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Hattie Stillwell

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
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2006

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Audiofile 2

Working lifestyle—remembers her husband invented some tool out of brass—views on Japanese-American camps—during the war in Oakland people started to leave—didn't believe the Civil Rights Congress to help defend the rights of the minority—her husband was the first African-American to open a bowling alley—views on the general strike and Pearl Harbor—speaks out about her views on nationality crimes against each other during war times.

Interview #1: 8/12/06

Begin Audio File Hattie Stillwell - 01 08-12-2006.mp3

01-00:00:03

Rigelhaupt: Okay, that one is recording. And now I'm going to turn this one on. Okay. It's August 12th, 2006, in Oakland, California. And I am doing an oral history interview for the Rosie the Riveter World War II National Historical Park research project. I'm doing an interview with Ms. Hattie Stillwell. The way I like to start is if I could just ask you to say your full name and your date of birth.

01-00:00:38

Stillwell: Hattie Stillwell, 1914.

01-00:00:45

Rigelhaupt: And where were you born?

01-00:00:47

Stillwell: Little Rock, Arkansas.

01-00:00:51

Rigelhaupt: And could you talk a little bit about some of your earliest childhood memories?

01-00:01:00

Stillwell: Well, we lived on a rice farm. My father left there and came down and worked at the sawmill. And then he started to raising rice. And we planted up a lot of rice and plowed it up. Because the price was so low. And he had so much rice, he was selling it for half a penny a pound. And by getting rid of it, the government would pay you for destroying it. And then the price would go up because there wasn't so much rice. Because my father was raising around 180 acres. And that was a lot of rice.

I was sewing the sacks. I got about seven, and I'd have to catch some sacks and put an A on them and sew them, so it could be put in a granary.

Our closest neighbor, for any other children, was 16 miles. And finally my mother had a school in our house. We lived in a big old house, one room would be big as this house. And you could put raised beds, bunk beds.

I was the only girl. I had three brothers and a bunch of first cousins, and I don't know who all. And they would always cause me to have to be in a fight with some of them. But I would fight, stay on them.

We'd have to pick berries, would have to go out—and the other fruit. And my mother would make a jar of fruit for every day in the week. And we had to go and pick the berries and bring them back. And we had a lot of dewberries and strawberries in the yard. And she'd go out and pick them. But she was scared

of snakes, and she wouldn't go out where no big briars were. So, we had to work.

01-00:03:25

Rigelhaupt: So did your father and your parents buy the farm after you were born—

01-00:03:33

Stillwell: No.

01-00:03:33

Rigelhaupt: —or before you were born?

01-00:03:34

Stillwell: No. They rented it.

01-00:03:37

Rigelhaupt: They rented the farm.

01-00:03:37

Stillwell: Yeah, they'd rent it for three years and move on further. Because if you stay in there over three years, the rice would turn red, red rice. Nobody wanted it. My mother would cook it, but nobody else would.

01-00:03:58

Rigelhaupt: And so did you live in that same house that you were describing, all the years you were growing up?

01-00:04:03

Stillwell: No. We moved. You'd live there three years, we'd move on to another section. And the houses that was there, you'd take them. And then maybe in a few years you'd move right back in the first house you was in.

01-00:04:22

Rigelhaupt: And the whole time, your parents were growing rice.

01-00:04:27

Stillwell: Yeah. And all kind of vegetables.

01-00:04:34

Rigelhaupt: Okay. And so you said you went to school at home? Your mother taught school?

01-00:04:41

Stillwell: Yeah. And we had a teacher, the home teacher. And she was such a nut, my brother and her got into it. She said something to me, and I said, "Say what, Miss Pearl?" And she wanted me to say "ma'am," and my mother didn't allow us to say "yes'm" and "no, ma'am" and all that stuff. So she jumps up and whips me. And my oldest brother went out and whipped her. And then he had to teach school for two weeks until she got able to come back to school.

01-00:05:19

Rigelhaupt: Could you tell me how many siblings you had, growing up?

01-00:05:23

Stillwell: Yeah. Let me see. Five.

01-00:05:31

Rigelhaupt: And where are you in the order, the birth order?

01-00:05:37

Stillwell: What do you mean?

01-00:05:38

Rigelhaupt: Are you the oldest, youngest, in the middle?

01-00:05:41

Stillwell: I'm the only one that's left, out of the six. My mother had six.

01-00:05:51

Rigelhaupt: And so, when you were growing up, did you have older brothers and sisters and younger brothers and sisters?

01-00:05:55

Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:05:56

Rigelhaupt: So you were in the middle.

01-00:05:58

Stillwell: No, I was next to the end.

01-00:06:01

Rigelhaupt: Okay.

01-00:06:03

Stillwell: I had two brothers older than me and a sister older than me and one sister younger than me.

01-00:06:15

Rigelhaupt: Who were your parents renting the land from, they were growing rice?

01-00:06:20

Stillwell: [DeVore's?]. They stayed there, the family, too.

01-00:06:31

Rigelhaupt: And did they own a lot of land near Little Rock?

01-00:06:34

Stillwell: Yeah. They owned a lot. But the one that got out and took care of things, he finally died, and the youngest brother—there was just two brothers. There's three, but one was in Pennsylvania. And the youngest brother, he got married, to the woman that come and cooked, took care of them after my mother moved to Stuttgart. And his son finally married the caretaker's daughter. And I haven't seen them but once since then. Because it's about 3,000 miles between me and them. So that is about the size of it.

- 01-00:07:34
Rigelhaupt: And how close were you to Little Rock, to the city?
- 01-00:07:40
Stillwell: We were about 36 miles from Little Rock.
- 01-00:07:46
Rigelhaupt: Did you go into the city often, when you were growing up?
- 01-00:07:51
Stillwell: Oh, yeah. We went everywhere. It wasn't nothing but the people that we knowed, and, a lot of them, my father would go in the fall of the year and take two trucks and pick up enough people to shock the rice. But you had to shock four acres a day to get paid a dollar.
- 01-00:08:27
Rigelhaupt: So who was getting paid the dollar, your father or the—?
- 01-00:08:31
Stillwell: The men who were working.
- 01-00:08:32
Rigelhaupt: That he hired.
- 01-00:08:33
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:08:37
Rigelhaupt: So how would you describe a typical day for your father, when you were growing up?
- 01-00:08:44
Stillwell: Worked himself to death, trying to keep a bunch of lazy people—you'd pick them up, and they'd want to stay there and want to be paid and want to eat. So, they got their food. We furnished the food and cooked the food and everything else, and washed clothes. It'd be so hot, and we washed clothes all night to get out of the heat. And had the lines out, wired them, and we'd hang them up. And we'd be hanging them out when the sun come out, and, before you get them hung out, they'd be ready to take off the other end. The sun be done dried them.
- 01-00:09:36
Rigelhaupt: And what was a typical day like for your mother, when you were growing up?
- 01-00:09:39
Stillwell: Worked all the time.
- 01-00:09:45
Rigelhaupt: With farming, did it change by the season? Were some—?

01-00:09:50

Stillwell:

No. Anything—you'd fool around and don't get all the rice up, and it'd get froze to the ground. And you'd have to take a broadax and chop 'em aloose, take them up on a dry place, and set them up so you could thresh them.

01-00:10:11

Rigelhaupt:

Were your grandparents living nearby?

01-00:10:13

Stillwell:

No. My grandfather, he lived—he was a doctor. And he lived in a cottage he made out of rails. And all the old people called it the old folks' home. And if somebody was down and not able to take care of theirself, he'd move them in there. And they stayed there until they got able to leave, or else they'd pass.

01-00:10:43

Rigelhaupt:

I'm just going to pause for one second. I think—[interview interruption]

01-00:10:54

Daughter:

Can I ask one question?

01-00:10:59

Stillwell:

That's what I think.

01-00:11:06

Rigelhaupt:

So tell me about some of your memories of your grandfather, when you were growing up.

01-00:11:12

Stillwell:

Well, he was really strict. If he told you to learn a speech or something, he'd make you sit outside until you learned it. And you didn't go and get a drink of water or nothing else. Because that's the way he had been treated in Africa. And he'd treat his kids the same way.

