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Berkeley, California

Howard Thor

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
Brendan Furey
in 2002

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Interview with Howard Thor, November 12, 2002

Interviewer: Brendan Furey

Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock

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00:00:10

Furey:

It is November 12, 2002, and here we are with Howard Thor. This is interview session one, tape number one. So, Mr. Thor, why don't we just start off with where you were born, and talk a little bit about your parents, and where they're from.

00:00:45

Thor:

Yes, I was born in San Francisco, lets see, in 1923. We moved from there when I was still quite young to San Pedro. My father was a deck officer on the steam schooners at that time. So was my uncle. San Pedro was one of the ports for the steam schooner lumber trade. I got sick down there with celiac sprue and tuberculosis, and was in a sanitarium for about six months down there. Then we moved up to Oakland—oh, I was about four years old—for a short time around 62nd Street and Sacramento Street, with some friends who lived next door. They owned the house. Captain Lervik owned the house. He worked on Mare Island. Then we went to Berkeley, built a house there, 1616 Stannage Avenue, Berkeley. Lived there until the war. I guess we moved out of there in 1941, after I graduated from Berkeley High School.

00:02:15

Furey:

Could you talk about where your parents are from and maybe how they met? What their background is, religious, kind of a quick summary?

00:02:27

Thor:

Well, my father was born in Finland, I think in Helsinki, the capital. He had a couple of sisters, but I've never met anybody in the family even though I've been to Finland, briefly. My mother was born in England. There was about a ten-year age difference between them. She worked on a farm; her father was a sharecropper, I think, a tenant farmer in England. I lived on that farm for about six months when I was about seven years old. Neither one, I think, went to school after about the age of 14. My father went to sea. And my mother, I guess, became a housekeeper for some of the rich estates in the area.

00:03:28

Furey:

She went into service.

00:03:29

Thor:

Yes, that was customary. During the war she worked in a munitions plant around London, and after the war she became a conductress on the double-decker buses there in London. I guess my father was on shore leave. I'm not sure if he was on an American ship, probably an American ship. In fact, he was in the American Navy during the First World War. Then she came over here around—I'm not sure, shortly after the war and they got married. In any case, I guess the first place they lived was in San Francisco, where I was born.

00:04:24

Furey:

So you came back to live in Oakland. How old were you?

00:04:37

Thor:

I figure about four. I got some pictures in the family album. Yes, about four.

00:04:45

Furey:

So, you start school before the Depression. Can you talk a little bit about your education years and then how the Depression affected your young—because you must have been coming into your teenage years during the Depression, and what that experience was like.

00:05:07

Thor:

Well, the Depression hit in October of 1929, October, November. I think kind of a strange thing; my father wanted to have my mother and my sister and I go to England for a trip. I think he bought the tickets and made the arrangements before the Depression hit, because a few months after it hit we got on a steamer, left San Francisco, through the Panama Canal, went to New York and then on another ship to England. It was early 1930. We were there for six months. The whole trip was six months long. We stayed on my grandfather's farm, and the Depression was just getting under way then. My father was having a hard time making ends meet, and probably I wouldn't have made the trip had it been a little later in the Depression. My father was a longshoreman, and of course, my mother was a housewife. We went over, by the way, on the *Oceanic*, which was the sister ship of the *Titanic*. It was built just a couple of years before the *Titanic*, almost identical, except for a few minor changes. I had a bunch of postcards of the *Oceanic* at that time. I was only seven years old when I made that trip. I lost all the cards of course, when I was a little kid, but since that time I started collecting postcards of pictures of ships.

When we came back, I think I probably had to repeat a grade in grammar school because I was away for six months, kind of a vague memory there. We lived only half a block away from Franklin Grammar School. That was really a key area for recreation for us, a lot of activity there, athletics, et cetera. Went to Burbank Junior High, which is now I think the West Campus of Berkeley High. It's around Chestnut and University Avenue. I had a bicycle by then, so I biked there. Then I went to Berkeley High, which is a little ways further. Biked up into that area.

But my father died right in the middle of the Depression, 1934. He was a longshoreman. He quit going to sea, I think, when I was born.

00:07:56

Furey:

How did he die?

00:07:59

Thor:

He died of a heart attack, but it was on the picket line in the big longshoreman's strike, actually The West Coast seaman's strike and longshoreman's strike of 1934. He died two days before

Bloody Thursday, July 5th, 1934. He died July 3rd of a heart attack. He had all kinds of health problems.

00:08:28

Furey:

He was active in the organization for the—?

00:08:27

Thor:

Yes, he ran for the executive committee of the longshoremen's union. It was called the ILA then, later became the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union]. He was one of the radicals, of a radical persuasion, politically. Didn't see eye-to-eye with Harry Bridges, because they were on opposite ends of the radical spectrum, you might say. We had meetings at our house. People like Jack London's daughter, came to the meetings, and [Barney Moss?], who later changed his name to Barney Mayes, and some of the other people who were identified at that time as Trotskyites.

00:09:21

Furey:

What were some of your memories of those meetings? Would you just kind of play around?

00:09:31

Thor:

Well, my mother was kind of out of it. Like I say, she was not politically active, but my father was very politically active. Probably started on the West Coast ships. A lot of the West Coast ships had a large Scandinavian crew and a lot of the seamen and also workers in the lumber camps, joined the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies. I think he might have gotten his early background from the Wobbly experience on the ships and went on from there. He did a lot of reading and, I thought, was well-educated, even though he hadn't gone to school since the age of 14. He had three inventions. Took me to an inventor's convention in Oakland at {Hotel Leamington, I remember, when I was a little kid. He had, as I say, these health problems. I inherited similar health problems, like this celiac sprue. At that time, that disease had not been identified by medical science. He took a lot of Chinese herbs and things like that. He did have a heart attack. They thought it might have been through something connected with the strike, because the strike went on quite a while.

00:10:54

Furey:

I can imagine. Probably not sleeping that much during the strike.

