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Josephine Wikelund

Rosie the Riveter

World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Samuel J. Redman
in 2011

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Josephine (Julian) Wikelund, 1941



Josephine Wikelund and great granddaughter Riley, 2011

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Interview 1: February 14, 2011
Begin Audiofile1

Redman: Josephine, would you mind telling me what your full name is and where you were born?

1-00:00:07

Wikelund: Yes. My full name is Josephine Estella, my maiden name, too?

Redman: Yeah, sure.

1-00:00:17

Wikelund: Okay, all right. Julian with an a, J U L I A N, and my married name is Wikelund. I was born in Independence, Kansas, Montgomery County, USA, September 2, 1922.

Redman: Wonderful, so could you tell me a little bit about who your parents were? What were they like, and what did they do for a living?

1-00:00:48

Wikelund: Well, my father and my mother were divorced back at a time when it was very shocking, but my father was a glass blower. He worked in a glass factory, and he had, if you're interested in a little bit of interesting stuff, he had a couple of his fingers cut off from blowing glass.

Redman: So it was a fairly dangerous occupation then.

1-00:01:21

Wikelund: That's right, and he actually died of cancer of the jaw and mouth, probably due to the inhaling of whatever it is they inhaled when they blew glass. And my mother was a homemaker, and her name was Sarah Elizabeth Ellen King. Both my father and my mother were born in Missouri, and, of course, my dad's name was Alfred Clinton Julian, called Al, and my mother's married name, of course, was Julian.

Redman: So after your parents separated what was a typical day like for your mother?

1-00:02:10

Wikelund: Well, my mother, when I was a little older, they separated when I was three or four. My mother took care of me and my sister, who is about a little over four years older than I am, and you might be interested to know, am I giving you too much detail?

Redman: Oh, no, this is perfect.

1-00:02:50

Wikelund: Okay. My brother Floyd, who was born in 1917, lived in the second wave of that influenza pandemic that hit the states again. He died in 1919. He was two years old at the time. And my mother was a homemaker, and she did washing

and ironing for people because there was no authority to make my dad pay any child support, so he didn't pay any child support. Then when I got older and we started school, then my mother went to work in a canning factory, and she canned tomatoes.

Redman: Do you remember interacting with your father much after your parents separated? Did you get to see him?

1-00:03:48

Wikelund: I only saw him once, and the only thing I ever remember him buying me was an ice cream cone.

Redman: And that was sort of the end of your relationship, really?

1-00:04:04

Wikelund: That was the end of my relationship until I became an adult and I left home. I went to Wichita, and I spent a couple of weeks with my dad.

Redman: So let's stay in this time period a little bit. Do you recall the effects of the Great Depression? I know some people growing up as a child, they don't really see or notice the Great Depression that's going on around them; they're just children, they're just growing up. But other people, through their parents, they can see the effects of the hard times economically.

1-00:04:39

Wikelund: Oh, yes.

Redman: Was your family or anyone in your community affected by the Great Depression, and how do you remember that?

1-00:04:48

Wikelund: Certainly all of the communities that I lived in—because there was a cement plant there, and my brother-in-law was the foreman of the cement plant. Of course, the cement plant closed down during the depression, and everybody felt the Depression except the people who worked for the Corey Oil and Gas Company, which was there and is no longer there now. But, I remember very well the Depression. I remember we had—we thought shopping a chit, maybe what you would call it, a little cart, and we went to a commissary that the government had set up. We could buy split peas and beans and tomatoes, stuff like that, rice with those chits. My mother was a wonderful soul food cook. She wasn't a good baker like cakes and pies, but boy, she sure could make good biscuits and good corn bread and good solid food. My mother was a good cook, and she always had, we always had good food. I still love that kind of food.

Redman: So you remember even though times were tough, and it was maybe difficult to make ends meet, the food was always there, and the food was always good. Your mother made do with what was available, is that right?

1-00:06:35

Wikelund: That's right, and you know something, Sam? I always felt a sense of security.

Redman: Do you think that was due to the family, the community, or where was that sense of security from, do you think?

1-00:06:50

Wikelund: That was from my mother. That's from my mother. I went to Sunday School every Sunday. I won a Bible for perfect attendance. Personally, I am not remotely religious. I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious. But my mother really was religious, and she really believed in the Bible, which annoyed me no end.

Redman: Now what kind of a church did you grow up going to?