01-00:11:35

Rigelhaupt:

So did he grow up in Africa?

01-00:11:38

Stillwell:

Yeah. He stowed away on a banana boat and come to the United States. Because he'd been trying to get out of there. Some of the slaves—people that owned them would have killed him.

01-00:11:56

Rigelhaupt:

Where in Africa did he come from?

01-00:12:00

Stillwell:

He come from—oh, geez—Popa-something. Millie, where was that place he came from?

01-00:12:12

Daughter:

I don't know. I didn't know him.

01-00:12:19

Stillwell:

I know my mother's mother come from Jamaica. And he stowed away and came here. And she was taking care of some children, and she came and said she was going back, but she never did go back. She stayed there until—she flew around and fell out arguing with her sons about the lumber that they was cutting and selling. One of them, Arthur, was selling it. And Pappy was watching and behind him, trying to keep him from selling all the wood. Because they didn't have nothing but the wood and a little coal they could go down on the railroad track and find. And she fell and broke her hip. And she died from that. And he just died from old age, and being so strict on everybody. He learnt me a prayer. And I still remember it, and I wasn't no more than about five years old when he learned it to me.

01-00:13:44

Rigelhaupt:

How does it go?

01-00:13:46

Stillwell:

Well, it's pretty long. It's, "All are architects of Fate, working in these walls of Time; some with massive deeds and great, some with ornaments of rhyme. Nothing useless is, or low; but each thing in its place is best; but that which seems an idle shower strengthens and supports the rest. So let us make the place where God may dwell beautiful, entire, and clean." [found in *A dictionary of poetical illustrations* authored by Robert Aitken Bertram published by Richard D. Dickinson in 1877]

01-00:14:18

Rigelhaupt:

That's great.

01-00:14:20

Stillwell:

And that was just a little of something.

01-00:14:25

Rigelhaupt:

Do you know where your grandfather first—where he first got when he arrived in the United States?

01-00:14:34

Stillwell:

He was at a place called Marché. And they don't even have it on the map any more.

01-00:14:42

Rigelhaupt:

Where is it near, that—?

01-00:14:44

Stillwell:

It's near North Little Rock.

01-00:14:50

Rigelhaupt:

And do you know how he chose to start residing near Little Rock?

- 01-00:14:56
Stillwell: Well, I know he had this big old house, about a mile long. And he fed the people and tell them how to save. And I had a job once to milk nine head of cows, twice a day, and give everybody milk.
- 01-00:15:25
Rigelhaupt: Do you know about what year your grandfather arrived in the United States?
- 01-00:15:31
Stillwell: No, I don't. He arrived in—I guess he must have came—he came before I was born. They had a way of, when a child was born, they'd put him in a river, when they're just born, just put them in the river. And he would swim out.
- 01-00:16:10
Rigelhaupt: And was this your maternal or—your mom's father or your father's father?
- 01-00:16:17
Stillwell: My mom's father.
- 01-00:16:19
Rigelhaupt: Okay. I'm just going to pause one more second. [interview interruption] So how old was your grandfather when he arrived in the United States?
- 01-00:16:41
Stillwell: I really don't know. Because I wasn't born. But I know he was 104 when he died.
- 01-00:16:59
Rigelhaupt: And do you remember about what year he died?
- 01-00:17:04
Stillwell: No. I can think back by my age—I don't really know what year it was. But I know I must have been about five or six years old when he died.
- 01-00:17:35
Rigelhaupt: So he was probably born before 1820 or so.
- 01-00:17:42
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:17:45
Rigelhaupt: And did you ever hear any family stories or did he ever tell you any stories about what life was like for him when he arrived in the United States?
- 01-00:17:55
Stillwell: No, he'd try to tell us, "Don't think about it."
- 01-00:18:08
Rigelhaupt: And what years were your parents born? Do you know what year your father was born or your mother was born?

01-00:18:20
Stillwell: No. My father was born about 25 years before he got married. And he was 17 or 18 when he got married. He married before he was 21. What did I do with they license? [to Milly]

01-00:19:06
Daughter: I don't know. The license is here somewhere. But how old was he when you were born?

01-00:19:12
Stillwell: Huh?

01-00:19:12
Daughter: What was his age when you were born?

01-00:19:17
Stillwell: Oh—I don't know.

01-00:19:27
Rigelhaupt: Well, did either of your parents talk about what life was like for them when they were growing up?

01-00:19:33
Stillwell: Oh, yeah. They didn't want you to associate with nobody that'd come in to shock rice or whatever. You stayed away from the boarders.

01-00:19:54
Rigelhaupt: Did they talk about any reason why you were supposed to stay away?

01-00:19:59
Stillwell: Well, they'd heard my grandfather talking about prisoners. And he didn't have much confidence in people. He just watched them all the time and tried to keep us away from them. Because he didn't know what they might be, might be black slaves or something. And so we kind of kept to ourself.

01-00:20:32
Rigelhaupt: So there probably were some people who may have been former slaves, working on the farms?

01-00:20:44
Stillwell: Well, you'd hear about slavery. It was a lot of people, you know. And then if they went to jail or something, somebody—if they had maybe 20 years, they'd go in there and then pay \$300 and work them for longer than the 20 years, if they didn't run off.

01-00:21:11
Rigelhaupt: So there were work camps for people who ended up in jail—

01-00:21:19
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:21:20
Rigelhaupt: —in Little Rock.

01-00:21:21
Stillwell: Naw, just like if you—they steal something from you, and you wasn't getting much service out of them, no way, so you'd take the \$300, and the person that bought them would work them for years, for \$300, and wouldn't give them nothing—

01-00:21:44
Daughter: Hm.

01-00:12:44
Stillwell: —but some food. And most of the time it'd be food that they raised theirself. Because everybody had a big truck patch.

01-00:21:56
Rigelhaupt: And was it mostly on rice farms? Or do you remember what other places people worked?

01-00:22:01
Stillwell: It wasn't nothing but rice farms—and fishing and hunting, and raising chickens for the market. And we'd get 15 cents for each chicken, if it was big enough to cook.

01-00:22:25
Rigelhaupt: And you said you had extended family, cousins—

01-00:22:28
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:22:28
Rigelhaupt: —living nearby?

01-00:22:30
Stillwell: Yeah. Most of them was my brother's kids. And they even came here and lived with me for two or three months.

01-00:22:49
Rigelhaupt: So your grandfather, do you know if he—? Did he go to medical school in the U.S?

01-00:22:55
Stillwell: I think he did. He was a doctor.

01-00:23:00
Rigelhaupt: But do you know where?

01-00:23:03
Stillwell: He was a doctor in Africa. And then when he come to the United States, he built this home for the elderly. And he took care of everybody in the community, to get them over there.

- 01-00:23:20
Rigelhaupt: And so that was just in Little Rock, near where you grew up.
- 01-00:23:24
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:23:26
Rigelhaupt: And you saw him pretty often while you were growing up?
- 01-00:23:30
Stillwell: Yeah, I saw him. Because I lived with him. My mother and them, when they moved off they left me there.
- 01-00:23:40
Rigelhaupt: Okay. And did you have—a lot of your jobs, your work, when you were growing up, was on the farm.
- 01-00:23:57
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:23:58
Rigelhaupt: What were some of the things you did while you were on the farm?
- 01-00:24:01
Stillwell: Shelled rice, sacked rice, moved rice into the [hook?], to go up in the granaries. You had big, long granaries, maybe a half a mile long. And you'd put all the rice that was being threshed, up there, until it go through that heat. Because if it got too much dampness it would rot.
- 01-00:24:37
Rigelhaupt: Now how—? So you were about 16 years old, 15, 16 years old when the Depression set into the U.S?
- 01-00:24:46
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:24:48
Rigelhaupt: Could you talk a little bit about how life changed for you and your family when the Depression started?
- 01-00:24:54
Stillwell: Well, it really changed. Because we was kind of like we was free. But when the war started, everything clamped down. We had to have a ration book to get food, and then most times, you couldn't buy it if you had the stamps.
- 01-00:25:22
Rigelhaupt: But when the Depression started, you were still living in Little Rock, Arkansas, on the farm.
- 01-00:25:28
Stillwell: No, we was living down in Stuttgart. That's down below, about 35 miles from where we live.