00:10:58

Thor:

Well, two men were killed two days later, shot by the police in front of the union hall in San Francisco. I think over twenty were wounded. In other ports also, there was a lot of gunplay. So it was a very violent strike. That's why the longshoremen's union still celebrates Bloody Thursday. I try to get to their celebrations every year. But the Depression really didn't affect us until that moment, until he died, because even though the amount of work longshoremen got during the Depression slacked off considerably, he still made a living. After that, of course, my mother was left pretty well destitute and was quite upset with the people that used to come

around for the meetings, because they no longer came around. She was left alone. She waited on tables at some Berkeley restaurant, and then cleaned house for some of the richer people in Berkeley, then, wherever she could find a job. Finally got a job as a cook for the Franklin Grammar School, and at that time they only had one person that bought the food, prepared it, cleaned up, and collected the money and that person was my mother. But of course, we got the scraps and were able to survive, but it was tough until she remarried about four years later. Married another former seaman; he had been a chief engineer. He had quit going to sea during the First World War when he went from the British Merchant Marine to the British Army and got wounded at the end of his career. He went into real estate.

00:13:15

Furey:

He was Finnish?

00:13:16

Thor:

He was part Finnish. He was part American Indian. His father was this famous—I shouldn't say famous—but notorious Western shootist that is associated with the Earp brothers, Wyatt Earp and his brothers in Tombstone, Arizona.

00:13:43

Furey:

What was his father's name?

00:13:45

Thor:

His name was Buckskin Frank Leslie, and my stepfather's name was John Leslie. I've never been able to really certify the fact that that was his father, but everything fits. Everything I've read about Buckskin Frank Leslie, it fits. He was of Scottish descent.

00:14:05

Furey:

He was born in America.

00:14:09

Thor:

Yes, his mother was probably American Indian and Finnish, a combination of the two, so he was part Scottish, Finnish, and American Indian. But he looked Indian, quite a bit like an Indian. But he spoke—he was brought up mainly in a Finnish mining community near Tombstone, so he still had a very strong Finnish accent. But he evidently went to Cornell University and graduated as an engineer, became a licensed chief engineer on British merchant ships. And then, when the war came along in this country—well, my mother met him in Berkeley at the Finn Hall, the radical Finn Hall, the one on Tenth Street. The other one split off, the one on Chestnut Street, the non-radical Finns. They're the people, I think, that started the co-op movement in Berkeley. Perhaps the other Finns had something to do with it, also. I'm not quite sure. Come to think of it, it might have been the Tenth Street Hall that started it, it would stand to reason.

00:15:28

Furey:

You said your mother was very much left alone during the Depression.

00:15:39

Thor:

Then, she remarried around 1938, I would say, about four years later.

00:15:43

Furey:

Did she feel a lot of shame for being a single woman, or was it just the fact that it was so hard to get by?

00:15:53

Thor:

Oh, it was hard to get by. She was really struggling and alone. I was only eleven years old. I can remember a lot of the friends, especially the married friends. My mother was a nice-looking woman and she was only thirty-six when my father died. And a lot of these women would get upset when she came around to visit bringing two kids—or despite the fact she brought two kids [laughs]—some of the women would get upset because they thought maybe their husband would take a liking to my mother. It happened several times. It was upsetting to her, so that made it even worse as far as loneliness. Of course, a lot of my father's friends were Finnish; she couldn't speak the language. She continued to see a few of them, but that part was the first part, and trying to make ends meet, of course. We almost lost the house; the house wasn't paid for, we had a veteran's loan. I think we were able to make arrangements whereby we paid only the interest on the loan at that time until times got better. So we were able to keep the house, but people all around were losing their houses. I remember as a kid seeing whole families on the streets with their belongings, thrown out of their houses in Berkeley, things like that.

Then, my father had built a house in the back. I guess the intent was to use it as a playhouse for my sister, but it expanded and then he decided to build a complete house and rent it out, but he never finished it. My stepfather, when he came along in 1938, finished it, and rented it out. But then they bought a bar on University and Tenth Street, where there were already two existing bars. Competition was very stiff, and it was still 1938, so they lost it. I think they took a mortgage on the small equity we had in the house and used that for starting the business, but they went broke. It was only the fact that the war had started in Europe in late '39, and I think we were making some efforts to build ships before that.

So, we were coming out of the Depression slightly and as they started building the Richmond shipyards and other industries around there in Richmond, he had the idea that he might be able to buy some property there. He looked into it and found this rooming house and bar on the corner of West Richmond and Railroad Avenue, across from the Natatorium. By some fancy financial dealings—I'll never know how he did it [laughs]—I don't think he had a down payment even, but because the shipyards were starting and because maybe he had some real estate background, he was able to buy that property. Well, at least get a down payment on it. Fixed up the bar and he fixed up the rooms, which he rented out to shipyard workers. My mother helped in the bar.

00:20:04

Furey:

Where were you living?

00:20:08

Thor:

Well, this was in probably the middle of '41 when I graduated from Berkeley High, and then almost immediately after that we moved there to that bar and rooming house. Then I started UC [University of California, Berkeley] in the fall semester of '41 and commuted from Point Richmond to Berkeley daily for a year.

00:20:40

Furey:

In '39, what was Richmond like?

00:20:47

Thor:

Well, the population was relatively small. Point Richmond was very small. It was a stable community.

00:20:56

Furey:

Point Richmond, at least now from what I see of it in the architecture, was kind of more of the upper class or middle-class.

00:21:07

Thor:

I had a friend through the tunnel there, on the other side of Nickle Hill. His father had a little boat facility where they had a winch and they'd take boats out for repair. They would do a little repair work. There were a lot of people that worked at Standard Oil; they had a lot of working-class people there. Of course, Standard Oil was the big industry there at that time, about the only industry. The Ford plant, of course, was up on Tenth Street.

00:21:37

Furey:

Which later they used to build and make tanks, right?

00:21:43

Thor:

I forget exactly when they shut that Ford plant down, but that was going for a long time. Maybe during the Depression they had problems, but it was mainly Standard Oil that ran the city, more or less. Downtown Richmond had department stores and they had a big theater there. Point Richmond had a little theater there, called "The Point," which was just around the corner from me, couple doors down. They had quite a few bars. They had {Schwartz's} Ballroom on Tenth Street near Macdonald, which sprang up when the shipyards started to build.

00:22:27

Furey:

What was the pre-war Richmond? Because, you got there in '39, right before.

00:22:36

Thor:

Middle of '41.

00:22:37

Furey:

Oh, you moved there in the middle of '41, but he bought the house in '39.

00:22:39

Thor:

He bought the house just before we moved. He was fixing it up while we were still living in Berkeley, see. Then once he got it fixed up we figured we could live there and he could operate the bar, and rent the rooms out to shipyard workers. It was probably six months later.