1-00:07:30

Wikelund: I went to a fundamental church. I would say probably a Pentecostal denomination. As an adult I became a Catholic because of the ritual and beauty and mystery. I can't say for sure, but I would certainly say it was one of the more primitive churches of the time.

Redman: My next question was going to be about school, but maybe if you have some stronger memories from Sunday School, we could stick with that, too? Do you recall—?

1-00:08:04

Wikelund: Okay. I was always a little show-off. I liked to perform. I was in all the church plays and concerts and stuff like that, and I really enjoyed it. As I say, I was a real show-off. I very much liked church, not for the good stuff it taught me, which my mother taught me that at home, but for the social activities.

Redman: So you enjoyed spending time with the other children and—

1-00:08:50

Wikelund: That's right, yeah.

Redman: Now, how about in school Monday through Friday, did you have a favorite subject in school? What was your school like? Do you remember what the building looked like—?

1-00:09:03

Wikelund: Yes, my favorite subjects were literature and history, not date things but events, what happened. I went to a lot of different schools because we moved quite a lot. They were named for presidents, Lincoln, McKinley, a bunch of those. I finished my education, high school; I graduated there in '39.

Redman: This was in Independence that you graduated from high school?

1-00:09:30

Wikelund: That's right. My family was kind of looked down on in school because my mother and father were not together and my mother had divorced my dad. So I was not popular in school.

Redman: Tell me about that sentiment of the time. You could sort of sense, or did people say directly to you, would they say mean things to you about your parents being separated?

1-00:10:04

Wikelund: That's right, they would, and some mothers wouldn't let their children play with me because my mother and dad were divorced.

Redman: So there was a pretty heavy stigma there surrounding that.

1-00:10:17

Wikelund: That's right, there certainly was.

Redman: So now you graduated from high school in 1939. What did you do right after high school?

1-00:10:30

Wikelund: Right after high school I went to work at one of the big pharmacies there, and I've racked my brains, and I can't remember the name of it. It was on Main Street, though, I know that. Then I went from there, that's when I went to Wichita from there.

Redman: So in '39 after you graduated from high school you worked for a pharmacy in Independence for a little bit right on Main Street. What did you do at the pharmacy?

1-00:11:04

Wikelund: I sold cosmetics and took the prescriptions back to the druggist and stuff like that. You want to hear something very interesting?

Redman: Sure.

1-00:11:17

Wikelund: All right. We had a lunch counter there and a breakfast counter, and there was a white man, and he did the short orders. He would make bacon and eggs and hash browns and stuff like that, and coffee, of course. Not much tea sold back then. We were Americans. We were coffee drinkers. We still remember that Boston Tea Party. Then I worked in that, but the interesting thing I was going to tell you, the white man was up front, and then in the back of the drug store there was another building where the main cooking was done, and a black man did the main cooking. But I was never to tell anybody that the black man did the cooking. It seems strange. It was really funny, Sam, because most of the people had colored people cooking, and it was usually the wealthy people. I mean, the woman, the colored woman, we called them colored then, if you

called somebody a black you would probably have been killed. They got colored then, so never to tell anybody that a colored person did the cooking.

Redman: So that was all sort of hidden behind the counter there.

1-00:13:00

Wikelund: Yeah, you want to remember that it seems like a long time, but the Civil War was still very active in people's minds, much more so than World War I.

Redman: Interesting, because I have read that a lot of people in the Midwest had some unusual feelings or some pretty strong feelings about the First World War because there were a lot of people of German descent living in places like Iowa or Kansas or Missouri, but I've also heard that that's maybe a little overstated, that—

1-00:13:38

Wikelund: No, no. Actually, I've got another interesting sideline for you. My history teacher when I was in high school—I've got it written down here so I'd be sure to tell you about it—was named Stocklebrand. He was German.

Redman: Can you spell that for me?

1-00:13:58

Wikelund: Yes, I can. S T O C K, I am guessing now, L E or E L, Stockle, and then brand, B R A N D.

He went to the Olympic Games in 1936 in Germany. He met Hitler. He actually met Hitler, sat in Hitler's box, and he was a real admirer of Adolph Hitler. And, of course, he told us all about it and what a wonderful man Hitler was and what all he was doing for Germany and everything. And, of course, we believed him; he was our teacher. But once I got a little older, oh, my goodness, I knew that that was not true, for me, anyway.