- 01-00:25:49
Rigelhaupt: Okay. I'm just going to pause one more second. [interview interruption]
- 01-00:25:57
Daughter: And so I'm confused.
- 01-00:26:01
Rigelhaupt: So what are some of your memories about the Depression and how it affected—?
- 01-00:26:08
Stillwell: Well, it's been pretty rough. I couldn't do anything much because my husband got sick. And I was determined that these kids would all go to college, which they did. I had to work all the time. Because I had this house, and that house down the street we was building and didn't have no income. Had a loan on both houses. And I worked three jobs. I worked Children's Fairyland, the laundry, and—what else was that out—?
- 01-00:26:54
Daughter: The cannery. He asked you about the Depression.
- 01-00:26:54
Stillwell: The cannery. The cannery. And I'd go to work—I had a car, and I couldn't—if—you'd get off of one job early enough to find a place to park. So I had to park the darn thing almost right in front of my house and walk down there. And if you didn't have a cap on your head and a lunch pail, the bus driver wouldn't let you ride. You couldn't get on the bus. You had to walk all the way down to the shipyard.
- 01-00:27:37
Rigelhaupt: Well, if we could just stay back in Little Rock, or near Little Rock, where you were living, just for another minute.
- 01-00:27:46
Stillwell: We stayed at Marché.
- 01-00:27:49
Rigelhaupt: And so, when we first started talking you mentioned that the price of rice changed—
- 01-00:27:58
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:27:59
Rigelhaupt: —and the government paid you not to grow it.
- 01-00:28:02
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:28:02
Rigelhaupt: So did your parents stop growing rice when the Depression started?

01-00:28:07
Stillwell: No.

01-00:28:07
Rigelhaupt: No.

01-00:28:09
Stillwell: They had no other choice but to keep on working, if they wanted to live. They wouldn't have nothing to eat. And you could buy bacon for five cents a pound, chickens for 15 cents each, eggs for 10 cents a dozen. So you had to work to live.

01-00:28:38
Rigelhaupt: What year did you get married?

01-00:28:43
Stillwell: When? The first time? I got married in—I got married a year before Frank was born.

01-00:28:59
Daughter: Mmm hmm. '32?

01-00:29:06
Stillwell: I think—

01-00:29:07
Daughter: Frank was born in '32.

01-00:29:08
Rigelhaupt: So if it was 1932, you were about 18 years old when you got married.

01-00:29:13
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:29:14
Rigelhaupt: How did you meet your husband?

01-00:29:16
Stillwell: He was one of the lazy rice shockers.

01-00:29:20
Daughter: [laughs]

01-00:29:23
Rigelhaupt: And do you remember dating? Or how did the courtship go while you were—
?

01-00:29:30
Stillwell: There wasn't no courtship. The first time I ever kissed a boy, kissed him, that night I married him. And my daddy wouldn't even let you go to the door with anybody that come there. He sat on the porch until they leave.

01-00:29:49
Rigelhaupt: So it was different than it is today. [laughs]

01-00:29:52
Stillwell: Yeah. You couldn't even walk out on the porch, off the steps when he'd leave. They were really strict.

01-00:30:09
Rigelhaupt: Was that true for your brothers too?

01-00:30:13
Stillwell: No, they would—one of them was grown when he got married. And the other one had left and gone to South Bend. No, he got married earlier then. But he didn't ever be with that first wife. He just married her. And her father was strict on her, and so he married her so she could get away. And she kept going. [chuckles] And then they finally married again, and again, about four or five times. And he passed about two years ago.

01-00:30:58
Rigelhaupt: And how did life change when you got married?

01-00:31:03
Stillwell: Well, there wasn't no difference because he was so darn lazy. He wouldn't do nothing. And I told him he had to clean the lamp chimneys and put oil in the lamp when I come in from work. And he wouldn't do it. And I got mad. And when I'd come home, my mother, she was always so kind. She had cooked enough chicken and stuff for him to have some. And I went in and got the whole thing and threw it out the door to the dogs. And I said, "Now, if you want to eat, you cook you some food." Because I'd been raised up with a whole bunch of devils, and I was ready to fight him if he'd of messed with me about the chicken. I just grabbed the whole thing and threw it out the door. I hadn't eaten either.

01-00:32:10
Rigelhaupt: So hard work was valued in your family.

01-00:32:13
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:32:18
Rigelhaupt: Now what year did you move to the West Coast?

01-00:32:25
Stillwell: Let's see. When was that first time I left, when Austin was sick?

01-00:32:35
Daughter: I don't know. Didn't you come before you had Otis, 1940?

01-00:32:43
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:32:47
Daughter: I guess.

01-00:32:51
Stillwell: Yeah, it was 1940.

01-00:32:54
Rigelhaupt: 1940.

01-00:32:56
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:32:58
Rigelhaupt: And what brought you out here?

01-00:33:02
Stillwell: Just looking. My brother, he had a wife, and she had about ten kids, and she walked off from him. And I stayed there with them, until his daughter made him come out here and brought them all out here, and left them all with me. And she went to Alaska and stayed for three years. And I [were?] with them until she come back out there. Her daughter came back. And she [were?] with them, I don't know—they're still around here somewhere.

01-00:33:58
Daughter: Hm. I think you were asking her about when she came here, in the 40's. And she's talking about the 60's, at this point.

01-00:34:07
Rigelhaupt: Okay. So did you move with your husband, in 1940?

01-00:34:13
Stillwell: No. He came before I did.

01-00:34:16
Rigelhaupt: And what brought him out here?

01-00:34:19
Stillwell: Well, they put him in 1-A, either come out here and work in the shipyard or go in the service. And he had four brothers already in the service. And I had one brother and three or four first cousins. And they all come back shook up and crazy.

01-00:34:45
Rigelhaupt: So your husband—what was his name?

01-00:34:48
Stillwell: Otis.

01-00:34:48
Rigelhaupt: Otis. And so Otis was working in the shipyards when you came out here.

01-00:34:54
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:34:57
Rigelhaupt: I'm just going to pause one more second.

01-00:35:00
Daughter: Did you come here before Otis—? [interview interruption]

01-00:35:08
Rigelhaupt: So you arrived, yourself, in about 1942.

01-00:35:13
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:35:14
Rigelhaupt: And did you arrive right in Oakland?

01-00:35:23
Stillwell: Yeah. No. When I first got to California I came to Los Angeles, and then come on out here.

01-00:35:40
Rigelhaupt: But your husband was already working at the shipyards in Oakland.

01-00:35:43
Stillwell: Yeah, he was already here.

01-00:35:47
Rigelhaupt: So what were your first impressions of Los Angeles?

01-00:35:51
Stillwell: I didn't like it. So hot. I can't stand a lot of heat. I stay cold all the time.

01-00:36:04
Rigelhaupt: And so then how long were you in Los Angeles before coming up to Oakland?

01-00:36:08
Stillwell: We were there about—oh, about a month. He had a sister stayed there. And we came to Gertrude's house. And then we left from there and come on to Oakland. And he had an auntie that'd come out here, Aunt Emma. And she jumped up and joined the Ku Klux Klan or something, and then she got scared and left.

01-00:36:43
Rigelhaupt: So what were your first impressions of Oakland?

01-00:36:48
Stillwell: I didn't like it. But I just stayed. I just made up my mind, anywhere I went, I'd just stay there.

01-00:37:00
Rigelhaupt: And where did you live when you first go to Oakland?

01-00:37:05
Stillwell: I lived on 7th Street, down by [John Singer], his building. And he had my husband to build an upstairs and downstairs room and told him he can have that—"You can take that off with your labor, for buying lumber and building." And so we'd be out there at night building. And when they got it built, he charged us twice as much as he was charging us for a room, after we built it.

01-00:37:55
Stillwell: Or kill that thing.

01-00:37:58
Daughter: [smacks something and laughs]

01-00:38:03
Rigelhaupt: What was 7th Street like when you got here?

