, she passed away. Has it been a couple of years?

02-00:37:21
Swettenham: Four years. But we went back to Port Chicago a lot.

02-00:37:26
Spittler: Oh, yeah.

02-00:37:27
Swettenham: We went to church.

02-00:37:30
Spittler: Oh, every Sunday I'd have the kids up, put on their Sunday go-to-church clothes, put them in the car, and away we went.

02-00:37:44
Swettenham: And she and her sister were the organist for the church, for the Sharon Lutheran Church.

02-00:37:54
Spittler: Yeah. Signa went there. Lillian went there, too. Then Signa and then Lillian wanted that, and I got the job.

02-00:38:03
Arbona: As organist?

02-00:38:06
Spittler: Uh-huh. One of those pedal organs.

02-00:38:11
Arbona: Had you played the musical instrument your whole life? I didn't catch that before.

02-00:38:18
Spittler: Well, I took piano lessons. I'm not very good, but I can a little bit.

02-00:38:34
Swettenham: Enough to play the organ at church. She had to read the music.

02-00:38:38
Arbona: Well, I can't even do that myself.

02-00:38:42
Spittler: Well, there's the different rituals at the different churches. They change. What do I want to say there? Christmas and different. What do I want to say, Susan? Different?

- 02-00:39:13
Arbona: The holidays or the rituals in the different churches? Is that what you're referring to?
- 02-00:39:19
Spittler: Well, the different rituals change.
- 02-00:39:22
Arbona: Catholic.
- 02-00:39:24
Swettenham: No, in the church as the year went through. You'd have before Easter and Easter and so you'd have different services as the year went through. Obviously they got to know them but she still had to—
- 02-00:39:40
Arbona: You mentioned this was the Sharon Lutheran Church in Port Chicago. What was the big day, if there was one in particular, that was sort of important community-wise for everybody to go celebrate?
- 02-00:39:56
Spittler: Probably the Fourth of July.
- 02-00:39:58
Arbona: Oh, really? So not a religious one, then?
- 02-00:40:03
Spittler: No, no.
- 02-00:40:05
Swettenham: They had an Easter parade. Did they have an Easter parade when you were little?
- 02-00:40:07
Spittler: Oh, yes. They had an Easter parade, yeah, where everybody got dressed up. Some of them were funny. Some of them were—oh, just a sec.
- 02-00:40:20
Arbona: Just one moment. A microphone fell down.
- 02-00:40:25
Spittler: Oh, wow.
- 02-00:40:26
Arbona: Let me actually—I'm going to pause the tape for one moment. Can you—?
- 02-00:40:29
Spittler: And we had an Easter egg hunt at Sunday School. Oh, that was good.
- 02-00:40:37
Arbona: Can you tell us about the Easter egg hunt first in Bay Point? I've read that it was actually a very important holiday in pre-Port Chicago days.

- 02-00:40:48
Swettenham: When you were younger.
- 02-00:40:50
Spittler: Well, that's what I remember. Well, they had a parade. But I remember it later on, not when I was a youngster. Of course, I'm going to be ninety-three. God.
- 02-00:41:12
Swettenham: Ninety-four.
- 02-00:41:16
Spittler: Ninety-four.
- 02-00:41:17
Swettenham: When you were young did you have Easter egg hunts in the field?
- 02-00:41:22
Spittler: Yes.
- 02-00:41:23
Swettenham: Tell him about it. Where? Where did you go, and who went?
- 02-00:41:28
Spittler: Well, this was Sunday School at the Sharon Lutheran Church, and they gave us a little thing to put our eggs in. Out we went looking for the eggs. They had them scattered around. We were close. Across the street from the school, and then they had sort of an empty lot and then the church. And then another big empty lot. But they kept it pretty close, where us little kids could find them. It was fun. Oh, it was fun. Those little baskets were given out.
- 02-00:42:18
Arbona: Was that boys and girls together?
- 02-00:42:20
Spittler: Oh, yeah. Uh huh. Of course, the boys were a little more boisterous, but the girls did very well, too. Yeah. It was a fun time.
- 02-00:42:40
Arbona: I guess I was going to ask also about how it became this parade in Port Chicago and when you remember that changing over to a parade or the first parade that you remember is which one?
- 02-00:42:56
Spittler: Oh, dear. My sister and her husband had like a hotel.
- 02-00:43:20
Arbona: They owned one? A hotel?
- 02-00:43:22
Spittler: Oh, he owned a bar and he owned—I think they had a dry goods business down below, something like that. And then they lived upstairs.