Then there were so many Germans that lived around us, and I've got several German memories, but my elder sister, Maude, was married to a German man. He was a first-generation American. His mother, his father, his four brothers were born in Germany, and they left Germany to escape the draft that the Kaiser had put for the young men there. So they were not pro-Hitler, but they were Germans. But, Sam, so many, many, many of the people around there were pro-Hitler.

Redman: But you feel like the Civil War was maybe more ingrained in people's consciousness than the First World War perhaps, or do you feel like maybe the German sentiment was, it was still palpable, you could feel it, or sort of sense it in—

1-00:16:02

Wikelund:

Oh, yes, yes. You could sense the admiration for Hitler and his—you know, I've traveled quite a little bit, and I've lived in other countries, and I am American. No matter what country I've been in, I've remained a deep American. My roots are in America. I think the Germans, at least the first generation of Germans there in America, our country, they felt the same way about Germany. You know, I can understand that because I feel that way about America.

I have, if you've got time—I worked when I first went to Wichita. I got a job; I was just a kid, now. I got a job in a box factory. We made gift boxes. This gift box factory was owned and run by a German, who was so German you could hardly understand what he was saying. And, oh, he was a terror. All the girls who worked there—we were just young girls—we were scared to death of him truly, we were really scared of him. His wife and daughter worked there, and they were afraid of him, too. Their husband and dad, they were—oh, he was a terrible man I can tell you. I thought something was very interesting. We had a tool, and it was called a bone, and it was a flat, smooth bone, and it was used to run along the inside of the box and press down the gift paper. Onto the box. Now, I thought later, when I knew the atrocities of the holocaust, I thought you have to wonder if some of those bone tools that I worked with, if they could have been human bone. I don't know that, of course, but I just wondered if it could have been.

Now, I didn't stay there long because he was such a terrible guy. I kept my eye open on the paper. Jobs were very, very hard to get then. But then there was an advertisement in the paper for young women to stuff envelopes. I tried for that job and got it, and this man was a German also, and I don't remember his name, but I've got a lot of books on the holocaust, and I've got a book on the history of Kansas, and his name is in one of those books. But they're at Alisa's house because I just live in an apartment in town.

Okay, but listen, this guy's name was I believe Gerald Winslop, or Gerald Wins-something. I worked there, would stuff envelopes, put stamps on envelopes. We sent to the German suppliers, we sent news from Germany, small papers, little newspapers with all kind of news from Germany, and anything that would stuff the ego of the German people. And we put those, the girls and I, put stamps and stuffed those envelopes with those papers. But one day, he was closed down. Two guys came in, and he was closed down. And you know something? They still owe me a couple of weeks pay. Do you think I'll ever get it?

Redman:

So was it government officials that came in and shut him down, do you know?

1-00:20:50

Wikelund: Yes, it was. I always like to assume, nobody ever introduced us, of course, they just told us to take our things and go. I figured they were probably FBI guys, wouldn't you think?

Redman: Yeah, that sounds like it certainly could be the case. Now was this before Pearl Harbor Day, December 7?

1-00:21:13

Wikelund: Yeah, before.

Redman: After the job stuffing envelopes ends, then Pearl Harbor must have happened fairly soon around that time.

1-00:21:24

Wikelund: That's right, and by that time I was married. I had about as much business being married as a five-year-old, but I was married. At that point in time we couldn't find work after that place was shut down. My husband and I, his name was Robert, and so we delivered papers and flyers with the throw-aways, you know? Boy, it was so cold then, Sam. We walked around into the residential district and we'd put advertisements into the mailboxes.

We lived in a miserable place in a basement, and it was like a, just straight through it was very narrow kind of like a railroad car, if you know what I mean, a narrow little thing, and it had cockroaches and mice in it, and oh, I hated to live there, just hated it because my mother hated bugs and rodents. But we couldn't get any place else. But the minute Pearl Harbor was declared my husband got a wonderful job as a tool and die maker. We got a very, very nice apartment, and I was hired immediately at Boeing.

Redman: Let me start asking you a few questions about Boeing now. Can you tell me what the Boeing factory looked like? Can you draw me a bit of a mental picture?