01-00:38:07
Stillwell: Oh, it was just like a nightclub, every place you went in. Here a juke joint and a bunch of killing and going on. And you couldn't go outdoors at night in the summer and then they'd have a blackout, and you couldn't have no light. I remember they had a blackout, and I had a flashlight, and I had it down under the cover. And the police come and kicked my door off the hangers.

01-00:38:46
Rigelhaupt: Because of the light?

01-00:38:47
Stillwell: Yeah. You couldn't have no light.

01-00:38:53
Rigelhaupt: So if we go back a little bit, did your husband move out here before Pearl Harbor or after Pearl Harbor?

01-00:39:01
Stillwell: No. He moved out here while Pearl Harbor was going on.

01-00:39:07
Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

01-00:39:14
Stillwell: Well, it seemed like a whole lot of it was unfair. They just rootin' to kill everybody what stood in front of them. They had a man over there, now, were fixing to kill him. And he had been over there, served in Pearl Harbor, trying to help the people. And the United States was going to kill him. And so they got up to some stuff, and he got away and got to come back home. It's really been rough.

01-00:40:12
Rigelhaupt: How did your husband describe the shipyards and working there?

- 01-00:40:17
Stillwell: Oh, he got extra jobs. He made some kind of little thing. And I tried to find it last night. I couldn't find it. It took the place of eight men, this one tool he made. They didn't do right by him. They give him a little old \$25 and a little medal. And the job he done will take the place of eight men in the shipyard.
- 01-00:40:54
Rigelhaupt: And was your husband a member of a union in the shipyards?
- 01-00:41:00
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:41:02
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember which union he was in?
- 01-00:41:07
Stillwell: No, I don't.
- 01-00:41:12
Rigelhaupt: But you worked in the shipyards, too.
- 01-00:41:15
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 01-00:41:15
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember which—were you in a union?
- 01-00:41:18
Stillwell: No. I worked at my sister-in-law's place. Just like when my youngest daughter—I took her to the cannery. I used one of the other's name because she wasn't old enough to be working. We really had to scuffle. We couldn't sit around and not do nothing. And she got her own—well, did you work at the plant?
- 01-00:41:53
Daughter: He's asking about the shipyard, mama. What did you do when you were in the shipyard?
- 01-00:41:58
Stillwell: Oh, I pulled the tank, what you light the torches. And the men'd keep it right at their feet. They were so ornery they wouldn't pull it over to them or push the torch over to it.
- 01-00:42:13
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember if there were any union jobs in the shipyards?
- 01-00:42:22
Stillwell: Wasn't nothing but scrubbing and cleaning up.
- 01-00:42:27
Rigelhaupt: But was that true for all workers or—?

01-00:42:29

Stillwell: No, just a few of them got it.

01-00:42:36

Rigelhaupt: Were the jobs segregated at all? I've read that often African-Americans didn't get the same kind of jobs that whites got in the shipyards.

01-00:42:45

Stillwell: Oh, yeah. When I came to California, you didn't see a black person doing nothing. And if he got a job, he could drive a cab. And the cab had to [run?] for the company. And he could drive a cab. And he didn't have no safety. Because always somebody was, you know, getting shot in a cab or getting a cab took away from them, and everything else. And they wouldn't even have a black person paying a toll for cars going across. We didn't have nothing to do, but get out of California.

01-00:43:40

Rigelhaupt: So was that similar or different to your experiences in Arkansas?

01-00:43:48

Stillwell: No. Because my daddy was the boss. And he didn't do nothing but stay out there and make you work. Of course, he told me he wasn't going to give me but 75 cents a day. And I was shocking over four acres. And I quit on it. And my momma didn't allow Daddy to whup the girls, so he couldn't do nothing but roll his eyes at me, and says, "I'm going to get you for that."

01-00:44:27

Rigelhaupt: So I'm still curious about some of the issues of race relations and the differences between Arkansas and California.

01-00:44:39

Stillwell: Well, it wasn't no different. Because my daddy hired all the people, and he hired anybody he wanted to. They'd be just sitting out there waiting on the truck to come through. They were going to get on the truck and tell him how much they could do and what they would do. And he'd take them and try them, and, if they didn't do it, they had to go. Because he had to make something to pay the people for the shocking and all that stuff and if he didn't make that off the rice, he wouldn't be able to pay nobody.

01-00:45:16

Rigelhaupt: So how did you get out to California from Arkansas?

01-00:45:24

Stillwell: I caught the bus. One time I come, I drove out here on an old Model T car, and had all my kids in the car with me.

01-00:45:36

Rigelhaupt: But that wasn't in 1940, when you first came out here—or '42.

- 01-00:45:43
Stillwell: No. I had already been out here. And a friend of my husband, he was coming out here in a car. And he begged my momma to let us ride out here with him. And he couldn't drive at night. And he didn't want to stop nowhere where the kids could even get something to eat, in Mexico. I stopped and got them food, and bought something that was so hot you couldn't eat it. Threw it away.
- 01-00:46:19
Rigelhaupt: So let's jump forward a little bit to when you were living on 7th Street. How many kids did you have, when you were first living on 7th Street in Oakland?
- 01-00:46:32
Stillwell: I didn't have but two, her and her sister. I had a son by my first marriage. He was about grown. He must have been about—how old was Frank when I came out here?
- 01-00:46:53
Daughter: No, he wants you to talk about during the war. How many kids did you have?
- 01-00:46:59
Stillwell: Oh, yeah?
- 01-00:47:01
Daughter: When you lived on 7th Street. You had Otis—
- 01-00:47:10
Stillwell: Well, nobody but Otis. And then you. And [T?].
- 01-00:47:25
Rigelhaupt: And so you had one child when you first came to California.
- 01-00:47:31
Stillwell: Yeah. And I went back and had this one. [referring to her daughter present at the interview]
- 01-00:47:37
Rigelhaupt: Now why did you go back?
- 01-00:47:41
Stillwell: Oh, I was in the hospital here, and they gave me some kind of old pill, to [relieve?] the birthing. I stayed in labor too many days. And then, when my baby was born, it got stolen, and was gone for three months. And then when she started turning dark, and her hair started getting kinky, they knew she wasn't white.
- 01-00:48:18
Daughter: That wasn't me. That was her other baby.
- 01-00:48:21
Stillwell: Huh?

01-00:48:22
Daughter: Tell him why you went back home to have me. That's what he wants to know. Why did you leave here to go back to Arkansas to have me?

01-00:48:31
Stillwell: Well, I didn't have no decent place to stay here. The room that the woman had let us have, when she found out I had a baby, she took the room back and gave it to somebody else. And kept the money.

01-00:48:53
Rigelhaupt: So was that common, that people who had recently moved to Oakland went back home to have children? Or were there other places here—?

01-00:49:06
Stillwell: Well, you couldn't find a place here. And the way they do, they have two different groups using that room. And they just flip the mattress, and get the men in, and you on the porch.

01-00:49:24
Rigelhaupt: And so that was during the war years, when there was—

01-00:49:26
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:49:26
Rigelhaupt: —a lot of people here.

01-00:49:27
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:49:29
Rigelhaupt: So was it hard to find housing when you first moved here?

01-00:49:32
Stillwell: Oh, yeah. My sister-in-law had a house. But she had a whole bunch of kids, and she didn't have no room for us. So they just bunked, sleep in the car, whatever. And the fleas were so bad, they'd about eat you up.

01-00:49:59
Rigelhaupt: Well, I'd like to ask you a couple questions more about the shipyards. One of the things I've read about is that there was a lot of effort by African-American workers in the shipyards to desegregate the boilermaker's union.

01-00:50:16
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:50:17
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember—?

01-00:50:18
Stillwell: Yeah, I remember.

01-00:50:21
Rigelhaupt: Could you talk a little bit about what you remember about those efforts?

01-00:50:25
Stillwell: Well, they had a boilermaker's union. And they had pipes that run in there. And they would pay more for taking the pipes out and re-changing them. So they'd give them all to the Mexicans and the whites. And the blacks couldn't get it. They'd call up work every morning, and you'd be there until the roll was called. And if they didn't call your name, you just have to go back home or go somewhere else looking for a job.

01-00:51:06
Rigelhaupt: And do you remember any of the people that worked to desegregate that union?