00:22:57

Furey:

So by the time you moved out there, had all three shipyards been up and running?

00:23:02

Thor:

No. I started work in Yard Three in the summer of '42. I had put in a year at UC and figured I'd be drafted, I had to get into something. Pearl Harbor had occurred six months previous to that. So I went to work in the yard, figuring that I had to earn some money doing something. Went in the yard as—I guess my title was "Shipfitter's Helper," but my job was actually to take these large hull plates for the ships on flatbed railroad cars, get a crane, take them off the flatbeds and put them in big wooden racks, then paint the numbers on the edge of each of the plates to determine where they are going to be located on the ships. It was a day job, to begin with. An easy job. I finished the job in a couple hours, and then I could read if I want, as long as I wasn't in an area where a lot of supervisors were walking around.

I did get into trouble there once, though. I walked around the yard—it was very interesting. Didn't even have a fence around it yet, it was that new. In places it didn't have a fence. It was fascinating, because they were building the ships in these huge cement basins, and when the ship was finished, they'd flood the basin, open the gate, and launch the ship. It was fascinating. You could see all the work going on by just walking around these huge basins. So that's what I did after I finished my job. One day, a supervisor asked me what my job was, and I told him what it was and that I'd finished. And he wanted me to go back, get the same crane crew, take all the plates off and put them from one end to the other end, and when I was finished with that, put 'em back where they belonged. I refused to do it. I didn't tell him that I wouldn't do it, but I walked away. It might have been another couple of occasions where I was reading after I finished the job, not wanting to walk around anymore.

But in any rate, I was there for quite a few months. My stepfather, in the meantime, had gone to work for Yard One as a chief engineer at the trial crew. They were building Liberty ships for England I think, at that time. He told me that there was an opening, so I went down, got a job as an oiler on the trial crew, which was a fascinating job compared to the one I had quit in Yard Three. This was Yard One. He helped a lot of the oilers get their engineers' papers, because later when I got mine, I saw some of them at the Marine Engineers' Union Hall. They told me about how he helped them. Some days we didn't have a lot to do. I'd bring some marine engineering books down and we'd study marine engineering, that kind of thing.

But on the day of the trials, we were extremely busy because for some reason they wanted to run these engines near full speed. Not top speed, but nearly. They'd be running them very fast for four hours ahead and four hours astern. Well, with the kind of an engine like that, reciprocating engine, the backing guides, the guides that take the brunt of the force of the crosshead, when you're running astern don't have the surface area to take all that force, so they'd start heating up. So we'd have to get one of these squirt guns like a turkey baster and squirt oil on the guides, keep them from burning up and that kind of thing. That part was hectic. When we weren't actually testing a main engine, we would go up on deck and adjust the bearings on the winches. They were steam winches, cargo winches, and also the anchor windlass and the steering engine, equipment like that, and make sure the bearings in the shaft alley had oil in the oil sumps and all the things you have to do to get ready for a trial.

So we kept fairly busy, much busier than I was on that other job in Yard Three. About half of the crew really didn't have experience on ships, but they were breaking in, like I was. I guess that was true with most of the jobs in the Yard. There were probably more experienced people on the job I was on, because they had to have a fireman who knew what he was doing with the boilers and this kind of thing.

My stepfather, who was chief engineer, pointed out one day that a lot of some of the higher position jobs were politically influenced. He said, "Watch this fellow coming down the ladder in a white boiler suit." He said, "He's an inspector. He works for the government. Watch what he does." And of course, all he did was go down all the way to the bottom and look in the bilge with a flashlight and walk up. He was supposed to approve the whole thing. I think he got his license from the ferryboats. He was probably a ferryboat engineer at one time, but he had been selling real estate since the First World War, probably.

00:30:23

Furey:

And they hooked him up with this job to be in the war industry.

00:30:27

Thor:

Came up with that job as inspector because of some political dealings. I know he was a big wheel in the Masonic club, but I don't know whether that was the key reason why he got the job. There was that type of thing going on, probably always will be that type of thing going on. But he was no help at all, as far as building ships.

00:30:51

Furey:

So by '42, there weren't many blacks working in the shipyards?

00:30:59

Thor:

I remember in grammar school, for instance, we only had one black, and that was West Berkeley. Franklin School's right on San Pablo Avenue, just about five blocks north of University Avenue. I think there was just one black in that school. There was a Filipino family around the corner and there were about three Scandinavian families and about three Italian families, a Puerto Rican family all in that same block. We had a mixture, but even in Burbank Junior High there were

only a couple of blacks. What few black families there were in Berkeley were mainly around Ashby Avenue, kind of a steady community there. But in the shipyards at the beginning, very few, of course. A lot came in, just a lot of people from Texas and Oklahoma, Arkansas, states like that came in, whites and blacks.

00:32:13

Furey:

That was right before you left to go in the Merchant Marines is when people started coming. It was men like you who left and kind of vacated, so there were lots of jobs.

00:32:22

Thor:

Well, even before that when shipyards were starting they actively recruited them in the Midwest. So I guess the word had to get out. Also, the shipyards had to be built and word had to get out, but there was certainly room for all of them.

00:32:40

Furey:

You said before, when we chatted, that during the summer of '42 is when all these young men were going out in droves. What was the feeling among young people?

00:33:00

Thor:

It was a funny feeling, to see all your friends leaving. [laughs] I expected to leave; we put in our applications in the summer of '42 for the Merchant Marine Academy. We looked at many different options. In fact, when I was looking through my photo album I noticed that a couple of them went into the Air Force. One was killed in training, and the other one didn't make a career of it, but he was in for quite a while in the Air Force.

00:33:37

Furey:

So that was a big wake-up call for you, when you saw your friend—.