1-00:23:16

Wikelund: Well, it was huge, very big. It had hundreds of people. There were hangars for the airplanes, of course. When I first went to work there I was actually a riveter. I drove, there were two kinds of rivets: one, if you want this kind of stuff. There were roundhead rivets, and then there were countersunk rivets, which were ice box rivets, and they were icy cold, icy cold. So cold they were hot. We had to have our hair in nets or scarves, and we had cute little coveralls that were blue and fitted. I have to tell you I was good looking and I had quite a nice figure, and I'm small. Men liked small women back then. They still do to tell you the truth. [laughter]

Anyway, the guys, they used to toss those hot rivets at us women, us girls. One time one of those hot rivets went down my uniform and landed in my bra. Boy, I'm telling you, you talk about a burn. I had a burn that you wouldn't

believe. I had a scar on my breast I would say for—in fact, it's still, you can still faintly see it.

Redman: Wow, okay. So normally when someone would toss you the hot rivets, would there be another person there catching them for you?

1-00:25:24

Wikelund: No.

Redman: Okay, so you would catch them.

1-00:25:26

Wikelund: They weren't supposed to do that. They weren't supposed to toss them. They were supposed to be kind of a, you know what a flour scoop looks like?

Redman: I think I do, okay.

1-00:25:38

Wikelund: It had a handle and a scoop. Those rivets, just a few at a time were put in there, and then we got one out and someone would put it in the hole and then we would rivet it. I was very little. I didn't even weigh a hundred pounds. I probably was not strong enough to rivet so then I bucked. It was called bucking. I riveted for a while, and, of course, you need to be really, really strong for that riveting.

Redman: Because you need to lift the gun.

1-00:26:21

Wikelund: Then I went bucking when you had a stainless steel bar that you put behind the hole of the sheet metal that was being riveted together, and then you push that against the metal, and the rivet would, went against that and was pounded smooth. See what I'm saying?

Redman: Sure, yes.

1-00:26:44

Wikelund: Okay, I did that for quite a while, several months, and then they needed a woman, a girl, and the guys all like me even though I was married, and I got a better job, and I became a liaison clerk then. I carried messages, I carried important, all kind of important, what do you call those—blueprints.

Redman: Memos, or memorandum or—

1-00:27:24

Wikelund: Yeah, I carried instructions and a whole bunch of stuff all around the plant. And you know, the guys would send me for funny things like sky hooks and all that. My boyfriend, man friend, not a boy, he's my age, Donald Baldwin, lives in America. He said, "They sent you on these trips so they could watch you walk!" I expect that's true because the thing of it is there was no sexual

harassment law back there, and you really could get yourself into trouble, you had to be really careful. The guys like to feel you up, get you in a corner, and—

Redman: Yeah, tell me a little bit about, did your appearance change from the time, because you mentioned that you were wearing the riveting overalls and the scarf for when you were doing that, but then when you transitioned into this messaging job, did you change your outfit?

1-00:28:35

Wikeland: No, we had to be dressed that way.

Redman: So you were still moving about the planes and the assembly lines with these instructions.

1-00:28:44

Wikeland: That's right. Then there were welders and all kinds of stuff like that, and you really had to be covered decently, none of the way the girls dress now.

Redman: Right. So I am curious, that is really interesting when you told me that, so there was some, would you describe any of the relationships between the men and the women in the factory as having some hanky panky aspect to them, was there some of that as well?

1-00:29:19

Wikeland: Yes, there was a lot of that, but since I was newly married, I—but I have to tell you a lot of guys made passes at me and felt me up, and they just did, married men and older guys as well as young guys. And, of course, all the young guys tried to date me, and the married men felt me up, and not only me, but all the women.

Redman: Now did that really bother people, or was it sort of, the women in particular, did that bother them, or did you get the feeling that that was something that was sort of laughed off at the time?

1-00:30:04

Wikeland: Well, it'd depend on how graphic the feeling up got. You want to remember we women were just out of the home. The men weren't used to working around women then. They would pinch your bottom, then squeeze your breasts; they would get you in a corner and try to kiss you. I mean really they were ravenous beasts.

Redman: Yeah. [laughter]

1-00:30:31

Wikeland: I mean you'd never put up with it now.

Redman: Would be considered grounds for being fired, of course.

1-00:30:37

Wikelund: That's right. Yeah.

Redman: My understanding is that the Boeing plant shared a runway with the Wichita Municipal Airport. Can you describe how that would work? Would the planes taxi directly to a runway just as soon as they were done being produced?

1-00:30:54

Wikelund: We had a big what was called apron, and the completed planes were driven out on the apron. I worked on the last B-17 and the first B-29. There was a big celebration. Big shots came. Air Force guys came, and we were given oh, I don't know, an hour or so off, and everybody was out on the apron and this big celebration and—

Redman: Watching the last of the B-17s.