01-00:51:13
Stillwell: No. I remember a few of them, [Al McConnell?]. Practically all of them all of them dead, Al McConnell and Mr. Ford and somebody else.

01-00:51:37
Rigelhaupt: And you were at Moore Ship--?

01-00:51:40
Stillwell: Huh?

01-00:51:41
Rigelhaupt: What shipyard were you at, again?

01-00:51:43
Stillwell: Moore's.

01-00:51:43
Rigelhaupt: Moore's. One of the people I've read about that worked there was Ray Thompson.

01-00:51:49
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:51:50
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember Ray Thompson?

01-00:51:51
Stillwell: I remember his name. I never did know him.

01-00:51:56
Rigelhaupt: Were there any community groups you were involved with when you first came to California?

01-00:52:12
Stillwell: No.

01-00:52:15
Rigelhaupt: Was there a church you were involved with?

01-00:52:17
Stillwell: Yeah, Star of Bethel.

01-00:52:21
Rigelhaupt: And where was that church?

01-00:52:23
Stillwell: It was down in West Oakland.

01-00:52:27
Rigelhaupt: And did you remain a member of that church for many years?

01-00:52:32
Stillwell: Yeah. And then I got into—I can't think of—The church right around the corner.

01-00:52:42
Daughter: Downs [Memorial Methodist Church].

01-00:52:42
Stillwell: Downs. My husband, he was there at Downs and got me to move over there to that church. Then when I moved over there, he moved to some other church.

01-00:53:08
Rigelhaupt: And what was the church like, when you first got to California?

01-00:53:13
Stillwell: It was all right. I stayed with the church until—here these last three years, I haven't been going to church because I've been sick. Well, first one thing—and another.

01-00:53:43
Rigelhaupt: But when you first came to Oakland, was that church an important part of community life in your neighborhood?

01-00:53:51
Stillwell: Yeah.

01-00:53:56
Rigelhaupt: Did that church help people find housing and those sorts of things?

01-00:54:01
Stillwell: They didn't help me. I got out and found—myself. I had wallpaper. I had two big flats, one on my back and one on my shoulder. And I'd go to everybody's house, sell them some wallpaper. Used to buy it. And lots of times I'd run up on a place to stay.

01-00:54:44

Rigelhaupt: Well, you know, I just have to change tapes. So I'm going to pause for one second.

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

Begin Audio File Hattie Stillwell - 02 08-12-2006.mp3

02-00:00:07

Rigelhaupt: So just before I stopped to change the tapes, you had talked for a minute about a tool your husband invented.

02-00:00:16

Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:00:18

Rigelhaupt: What was it called? And could you describe it?

02-00:00:24

Stillwell: Oh, I remember it had a ship on it and cars on it. Tried to find it last night. It's around here in some of these beads. I've got so many beads, until I can't hardly take care of them.

02-00:00:51

Rigelhaupt: But the tool your husband invented was used to make ships?

02-00:00:55

Stillwell: Yeah. To do something to the ship, to take the place of eight men.

02-00:01:06

Rigelhaupt: And do you remember when he invented it?

02-00:01:15

Stillwell: This would be in—must have been about when Katy was born, wasn't it?

02-00:01:25

Daughter: Well, I don't know. It was during the war, when he was working in the shipyard. They called it the Stillwell clamp, wasn't it?

02-00:01:42

Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:01:45

Rigelhaupt: And so this tool, your daughter just told me it was called the Stillwell clamp.

02-00:01:53

Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:01:55

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how your husband invented it?

02-00:01:59

Stillwell:

Well, the little thing they give him was made out of brass. And it had something like a—I'm trying to think where that thing—

02-00:02:23

Daughter:

You're talking about a commemorative medal that they gave him. That's what she has had.

02-00:02:30

Stillwell:

It was just this little small medal, like you take the picture of something. And they made it out of brass and gave it to him. And it was worth a lot of money, but they didn't give him nothing. Because he was black.

02-00:02:51

Rigelhaupt:

So he didn't make money from the tool that he invented.

02-00:02:56

Stillwell:

No. He had a job. But the tool helped to take care of eight men. And they just give him a little small picture of it, just like a picture of it. And it's probably in my bead box or somewhere. I tried to find it last night, but I didn't have no luck. I think it's still in some of them pans of beads.

02-00:03:27

Rigelhaupt:

So even though this tool benefited the company—

02-00:03:33

Stillwell:

Yeah.

02-00:03:33

Rigelhaupt:

—they didn't share any money with your husband.

02-00:03:35

Stillwell:

No. They gave him \$2 or \$3. It wasn't nothing but that little old picture of it.

02-00:03:44

Rigelhaupt:

But it saved them a lot of money and labor costs.

02-00:03:46

Stillwell:

Yeah. Yeah, it saved a lot.

02-00:03:54

Rigelhaupt:

So what do you remember about the war ending? World War II, that is.

02-00:04:01

Stillwell:

Oh, I was glad when I ended. But so many people was misused they didn't do nothing about. Because I had a little friend, she was a Japanese, I think. And they took them, put them in a camp, took everything they had, give it away or whatever.

And I used to go to the store, and, if I didn't have no food stamp, I couldn't get no coffee, no fruit, no nothing but pigskins.

- 02-00:04:48
Rigelhaupt: So when you first moved to California, Japanese-Americans were still living in—the internment hadn't begun.
- 02-00:04:58
Stillwell: No.
- 02-00:04:59
Rigelhaupt: So what do you remember about Japanese-Americans being interned and leaving your—?
- 02-00:05:05
Stillwell: Well, I hated it because they were my friends. And a lot of things that I didn't have food stamps for, I could get it from them. And there's one right across the street from me. And my kids would go over there and get popsicles and different things. And they had ration stamps on everything. Nothing but a meat skin.
- 02-00:05:39
Rigelhaupt: So on 7th Street the owners of a store across from you were Japanese-Americans.
- 02-00:05:47
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 02-00:05:47
Rigelhaupt: And then they had to leave.
- 02-00:05:51
Stillwell: They had to leave. And they had houses, and they took the houses away from them.
- 02-00:06:06
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember people talking about what it meant for—?
- 02-00:06:10
Stillwell: Yeah. Everybody hated to see them locked up and misused.
- 02-00:06:21
Rigelhaupt: From what I've read in history books, there was this belief that Japanese-Americans were a security threat. And that was the rationale for internment. But it doesn't sound like you or your neighbors believed that.
- 02-00:06:40
Stillwell: We didn't. I just wonder why they put their little camp right here. [referring to children playing outside]
- 02-00:06:48
Daughter: They're having a party, Mother. [laughs]
- 02-00:06:51
Stillwell: No, that's a—

02-00:06:52
Daughter: It's a party, Mother. He's taping you, Mother.

02-00:06:55
Rigelhaupt: It's okay.

02-00:06:57
Daughter: [laughs]

02-00:06:56
Rigelhaupt: So do you remember, the storeowners, did they come back home?

02-00:07:09
Stillwell: No.

02-00:07:11
Rigelhaupt: And do you remember any Japanese-Americans moving back into the neighborhood after the war ended?

02-00:07:16
Stillwell: No, I don't. I saw a few people that I had met when I was working at Children's Fairyland. I worked there for about five years, taking care of the people that didn't want to be bothered with the kids and come and push them under the gate and give them a dime. So I got so I wouldn't take the dime. I said, "No, you go back out there, give your dime to your daddy." The women would want some rest, and they'd put the kids off with their husbands. And the husbands would bring them and put them off on the park and let them stay there until the park closed.

02-00:08:08
Rigelhaupt: One of the things I've read about is there was a growth in civil rights activism during World War II, that, as this nation was fighting a war for democracy, it became more apparent that democracy was not true in the American South.

02-00:08:29
Stillwell: No.

02-00:08:31
Rigelhaupt: And I'm wondering what you remember about a sense of civil rights growing during World War II.

02-00:08:38
Stillwell: Well, I didn't get out nowhere but to go to work. And civil rights was mostly just a voice. There wasn't nothing happening.

02-00:08:53
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember the Double V Campaign?

02-00:08:56
Stillwell: The what?