00:33:39

Thor:

Right. We got our draft notices and we had to make a decision. Some went in the Army; a couple of them tried to get in the Merchant Marine Academy. One of my friends got in the Merchant Marine Academy, got to the basic school, almost immediately flunked out before I could even get down there. Because I didn't get called until April of '43, even though I signed up in the summer of '42. Another friend of mine signed up quite a bit later than I did, but he got called the same day I did. In fact, we were in the same class and we were on the same ship together. In fact, we were on three ships together. Another one, he tried to get in the Merchant Marine Academy but they didn't process his papers in a timely manner, so he joined the Navy, became part of a gun crew on merchant ships. So he did end up on a merchant ship. Of course, he was in the Navy, and the gun crew is not quite the same thing. Another went straight Navy on a destroyer. I joined the Navy as an apprentice seaman so I wouldn't get drafted. But the Navy did promise that they wouldn't call me immediately. They gave the Merchant Marine Academy three months to call me, because once you're in the Merchant Marine Academy you're a midshipman, Naval Reserve. So if the Merchant Marine Academy called me, I'd still be Naval Reserve.

00:35:25

Furey:

So you were exempt from the draft.

00:35:29

Thor:

Right, exempt from the draft and also the Navy people would be satisfied that I would be performing more of a needed function. The Merchant Marine Academy needed engineers more than the Navy needed apprentice seamen. But it was touch-and-go. I even quit my job in the shipyard in March of '43, because they had given me word that I was going to be called any minute. Then I wasn't really called until April. I had about a month there at home before I was called.

00:36:13

Furey:

Kind of like the Marines now.

00:36:15

Thor:

I was reading a lot of marine engineering. I figured I'd be one step up on it.

00:36:18

Furey:

So you told me before that there was, around the Schwartz Ballroom and the boarding house there, this whole culture that was going on, nightlife in Richmond. I'm wondering also about the feeling of the summer of '42 when all these young men were about to go away. Did that have an influence on—I imagine it was kind of romantic for young men, they're saying good-bye to their girlfriends, "I'm leaving, I'm going—." What was that social scene like?

00:36:52

Thor:

I'll give you an example. Schwartz Ballroom on Tenth Street near Macdonald, founded by the Schwartz family and the orchestra, or band was made up of members of the Schwartz family. It was on Saturday nights, mainly. I went there once I moved to Point Richmond. We moved there some time in the latter part of '41 and I had to commute to Berkeley, of course. But it didn't really get going until after that, after the shipyard workers started moving in. I remember before my leaving in April of '43, the ratio of women to men was fantastic from the point of view of all these men and boys had gone and here we were, left with all these women straight out of Texas and Oklahoma and Arkansas. It was fantastic.

00:38:05

Furey:

[laughter] Were you active—did you date a lot of women?

00:38:13

Thor:

Oh, Yes. I met quite a few. But one I saw quite often. In fact, I invited her to our dance down at the Merchant Marine basic school at Coyote Point. We only got two overnights on liberty. One, we had to give a pint of blood and we got an overnight liberty, and the other one was after the dance, since some of the girls lived out of town and we got an overnight to drive them home. So

out of the ten weeks, I only got two overnights. Some of the bars, too. This one, this girl named Tilly, [chuckles] she was an usherette in the Point Theater, which was around the corner.

00:39:01

Furey:

In Point Richmond.

00:39:03

Thor:

Yes, in Point Richmond, just around the corner from our boardinghouse and bar. My room was just on the ground floor, on the end on Railroad Avenue. When the box office closed, she'd come over and knock on the windows and let me in for the last show. Of course, I had to drive her home at night. She lived down the other side of Macdonald. Her uncle owned a bar up on San Pablo in Richmond. But there were quite a few bars there and I can't remember the name of it. I only went there a couple of times. The last time was when we finished the round-the-world trip, just after the war. She was the barmaid there.

Some of the theaters were open all night. Some of the shipyard workers, of course, slept in the theaters. Rooms were at a premium. And of course, in cars and things like that, too. Before the war, we used to go out to Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland. It was all the big bands, Louie Armstrong, all those people were there on Saturday night. It was a fantastic place to go. That continued, of course, right up through the war, but the last time I was there was April '43. That would be the last time I went there until after the war, because all during the war I had only a couple days home. I was mostly in the Pacific. As far as the other recreation was concerned, people went out of town. A lot of people that had cars could go out of town, if they weren't satisfied with what Richmond had to offer in terms of entertainment.

00:41:08

Furey:

Where would people go?

00:41:12

Thor:

Mainly I would say that the people that liked to drink, went to those bars, all along San Pablo. There was a gambling place that Blackjack Jerome had, where the mall is now in El Cerrito. There used to be a racetrack and they had gambling, casinos. There were some bars that had slot machines behind a curtain in a back room. They didn't have a lot of them, but they had a few. There were a lot of bars and some had underhanded gambling.

Of course, the Natatorium was a big attraction, people swimming. Still is, I'm told. Recently it closed, lack of funds for remodeling. I was gone during a good part of the war, so I can't really tell you.

00:42:16

Furey:

I think this might be a little bit later when a lot of the newcomers, migrant workers, come in, where lots of social problems occurred. A lot of vagrancy, bar fights, stabbings, was there much of that going on? Were there ever fights?

00:42:40

Thor:

Well, in Oakland at Sweets Ballroom, there used to be a few fights, but not many. Nobody had any guns; it was unheard of. In fact, if somebody used a knife that would be really an extreme case. I don't remember ever locking my door. In fact, when I was living to Cloyne Court Co-op, when I was going to UC after the war, we never even locked the front door on it. When I went to visit my son, who was at Cloyne in the 1970's, I couldn't get in. The door was locked in the daytime! That kind of surprised me. But in Richmond, I don't remember ever locking up. In Berkeley, I don't remember locking the door. Now, you better put a couple of double locks on there. [laughs]

00:43:42

Furey:

Is it '42 when the Alien Land Act happens? Then, later the Japanese were relocated to camps. You said that you had some Japanese friends; can you talk a little bit about that?

00:44:00

Thor:

Yes, at Berkeley High, a couple of them were very good friends of mine. Some of them went to Cal with me, UC, that first year, '41-'42. Then, of course, I remember Pearl Harbor, hearing about. I was studying in Point Richmond and eleven o'clock, I remember having the radio on. I heard the news, and a couple of months later, they were rounded up and taken to different camps, relocation or concentration camps. I got letters from about three of them who were later shipped off to different parts of the country. One went to an all-girls school back East. He was probably quite happy there. They thought he was Filipino instead of Japanese, I don't know that—. This is what he told me later. But the other one went to the University of Chicago later, studied architecture, is still an architect in San Francisco. I lost track of the third one. But, it was kind of devastating to all of us. These people, some of them were more American than I was. You'd go over to their house, I remember this one had a big jazz record collection, both he and his brother. They were more up on that than I was. Their folks, of course, couldn't speak a lot of English; they were born in Japan, but the kids were 100 percent American.