1-00:31:34

Wikelund: Yeah, and the first 29s, and I—oh, that was a lot of fun. I mean those were exciting times. Even some of the guys if they were good looking and charming and you weren't too upset if they didn't get too naughty. We were all young and feeling our hormones.

Redman: Yeah, yup. Now tell me about when we transitioned from the B-17 to the B-29, did a lot of things in the factory have to change, or was it pretty similar in terms of assembling? Because my understanding is that the B-29 is much larger and in some ways more complicated than the B-17s.

1-00:32:17

Wikelund: That's right, but at that time I was no longer working directly on the planes, so—my, but I'm sure there were a lot of changes, but I was doing the liaisioning work, I was called a liaison clerk at the time.

Redman: Let's step back for a minute for when you sign up for the job initially. I know you and your husband, did you guys go together to the factory to sign up, or did you go separately?

1-00:32:56

Wikelund: No, my husband worked for a separate private factory that was government controlled or leased or whatever, but he made tool and die, whatever that means. He made tools for the people to work on the airplanes with. And then my husband—I think he was about four years older than I. I'm good at memories except I'm not good at dates. He wanted to be in the Air Force, so he enlisted in the Air Force, and he wanted me to go to the different places with him where he was sent to boot camp and training, so I did. I was in Amarillo, Texas, and I was in Tempe, there in Arizona over here by Phoenix at that point in time. No airplane factories were there, but I got a job, of course, right away. Sounds like I'm blowing my own horn, and my mother says, "a woman of culture never blows her own horn," obviously.

Don Baldwin, my man friend, says that if you don't blow you own horn, no one's going to hear you. Anyway, I had real good looking legs, and back at that time, of course, there was a restriction on silk and nylon. They were making the parachutes out of nylon and stuff like that, and I made leg makeup.

They couldn't produce enough silk and, of course, we got a lot of our silk from Japan, and, of course, Japan wouldn't have anything to do with us then, other than to bomb the hell out of us, and so what we did, we did the best we could without silk and nylon, but we really had restrictions on the stockings and things like that. I kind of lost my thread of thought here.

Redman: Oh, that's fine, that's fine.

1-00:35:26

Wikelund: I can tell you more things about the let makeup.

Redman: So let me ask, when you signed up for work at Boeing, let's think in Wichita just for a couple more minutes. When you signed up for work at Boeing were you worried or apprehensive, or were you excited to find that work that was higher paying?

1-00:35:42

Wikelund: I was excited. I was in the midst of things; I thought I was doing something. And not only that, I had a little bit of money, I could eat.

Redman: Tell me, I ask people this question a lot, after coming out of the Great Depression and they find this work in the defense industry and they're suddenly making a lot of money, I find that people did a lot of different things with their money. Some people used it to party and some people saved their money. It sounds like you wanted a new apartment. What else did you do with your money?

1-00:36:19

Wikelund: I bought sterling silver. Beautiful. My eldest daughter Giselle has it now. While I was at Boeing, and when my husband enlisted, as I told you he wanted me to travel with him, and, of course, then I didn't have such a good paying job, but I saved. I bought war bonds, of course. We all bought war bonds. With the war bonds I put myself through Santa Monica, California, Business College when I left, when my husband went overseas.

Redman: Let me ask quickly about when you initially started at the factory when you were riveting on the B-17, was there a particular part of the plane that you were riveting?

1-00:37:17

Wikelund: Just the fuselage.

Redman: Would you go all the way around the fuselage, or were you on a particular side?

1-00:37:24

Wikelund: Yes, we went to one side and then cross over to the other side and in the same area, see what I mean? If we were working in the front, we did the front on one side and then went to the front on the other side.

Redman: I see, and would you rotate front, middle and back then?

1-00:37:45

Wikelund: No, I just worked on the sides.

Redman: Would you rivet the ball turret gun underneath as well?

1-00:37:51

Wikelund: No, I didn't. I just put the sheets of the plane siding together.

Redman: So other people would put maybe the glass and the gun for let's say the ball turret underneath the gun.

1-00:38:09

Wikelund: That's right. I only did the skin.

Redman: Was there a particular reason? Do you know why that was segregated by gender, why men—?

1-00:38:18

Wikelund: I would imagine it took more strength. Men are so much stronger with more upper body strength. Being taller helped also.

Redman: How would you describe that work on a typical day? You'd mentioned that wonderful story about these ice cold rivets being tossed at you, but so that was pretty hard work and especially for someone who, you say you were pretty small back in that time, that must have been—

1-00:38:43

Wikelund: I'm still small.

