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Dallas Wilcox

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 2005

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Interview with: Dallas Wilcox
 Interviewed by: Brendan Furey
 Transcriber: Kirstin Jackson
 [Interview #1: January 19, 2005]
 [Begin audio file 01 1-19-05]

1-00:00:04

Furey:

I am here with Dallas Wilcox, January 19, 2005, and we start out these interviews, where it all begins, with your birth. So could you tell us where and when you were born?

1-00:00:20

Wilcox:

February 1, 1925, on 46th Street between Grove and West.

1-00:00:34

Furey:

Give us your father's name, and a little bit about his family, and then we will talk about your mother's. Let's start with your father, his name, where he was born.

1-00:00:45

Wilcox:

Ah, William Dallas Wilcox. And where was he born? I don't know, they lived in Seattle—oh, he came across in a covered wagon with my grandmother and his brother. They were about seven years-old when they'd come from California from Kansas, I think that it was Sheldon, Kansas, and they'd come to California and they landed, where is that old soldiers home? Yountville.

1-00:01:30

Furey:

Yountville.

1-00:01:33

Wilcox:

And then from there they spilt up and wound up in Dixon, and he was with his father then, and my grandmother and that was the—

1-00:01:51

Furey:

What was his background, his ethnicity, and religion?

1-00:01:52

Wilcox:

Well, he was English. I went back to the 11th century on the Wilcox's, it was quite interesting. They were part of, supposedly, the Williams. Wilcox is, how would you put it? I don't like to get into the royalty, or any of that stuff, but it all goes back to the 11th century. Wilcox, when they came to Virginia, the names kept changing and the spelling of it kept changing. Wilcox was originally William is what I was told, and then when they come to Virginia in the 1600s, they start splitting up and the name kept- W-I-L-L-C-O-C-K-S [spells out], and they kept changing it around, and there were more or less business-oriented people, most of them were, and that is his side of it.

1-00:03:13

Furey:

How about your mother's maiden name and a little bit about her?

1-00:03:16

Wilcox:

{Kimsner?}. She was my mother. Her father was German and her mother was Spanish, Castillian . Then my great-grandfather, he built one of the first steamships on the Sacramento River, the *Matilda Hern*, which sank back off Steward's Point back in the 1800's I believe.

1-00:03:58

Furey:

Up in Sonoma, Steward's Point in—?

1-00:04:01

Wilcox:

Yeah. Up north. And I have been trying to—Maltida Hern was an actress that my great-grandfather was in love with, and she furnished all of the silk drapes on board, and the flag, and apparently in those days it was quite a thing. Oh, let's see, what else?

1-00:04:30

Furey:

Well, tell us a little bit about how your parents met.

1-00:04:33

Wilcox:

Oh. Well, {Josi?} what was her last name, I forget what their last name was, they lived over in Frisco and they, my mother used to visit them when my mother lived in the hotel with her mother down on Broadway, I think that it is 2nd or 3rd and Broadway.

1-00:04:59

Furey:

What was the hotel called?

1-00:04:59

Wilcox:

I don't know what it was called, but the, it was down in a better part of town in that time, and she, let's see, my mother used to tell me some of the stories that she did when she had the woman that was watching her. My mother was pretty young then, and she had to whitewash piano stool, or something like that. She gave my mother some alcohol, and my mother got a little disoriented I guess. And my grandmother fired the girl that was watching over my mother. And I don't know.

1-00:06:04

Furey:

Your mother was in the earthquake, right?

1-00:06:08

Wilcox:

Yeah. She was about fourteen. She was living in Frisco at that time, with her mother. She was telling me stories of this one guy come up to a guard there- they had the militia out there, come up to the guard, said, “That is my mother over there? Can I kiss her goodbye? She is dead?” you know? And he went over there and he was starting to bite her earrings off. He was trying to get her earrings, and the militiaman shot him dead right there. Then my grandmother’s husband, he owned a big produce market down in Frisco, along the waterfront, I believe, and he was trying to pull some woman out from beneath some bricks, and a brick hit him, it had come off of the building, and it created cancer for him and he died from it anyhow, and she was left quite a bit of money, probably at that time around \$700,000 or \$800,000, which was a bundle. And she put my mother in a convent. And because she was going to be highflier, you know, she went to New York and Chicago, and she went all over the United States. I don’t know if she ever went to Europe or anything. But she was spending money, she was married to a guy named {Sudeth?}, he was one of these pin striped suit playboys himself, and he had come from a well-to-do family, they didn’t have any money anymore. So they went all over the country until she bought a ranch for her son up in Petaluma, a chicken ranch, and all of the chickens died, so they sold that, and she bought them a three story house in Berkeley, a nice old Victorian, and then after that my grandmother, all she was getting was her—she ran out of money is what she did. All she was getting was the social security I think at that time. So he dumped my grandmother at my mother’s house to take care of, and every time a check would come in, he would come down and take her out and wind up with her money. And I don’t know, it was quite a family.

1-00:09:11

Furey:

Tell us a little bit about, just about your childhood growing up in the late twenties and early thirties in North Oakland.

1-00:09:22

Wilcox:

Well, I was always curious about things. I always liked to take things apart, for one thing. My mother, she had a, my grandmother’s clock was up on a mantle, and it was a nice old clock, I which I had it today. It had about that wide, and the old columns in front of it. And I asked her, I said, “Can I have the clock, Ma?” She says, “Yeah, go ahead, take it,” because she didn’t like my grandmother and the clock belonged to my grandmother. So I took it all apart [laughs]. And then when I start building a boat in the backyard when I was about eight, I had a hammer and saw and away I went. I build a boat that people said, “How in the hell did that kid put that thing together like that?” because it had two cabins in it, it had a forward cabin and it had an after cabin, and the thing was about ten-foot long and it was, I wish to the devil that I had taken a picture of that thing, because it was unbelievable. Then from that I started building and airplane. Down in Emeryville there used to be a hardwood floor outfit down there, and all of there scrap oak pieces were big long lengths, about ten-foot long. So I built like a Fairchild cabin job that would maybe hold one person, [laughs] if it ever got off the ground. But I built that, and it was all ready to cover and everything, a canvas, and I needed a motor for it. So I go in the house and I ask Ma, and “Can I have the motor off of the Victrola, Ma?” And she said, “Yeah, Willy,

go ahead, take it. So I was gonna put that, and I lost interest, I went on to something else, but I don't know. I was always building something.

1-00:11:41

Furey:

What was North Berkeley, or sorry, North Oakland like at this time? You grew up on what street? On San Pablo?