00:46:01

Furey:

Your mother obviously spoke English; she was from England, but your father—

00:46:06

Thor:

Yes, my mother had problems with grammar and things like that. When you're brought on the English farm area, you don't have the opportunities and all that.

00:46:27

Furey:

The Cockney, or—

00:46:29

Thor:

Not so much Cockney, but you hear a lot of grammatical errors. My father, he had a pretty good accent. Not as broad as my stepfather; my stepfather had a really broad Finnish accent.

00:46:48

Furey:

And he was from America.

00:46:51

Thor:

He was from America. Born in Tombstone, Arizona, evidently. Brought up in that Finnish mining community, you see.

00:46:57

Furey:

Insulated.

00:47:00

Thor:

He didn't speak much English, whereas my father from the age of 14 on, went on ships with different nationalities. In fact, he could speak a lot of German, a lot of French and taught himself English. In fact, he was teaching my sister and I French for about six months before he died. We had a full notebook and each day we'd put a new phrase in there. Had a little French book with pronunciation and all that. In fact, I was taking violin lessons, too. They were paying for me to have violin lessons some place on University Avenue. When these radical groups came over for meetings, I remember I had to play the violin for them, to demonstrate that their money wasn't being thrown away. [laughter]

00:47:53

Furey:

[laughter] Did you remain friends with a couple of those Japanese guys after they had come back?

00:48:00

Thor:

With one of them; I lost track of the other two, but one of them I still see. He lives in the area.

00:48:11

Furey:

Did they feel—did they resent it a lot?

00:48:13

Thor:

They don't like to talk about it, and I don't like to talk about it with them. This one, he invited me to a talk at the Oakland Museum last year. The person giving the lecture was talking about this, but other than that, very seldom do we talk about things like that. Just probably something that's painful.

00:48:55

Furey:

I can imagine.

00:48:57

Thor:

I don't like to bring it up. A lot of people think that because they got twenty thousand dollars by this act of Congress, that it's justified, the action taken then. Other ethnic groups are using that as a model, saying that because they got it, we should get it because of this and that. But its, not quite the same.

I was in Japan right after the war. In fact, this year we were in Hiroshima, my wife and I. But right after the war, I made a trip to Japan. It was devastating to see what bombing can do. I was in Yokohama and Tokyo, and they were leveled. Just about like Hiroshima.

00:49:53

Furey:

Cities were just completely flattened.

00:49:55

Thor:

Yes, mainly by firebombs.

00:49:59

Furey:

We should get back to your work experience in the shipyards. Could you go into a little more about being an oiler and what some of the memories you have of that experience? Things that kind of impressed upon you?

00:50:31

Thor:

My stepfather taught me a lot of things about how they did it on British ships at the time of the First World War and before the First World War. Actually, the Liberty Ship engines were designed back in the 1880s for British tramp steamers. We adopted them because there was an engine-plant down in the Peninsula, for one thing, that was equipped to make these engines. Joshua Hendy, I think. Also, they were relatively simple to repair, and to operate. They were low pressure boilers that didn't require the care for operating that high-pressure boilers did. High-pressure boilers, of course, are very sensitive to impurities, salinity, this kind of thing. You have to be very careful to operate them properly, otherwise you get massive leaks. Low-pressure boilers have the same problem but not to the same degree. So that was another reason, they were easier, in that sense, to operate. A lot of the people that came off of ships didn't have experience with high-pressure boilers. Some of them didn't have experience with turbine engines. They were used to these reciprocating engines. So that was another reason that that type of engine was used.

I remember my stepfather saying how on British ships during that First World War period, they kept track of how much oil the oilers would use. You had to use oil very sparingly. They kept track of that. He made me a little oil can that I could hold in my hand, made out of sheet metal, copper, I guess, peened. You could use that to get the oil in the cups as the cups were moving on the engine; you could squirt that oil in those cups. Showed me how to feel the bearings of the cranks as the cranks were coming around. You can get your hand in there—you can't have any loose clothing, or anything like that would catch so that you'd be thrown into the pit. It was easy once you had done it a couple of times, but it looked frightening when that

engine is going full speed to have that huge crank coming at you. Then to get your hand in there to feel how it is, if it's getting hot. There were a lot of little things like that involved with the job of oiling on one of those.

As a fireman, you had to watch for the water level in the boiler, make sure that you always maintain proper water level, this kind of thing. They weren't automated. The turbine ships usually had some sort of automated device which would maintain the steam pressure fairly constant, except on the Victory ships. On the Victory ships, you often had to do that by hand. Same thing with the water level in the boiler. On the Liberty ships, you had more time to react; everything was happening much slower. You could usually set your steam pressure, set your water level and it would be maintained, unless you were going to change the speed of on the engine. But you had to be alert and watch those things.

00:54:43

Furey:

Now both the Liberty and Victory ships, at least in Richmond, they were built in this new prefabrication system, right? Before, ships were built—

00:54:56

Thor:

Yes, [Henry J.]Kaiser, I don't know if he innovated that, or started it, but he certainly put it into extensive practice. I was at Yard Three first and we made the C-4 type of ships. Again, instead of using a lot of rivets, welding was done predominately. And the ships were built in sections and they had these huge cranes. They lay the keel first, of course, and then they put the double bottoms in by sections, and then your steel plates, and then your houses. Section by section. But we mostly welded; there would be a few rivets for the framing, internally, but almost all welding. Prefabricating, of course, made it possible to turn one of those ships out I think in four and a half days. That was a record.

00:55:56

Furey:

And the deckhouses were built, and they would bring the whole deckhouse in on a crane. Before, they would—kind of like you're building a house.

00:56:04

Thor:

They did that with every part. The double-bottoms were built in sections, and the hulls were built—they put the huge bulkheads in as a bulkhead. They'd weld them ashore and put 'em in by crane. The same with the decks and then the houses, and the mast houses, also. All prefab, period.

00:56:37

Furey:

So everyone, even the people who had experience, was not used to building ships in the way that Kaiser was. So even the experienced people were kind of new.

00:56:50

Thor:

I'm sure, almost all of them. Maybe a few people had done this before, but in the upper levels, the managers and engineers, this kind of thing, but I don't think any of the lower echelon people had any experience doing this.