Redman: I can imagine it must have been pretty tough work.

1-00:38:49

Wikelund: It was hard work. It was very hard work, but I found it stimulating. We had fun, it wasn't all grim. We had lots of fun, we joked, and surprisingly enough, the men weren't vulgar, they didn't tell filthy jokes, but they did feel you up.

Redman: Other than that, would you say it was a fun work environment?

1-00:39:17

Wikelund: Yes, it was.

Redman: Now, was there a sentiment of patriotism running through all of this that people felt that there was a patriotic duty side of this?

1-00:39:26

Wikelund: Yes, there was, especially with the women. The women, Sam, I'm telling you, we were so glad to be taken out of the kitchen or out of working in the dime stores. We couldn't do anything else, you know. Women back in those days, you could be a teacher, or you could be a nurse, or you could work in a dime store, or you could wait a table, or you could work in, like I did, in a pharmacy, the regular shopping part.

Redman: But then having this opportunity of a new job opening up was a pretty big deal then, this new type of work.

1-00:40:15

Wikelund: Yes, it was. We were proud, and we took ourselves seriously, but with fun.

Redman: Was there an active union at the factory, and if so, did you join the union?

1-00:40:26

Wikelund: Yes, I did, and there was.

Redman: Was it required that you join, was it a closed shop, or did you just make the decision to join?

1-00:40:39

Wikelund: To tell you the truth, I don't remember, but I know I wanted to join because my mother was an avid union member, and she worked very hard for the union in my small town of Independence, Kansas.

Redman: You had a positive feeling about unions coming into the factory, and then you joined the union knowing that that's how you felt about unions before doing this.

1-00:41:05

Wikelund: That's right, and also, I still feel that way about unions, and I think it's awful, awful, awful and infringing on your rights to just about have done away with unions. There's hardly a union up here in Canada any more.

Redman: Do you remember, was the factory segregated by race at the time, or throughout the time that you were there, or were there people of color there?

1-00:41:36

Wikelund: Yes, there was.

Redman: Did they have different jobs?

1-00:41:39

Wikelund: Also, I'll just mention this. In my schools we did not have segregated schools. I went to school with Chicanos, and there were a lot of Mexican people, which

I really, really loved the Mexican people. They're warm, friendly, fun people, and have wonderful food. The Negroes were more reserved and stayed to themselves. But I remember Joe Lewis fought Max Baer at the time. They have wonderful food and cooking too. Do you remember? Well, you don't remember.

Redman: Well, I don't remember, but I've heard about that.

1-00:42:20

Wikelund: Yeah, you've heard about it. Anyway, Sam, there was one colored girl, and I remember her name. Can you imagine that? Her name was Clarissa White. She was in my grade all through school, but this was in '36, so I was probably in junior high at that time, '36, '37, '38, '39. Anyway, and whatever the year that fight was, which I don't remember, but she asked me who I wanted to win. I was so naïve, I didn't even know what she was talking about. She says, "Who do you want to win?" Well I said, "I want Max Baer to win." What'd she think?

Redman: She might have not been too happy about that.

1-00:43:20

Wikelund: Anyway, and she said, "Aw, you want some of that Baer meat." I had no clue what she meant. I was so dumb. Of course, I figured out later what she meant. But anyway, if you want to go back a little bit to the Olympics in Germany, I've got some real interesting stories on that.

Redman: Can I ask you first, can I ask you a question about Wichita?

1-00:43:53

Wikelund: Yes.

Redman: This is a little bit of a long question, but you can ask me to repeat any aspects of it you want. I'm going to read you a quote from a historian about the rise of the aircraft industry in Wichita, Kansas. Apparently, many people in the city worried that the war boom of that time would result in a post-war economic collapse. So this quote is from a historian named R. Douglas Hunt in a book called *The Great Plains During World War II*. Are you ready for the quote?

1-00:44:21

Wikelund: Yes.

Redman: Okay, it is, "Wichita provides an example of planning challenges for the post war years. By autumn of 1944 the city trailed only San Diego and Long Beach in airplane manufacturing. Between April 1940 and January 1944 employment in Wichita's aircraft industry increased more than thirty-fold to 53,000 workers, a number that exceeded by 4,000 the wage earners employed by the aircraft industry nationwide in 1939." So that quote is saying that in Wichita

by the end of the war there were more people working on airplanes than anywhere else in the country combined in 1939.