1-00:11:48

Wilcox:

No, it was on 46th street, between Grove and West. And what used to happen, this is before they had stop signs. And I would be playing in the yard there, and all of a sudden you hear a big crash. I would run out in the street and look down the turner, or west, 46th, and there might be three or four cars all collided. And that is when they had plate glass. They would usually be blood all over the place. That plate glass, it would just take your head off. These people, they just, well, they drove like crazy. They had a big old heavy car and when they all hit, and about, at least once a week, at least once a week, they would have a wreck down there I wouldn't go off of the curb to look at anything, because I didn't like the sight of blood anyhow, but the wheels would still be turning, you know.

1-00:12:50

Furey:

You were was saying that the sidewalks were a little different than what you see today.

1-00:12:55

Wilcox:

Ah, well, part of the sidewalks, at that particular time, they had the old redwood timbers holding the dirt back in. But little by little they were replacing all that. I don't know who the contractors were who did that kind of work, but little by little the sidewalks come back. There were some sidewalks that were still wood when I was six and seven years-old. And Oakland was a nice town. You didn't have to look up your doors or anything like that, and everybody more or less would help one another as much as they could. I was down in the Italian part of town, Temescal, that is where most of the Italianos lived, and there was one colored family who lived up there, he was a mailman. And people who worked for he government or the state were pretty well situated. They always had a good check.

1-00:14:07

Furey:

Now, before the war there weren't many black folks in Oakland.

1-00:14:11

Wilcox:

Ah—

1-00:14:13

Furey:

Do you remember any?

1-00:14:13

Wilcox:

No, yeah, yeah. Further on, there was a black family and there was quite a few of them there. And these were good people, I used to with this little black kid, the two of us. We would hike around down, do this, do that. And I brought them up the house one time and my mother made us a couple of sandwiches, and I took off, and then when I come home that day my myself, she said, "What are you playing with that kid for?" I said, "Well, he is my friend." And I never thought too much about it then, but the influence from parents really create problems some times it works on both sides of it too. Because I remember driving through Richmond, maybe thirty, forty years ago, and I would be down on the South Side down there, and little kids would come out, "What are you doing down here, whitey?" [laughs]. But, it is not the kid's fault, really.

1-00:15:28

Furey:

And your mother is, your grandmother owned the apartment where Huey Newton's family lived?

00:15:34

Wilcox:

No, my parents owned the, it wasn't an apartment. It was and house that my parents owned when my mother and father were still married. That is where they divorced from that house, and they sold it, I think that they got \$2,500 from it, or something like that. Because houses then, during the depression, man, you could pick up a house real cheap. Some of these McGregor house back in the thirties you could pick up for \$2,500 over in Alameda. They would go for \$2,500 and these houses going for \$400,000 now, you know. And it is—

00:16:21

Furey:

So do you remember meeting the Newtons?

00:16:24

Wilcox:

No, no, that was years later that I found out that they bought the house and they lived there. I think his father, I think he was a preacher, I'm not sure. And, but they were good people, you know. Huey, he was just one of those radicals that went in different directions. I met Cleaver, Eldridge, because I used to go to the Young Republicans meeting that they had at, where is that, at Spengers. They used to have it once a month. And he'd come in there one day and I was talking to him, and he was really bitching about the City of Berkeley, how they were harassing him. This is when he was more or less all calmed down and really legitimate.

00:17:25

Furey:

What did you guys talk about?

00:17:26

Wilcox:

He was talking about the, they were trying to force him to do something with his property or something that he didn't want to do and I was involved in a lot of real estate at that particular time too and I says "Well, hey join the club Eldridge, it is the way it is. You are from Berkeley, you are getting a taste of your own medicine now, you know?" He was a good guy. He was all right. Let's see, what else?

00:18:02

Furey:

So then, just about the depression, how did your family get along? You said that your mother did not work during the depression years.

00:18:11

Wilcox:

No.

00:18:09

Furey:

You guys paid \$12 rent. Could you tell a little about your day to day life during the Depression era?

00:18:18

Wilcox:

Well, my mother [sighs], when it was my mother, my brother and me, my sister, she already married and had some kids and she was living her life in the general area. And I would go out and pick up wood for the stove and we would go down, she would pay a nickel or something for a beef joint, what do they call it, there was a particular name for it. It was a cheap cut of meat, and she would make soup out of it, and the soup would last for quite some time. It would last for a week, you would eat soup, and then for breakfast when I would go to school, we would have cornmeal or oatmeal. We never really lived high on the hog until my step-dad came into the picture. He had two sons that became my stepbrothers and they, when he moved in, my mother married my step-dad, he used to own the Bucket of Blood, the original Bucket of Blood down in West Oakland when it was back in the early twenties. He had come from a family that sold butter and milk and eggs and stuff like that to the miners, and they were all pretty wealthy. They seemed to die pretty close the same time, the mother and father did, according to what my step-dad told me, and they went down in the basement and started digging up containers of gold that they buried in the basement because banks weren't that great. Then he opened up that Bucket of Blood down in West Oakland, and he went through the money foolishly, really, he would take the band that he had playing in his place there, he would go around serenading his girlfriends and stuff like that, and loaning money to different people, because I have seen the book that he loaned out and he never got it back. And he finally went broke. He had, at that time, he got involved with my mother. He had a '29 Hupmobile, a big car, and then he had a touring Hupmobile, a '27 or a '28. He got rid of one of them. And we started eating pretty good, then. He was a painter.

00:21:18

Furey:

What year was this, that he came into your family?

00:21:21

Wilcox:

I was about eight.

00:21:25

Furey:

[inaudible]

00:21:27

Wilcox:

Yeah. I was about eight years old. And he was a good guy. He understood kids. We used to go on Saturday, we would go hiking around where the race track is in Albany. That was two hills at that time. There wasn't nothing over there—the race track wasn't there. And we would go hiking all out there. They call it Bare Ass beach, and it was a good beach, there was usually in the summertime about fifteen to twenty people swimming all of time, behind where the racetrack is now. They tore that hill all down and flattened it all out. There used to be a city dump over there and I wish that I could have collected some of that stuff to come out of that dump, because they were hauling these old bottles from the 1800's out of there, and all of the garbage from the 1800's for about six months, they emptied all of that area and filled it up where the racetrack is. And let's see. Oh yeah, now this gels into the, when my other two buddies and I were going to run off to the Coco's Island, we needed outboard motors, and everything that you would need on an exploration trip like that hunting for gold.

00:23:05

Furey:

Will you tell that story please?

1-00:23:06

Wilcox:

What?

1-00:23:08

Furey:

Why don't you go ahead and tell that story.