02-00:08:57
Rigelhaupt: The Double V Campaign?

02-00:09:00
Stillwell: No.

02-00:09:00
Rigelhaupt: I think it was mostly on the East Coast. Some of the African-American newspapers in Baltimore ran this victory abroad and victory at home—the idea that you would end fascism in Europe and in the Pacific and then end Jim Crow in the South.

02-00:09:19
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:09:20
Rigelhaupt: So that wasn't talked about in Oakland?

02-00:09:24
Stillwell: No.

02-00:09:24
Rigelhaupt: Okay. How did Oakland change during the war?

02-00:09:40
Stillwell: Well, people started to leaving, and the houses got to the place where the black could buy the houses. But they didn't have nothing but the house and a whole lot of hatefulness around.

02-00:10:06
Rigelhaupt: When you say hatefulness, what do you mean?

02-00:10:08
Stillwell: And that they'd come out at night and throw things on your steps and steal everything you'd put down.

02-00:10:17
Rigelhaupt: Who was doing this?

02-00:10:18
Stillwell: You never know. And if you got out there messing around with them, you'd get shot

02-00:10:27
Rigelhaupt: And this was happening all over Oakland?

02-00:10:29
Stillwell: All over Oakland.

02-00:10:32
Rigelhaupt: And were there any groups or organizations that tried to help defend people's homes?

02-00:10:41
Stillwell: Well, one or two people, but they was Catholic, and they didn't do too much. They'd just talk.

02-00:10:54
Rigelhaupt: Was the NAACP helping to protect people's homes?

02-00:10:58
Stillwell: Not as far as I can say.

02-00:11:02
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember much about the NAACP in Oakland?

02-00:11:06
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:11:07
Rigelhaupt: Could you talk a little bit about what you remember about it?

02-00:11:11
Stillwell: Oh, they would talk a lot and come by your house, the Jehovah Witnesses, and sit up and nod and sleep and get up. "Well, I'll see you next week." They still come here. But I don't even let them in.

02-00:11:33
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember a group called the Civil Rights Congress?

02-00:11:41
Stillwell: Yeah, I remember.

02-00:11:43
Rigelhaupt: And what do you remember about that group?

02-00:11:46
Stillwell: Well, they just come around, and just like the Jehovah Witnesses. And they sing, and we will talk—and hand me a pamphlet. And you buy it, and they put the quarter in their pocket and go on about their business.

02-00:12:03
Rigelhaupt: So you don't remember the Civil Rights Congress helping to defend civil rights in minority—

02-00:12:10
Stillwell: No. They talked about it, but I never seen nothing they was doing. The fact is I wasn't at home enough to know what was going on. Because I had these children, and their father was sick one time for three years and eight months. And wasn't nobody working but me. And the welfare was talking about taking the kids and taking their clothes and this that and the other. I told them—I said, "Well, I tell you what. I'll pack their clothes, and you can take every damn one of them." Because I was trying to save my house. And they was

going to talk about giving me \$60 a month to feed four kids and pay two house loans and pay for a brand new car.

No. But I was hiding out and working all I could to keep from losing my kids. And I know they wasn't going to take them. Because they were so hostile. They'd be giving them a bad time if they come and got them. They wouldn't never let nobody take them.

02-00:13:28

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about how you learned about how the war effort was going? Did you learn from listening to the radio or seeing newsreels?

02-00:13:42

Stillwell:

No, I learned from the treatment I was getting, and my husband was getting. He had worked in the shipyard and built houses around here, and when he got sick we had to go way out to Pinole, put him in the hospital. And he stayed out there for three years and eight months.

02-00:14:08

Rigelhaupt:

But this wasn't during the 1940's.

02-00:14:12

Stillwell:

No.

02-00:14:14

Rigelhaupt:

But during the 1940's, do you remember seeing newsreels before movies or listening to the radio and hearing about World War II?

02-00:14:22

Stillwell:

No.

02-00:14:24

Daughter:

How did you know what was going during the war?

02-00:14:26

Stillwell:

Not too much. But everything was hard to live.

02-00:14:33

Rigelhaupt:

So it sounds like things were so busy it was hard to keep up with the news.

02-00:14:38

Stillwell:

Yeah. And it wasn't much use keeping up with the news because you could tell what was going on from the way you was living.

02-00:14:55

Rigelhaupt:

Now, do you remember the explosion that happened out at Port Chicago?

02-00:15:01

Stillwell:

Yeah.

02-00:15:02

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about it?

02-00:15:04

Stillwell: I just remember hearing them talking about it. And nothing.

02-00:15:30

Rigelhaupt: But I've heard that people living as far away as Oakland and Berkeley and Richmond heard and felt the explosion.

02-00:15:37

Stillwell: Yeah, they did.

02-00:15:40

Rigelhaupt: What did you think happened?

02-00:15:42

Stillwell: I didn't know what happened. Because when I was living in San Francisco, my husband was over here. And he had to stay over here because they thought they saw a submarine in the water, and they didn't want the people to be on the ferry coming across. And so he had to stay over here three days before he could come home.

02-00:16:14

Rigelhaupt: And when did you live in San Francisco?

02-00:16:17

Stillwell: I lived in San Francisco, oh, along when Otis was a baby. Because I thought about throwing her out the window, she worried me so much. That child cried night and day. And you had to walk around with her in your arms. When she'd sleep, if you try to lay her down, her mouth would fly open. And if it would be a racket when it was a blackout, the police would be there kicking your door in.

02-00:16:58

Rigelhaupt: When did the poli--? Say more about what you were—about the police?

02-00:17:01

Stillwell: No, but I had a light on, and try to keep her quiet. Because she didn't want to be in the dark. She was always scary and want to be seeing or something. And she like to drove me crazy.

02-00:17:17

Rigelhaupt: So after the war ended, were you still living on 7th Street?

02-00:17:23

Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:17:24

Rigelhaupt: How did the neighborhood change?

02-00:17:27

Stillwell: It didn't change. Because certain people left and went to Los Angeles and different places, and went to Alaska. And I never did go there.

02-00:17:42
Rigelhaupt: And you said your husband built the house that's just two houses down.

02-00:17:47
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:17:48
Rigelhaupt: What year did that happen?

02-00:17:54
Stillwell: That was when—

02-00:17:59
Daughter: Around '50. But he built a bowling alley down on 7th Street.

02-00:18:04
Rigelhaupt: Yeah. So, yeah, could you talk about building the—your husband built the bowling alley on 7th Street.

02-00:18:09
Daughter: The Chimes.

02-00:18:09
Stillwell: Well, he had a bunch of men work for him, and he had jobs all over town. And he'd go and check on them, and go on to Richmond. We built a duplex in Richmond. And when he come out of the hospital he wanted money to spend and to keep his business going, and told me he had a notion of letting them give it away.

02-00:18:38
Daughter: But talk about the bowling alley and the bowling team he had right down there on 7th Street.

02-00:18:44
Stillwell: Yeah, I told him about the bowling alley.

02-00:18:47
Daughter: That he built that.

02-00:18:48
Rigelhaupt: He—

02-00:18:48
Daughter: And he had a team. In fact, he was like the first African-American to build a bowling alley.

02-00:18:56
Rigelhaupt: So that was a significant accomplishment, to build that big of a building.

02-00:19:01
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:19:01
Daughter: Mmm hmm.

02-00:19:03
Rigelhaupt: And it was a probably a big contract.

02-00:19:07
Stillwell: And he built several nice buildings around.

02-00:19:13
Daughter: But that was the Chimes Bowling Alley.

02-00:19:15
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:19:16
Rigelhaupt: But he didn't—so the Chimes Bowling Alley, that he built. But—

02-00:19:23
Stillwell: They paid him to build it.

02-00:19:25
Rigelhaupt: And where was it on 7th Street?

02-00:19:31
Stillwell: It was on 14th and 7th.

02-00:19:37
Daughter: Uh-uh.

02-00:19:38
Stillwell: Huh?

02-00:19:39
Daughter: No, it was down like over at the end of 7th, like maybe Wood Street. And they tore it down right around when they put the post office in.