1-00:45:10

Wikelund: Yes.

Redman: So did you get the feeling that there was sort of some apprehensiveness of all these people moving into Wichita and getting these jobs that maybe once the war was over, they would go back to the Great Depression, that they would go back to being jobless? Did you get any sort of that feeling, or—?

1-00:45:28

Wikelund: I didn't. I didn't get that feeling at all. I know that women were fearful that we would lose our jobs, which, of course, we did, when the men came back, which a lot of women were very resentful, and I don't blame them, because just to be dumped out when we did a job on par with the capabilities of men. The thing of it is, it costs women then, as now, more money to live than it does a man. Women have a lot more things to buy. Women's clothing, shoes, everything is so much more expensive than men's. But I didn't get that feeling.

Redman: Did you and other employees at Boeing at the time sort of assume that this job was temporary, or did you think that it was something that would lead you into a career following the war?

1-00:46:43

Wikelund: No, I think all the women, I had a very close friend there, and she happened to be Jewish, I even remember her name. Her name was Ann Gerber. She was a dear friend of mine. We knew, Sam. We absolutely knew that once the guys came back we would be out.

Redman: One of the shipyards that we are studying really closely out here in California is in Richmond. It's nearby where I'm at Berkeley, and their shipyards gave both health care and child care plans to the employees, and I'm wondering if Boeing had, did you have health care when you were at the plant. I know you were young and healthy and maybe didn't need to go to the doctor very often, but do you remember a health care plan at all?

1-00:47:39

Wikelund: You know something, Sam, I have to be honest. I don't, but that doesn't mean anything.

Redman: What about child care? Was there any sort of child care options for the other women? Do you remember anything about that? If you don't, that's—

1-00:47:54

Wikelund: No, I don't. I didn't know any women that had any children.

Redman: Let's step back; you said you had a couple of interesting stories or an interesting story about the German Olympic Games that you recall about that?

1-00:48:09

Wikelund: Yes, I do. Stocklebrand, as I told you, my history teacher, was in Hitler's box during the 1936 Olympics. Jesse James Owens, believe it or not, he was born and raised in Oakville, Kansas, just a few miles from Independence. He was the grandson of slaves. Both his grandmother and his grandfather had been slaves. Jesse won four, the most ever won at that point in time, Gold Medals. He won for long jump, relay, and also he was the first person to ever run a four-minute mile. Now, that was just a little grandson of slave people who just practiced out on the, just the roads out in this little old beat up nothing town. I always had a great deal—I never, I have no prejudice against Negro people. In fact, to tell you the truth, my, I'm not too proud to say so, but my great-great grandparents owned slaves. On both sides.

Redman: Did that sort of color how you viewed this growing up and learning about Jesse Owens and his accomplishment, and then hearing sort of these conflicted messages from your history teacher and then later from a lot of other people about Hitler and what he was doing in Germany?

1-00:50:16

Wikelund: Well, did you know that Hitler refused to shake Jesse's hand?

Redman: That's right, yeah.

1-00:50:23

Wikelund: Well he did, and the thing of it is, my friend, my gentleman friend who's my age, as I told you I'm 88, I'm going to tell you something. It's going to blow your mind. He didn't know that Jesse Owens was a black man. I just told him the other day. He said, "No." He said, "You're mistaken." I said, "Don, I'm not mistaken at all; he was a black man."

Redman: So a lot of people maybe didn't know at that time even.

1-00:51:02

Wikelund: No, and I said, "Well, Americans didn't need to get all hopped up because Hitler wouldn't shake his hand," because you know what? I wouldn't say too many white people would have shook a Negro's hand.

Redman: So that maybe didn't shake things up as much then as maybe we would react to it now.

1-00:51:19

Wikelund: That's right. I always felt very proud. In Independence my mother was a friend of a woman who was herself a slave as a child. Now her name was Farmer, and she is buried in the Independence Mount Hope Cemetery. [Narrator addendum: I have found that she is not buried in Mount Hope. I am trying to find her grave so I can put flowers on it for my mother's and my

sake, and for my daughters Laurie, Alisa and Giselle.] I'm going to be buried in my family plot. My mother is buried there, and my brother who died of the flu, he died, and I'm going to be cremated, do you want all this information? I'm going to be cremated, and I have permission to be buried back behind my brother's baby grave. I'm going to be cremated here in Canada. It's already paid for. Then my ashes are going to be, my daughter Alisa is going to take them down to Independence and bury them there.