- 02-00:43:42
Swettenham: But they bought that big house on the hill though.
- 02-00:43:49
Spittler: Yeah, they bought that house, but I don't know when.
- 02-00:43:57
Arbona: Was the Easter egg hunt usually folks from the Lutheran church? It was basically—
- 02-00:44:04
Spittler: Yeah. That was for the kids. The little ones. They'd go out and would bring our—I don't remember whether we brought the basket or they gave us the basket. But anyway, we went out and ran around and they hid them all kinds of little places.
- 02-00:44:35
Arbona: Were you going to say something?
- 02-00:44:36
Swettenham: No, I was just going to say when I was a little girl they did have a parade. So that was in the fifties. So are you saying that they didn't have a parade?
- 02-00:44:46
Spittler: I can't remember parades. But I can just remember the—
- 02-00:44:54
Swettenham: Easter egg hunt.
- 02-00:44:56
Spittler: —Easter egg hunt and our little Lutheran Church.
- 02-00:45:01
Arbona: Were the families that practiced in the Lutheran Church more or less the Swedes and the Germans? What—?
- 02-00:45:12
Spittler: The Swedish.
- 02-00:45:12
Arbona: The Swedish were the ones that came in.
- 02-00:45:14
Spittler: Swedish, Norwegian. Yeah. Mostly. The Italians, they went to the Catholic Church which was kitty corner from our own.
- 02-00:45:37
Swettenham: That was on the main road.
- 02-00:45:38
Spittler: And the Congregational Church, which was just a house away from us on the corner, kitty corner from the Catholic church. They had a congregation, too.

But mostly the Lutheran Swedish were Lutheran. Swedish. And there were a lot of Swedes in Bay Point. Freids, Olsons.

02-00:46:17

Spittler: Gustafson.

02-00:46:18

Spittler: Gustafson.

02-00:46:19

Swettenham: {Lonstrom?}.

02-00:46:23

Spittler: Nystrom.

02-00:46:24

Arbona: Now, was the Fourth of July the day that brought together more of different folks from the town? Say the Catholics, Germans, the Swedes, Norwegians, all these different families?

02-00:46:56

Spittler: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They all participated, and the kids.

02-00:47:06

Swettenham: Did you have fireworks?

02-00:47:10

Spittler: Fireworks.

02-00:47:11

Swettenham: Or did you have a picnic? Or what did you do on the Fourth of July? You said it was fun. What did you do on the Fourth of July?

02-00:47:17

Spittler: Was it the Fourth? We had a picnic from the Lutheran Church but I don't know if it was on a certain day or not. Isn't that awful? You can't remember. We used to go to March Creek Springs, which is outside of Clayton there for our picnic. Oh, it was fun. Then they had games for the kids to play and gifts. Lot of fun.

02-00:48:10

Arbona: I am curious if I might be projecting things a little bit further into the past, but I'm curious. You mentioned you started dating your husband in high school. But did you know him before that, or did the families know each other at all?

02-00:48:29

Spittler: No. I met him. He was coming down the stairs at Mount Diablo. Not a whole lot of stairs. There's about six stairs. I was just coming around the newel and going to go up. And he bumped into me. Practically knocked me down. So, of course, he picked me up or righted me and apologized and apologized. Then there was a fellow with him, Reese. I can't remember the first—well,

anyways, last name was Reese. And he came from Bay Point, and he knew me, so he introduced me to Al. That's when I met my husband.

02-00:49:41

Swettenham: My dad had moved from Santa Rosa.

02-00:49:46

Arbona: Santa Rosa, huh?

02-00:49:47

Swettenham: Yes. He was born and raised in Santa Rosa, and he moved in with his older brother and his wife so he could go to Mount Diablo and play ball.

02-00:49:58

Spittler: In Concord.

02-00:50:02

Swettenham: He played baseball for the high school.

02-00:50:05

Arbona: The high school was known to have a very good team or a good coach or something?

02-00:50:17

Swettenham: And his mother—

02-00:50:18

Spittler: And they had a team.

02-00:50:20

Swettenham: Well, and my grandmother was religious. She didn't want him to play ball on Sundays. "Why do you play ball on Sundays?" So he moved from Santa Rosa to Concord into his brother's house so he could continue playing ball.

02-00:50:42

Arbona: Wow.

02-00:50:42

Swettenham: When he was a senior in high school. He started to go to Mount Diablo and she was a freshman at Mount Diablo.

02-00:50:52

Arbona: So that was almost like a minor act of rebellion, in a sense, right?

02-00:50:59

Spittler: Yeah.

02-00:51:01

Arbona: How did he manage that with his parents?

02-00:51:08

Spittler: Well, his mother moved to Concord.

02-00:51:11
Swettenham: Oh, she did move to Concord?

02-00:51:13
Spittler: Yeah.

02-00:51:13
Swettenham: Oh, I didn't know that. She wasn't in Santa Rosa, then?

02-00:51:18
Spittler: Yeah. And Bob, I think, moved her. His brother.

02-00:51:23
Swettenham: Okay. After Daddy moved or before Daddy moved?

02-00:51:30
Spittler: After Daddy moved. And when Al came from Santa Rosa, he lived with Bob and his wife. I think she was there, too.

02-00:51:52
Swettenham: She moved, too? At the same time?

02-00:51:59
Arbona: So Al's older brother—

02-00:52:00
Spittler: I think so.

02-00:52:03
Arbona: He was married already? The older brother?