1-00:23:10

Wilcox:

Well, that one there, when I was out at my step brother's place one day, I saw these outboard motors, and these fishing lures and everything else. I said, "Boy, that is just what we need." I didn't tell him that, "Just what we need!" And he, then I came home and I told my buddies. I said, "I know where you can get a couple outboard motors, you know?" So we took my red wagon and we followed the old, lets see, what track was that? I think that it was the Sacramento Northern, because I noticed that when I was out there that the railroad track was up above the house. So one night we told my mother I was going to go to a show or something. So we, the three of us, went out bumping over the

rails, and I found the house down there. Me and one of the other kids went down there, went into the basement, got those two outboard motors, and a bunch of fishing lures, and put them in the wagon, and took off. And brought them back to my house, put them in a basement, and then a couple of days later my mother says, “What’s those motors doing down there?” And I said, “Oh, we found them.” Then my step dad went down and looked at that and said, “Those look awfully familiar,” [laughs] “Where did you get those?” So, I told him where and he says, “Okay, we are going to up to the fire department up there because that is where my stepbrother’s other father worked. He was the chief, the captain up there. He says, “You go up and tell him what you did.” So I went up to him and I said what we did and he said, “I don’t know how in the hell you guys did that because we got a German Shepherd there and he must have been sleeping!” I was off the hook I told the truth and they got their motors back. But that didn’t stop us for searching for more loot to help us get down to the, steal that boat down in Port of Oakland that we were going to steal. Broke into all of the freight cars—

1-00:25:55

Furey:

What were you planning on doing with the boat?

1-00:25:56

Wilcox:

We were going to steal the boat and go down to Coco’s Island, down off of Peru. We didn’t know nothing about sailing a boat or anything. Didn’t know nothing. But we were just kids with dreams. We were going to fulfill them. You got to do it, you do it. But it never did get down, thank God, or we would be fish bait a long time ago.

1-00:26:28

Furey:

Will you go ahead and tell the story about the World’s Fair?

1-00:26:32

Wilcox:

Oh, that, yeah. This other buddy of mine, he was working at the Palm Market right next to our school there, and he was working in the vegetable department. He said that he knew where they hid the money, and so we needed money for the trip so we figured on robbing it. So he was going to go in that night there and hide in the back room and then open the door and let us in, but then he got cold feet and didn’t want to do it so I went in and sneaked in the back there and covered myself up with some {Toasty Posty} boxes on a shelf off of the floor, and then the women come in there and they start changing their clothes and telling jokes and I was ready to giggle, but I refrained, and then when they took off I opened up the back door and let my two buddies in, and we start loading up on, we had two gunny sacks full of candy, big chocolate bars and candy kisses and all kinds of stuff. And then my other buddy says, “Oh, I found it, we’ve got the money now!” So then we, then the cops pulled up in front of the place and put their spotlights in there because somebody might have called in. Next-door was an ice cream shop and they might have heard some noise. They put the spotlight through there and we ducked down on the floor hiding behind different things, and when they took off we took out the back door on our bicycles trying to balance ourselves with gunny sacks full of candy and the

money. Then we go down Temascal Creek the next day to divvy up the money, and I was divvying it up and I give it “the old Wilcox split” which was, you know, two for you and four for me and, but I got the bigger share because I was president of the club. I was the brains, supposedly [laughing]. Then we all went to the fair. The ‘39 fair in Frisco, Treasure Island, and that was—

1-00:29:05

Furey:

What did you guys do?

1-00:29:05

Wilcox:

Oh, we went on all of the rides that they had there and went on all of the different things, we were really busy over there. We only spent \$20 out of the \$300 that we had total. Then when we come home the cops were there and they were at the house. They picked us up and hauled us down to the Juvy Hall, all three of us were down there. And they were interviewing us on some other jobs that—we pulled one of them, but we didn’t admit to it. Then our mothers were down there and they figured, oh, we were good kids, basically, we just have to split up, each go his own way. So we did that. I think I got an after-school job and it was at United Parcel. Then I start to earn a little money and I get my—

00:30:27

Furey:

How old were you at this time?

00:30:28

Wilcox:

Ah, when I went to work for, we was just out of junior high school, and I was going to University High School.

00:30:44

Furey:

[inaudible]

00:30:44

Wilcox:

Yeah, I’m pretty sure that is Berkeley, I am not sure, but it is around 58th, the dividing line is in there really close. Let’s see—

00:31:00

Furey:

Could you tell us a little bit about the United Parcel job?

00:31:03

Wilcox:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, working on the belt, and then at Christmas time we would go out and help the other drivers pick up the, off of the big stores, Capwells and Sullivan [?] and Conn’s, and all of the other stores that they had down there, Brueners, Jackson. We would go out in the trucks. We had a uniform and everything else. And sometimes we

would help the guys deliver the stuff to different places, private residences, and that was about the extent of it there. Of course—

00:31:55

Furey:

How long were you there?

1-00:31:56

Wilcox:

Of course, we had the belt in the evening there, we would work that. All of the packages would come down on the belt, and one time the belt from Capwell's came down there, and it had a bottle of cognac in there, and this was close to New Year's, and we slipped that aside, you know. The belt is, you have a bin, there are five or six bins, and the things that come out have your numbers on it, and you would put them in these separate bins and then the drivers would come up and they would load all of the stuff into the truck accordingly. And the—what did I do after that? Well, that one bottle of cognac, when we quit one night, we open that thing up too, and man, it taste awful. We just threw it away. And at that time, cost \$25 for that bottle of cognac. After you opened it up you could see what it was you know. And boy, that was a big waste [laughs]. But, we didn't like the taste of the alcohol.

1-00:33:19

Furey:

So this was right around New Year's, 1940.

1-00:33:23

Wilcox:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

1-00:33:25

Furey:

Almost two years prior to the U.S. entry into the war.

1-00:33:30

Wilcox:

Well, yeah, yeah, with December.

1-00:33:33

Furey:

But, but at this point Kaiser already had the contracts—

1-00:33:37

Wilcox:

Yeah.

1-00:33:37

Furey:

And was just opening the shipyards. Did you notice the mood of the East Bay shifting?

1-00:33:40

Wilcox:

Well everybody was, people were coming down from Oroville up there, working in the ship yards. There would be five or six of them in car or more, and they would come all of the way down from Oroville to work in the shipyards. And it was, people were turning in all of their aluminum, all of their pots and pans and you know, they really got into it because everybody was making money for one thing, so everything was changing in a way. The economy was pretty good and everybody was working, and anybody that wasn't working didn't want to work, apparently. Because they were out there, they would hire anybody. Kaiser hired as many as he could out there in the first place because he got so much from the government for employee I believe that he had, if I read it correctly, I don't know. And then from there, that is yeah, I wound up in the shipyards then.

1-00:35:02

Furey:

You had a ball bearings job.

1-00:35:02

Wilcox:

Yeah, that was pretty short. I learned how, that was a machine shop, and they rebuilt engines, the old model A engines, and the V8s, the 35V8s, and—

1-00:35:15

Furey:

And where was that?

1-00:35:15

Wilcox:

That was down Webster Street. It was on Webster Street. I only worked there a short time, because that was really a crummy job. I was learning how to line the engines and they had me on a wire wheel, and it would breath in a lot of crap that wasn't too great. So that, from there I went to the shipyards.