Redman: So let's talk about your life at the end of the war. Your husband enlisted and you traveled to Texas first then Arizona?

1-00:52:48

Wikelund: Yes.

Redman: Where did he end up going overseas? Did he go to the Pacific or to Europe?

1-00:52:49

Wikelund: He went to the Atlantic theater of war, and actually, Bob and I didn't see each other for five years. So after the, do you want this information? After the war we divorced amicably. We weren't mad at each other. We just didn't know each other.

Redman: Right, you were pretty young when you got married.

1-00:53:18

Wikelund: Yes, and we had just grown apart. So anyway we got divorced, and I married another man that I loved very deeply. I was too young to really love Bob; I was just a kid, I imagine, back then. Bob was very nice and very good looking.

Redman: How did you meet this other man?

1-00:53:44

Wikelund: I met this other man at a bowling alley in Santa Monica, CA. His name was Walter Bibo. His family had come from Germany. He was born in America.

Redman: Okay, can you spell his last name?

1-00:53:53

Wikelund: Yes. B I B O, and there's a little town in Arizona or New Mexico named for him, his grandfather. Great or great-great grandfather I should say. A little trading post area. I think it's in Arizona, but it could be in New Mexico. But I have a feeling it's in Arizona.

Anyway, he had, he was an Indian trader, and he made a lot of money. They lived afterwards, they lived in San Francisco, and my husband was German, wealthy Jewish man, and he died. He died when he was forty-four years old; he was fourteen years older than I. His death was awful for me. He was a fine handsome man with one son. After he died a few years later, I married the

man that's the father of my children, and he was in the American Navy. He was in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of war.

Redman: I have just a couple of questions to wrap up. One of the questions is a couple of weeks ago the woman who inspired the Rosie the Riveter We Can Do It poster passed away. Have you seen that poster, the We Can Do It poster?

1-00:55:11

Wikelund: Yes, my daughter bought me the book; she bought me a necklace, Alisa. She bought me two fridge magnets and it's got the real cute, in fact, quite a glamorous young woman.

Redman: I've been told by some women who worked in defense jobs that they didn't think of themselves as Rosies until a few years later. Was this the case for you? Do you think of yourself as a Rosie the Riveter, or did you think of that as who you were during the war?

1-00:55:44

Wikelund: I thought of that, I was pretty full of myself then. I thought I was pretty important. Of course I wasn't. I realize now that I was just a cog. But anyway, I felt that I was Rosie the Riveter, yes I did. Even when I became a liaison clerk I felt that my contribution was as great as when I was riveting.

I've got the necklace, pretty cute, it's on one of those chains that you can put over your head, and then I've got the real cute magnet, I'm looking at it right now, I'm in my kitchen, and I'm looking at it right now, it's on my fridge. We Can Do It, and She's a Cutie, and she's got on a blue uniform. Mine was something like that, not exactly, but something like that. You know something, Sam, photography, pictures, private pictures weren't so common back then, and I do not have a single picture of me in my uniform or anything like that.

Alisa said that you wanted a picture, and I've got a nice picture of me when I must be about 84, 85.

Redman: Okay, yeah, that works just fine. Well, let me ask you one last question. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me today?

1-00:57:28

Wikelund: Let's see. I love America. I am so proud of being one. If buried elsewhere I wanted "Born in the USA" on my headstone.

Redman: Just sort of, so we've talked about all the way from where and when you were born, what the Great Depression was like, your recollections of Pearl Harbor and signing up for work, and sort of the social life of life on the job, and then actually riveting, and then your memories of what Wichita was like and how Wichita was changing, do you have any other sort of memories that stand out in your mind?

1-00:58:02

Wikelund: My feeling was one of great patriotism. I think America—

[End of Interview]

Narrator addendum: I believe, along with Rhetta, that all wars are fought basically for money, but I was never so angry with the Japanese as I was the Germans. Japan's culture was so different than ours. Germany was so like us and to just kill everyone because you don't like them is horrible. For the people to let it happens is unforgivable. I know what we did to our native people and we were horrible too. No excuses are acceptable to me. I still am American and love my country, and Sam, I want to thank you for this wonderful opportunity to tell my war memories. I hope young people can imagine how we the women of America really changed their world. I want to thank Alisa and my other two daughters Giselle and Laurie for their support and Alisa for finding out about this project. I hope this interview is interesting.