00:57:16

Furey:

Did you ever see Kaiser around?

00:57:20

Thor:

My wife did. My wife was a nurse in his hospitals and he came around to visit. She worked in the Oakland hospital quite a bit, in the emergency room.

00:57:37

Furey:

In Herrick?

00:57:38

Thor:

She worked in Herrick first until the big strike in 1951. They all got fired after going on strike, and so she went to Kaiser Oakland and stayed there until she retired. My son worked for Kaiser for 12 years as a doctor, and my daughter is a nurse. She's still there, at Kaiser. But I'm not sure. My wife talks about seeing Harry Bridges in the hospital. He had ulcers and he was one of her patients at one time out there. She asked if he knew my father, and oh Yes, he knew my father very well.

00:58:24

Furey:

He's the ILWU head.

00:58:27

Thor:

Yes, head of it.

00:58:31

Furey:

So, going back to Kaiser. From what I've read, he's sort of looked at as this fatherly figure. There was a lot of patriotism going on one side, and then there was a lot of trust that was put in Kaiser. You know, "Kaiser can do it." What was the motivating factor? You talk to a lot of people—and this may lead to the later period because you're kind of in the pre-migration period—where they say that there was this patriotism and they felt like they were being a part of this.

00:59:18

Thor:

You mean the people that worked there.

00:59:21

Furey:

Yes, people who worked in the shipyards—welders and—

00:59:25

Thor:

I was generally on-board ships. The people I saw during the war didn't have to be there. I mean, there were some fifteen-year-old kids that they didn't ask for their age, or I guess let them go. Or they had lied about their age or whatever, but they were young kids. Quit high school and went out as wipers. I took pictures; some of them were on my first ship, a tanker. Then I had a fireman who had one eye and an electrician who had only one eye. They didn't have to go. They weren't going to be drafted.

01:00:04

Furey:

This is in the Merchant Marines.

01:00:08

Thor:

Yes. In the shipyard, of course, you had mainly women working there when it ended.

01:00:16

Furey:

I think it was in June or July of '43 when the Boilermakers union opened up to blacks and women.

01:00:25

Thor:

Yes, '43.

01:00:28

Furey:

That leads me to the whole union question: what union were you a part of?

01:00:36

Thor:

Marine Engineers. In the shipyard, Shipfitters Union. I was an apprentice in the Shipfitters Union.

01:00:46

Furey:

In the hierarchy of unions, is that one above Boilermakers?

01:00:50

Thor:

I wouldn't say that.

01:00:54

Furey:

It's just different.

01:00:55

Thor:

Yes, different, that's all. As far as discrimination goes, during the war, discrimination still existed in some of the Maritime unions. Where they did have blacks, they confined the blacks to the stewards department. They couldn't become members of the engine department or the deck department. Other maritime unions brought in blacks or let blacks become members, and could work in any of the departments.

01:01:36

Furey:

Shipfitters was also—

01:01:39

Thor:

I'm not familiar with it.

01:01:41

Furey:

By that point, there probably wasn't that much of a question about it because there weren't that many blacks or women that were trying to get in.

01:01:51

Thor:

Yes, before the shipyards started there weren't. That's one thing I would say the shipyards did, is—well, it brought in the migration—but it opened up jobs and trades where they couldn't work before, blacks and women.

01:02:04

Furey:

Do you remember any incidents where blacks were working?

01:02:11

Thor:

No.

01:02:11

Furey:

You don't remember any blacks working in the shipyards?

01:02:13

Thor:

No, I can't remember any at that time, in the two jobs I had. But I can remember incidents on ships where blacks got into the union, even though the union was discriminatory. I remember one in particular—

01:02:41

Furey:

We can start this in a minute, because I need to change the tapes.

[Interview interruption]

[begin file Thor2 11-12-02]

02-00:00:10

Thor:

The incidents that I mentioned, I was on a ship. It was right after the war, and I remember going down in the engine room and instead of having one oiler down there, there were two oilers. They were both black. It seemed kind of strange, but these two, I guess, had gone to court, were able to get by the discrimination by some sort of court order. But they were so afraid of maybe doing a wrong thing on the job that both of them were there together instead of having one on the 4 to 8 watch and the other on the 8 to 12 watch, they both were standing the watches together. It was very strange. I felt sorry for them, because they were terrified that they were going to do the wrong thing or that somebody was going to frame them. I don't know what happened to them. But in my own union, the Marine Engineers Union, I witnessed discrimination.

02-00:01:16

Furey:

During World War II, or after?

02-00:01:18

Thor:

During World War II, of course. Right up until the 1950s, I remember going into the union meeting, one during the 1950s. Usually when somebody applies for membership in the union, he fills out an application, of course, but then at the next meeting the members vote on that. They have a little box with white balls and black balls in there and they ask the members to act on the application. Usually, in almost every case, one or two people come up and put a white ball in there and then the members then accept him. The member doesn't attend that meeting, of course, that meeting. This had been going on for years, this type of thing. Finally I went to a meeting during the '50s and somebody said, "There's going to be a special case during the voting on new members." Word, word of mouth, got around that a black engineer was involved. I'm not sure what license he had then, but he later got a chief engineer's license. I hadn't met him; I didn't know who I was voting on. No words were said, just his name. Instead of one or two going up there and putting a white ball in, 35 people lined up! I counted them. It was a close vote. I think he lost by only a couple of votes, but then he went to the New York local and he got in there. They probably had a similar system, but it had a different outcome. Later he sailed and became chief engineer of a ship. I met him and we talked about what happened. He turned out to be very nice, and a skilled engineer.

That more or less broke the ice, and as time went on and other things happened. There were a couple other blacks that got in. Some got in through the New York local and then because they lived out here, transferred to our local. But there were only a handful, three or four. Most of them turned out to be very good engineers.

02-00:04:18

Furey:

Now the Merchant Marines are not predominately white anymore. Lots of Filipinos and a lot of—

02-00:04:31

Thor:

No, there's no effort that I'm aware of now to keep out minorities. Of course, a lot of them come in through the Maritime Academies. In fact, my union had its own cadet school for a while. That was the gist of my lawsuit, that they were discriminating against Maritime Academy graduates. My union later discontinued the cadet school entirely. It's now an upgrading school. Now members can go for additional courses, upgrade their license. But discrimination now in my union might be on a personal basis, but I don't think it's on a union basis.