02-00:19:49
Rigelhaupt: Well, about the time they built the post office, Oakland was going through urban renewal.

02-00:19:56
Daughter: Mmm hmm.

02-00:19:57
Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about how that time, where they were tearing things down and building new things—? How did that affect your neighborhood?

02-00:20:08
Stillwell: Well, most of the time we would—for the neighbors. And people would see him building there, and they'd get him to do something onto their house. And on and on.

- 02-00:20:23
Daughter: But what about when they took all those people's property down there?
- 02-00:20:27
Stillwell: Yeah. They took everybody's property all around through West Oakland, come and set a price what they'd pay them for it, and, if they didn't accept the price they offered them, they would tear their house down.
- 02-00:20:47
Rigelhaupt: How did people feel about this?
- 02-00:20:49
Stillwell: They felt bad! And they couldn't do nothing about it because the law was on they side.
- 02-00:21:02
Rigelhaupt: Were there any groups or people trying to stop the property from being taken and homes from being torn down?
- 02-00:21:07
Stillwell: Yeah, my husband tried it, and Tim Evans down the street there. But too many people—so silly, to get the little \$5,000 or \$6,000. They's getting some money. And so they just give it up. And they wasn't doing nothing to try to keep it up.
- 02-00:21:33
Rigelhaupt: Did your husband work in an organization or a group to try and defend—?
- 02-00:21:38
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 02-00:21:39
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what it was called?
- 02-00:21:42
Stillwell: No. They was just trying to claim one or two streets. And that took a—and all of West Oakland was run by the same people. They're just ready to leave. They didn't have no job. They didn't have no money. And \$500 was a lot of money to them. And they just sold out. Now they're trying to come back, some of them.
- 02-00:22:27
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what was being built where the homes used to be?
- 02-00:22:34
Stillwell: Well, they claimed they was building a big post office and a factory and I don't know what all. But they didn't build nothing but a post office.
- 02-00:22:45
Rigelhaupt: So the changes that happened around that time, did—?

02-00:22:49
Stillwell: Didn't materialize to nothing, for the people, the owners, or the people in the neighborhood.

02-00:23:02
Daughter: Hm.

02-00:23:09
Rigelhaupt: Now do you remember, when you were working at the shipyards, were you working around any chemicals or anything that? And did you feel like your job was safe?

02-00:23:23
Stillwell: Yeah. I wasn't doing nothing but pulling the torch to light the men's torches, what they welded.

02-00:23:36
Rigelhaupt: But do you remember did other people have dangerous jobs at the shipyards?

02-00:23:41
Stillwell: Yeah, getting burnt and everything else, and some kind of lye water they was using then got on people, and it just ate the flesh off.

02-00:23:58
Rigelhaupt: And do you know if that was true in Richmond too, where there were also shipyards?

02-00:24:04
Stillwell: No, they had shipyards over there, but I didn't go over there for nothing. The fact is, when you're working three jobs and got four kids, and some of them getting so womanish, that she want to run off and get married, and first one thing and another.

02-00:24:29
Daughter: Years later.

02-00:24:32
Stillwell: Say what?

02-00:24:33
Daughter: He's talking about in the war. I was a baby.

02-00:24:40
Rigelhaupt: So what do you—? Do you remember—? Going back to—if we could talk a little bit more about Port Chicago, there were a large number of African-American men in the Navy who were charged with treason for refusing to go back and—

02-00:24:57
Stillwell: Yeah, I know.

02-00:24:59
Rigelhaupt: And Thurgood Marshall was one of the attorneys that came out.

02-00:25:03
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:25:04
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember hearing about that?

02-00:25:07
Stillwell: Yeah, something about him. It wasn't him that got killed. I don't know.

02-00:25:24
Rigelhaupt: But did people in your neighborhood talk about what happened at Port Chicago?

02-00:25:29
Stillwell: No.

02-00:25:33
Rigelhaupt: Okay. Do you remember the general strike in Oakland in 1946?

02-00:25:44
Stillwell: The general strike. I remember when all the taxis stopped running. And people would sit around with a car, and they would take you home, or take you off somewhere and take your food from the store.

02-00:26:20
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember why the taxis stopped running?

02-00:26:24
Stillwell: You mean the buses. They went on a strike.

02-00:26:30
Rigelhaupt: But the general strike in 1946, I think involved a lot of department store workers.

02-00:26:38
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:26:40
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what that was like?

02-00:26:44
Stillwell: No, not—I remember it was hard on a lot of people. Because they would throw their clothes away and stuff, you know, and then they wouldn't have no money to buy nothing else. And in the neighborhood, around in the country, would have all them kids out there. If they had some clothes they'd put them up on the street, where they could get them and they would have clothes to wear. Because they didn't take care of their clothes. They just throw them around.

02-00:27:22

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember hearing about when the atomic bombs were dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima?

02-00:27:29

Stillwell: Yeah. I remember then.

02-00:27:34

Rigelhaupt: And what did you think about it?

02-00:27:38

Stillwell: Well, I just thought, "Well, Lord, save me." I just prayed a lot. And I still pray a lot.

02-00:27:58

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember conversations you had with any of your neighbors or friends about the use of nuclear weapons against Japan?

02-00:28:07

Stillwell: No. Because I had an old bunch of guns. Because we didn't know what was coming to— back there in Arkansas people would sneak up on you and set your house afire and shoot you when you come out.

02-00:28:35

Rigelhaupt: Now—

02-00:28:38

Stillwell: They would do that. Some white guy would pay them to do it. And one time they come out, and my mother would be outside of the house washing, and he came up and poured kerosene around the doors and went in the chicken house and pulled a bunch of chickens, put them in a bag. My momma stood there with the shotgun and just let him get loaded up. And then when he started out across the rice field, she shot him in the behind, and killed a bunch of the chickens he had in a sack. And right there they got up, took him to the clinic.

02-00:29:22

Rigelhaupt: But do you remember why or what precipitated—?

02-00:29:26

Stillwell: This guy was mad at my father because he wouldn't let him join in with him, you know, raising rice. And he paid this guy to come out there and burn us up in the house.

02-00:29:42

Rigelhaupt: So this was probably not all that uncommon, that African-American owners of land faced—

02-00:29:50

Stillwell: They was always doing something. And the whites would put them up to it. And they'd do it. They would say, "Man, I'll give you that land if you burn

them off of it and you won't be bothered." They'd be stupid enough to believe it. And everybody in my house had a gun, just in case.

02-00:30:14

Rigelhaupt: Was it different when you go to Oakland? Did it feel safer?

02-00:30:20

Stillwell: No. They was shooting and doing [inaudible].

02-00:30:27

Rigelhaupt: Because one of the things I've read about is that a lot of the Oakland police officers, as the city grew during World War II, were recruited from the South, and brought—

02-00:30:40

Stillwell: They was just as bad when they got here as they was in the South.

02-00:30:46

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any particular incidents?

02-00:30:49

Stillwell: Yeah. I remember one night somebody was at my window and said, "Please, lady, open the window." And he was trying to get in. And the next morning we found him laying on the ground right under the window. They killed him.

02-00:31:08

Rigelhaupt: The Oakland police had.

02-00:31:10

Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:31:11

Rigelhaupt: And do you remember why or what happened?

02-00:31:15

Stillwell: They had a certain time you couldn't be on the street. And you had to be in a certain neighborhood. You couldn't hardly even let your children go out for trick or treat, that they didn't put pins in the candy and everything else.

02-00:31:34

Rigelhaupt: It sounds like what you're saying in the 1940's and 50's, that the Oakland police did not treat members of the African-American community particularly well.

02-00:31:48

Stillwell: No.

02-00:31:49

Rigelhaupt: Were there any groups that tried to improve relations with the police?

02-00:31:54
Stillwell: No. They'd go get somebody right out the gang, what they done laid off and bring him on back.

02-00:32:15
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember some of your favorite movies during World War II or in the 1940's?

02-00:32:23
Stillwell: No. I didn't go to no movies.

02-00:32:28
Rigelhaupt: Anything in the 1950's?

02-00:32:33
Stillwell: I think I went to one movie. What was that little old movie we went to when Ruth Ann was here? [to her daughter] You know, [inaudible] run off and left her?