02-00:52:06
Spittler: Um-hmm.

02-00:52:07
Arbona: Wow.

02-00:52:09
Spittler: And then they bought her a home, didn't they? Somebody bought her a home.

02-00:52:21
Swettenham: Don. I thought his brother Don. [microphone static].

02-00:52:27
Spittler: Yeah, Don.

02-00:52:29
Swettenham: But that was a little bit later.

02-00:52:30
Spittler: Moved from Bay Point. Well, she lived in Knox's Boxes, they called them.

02-00:52:37
Swettenham: Grandma did?

02-00:52:40
Spittler: Yeah. Belle.

02-00:52:42
Swettenham: I didn't know that.

02-00:52:44
Spittler: Yeah, in Bay Point. They had government housing there in Bay Point, and they called them Knox's Boxes. But anyway, Don, I think.

02-00:53:00
Swettenham: That's my dad's youngest brother.

02-00:53:04
Spittler: Well, he was working at one of the refineries.

02-00:53:09
Swettenham: Shell Oil.

02-00:53:11
Spittler: Shell Oil.

02-00:53:11
Swettenham: After the Navy.

02-00:53:13
Spittler: Yeah. And then he bought his home and he brought his mother there, of course, and she took care of him until she passed away. Then Don kept living there. I don't know. He was a little bit strange. He ended up with a gun, didn't he?

02-00:53:49
Swettenham: Well, that's another story.

02-00:53:52
Spittler: Yeah.

02-00:53:54
Swettenham: But Grandma died in 1951. But he never moved.

02-00:54:04
Arbona: We're almost actually out of time on this tape, but I wanted to find out. It sounded like you stopped working after you got married and raised your two daughters. Or did you keep working at that time?

02-00:54:22
Spittler: No. I quit, didn't I? I wasn't working when I had the children. That I know.

02-00:54:42
Arbona: And Al was working at Shell.

02-00:54:43
Swettenham: No, at Tidewater.

02-00:54:44
Arbona: No, at Tidewater.

02-00:54:45
Spittler: Associated.

02-00:54:46
Arbona: That was an Associated. Sorry. Yeah, that's right. And did jobs at Tidewater have a union? Did the employees have a union, or was he unionized at all?

02-00:55:02
Swettenham: They had a union.

02-00:55:04
Arbona: They did?

02-00:55:05
Swettenham: But he was not because he was later. He was management.

02-00:55:08
Arbona: So he left the union because he became management?

02-00:55:12
Spittler: Right.

02-00:55:15
Arbona: I see.

02-00:55:20
Spittler: Let's see. What else?

02-00:55:25
Arbona: Since we're pretty close to the end of that tape but we still would have to just—if there's anything else that comes to mind about all these topics that we've been talking about. If I cut you off or if you thought that anything else was missing that we wanted to put down there. You still have a few minutes to do it.

02-00:55:49
Spittler: No, nothing.

02-00:55:51
Arbona: Or we can take a break.

02-00:55:55
Spittler: What I want? I want to say what a wonderful childhood I had in Bay Point. I was very lucky. Mommy and Daddy and Uncle and Grandma. So I had a good life. And I have a good life thanks to my darling daughter.

02-00:56:24
Arbona: And everybody was nearby? So everybody was pretty much neighbors? All of those relatives that you mentioned, right? So that's part of the good life that you're talking about?

02-00:56:40
Spittler: Yeah. Of course, we had some in Modesto. We used to go up there. Oh, that was fun. We always came home with a great big watermelon. They grew them. They had a place along the river there.

02-00:57:03
Swettenham: Now, that was the Sutherlands, right?

02-00:57:05
Arbona: Yeah, who were they?

02-00:57:05
Spittler: Yes.

02-00:57:06
Swettenham: The Sutherlands.

02-00:57:07
Spittler: Sutherland.

02-00:57:08
Arbona: Sutherland.

02-00:57:10
Spittler: And—?

02-00:57:13
Swettenham: How were they related?

02-00:57:16
Spittler: I think they were just good friends.

02-00:57:19
Swettenham: Maybe just good friends.

02-00:57:23
Spittler: Yeah.

02-00:57:24
Swettenham: Were those some of the friends that Grandma came to Port Chicago—?

02-00:57:28
Spittler: Fogarstons.

02-00:57:31
Swettenham: The Fogarstons.

02-00:57:36

Spittler: Yeah. Fogarstons, Nystroms.

02-00:57:49

Arbona: Pardon my ignorance, but Spittler is a last name from where? Is Spittler German or what's the—?

02-00:58:04

Swettenham: Daddy always said Pennsylvania Dutch.

02-00:58:07

Arbona: Oh, Pennsylvania Dutch.

02-00:57:08

Spittler: Yeah, that's what he said. But I don't know.

02-00:58:12

Swettenham: We have genealogy back to the 1600s where Spittlers came in his family. They were here a long time.

02-00:58:22

Arbona: Okay. Well, why don't we just pause with that and take a little break.

[End of Interview]