1-00:35:49

Furey:

How much are you getting paid at those jobs, at least the jobs prior to the war?

1-00:35:53

Wilcox:

Oh, [sighs], maybe sixty, seventy cents and hour. Didn't make too much then. Yeah, and I saved my money too, and when I was a kind, younger, I used to pick up a lot of, we would break into an aluminum freight car down there in Emeryville, and we would take all of the pots and pans out and smash them and sell them to the Rag Bottle Sack man. He is the Jewish fellow, ordinarily, Jewish, with his horse. He would have this horse and his wagon, yelling, "Rag Bottle Sacks." He would buy bottles, roughneck bottles, like the old milk bottles were worth a nickel apiece then. And party pack bottles, they were a nickel apiece, and he would give us maybe a few cents for those. And copper, when they were building the Bay Bridge, we picked up a lot of copper scraps. We would go down by the bay there and we would, when they weren't looking, we would haul off some of these big chunks of copper. You had a piece of copper about this long and about that diameter, you

would get sixty-five cents for that. That was a hell of a lot of money then, when they were building a bridge. Then what—?

1-00:37:25

Furey:

How was school going at this point for you? Which high school were you at?

1-00:37:29

Wilcox:

I dropped, University High School. That is on Grove Street, between 55th and, 56th, between 55th and 58th. That was a good school. They had some good teachers there. I got along real well, but the when my step-dad died, I more or less had to bring home some money to keep things going, and let's see. I quit school. That is when I started going into the shipyards.

1-00:38:22

Furey:

Where did you hear about the shipyard job?

1-00:38:25

Wilcox:

My brother was working in Kaiser, I think it was number two yard, it was the ones that are building the, what are those, the Liberty Ships? I think that they were Liberty Ships. I get them mixed up myself. So he told me to go down to Union Hall down there, and they will send me out there. I don't know what they really sent me out there for, I would up being a slinger. But, when they sent me out there it must have been when I was reading the drums up there. They send me up in those big cranes, those big whirlies about sixty to seventy feet up. You go up that ladder and then you go to the back and you would watch the cable as they come up, because you have got to keep those cables even, because if a cable jumped over on one side and you had a heavy tonnage on that crane out there, because, that one day I was working there, one of the cranes down below, one of the smaller ones, was booming back, and they didn't have a boom stop on it, and the thing folded all of the way back and killed a guy, just flattened him out, because the head of that crane comes down and there is a lot of tonnage there. And that happened one day when I was working out there.

1-00:40:02

Furey:

Know, could you just explain, well, first of all, they were Victory Ships, the ones that they were building. And, could you explain what a slinger does, to someone who doesn't know what a slinger is.

1-00:40:13

Wilcox:

Yes, a slinger guy, he has got his tin hat and a spud wrench. A spud wrench is a big long wrench with a real long point on it where if you had to weave some, how in the hell would you put it—but we used it for tightening up some of the shackles on some for the loads. We would be slinging H-Beams and channel beams and moving them in different parts of the yard. They were going to weld them together, part of the ships. The plates,

you use sea clamps, they are clamps that lift these plates that weighed maybe a couple of tons or more. And a slinger was the guy who hooked up these sea clamps and hooked the cables around the loads of steel. And I remember one time there, one night I think it was, I was working under the big crane and they had a big load of steel on it, maybe ten tons or something like that, it was a light load, and I was riding a load over, I was hanging on to it, I was way up in the air about forty feet or so, and they were swinging the crane around there, and I think the clutch or something slipped on the crane or something when he was swinging, and I jumped off the load up in the air and landed on a pylon, and I don't know how in the hell that I did that, but I guess that it wasn't my time to go, really. Here I was on the pylon up in the air there [laughs]. The guy who got control of the thing and he swung it back over there, and I jumped back on it, and then they lowered it.

1-00:42:22

Furey:

There was another time where you, almost lost your foot.

1-00:42:32

Wilcox:

Oh, that is when I was working out in the yard there one night. We were, it was a rail, a regular rail road crane that we were moving some plates around there, and we were hooked up and he was heading down to the other part of the yard to deliver it. That was about four or five guys working in these different crews, and I went to swing back onto the crane and ride it down to the where we were going, some guys walked, some guys rode, and my boot slipped off of the foot rest, and it was pushing my heel in the gravel and I thought the thing was going to flatten me out. But I caught myself and I didn't ride that thing anymore after that, didn't want to take no chances. I was pushing my luck as it was.

1-00:43:44

Furey:

How much did a slinger make an hour?

1-00:43:46

Wilcox:

Jeez, you know, that is going way back.

1-00:43:52

Furey:

Ninety cents an hour? Does that sound right?

1-00:43:53

Wilcox:

That sounds, yeah, that sounds about right.

1-00:44:01

Furey:

And that is a boiler makers union job. Can you tell a little bit about your union? You probably were hired through the union, right?

1-00:44:06

Wilcox:

I was hired through the union hall, because you couldn't get a job, you had to come out from the union. So you had to go down to union first. That was the only way. You couldn't go down to the shipyard and ask for a job, they wouldn't give you one. You have to come out through the union. So I wound up joining the Boilermakers' Union. Then after that I wind up in the Cooks and Stewards union. Then after that I wind up in the Linoleum Layers union.

1-00:44:46

Furey:

What did you think about the Boilermakers' Union? They were CIO, right?

1-00:44:46

Wilcox:

Yeah, yeah, I think, well, no, back in those days you didn't think too much about that because you were out making a buck and everybody was happy and it didn't, the CIO, the AFL, in fact the union I belonged to when I joined the merchant marine, I come to find out, was a communist union. I mean flat commie. But I knew the head of the union at that time, he died, and he was a damn good guy, and I didn't see anything that was illegitimate about it. They didn't try to brainwash me or anything, you know. It was— then the Teamsters Union. I belonged to about four unions in my time, all very interesting.

1-00:45:56

Furey:

Could you paint a picture of the shipyards at this time?

1-00:45:58

Wilcox:

Well, Cutting, you had a lot of redwood gutters going down Cutting Street too, because when my brother and I would go home from the shipyard, we would be going up Cutting. The only way up there was San Pablo Avenue. That was the only way back to Oakland as far as vehicles go, and boy, there was, the people down there, there was just thousands of them, when a shift would change. And Cutting was, you had a few blacks that were coming in and working in the yard too, which was okay, really. Some people, you know, a lot of people from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, you had a lot of these people come out here. Some of them were good people, some of them weren't, but you get that in everything, really.

1-00:47:08

Furey:

Do you remember any or your interactions with people from—

1-00:47:13

Wilcox:

Different—?

1-00:47:13

Furey:

South of the Midwest?