02-00:05:21

Furey:

Let's talk about your last few months living in Richmond before you shipped out.

02-00:05:32

Thor:

I got awful lonely, I'll tell you that; awful lonely because by March, I quit that job—

02-00:05:40

Furey:

'43.

02-00:05:41

Thor:

Yes, and then left the next month of April to go to cadet school. Everybody was gone. There was just this one friend in Berkeley who happened to be called to the Maritime Academy at the same time I was. I mentioned we were in the same class and we got on the same ship together right out of the Maritime Academy in San Mateo. But everybody else was gone. It became quite lonely to see all your high school buddies and people you knew from college leaving. Really a funny experience. Of course, if you were in good health, and a lot of super-patriots looking at you kind of strangely and say, "What are you still doing here?" That didn't bother me; I had signed up the previous summer. [laughs] You couldn't go to the dances we went to. I went to Schwartz Ballroom and there was predominately women there, hardly any guys I knew there anymore. So it was kind of a strange experience.

Then, of course, the opposite happened, I think I mentioned, right after the war, fall of 1946, the year following the war. People in the Merchant Marine, if they were eligible for the draft, had to keep sailing for a year after the war. Otherwise they'd be drafted. Then the big Maritime strike occurred in the fall of '46. That was another peculiar thing. As the ships came in and the people got off the ships for the strike, you saw a lot of people that you hadn't seen for years.

02-00:07:47

Furey:

A lot more competition for the young women. [laughter]

02-00:07:48

Thor:

Well...[laughs] It wasn't that so much. It was a peculiar feeling, though. You see all these guys. You might have seen these guys in a seaman's club in Yokohama a couple of months before for an hour or something like that, and a lot of them you haven't seen since before the war. And all

of a sudden, all of the guys that were in the Merchant Marine—on this coast anyway—were off together. The strike lasted a long time, so you had enough time for a lot of ships to come in and crews get off. During the war, though, that was a funny feeling. [laughs]

02-00:08:45

Furey:

I haven't touched on the boarding house. What was that like? Your mother and your stepfather ran the house.

02-00:08:55

Thor:

Yes.

02-00:08:56

Furey:

Who were the people that would come in? Were some of them migrants that had just come?

02-00:09:02

Thor:

These were relatively small rooms, so they were single men, for the most part. Almost entirely migrants coming in from out of state and renting rooms, working in the shipyards, I think in every case. My mother kept a bar and then once my stepfather went into the yards, I think she probably operated the bar for a short time, but they sold it. And we moved up to South 13th Street, a block away from the shipyard hospital. My sister graduated from Richmond High School about June of '43 and got a job as a receptionist there.

02-00:09:58

Furey:

At the original Kaiser hospital.

02-00:09:59

Thor:

Right. I mentioned that there's a nurse that my wife knows who also started work there at Richmond Hospital as a nurse, on Cutting Boulevard and 14th Street. We lived on South 13th Street, just a block away. That probably happened at the end of '42, beginning of '43, when we made that move, got rid of that rooming house and bar.

02-00:10:38

Furey:

Was it hard? Did your mother not like it?

02-00:10:43

Thor:

Well, you know, she couldn't very well operate a bar herself. She used to serve lunches there too, at the bar. Once my stepfather got the job, I guess she couldn't handle it by herself.

02-00:11:00

Furey:

He also could support her. He had more income.

02-00:11:03

Thor:

That's right, more income. I don't how much income they got from the bar and rooming house, but anyhow they built up an equity in that, because they were able to buy a small fourplex on 47th Avenue in East Oakland. They moved there after I left. Must have been after I started going to sea, so it must have been the fall of '43 that they sold that little house on South 13th Street, and bought that fourplex on 47th Avenue in Oakland. Then, my stepfather and my mother and my sister moved there. My sister got married shortly after that and moved to San Francisco. When my stepfather died, my mother stayed in Oakland until '47, then she went over to my sister's house.

02-00:12:03

Furey:

Your sister, what was her experience in the Kaiser hospital like?

02-00:12:08

Thor:

I talked to her this morning and I forgot to mention this, but she became a model after she moved to San Francisco. And then later when she became too old to be a fashion model, she became a fashion show coordinator, worked for big department stores. Did that for a long time, then she went into real estate and became a real estate broker, or a salesman for some other broker and did that up to fairly recently when she had a stroke. Lives at Dillion Beach now. I can't remember; I was out at sea when she had that job as the receptionist at the hospital.

02-00:13:06

Furey:

We'll have to talk to her about that. We should definitely contact your sister.

02-00:13:16

Thor:

You ought to contact that nurse, too.

02-00:13:23

Furey:

{Harriet Stewart?}

02-00:13:24

Thor:

She's in the same pottery class as my wife.

02-00:13:31

Furey:

Maybe we could briefly touch on your experience at sea during the war and then when you came back, during the Maritime strike. What were your impressions? First of all, what was your experience at sea like and your war experience, and then your impressions of how Richmond may have changed?

02-00:13:59

Thor:

The experience at sea, as I mentioned I put in ten weeks at the basic school. The first ship was a tanker up in Portland. The fellow I knew from high school—he went to St. Mary's High—he was

a deck cadet and I was an engine cadet. There was another engine cadet from our class. The three of us went up to Portland and got this brand-new tanker out of the shipyard up there, Swan Island. I guess we were all going from the train station, standing there with our sea bags, and some girls come by in a convertible and picked us up and took us to the ship. They invited us down to Maltanoma Hotel. The basement was a beer garden. I remember that they had ten-cent glasses of beer about this tall. I'll never forget that. [laughs] The first moment we stepped aboard that ship, I'll never forget that either. They were eating lunch, I believe, and you know, the officers have their own mess room. We go in the mess hall, the chief engineer's down there and the first engineer's there. 'Course, the two engine cadets were supposed to report to the chief engineer and the deck cadets get to report to the captain. They were all eating, and somebody said, "Well, that's the chief," so the two of us went down to talk to the chief. He was eating. [chuckles] Before we got there, he said, "Who are those guys?" He was a little guy, worked for Standard Oil for years as a chief engineer, was notorious there. His name was "Snuffy" Smith. That was his nickname; his real name was Smith. There was a little character in the funny papers called Snuffy Smith at that time, little sawed-off guy. This guy was short, of course, bald-headed, and very gruff. Somebody said, "Those are your new cadets." He said "I don't want any blah-blah cadets on my ship! Get 'em out of here!" So then this great big hulking guy came over, all bent over, and said "Don't pay any attention. Come over here, come over here." So, he gave us our own little table and said, "You work for me. I'm the first engineer. Don't go near the chief." So we didn't see the chief.