02-00:32:49
Daughter: I don't know about—she just worked and stayed at home. No movies for her.

02-00:32:55
Rigelhaupt: What about music?

02-00:32:56
Stillwell: Huh?

02-00:32:57
Rigelhaupt: What about music?

02-00:33:00
Stillwell: I didn't have time to listen to no music.

02-00:33:05
Rigelhaupt: But do you remember who were popular musicians?

02-00:33:10
Stillwell: Oh. [pause] Oh, I've got a bunch of old records in there. I used to listen to those when I had time.

02-00:33:28
Daughter: Lena Horne was one of her favorites. I know she used to talk about her.

02-00:33:31
Rigelhaupt: Lena Horne?

02-00:33:32
Daughter: Lena Horne.

02-00:33:34
Rigelhaupt: Well, do you remember when you—

02-00:33:36
Daughter: Nat King Cole.

02-00:33:36
Rigelhaupt: —first heard Lena Horne?

02-00:33:39
Stillwell: No. I had all my kids, I think. All but—

02-00:33:47
Daughter: Nat King Cole.

02-00:33:49
Stillwell: Yeah, Nat King Cole. Who was that they threw the bricks on?

02-00:33:59
Daughter: Mother, that's way in the 60's.

02-00:34:03
Stillwell: Well, I still got it.

02-00:34:04
Daughter: Well, she's talking about—he's talking about what kind of music you liked way back when.

02-00:34:08
Stillwell: Oh. I listened to that old man that'd have the story.

02-00:34:28
Rigelhaupt: Now what year did your husband build the house that's right down here?

02-00:34:35
Stillwell: That was when you was born. [to daughter]

02-00:34:37
Daughter: Uh uh. That's when Dick was born, around—1950, I think, is when you first had enough bedrooms for us to move into, when Dick was born.

02-00:34:50
Stillwell: Yeah.

02-00:34:51
Daughter: Because we moved here in December.

02-00:34:51
Rigelhaupt: And what was the neighborhood like when you moved in here in 1950?

02-00:34:57
Stillwell: It was pretty good. A few people lived in here.

02-00:35:04
Rigelhaupt: So there weren't that many people living here when you moved here?

02-00:35:07
Stillwell: Uh uh..

02-00:35:09
Rigelhaupt: How did it change?

02-00:35:12
Stillwell: Well, in fact, all of them died.

02-00:35:21
Daughter: But how did the neighborhood change?

02-00:35:23
Rigelhaupt: Because there's a lot of people living here now.

02-00:35:26
Daughter: Mmm hmm. But it was—

02-00:35:29
Stillwell: No, they ain't too many living here now. They just moved here, this last year.

02-00:35:38
Daughter: Who lived in this house?

02-00:35:41
Stillwell: Well, Ruth was living here. And she died. And then we took the house. And down the street there, there wasn't no house. We built down there.

02-00:36:14
Rigelhaupt: How is this neighborhood different, comparing the 1950's and 1960's?

02-00:36:26
Stillwell: It ain't no different. It's about the same.

02-00:36:36
Daughter: No, it was a white neighborhood when they—petition.

02-00:36:39
Rigelhaupt: Was this an African-American neighborhood when you moved in?

02-00:36:45
Stillwell: No.

02-00:36:48
Rigelhaupt: How many other African-American families were living in the neighborhood?

02-00:36:52
Stillwell: Wasn't but one.

02-00:36:54
Rigelhaupt: What was that like?

02-00:36:55
Stillwell: No, it was two, Reverend Watson and—what is this man that died not too long ago, that owned that house right there? Mr. Lee. No, Mr. Lee wasn't living here then.

02-00:37:10
Daughter: I know who you're talking about. I can't remember.

02-00:37:13
Rigelhaupt: Was that—?

02-00:37:13
Daughter: It was a white neighborhood.

02-00:37:17
Rigelhaupt: Well, was that difficult, to move into what had been an all white neighborhood?

02-00:37:21
Stillwell: No.

02-00:37:24
Rigelhaupt: Were your neighbors accepting?

02-00:37:29
Stillwell: Yeah, in a way. They'd complain every once in a while but not too much. The old lady that lived in this house, she'd walk across the street and go down and come back on this side, to the store, because she didn't want to pass by my neighborhood.

02-00:37:58
Rigelhaupt: Because you were living here.

02-00:38:00
Daughter: Mmm hmm.

02-00:38:02
Stillwell: No, I was living down—

02-00:38:04
Daughter: Well—

02-00:38:04
Stillwell: —the street there.

02-00:38:04
Daughter: And she circulated a petition to keep us out of the neighborhood too.

02-00:38:09
Rigelhaupt: So what do you remember about this petition, that was trying to keep you out of the neighborhood?

02-00:38:17

Stillwell:

We just didn't pay them no mind, went on and built. And bought her house. And before I come to California I never lived around nothing but white, until the rice harvest time come in, and my daddy would get on a truck—they'd have two trucks—and he'd go pick up two truckload of men, and bring them on back out there. And they stayed out there, and they worked in the rice. And when they get out the rice, they worked cutting timber and making lumber, to build granaries and bunkhouse and things like that. And a lot of them'd stay there and work, if they could get up enough energy to work.

02-00:39:21

Rigelhaupt:

Now this neighborhood here, did most of your—did it stay a white neighborhood for a long time? Or—?

02-00:39:32

Stillwell:

Well, it stayed a white neighborhood for about three months, and then they all moved out. And now they done all moved back.

02-00:39:53

Rigelhaupt:

Was that something that happened in Oakland in a general sense, that whites were moving out of neighborhoods that African-Americans were moving into?

02-00:40:03

Stillwell:

Yeah, well, houses got so high, and they work up in towns and places and have to get up so early to get out, until they bought here. And then, if they don't stay here, if they're in and out of here on weekends, and then, when time comes to go to work, they move back. I don't pay them no mind.

02-00:40:45

Rigelhaupt:

Did you know other people that had petitions or other sort of efforts to keep them out of neighborhoods?

02-00:40:55

Stillwell:

No, it wasn't that many because several places had been building up since the—they're moving out. And they worried me to death trying to buy mine, but I ain't sell it.

02-00:41:14

Rigelhaupt:

People recently have been trying to buy these homes.

02-00:41:18

Daughter:

Mmm hmm.

02-00:41:18

Stillwell:

Yeah.

02-00:41:43

Rigelhaupt:

Well, I think we've covered a lot about World War II and your experiences. Generally, the way I end interviews is I ask you if there's anything you'd like to add or anything that I should have asked that I didn't.

- 02-00:42:03
Stillwell: Well, I wish people would realize people are people, regardless of what nationality they are or what side of the world they come on, and stop this war and killing all those people. It's just a shame. For what? And the President, he ain't got sense enough to do nothing but stand and rip and run.
- 02-00:42:36
Rigelhaupt: Well, from what you've just about the war going on right now, did you have a similar reaction to World War II? Or how do you remember it being different than the war that's going on now?
- 02-00:42:50
Stillwell: Well, they ain't just trying to kill the blacks. They're trying to kill every nationality it is. That's what I don't like.
- 02-00:43:08
Rigelhaupt: And what about when the Korean War started?
- 02-00:43:12
Stillwell: It was bad.
- 02-00:43:16
Rigelhaupt: Did you have friends or neighbors who were in the service?
- 02-00:43:19
Stillwell: Yeah. I had a bunch of nephews and nieces and a brother. It's been the devil all the way around.
- 02-00:43:40
Rigelhaupt: And how would you compare the Vietnam War to your memories of World War II?
- 02-00:43:51
Stillwell: It was lopsided. Because they didn't have nothing to be going over there killing people. And just look what's about to happen, Saturday night, when they had all that liquid, fluid going, bum up all of Oakland and everywhere else. And the planes had to be grounded. They couldn't move. And that's nothing but hatefulness. [train whistle sounds in the background]
- 02-00:44:38
Rigelhaupt: Okay. Well, maybe we'll stop there.
- 02-00:44:42
Stillwell: Yeah.
- 02-00:44:50
Daughter: Mmm hmm.

[End of interview]