1-00:47:15

Wilcox:

No, no, they all, everybody was friendly. Everybody was all friendly, all good. You could relate to one another. Even with the black guys there. You get some red necks sometimes, we always got some of those guys in there, but I have always been one of those “to each his own,” and they were all here on this “spaceship” and do what you can to help the other guy as much as you can without cutting your own throat.

1-00:47:52

Furey:

Did you ever go up to North Richmond? At that time it was unincorporated, right?

1-00:47:58

Wilcox:

Yeah, North Richmond? No, never had no need to go into North Richmond. It wasn't nothing out there to speak of really, in fact, there wasn't too much out here in Richmond. San Pablo in particular. People, if they had a piano crate or something, it would turn into a house. There are still a couple of houses out there that are no bigger than a garage. And the people, apparently, they just took care of that piece of property, a house worth a \$150,000 or more [laughing]. People just, they had to do what they had to do to go. A lot of these bunks, they would be worked in shifts in some of these rooming houses. They had, like they had the old Denver hotel down there, and they would work some of those things on shifts because, the bed would never cool off, because you had to have a place to sleep, or a lot of times me and my brother would go to a show afterwards, we would just go to a show and go to sleep in a show. Because they had about five or six theatres along McDonald avenue down there, and it was going twenty-four hours a day. So—

1-00:49:29

Furey:

You had a car at this point, right? From your house in Oakland?

1-00:49:35

Wilcox:

Yeah. Let's see [sighs], yeah. I had a car a then. I think that it was, which one was it? It had, when I was working for United Parcel I had a Ford '60 Coup, and I got rid of that and I had a 1937 Dodge convertible sedan, which belonged to the {Cardnier?} candy company kid. He was a wild one I guess, and I bought it for \$600 off the showroom floor off of J.E. French. The first day that I drove it out I had three flat tires. Come to find out that they put boots in the tire, you know, you have a bad tire and you put a boot in there to help hold the air that you had your tube. It was a good thing that I had foresight or something, because I had four brand new sixteen-inch tires under my bed. Because I always try to plan ahead, you know. That same thing I think fit my Ford, so I had extra tires. So I start putting those on, and then the thing kept wearing the tires out on the inside and I took it down to J.E.French and they said, 'It will cost about \$700 to fix that, this car has been in a wreck. That kid was really rough on it.' So let's see, what did I do then?

1-00:51:22

Furey:

Can we just back up for a second and—

1-00:51:24

Wilcox:

Yeah.

1-00:51:24

Furey:

Where were you December 7, 1941?

1-00:51:28

Wilcox:

I was coming, I was coming home and I heard it on the radio. I was down by Sears and Roebuck in Oakland. It was, I forget what time it was, it might have been, I think that was when I was in my, I forget what car I had then, but I heard it then, and didn't know what to believe, really. But [sighs], yeah.

1-00:52:17

Furey:

How can you compare it to say, September 11?

1-00:52:22

Wilcox:

I would say it was pretty close to the same thing, just different people. I mean, when you come in and, well, I think that they knew all of that was coming anyhow, really. I think that Roosevelt had to get the sympathy in order to go in with England, which we had to do anyhow because we all would be speaking German now, if we hadn't had gone into the war. I am pretty sure of that. Because Hitler had some pretty sharp engineers going in. They were working on planes to reach over here to bomb the United States. The Japanese, they, well, they were invited in to a certain extent, I believe.

1-00:53:28

Furey:

So on the home front though, how did Pearl Harbor attack?

1-00:53:34

Wilcox:

Oh, actually, I was driving down to LA just one day after that, and they, people were scared because they did, because the Japs were smart enough or knew enough. They had to come to shore here, because, I know when I was driving down there, I saw these other headlights coming towards me, I said, "Oh, Shit." I'd never seen headlights like that before. I was ready to pull off the road and see what it was, because people felt threatened because of the—they threw a few shells into a couple of the places down south and blew up an outhouse or a pump house or something, but they sunk ships off the coast here, between here and Hawaii, there was people lost in the merchant marine. They lost more people in a merchant marine percentage wise than they did, I believe, in the army. My brother was on the Coolidge when Navy was showing her through a minefield and

she hit a mine, and they beached her. That was APL line, American President Line. No, they, people were scared.

1-00:55:06

Furey:

About the same time you were working the shipyards, I guess, that is when they evacuated all of the Japanese. Because by May of 1942, they had gotten all of the Japanese out. Do you remember that?

1-00:55:18

Wilcox:

Yeah, I remember that. That's pretty controversial, in a way, because a lot of them were American citizens, but that was something that Roosevelt and MacArthur, who was pulling the—

1-00:55:38

Furey:

It was the governor Earl Warren too.

1-00:55:39

Wilcox:

I don't know.

1-00:55:44

Furey:

[inaudible]

1-00:55:44

Wilcox:

Well, no. Earl Warren wasn't in there then.

1-00:55:48

Furey:

I'm sorry, I think he had some position then.

1-00:55:53

Wilcox:

He—

1-00:55:56

Furey:

He was the Attorney General.

1-00:55:56

Wilcox:

Yeah, he may have been the attorney general at that time, yeah, that could be. Yeah, because some of those people, they got a raw deal, you know.

1-00:56:09

Furey:

Do you remember any specific stories?

1-00:56:10

Wilcox:

Well I have seen some I think on history channel, but that is about the only way that you are going to see that. There wasn't any Japanese in my neighborhood that I know of. They were kind of clannish, they had their own neighborhoods more or less, just like the Italianos had theirs, and the Caucasians had theirs, it was all still neighborhood, but they were all coming together because of the war to where they had to sink or swim. They had to help one another.

1-00:56:54

Furey:

So, a little bit more on the shipyard before we got to your time at General Engineering at Oakland, and then on to the other yards you've worked in, and your experience. What was it like having women in the shipyards? Did you kind of note that?

1-00:57:15

Wilcox:

Yeah, Yeah. Hurley Marine didn't have any women that I knew of, and Richmond and Moore Shipyard, I know, had women in them, and a lot of them were chippers, and they worked on the pattern shop, and welding, a lot of women welders, because, well, these women, they are just as good if not better than a lot of guys. They were conscientious. They wanted to get the job done the best way that they knew how, and most of them did.

1-00:57:58

Furey:

Did you work shoulder to shoulder with any of them?

1-00:58:00

Wilcox:

Ah, yeah. When we were delivering the steel onto the assembly pad or in that area, they would call for certain pieces of steel that we would have deliver to them. And we would deliver them to them, and women would be there. You would talk to them. Yeah. There is one story, I probably shouldn't tell it though, because, unless you guys edit it out [laughs]. Richmond, one time, they had that paper going. It was I think a monthly paper or a weekly paper that the shipyard put out.

1-00:58:47

Furey:

Fore 'n Aft?

1-00:58:52

Wilcox:

I don't recall. I had it at one time, I think I lost it, because they were—

1-00:58:58

Furey:

It's called Fore 'n Aft.