We were up and down the coast. We had a lot of engine problems. A new ship often has problems like that. They left these little welding rod stubs in the pipes and they worked their way up under the valves and couldn't shut the valves, and couldn't shut down the main engine there for a while, that kind of thing. Later, we had massive condenser leaks which meant massive boiler problems. We burned out the water wall tubes. That was in Australia a little later, but we had a lot of problems.

One of the biggest problems was the chief engineer had no turbine or high-pressure boiler experience, you see. He was with Standard Oil, but he always was in with these reciprocating engines and low-pressure boilers. We had one engineer on there—they had four or five engineers—one engineer, the youngest, had been with the high-pressure boilers but they wouldn't listen to him, see, he was second engineer. The first engineer was similar to the chief. He was an old-timer and he had been on what they called the Murmansk run, the ships going across the Atlantic to Russia, around the northern end, where they were bombed. Out of thirty ships in a convoy, maybe just a handful got through because of the bombing and the torpedoes. It was a terrible trip.

02-00:18:20

Furey:

Bringing supplies to Russia?

02-00:18:24

Thor:

Yes, around the northern end of Norway, into Murmansk. He had made that run, and I don't know if he was an alcoholic before that, but he turned into one. It was a real experience.

02-00:18:38

Furey:

The submarine blockade in the Baltic.

02-00:18:41

Thor:

This was before they ever got to the Baltic. They didn't go through the English Channel; they went around the end of Norway.

02-00:18:48

Furey:

Of the north of Norway.

02-00:18:52

Thor:

Up into the White Sea, right.

02-00:18:53

Furey:

But from New York.

02-00:18:54

Thor:

From New York, Yes. It was the worst run of the war.

02-00:18:56

Furey:

The Liberty Ships went down in droves, but then the Victory Ship, by the time they had broken the blockade, most of the submarines were isolated in the Baltic.

02-00:19:14

Thor:

They had both submarines and bombers off the coast of Norway attacking them. Anyway, he had been through that and he was okay when he was sober—

02-00:19:27

Furey:

Like all drunks—

02-00:19:30

Thor:

Yes, he didn't have the experience for that type of engine.

02-00:19:34

Furey:

So your time was spent mostly out in the Pacific? What were most of your runs? Where were you going between?

02-00:19:45

Thor:

Well, the first run we went up and down the coast here on that tanker. Then we had a trip to New Zealand and back. That was about a two and a half-month trip, and then the trip down the coast,

about a month and a half. Then we made a trip to Australia, came down from there, went to about four ports in southern Australia, then we went up to the Persian Gulf, to a big refinery to get some high-test aviation gasoline. At that time, we carried airplanes on deck too, with the wings folded. Carried them down to Australia. Not like some of the jet fuel you have now; this is high-test gasoline on this tanker. It was like a floating bomb. And we had trouble coming back. It was a six-month trip all together. Coming back from Australia to Panama took over thirty days. A lot of time, we were dead in the water working on the boilers. We tried to arrange it—

02-00:20:58

Furey:

Waiting out there, and if any Japanese plane or submarine comes along—

02-00:21:05

Thor:

Submarines. We were out of the traffic of the airlines or the bombers and all that, but they had submarines there. Anyway, when we had both boilers going, we could hit about eighteen knots which was beyond convoy speed, so we weren't in convoy at any time. But, we were dead in the water or going slow with one boiler a good part of it. That's why it took us thirty days to get across. All together, we were ten months on that ship. We came into New Orleans and that's where I made a deal with the King's Point officer there to make another trip, rather than go back to King's Point. I got home, I had two or three days at home, and then they put me on a troop transport. I was five months on that. A big staging area was Enewetak and we stayed in Enewetak, went to Guadalcanal. We went to Guam, Tinian, Saipan, and went to Pearl Harbor. Out of that whole five-month trip, the only shore leave we got was an hour or two in Pearl Harbor. Five months.

02-00:22:28

Furey:

So you were out at sea the whole time.

02-00:22:28

Thor:

Yep. Either that or waiting in Enewetak in that staging area waiting to—we were troop transport. We took the First Division Marines out of New Zealand. They came up on another ship and then we took them to Guadalcanal from Enewetak. This was after we invaded Guadalcanal

02-00:22:55

Furey:

Did you ever come under fire?

02-00:22:58

Thor:

Oh, Yes. Not there, but let's see—I got my license then, and then the first ship on my license was a six-month trip with no liberty. No liberty on a six month trip. We ended up at Okinawa with the kamikazes coming over. Most of the kamikazes were picked off miles away by picket boats that would shoot them down, but a couple of them got through. I remember when the first one came through, we'd only been there I think a day. We stayed there quite a while. Heard all this really big racket on the deck, a lot of the shrapnel from our antiaircraft guns was landing on deck. It would go up and come down; and when it came down that's steel hitting steel. Made a

nice racket, but after a while you get used to that. You'd see a searchlight pick out a kamikaze and then everybody would converge their antiaircraft guns on it before it could dive, when it dived, it of course, tried to dive on a big aircraft carrier or some other big ship—

02-00:24:15

Furey:

They'd go up high enough so the antiaircraft wasn't hitting them, wasn't as accurate.

02-00:24:19

Thor:

They weren't skilled pilots, either. They were young kids. They learned enough to get the plane off the ground, get up there and then dive on the target.

Two ammunition ships blew up while we were there, but they were not in the immediate area. We didn't hear the explosion, didn't see 'em. But that was kind of scary. Especially when we came home, we were coming up almost to the Gate [Golden Gate Bridge]. We made a left-turn, started going up the coast. This was after six months, no shore liberty, and on the previous ship, we had no liberty except Pearl Harbor for a couple hours. But my fireman—the guy with the one eye—was so upset about this that he wanted to jump overboard and try to swim home from outside the Gate. He was just going crazy. We didn't know where we were going, but it turns out we were headed for Prince Rupert, Canada to load ammunition for Okinawa.

[end interview]