1-00:58:58

Wilcox:

Is that what it was? Because they had an article in there to the women. They were working down below as electricians, electrician helpers, what have you. “Please, ladies, do not stuff your panties into any open pipes.” Because when they were taking the ships out on test runs, some of the pumps would jam up. And when took them apart, they were [laughs] selling their souls down below in different areas. But, too much of that didn’t go on though. The only yards that I knew it went on it was Moore’s and Richmond.

1-00:59:46

Furey:

Do you remember seeing the women?

1-00:59:49

Wilcox:

Not really, because you were always moving in the first place. I was always moving, anyhow.

1-00:59:57

Furey:

But did you ever hear stories about prostitution? Was their prostitution?

1-01:00:04

Wilcox:

No, I didn’t have no desire to get involved in that. I was too damn green anyhow at that time. I was, jeez, I think the first cat house I went to was in Richmond. My buddy figured that I needed an overhaul or something [laughs] and took me to this one place in Richmond there, on 13th Street I think. I went upstairs. First cat house I was ever in. And I go up—

1-01:00:41

Furey:

What year was this?

1-01:00:42

Wilcox:

Well, it was when I was working for Richmond Shipyards, and at that time I—he paid, and I think it was two bucks, and he paid my freight because I didn’t have enough money at that time. And [laughs] I don’t know—

1-01:00:57

Furey:

Let me just change these—

[begin minidisc 2]

1-01:01:06 [mini disc ends]

Furey:

Okay, so, we are back on you. Could you tell me, so, these cat houses, what—who were the ladies working there?

2-00:00:11

Wilcox:

Well, they were ladies, you know, most of them probably came from Arkansas, or ones that were here, like, one of my family. My father's sister, I forget what her name was, she was supposedly a prostitute in Vallejo, and she committed suicide. Now, this was before my time, I believe, and you know, that was one way—the oldest profession in the world, in the first place.

2-00:00:52

Furey:

Where was this one cat house?

2-00:00:54

Wilcox:

Oh, the one around 13th or 14th? 13th I think, in Richmond. I go up there and she says, "Aren't you going to take your pants off?" "No." [laughs] So they come up with a pan of warm water or soap or something, and clean you all off to make sure they don't get anything, and that was really the first time that I, found out what it was all about. I thought it was for writing your name in the snow or something. And then when I was there, apparently I really must have got real hard. She said, "My, what a [pause] you have there." I said, "Oh, Junior pops out once in a while." And my buddy was in the next room. It was a petition, is what it was. And when I said that, he started laughing. I think he was in the middle of an episode himself. He told me when we got out, he said, "Boy, you sure screwed up my [pause]" [laughs].

2-00:02:21

Furey:

Now were the police, was there much policing of that? Because I know that there must have been a lot of community outcry because you have all of these [inaudible] coming into town, a lot of things changing, probably more prostitution.

2-00:02:34

Wilcox:

Well, yeah. Yeah. But you had more people. So with more people you are going to have more of everything else, you know. I don't know, it was—they had a place out in Benicia too. They had these houses in different areas, so they weren't really doing much about closing them down or anything, even when I was in the army down in Fort Ord. They had them down there. So, I don't know. And then I think Mrs. Roosevelt had the right idea, but it didn't fly too high. She was—

2-00:03:21

Furey:

What was that?

2-00:03:21

Wilcox:

Well, she was propagating to legalize these girls for the army, or what have you, have it controlled more or less. She had a free, she had a good mind. She made sense. But, you have the other side that is against all of that, the religious, the churches.

2-00:03:51

Furey:

So, on that topic, what role did religion play in your life?

2-00:03:56

Wilcox:

Well my mother was a staunch Catholic and the Spanish side was Catholic. I don't know what my father was. I don't think that he was anything. I didn't really think too much about it. What I did, when I was a little kid, I used to come up to my mother when I was seven or eight years-old, and say, "Where do you go when you die, ma?" She says, "Oh, they put you in a box and they put you in the ground." I said, "Nah, I don't buy that." I didn't tell her that, but I didn't buy it. What are you looking for?

2-00:04:30

Furey:

I was looking for a power jack.

2-00:04:34

Wilcox:

Oh, a power jack? I don't know. My son might have one.

2-00:04:37

Furey:

No, just a, no, not a power jack, sorry, an outlet. Religion?

2-00:04:42

Wilcox:

Oh. Oh, yeah [clears throat] I asked my mother, "Where do you go when you die, ma?" I was about seven or eight. She said, "Oh, they put you in a box and put you in the ground. And I just didn't buy that. That is not it. So, later on when I was down at old Temescal Creek one day, me and my buddy, we had our roller-skates on and we were down by Campbell's garage next to Grove Street and we were throwing wads of dirt, bottles, in the creek. I was pulling on the bank to get a clod, and the whole bank, a great big chunk of dirt about four or five feet across and about five-foot high, came off and pushed me into the creek. When I landed on the bottom of the creek in about five-foot of water, in the mud, I was screaming. And you know what happens when you scream underwater. I strangled. And that was the only part that was really horrific, the strangling. And then I saw these people all coming down to greet me, they were off on the side there. Things, a thousand things flashed through my head at that particular time. And I was wondering, "Oh, my mother was sad that I am not there anymore," and a lot of different things like that. Then these people, I couldn't see their faces, but I knew that they knew me and they were coming to greet me. Then all of a sudden that chunk of dirt busted in two, and what buoyancy I had. I popped to the surface and my hands landed on the side of the creek there. My buddy pulled me out, and after that I didn't need any religion really, because I know where I am going when I go, and, I welcome it, really, because it is always a better place, really, the way I believe it. I've had different girlfriends of mine tried to get tied up into the Catholic church and other churches, and I just don't buy that, really. I just do it my way. And I have read a lot of books on that subject. Most of your doctors back in the twenties were always, they figure when you die, you die, and that is the end of it. Then

with all of your different things that happened, I had a couple of books written from some doctors in the university of Los Angeles down there on the subject, and, how would you put it, these people that leave their body and they don't die, and they don't die, and their body is there and the doctor's working on it. And then after they will figure that the guy is dead, and then all of a sudden he will go back in the body again and he will tell the doctor just what he was doing to him. Now, a lot of these doctors, they, more than 50% of them believe that there is something, else, besides the cold, cold, ground and that is the end of it all, because it isn't.

2-00:08:45

Furey:

So what, so you move over, how do you leave the Richmond Shipyards? What causes you to depart from there?

2-00:08:54

Wilcox:

More money. I was just greedy. I needed more money.

2-00:08:57

Furey:

You worked as a slinger in the Richmond Shipyards for about a month?

2-00:09:02

Wilcox:

Just about a month.

2-00:09:04

Furey:

And then from there you go to General Engineering in Oakland?

2-00:09:10

Wilcox:

General Engineering was that was in Alameda, along with Pacific Bridge. And Bethlehem were all over there, and I worked for all three of those yards. I'd stay in maybe about a month in each yard.

2-00:09:26

Furey:

Can you tell us about what those jobs were?

2-00:09:27

Wilcox:

Yeah. Let's see. Pacific Bridge, after I left Richmond, Pacific Bridge, my brother and I worked there for about a month, and they were building either mine layers or mine sweepers for England. They had three or four of them on the ways over there, and I worked as a slinger there. A slinger or a ringer? I forget what it was.

2-00:10:03

Furey:

What is the difference between a slinger and a ringer?

2-00:10:05

Wilcox:

Well, more money. A machine rigger made more money. They were an older group, a more educated group I would state. But to come down to it, they weren't much more educated than I was, when it comes down to getting things done, really.

2-00:10:24

Furey:

But they do essentially the same thing, they are loading up—?

2-00:10:27

Wilcox:

They are moving heavy equipment down through the hull of the ship, pumps and stuff like that. Getting stuff down through that they need down below. A slinger worked mostly out in the field, moving the plates around, moving the steel around, working into the cranes, and machine riggers, they worked the ships, mostly, moving the stuff down through the hole. Then from there—

2-00:11:04

Furey:

So what was your average day like at Pacific Bridge?

2-00:11:08

Wilcox:

I think that I worked the Pacific Bridge at night. I worked there at nighttime. I think I was under, let's see, it was either swing shift or the graveyard, I forget. You are working all of those damn shipyards and most of these people who worked the shipyards never did I the way that I did it. I mean, I've run into people down on the Red Oak down there, I went down there for a breakfast about, last year, and that was the best thing that ever happened to me. I went down there and we had a breakfast and everything, the guy who was sitting across from me, he had his wife, he brought her down there, he was about eighty, or pretty close to my age, what have you. I told him all of the different places that I worked, and he said, "I bet you didn't work in the one that I worked in." I said, "Which one was that?" He says, "Hurley Marine." I said, "Yeah, I worked in Hurley Marine, they had the old Russian windjammer in there, she had an engine on board, but she was an old sailing ship that had come over from Russia, and we were doing work on her so that she would get back home." It was [Old Work?], and [Old Work?] paid more money, and I worked there, I think that was, let's see, yeah. What was the name of that ship? I know the name of it. It doesn't, slip my mind right now. But I worked on the old ship, and that is, I said, "Yeah, that is when they had the old [Yahkaslar?] or something. She had the old woman captain." I said, "Man, she was a beauty." She was blond, blue eye, nice build and everything, and she was a skipper, you know. [Knock on door] There is nobody home! And he said, "I'll be damned." And I met some other—

2-00:13:16

Furey:

She was a Russian lady.

2-00:13:17

Wilcox:

Yeah, she was a Russian woman. It was a Russian ship. It was an old windjammer that converted to steam. I worked on that one, and after that, let's see, I think that my last job in the shipyards was [pause], Bethlehem, I think. That was in Alameda. They were building troop ships over there.

2-00:13:47

Furey:

And the Moore. How about the Moore Shipyard?

2-00:13:50

Wilcox:

Yeah, and the Moore. Yeah, Moore was the last one that I worked in. Yeah. Moore shipyard down there. They were building these troop carriers, so they would carry tanks and all kinds of equipment. They were big enough to sail across.

2-00:14:07

Furey:

These were bigger than the Victories?

2-00:14:09

Wilcox:

No, they weren't that big, I don't think, but pretty close to it. They had the doors that would open, you know, those big ones. And invasion. Big invasion barges. That is what they were doing down there, but I think that they were also building some other, another ship down there, another cargo carrier. But I didn't stick around these yards long enough, really, about a month, and I would jump from one to the other. I don't know, everybody was frozen to their job, but somehow or other I, if they checked back through my work in Social Security, they'll find out what yards I worked in, about how long they were.

2-00:15:00

Furey:

But at one point you jumped from slinger to—

2-00:15:03

Wilcox:

Rigger.

2-00:15:03

Furey:

Rigger.

2-00:15:04

Wilcox:

Yeah, that's—

2-00:15:04

Furey:

How did you get to do that?

2-00:15:05

Wilcox:

That's when my brother told me that machine rigger made more money, and he did it to his card. He went down, he'd become a machine rigger. Then when I had done it to my card, he blotted it out for me, then I went down to the union down there, after I quit the job. I had to quit, that is when I told the superintendent at Kaiser yard, I start cussing him out. I say, "You better not hit me because I am a miner and my mother will sue you." So I got canned. So, I go down to union hall with this machine rigger worked in and the woman down there, she looked at it, and said, "Geez, you're awful young to be a machine rigger." I said, "I'm smart." And she shipped me out as machine rigger, and I was making machine rigger wages.

2-00:16:04

Furey:

How much was that?

2-00:16:07

Wilcox:

More than slinger. I forget what it was. Probably about fifty, sixty cents more. I'm just guessing at it, maybe sixty, fifty cents more an hour, possibly. But I saved my money.

2-00:16:30

Furey:

And then from Moore shipyard you go into the merchant marine.

2-00:16:36

Wilcox:

Yeah.

2-00:16:37

Furey:

Can you tell us a little about that, how you made that transition. Was it again following your brother?

2-00:16:42

Wilcox:

Yeah. My brother joined the merchant marine, and he said, "You ought to join the merchant marine." I said, "Oh," I go down to my draft board down there, and I told them, "I'm going to join the merchant marine, and he was an ex-kernel that was the head of the Emeryville draft board. He said, "No you aren't, we are going to draft you." So I just, "Screw you." So I turn around and I walked out, and I swore that I worked at Jean Comptons as a cook, I worked at my stepmother's restaurant for a few months as a cook, and I go over to Frisco and I get all of my papers like I showed you there, captain of the port, and all of my documents, and, [sigh] lie like hell. And, now I'm a merchant mariner. Then I go down to union hall and they say, "Well, we have got a ship you can catch over at [Crockett?] that is going to Hawaii. I go there and I walk through the sugar mill there with the big piles of sugar, you know, about fifty feet high, just one big pile of sugar. I go board the ship. They say, "Well, we don't need you now, the cook showed up." Because they said that the cook was a drunk and he was drinking all of the vanilla flavor. You know, it has a little alcohol in it apparently. And he came back so, I lucked out really,

because I asked my brother, I said, “What the hell is a third cook do in the first place.” He said, “You know, they make hotcakes, cook up the eggs.” I said, “How do you make hotcakes?” I didn’t know a damn thing about it. So I go back down to union hall down there, and they ship me out. They say, “Well, we got a new rate here. It is a crew pantry. You make salads and stuff like that for the crew down below.” So, I went off on that, and here I was, a punk kid and I had three guys working underneath me, mess-man they were. I would make the salads and they would put them on the tables. When I was making this one salad, we had just cleared the Golden gate at that time, and I was down below, said, “Cucumber salad.” So I got a bunch of cucumbers and I start cutting them up in a big tub, and second steward, he used to work for the big English lines, the chief steward and the second steward were all off the big passenger liners. They were old timers, I mean, old timers. And he comes in, and “What are you doing Dallas?” I said, “Well I’m making a cucumber salad. He said, “Don’t you peel them?” “Oh, shit,” I says. I was so excited that I just wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t peeling them. Well, cucumbers back then, they always peeled them. Because they figured that the skin there was bad for you or what have you.

So I think he got the drift that I was full of crap in the first place, but he went along with me and I was able to, you know, make things work. And the one thing that I did when they were inspecting one day, I had a salad out there, and I cut a red cabbage, the blue cabbage, or the red cabbage, whatever it is. I cut it in two one time and I was looking at it, and I was saying “Jeez, that’s beautiful. That’s pretty.” So I shredded it all up and put it in with the green salad and mixed it all together. This chief steward, the head one, he came down. He said, “Hey, I’ve never seen that before.” And here he was working on the big passenger liners. Then my, when I got out of the merchant marine, my stepmother, which was in the restaurant business all of her life, when she was at her house I made some salad, and she saw it, and she starts serving it in her restaurant, which was really kind of a novelty in a way.

2-00:21:21

Furey:

So, could you tell us a little bit about just the merchant marine experience during the war?

2-00:21:29

Wilcox:

Oh. Yeah, well, we left Frisco with a, Frisco bay, one day you would have a hundred ships out there, or a whole slew of ships. Then you would go out there the next day and most of them would all be gone. They would leave in a convey. When we were, I think we were in the Coral Sea when the ship broke down. All of the power went out. No lights, no nothing, no engine. And no emergency lighting either, that you could see. The most guys went topside on deck, because they didn’t want to be down below, and get torpedoed. I crawled down below and just crawled on my bunk, and the hell with it. I figured, if you are going to go, you are going to go, so, I never worried about it. Some, they had a French corvette circling us when we were dead in the water for a couple of days. They said that there was a submarine out there trying to get to us, but I don’t know. But, most of the guys stayed on deck, and then they got going again. Then we—

2-00:22:44

Furey:

Did you have life floats in that boat?

2-00:22:47

Wilcox:

No, no, they didn't go into any life boats or anything because they were, they got the ship running again. See, the ship originally, what I was told, was sitting on the mud flats. They were going to scrap it originally. And they needed ships, so they pulled her off the mud flats and reconditioned her the best way that they knew how. She was an old dollar liner, a weight about, she was the biggest ship on the coast at that time, 22,000 tons she was. Your Liberties I think, are 10,000. She was a big ship. They got her going again, they got her going again.

2-00:23:31

Furey:

Rigged up a couple of guns on it, or—?

2-00:23:33

Wilcox:

Well they had, rigged up what?

2-00:23:36

Furey:

A couple of guns.

2-00:23:38

Wilcox:

Guns?

2-00:23:38

Furey:

Yeah, like a Victory ship has a got several guns on it.

2-00:23:44

Wilcox:

Yeah, yeah, they have got five-inch on the stern I think, the Liberties, they had a big five inch on the stern of the Johnson, too. I think they may have had, I'm not sure about the other guy, they had armed guards on board. They had the Coast Guard on board. We had what they call an armed guard group. They took care of the five-inch guns. And I was under the gun there one day when we were going after, we got going again, down the Coral Sea, we got paid five dollars more a day because you are in a dangerous area.

2-00:24:20

Furey:

Where is that? That is between Hawaii and Australia?

2-00:24:23

Wilcox:

Ah, Coral Sea is down off of, pretty close to Australia in Great Barrier Reef, and getting into that area down there. It is, it was a hot area at the time, but I was underneath that five

inch gun mount one day, and they start practicing. When that damn shell went off, man, I flew up and hit my head on the steel bulkhead, man my ears rang for months, really. I always watched out [laughs] after that. But then we got into Australia, Brisbane, and emptied off the crew. Let's see, what did we do? Did we dump the crew off? No, we went to Australia, Brisbane, and loaded up on some stuff. Then from there we went up into New Guinea, Port Moresby. The Japs were on the other side of Port Moresby, and we were on the other side. And they had the, I think, the Miraposa? Was it the Miraposa? The [Laureline?] was in there at the time, and we were in there too. That was another big American liner. You had the aircore there, you had the hospital there, which was tense. It was all tense.

2-00:25:44

Furey:

What cargo were you carrying?

2-00:25:46

Wilcox:

It was just miscellaneous cargo all down below. I had to go through below all of the time to get the vegetables and stuff was all, you would go through there, it was all lashed down, all wrapped up in burlap, all kinds of stuff, plane equipment, you know. You name it. It was a big ship. It carried a lot of stuff. It took a few days to unload it. It took three, four days, to unload it during Port Moresby. Then natives were running around there with no clothes on. Then, they start getting cigarettes off the crew or something. They burnt their village down accidentally. So, oh, a lot of different things happened. It was, an experience. Yeah, I, had a lot of fun.

2-00:26:52

Furey:

So were you still in the Pacific during Hiroshima? [pause] Or had you gone back to Hawaii?

2-00:27:03

Wilcox:

No, when I came back—

2-00:27:07

Furey:

Well you were, sorry, you were in 1943.

2-00:27:10

Wilcox:

Yeah. When I came back I should have taken another ship out, but when I came back I had a letter there from the FBI or something, telling me to report to my draft board. Well here I am, I'm trying to be legitimate and everything else. I write a letter to the governor, I write a letter to the president, telling them hey, I'm from an old sea-faring family, and if I am going to die, I would like to die on the water because, that is where I want to be. I never, never got any answers back or anything. So, I report to the draft board because I didn't want to lose my papers or stuff like that, but I wasn't really thinking right because I know other guys would ship right back out again, the hell with it. But I wanted to be

right. Well, by being right I was wrong. I get drafted. They put me in the infantry. Let's see, I had it all set to go in the Navy when I was at the draft board, but I'm color blind, so they don't have no colorblindness in the navy because of different amos and colors and everything. So then, for some reason or another, I was high enough for the air corps, and color blindness screwed me up there too.

So they put me in the old forty-second division, which had Collins, was a general there. And I refused to do anything. I had a hell of a time trying to work things around. I refused to march, and I had the guys threatening me. They said, "Boy, wait until we get overseas, you are going to be my first target," because they were jealous because I wasn't doing anything that they were forced to do. They took me out one time, lieutenant come in and said, "I'm going to give you direct orders. Get your stuff and jump in my jeep." He dumped me out in the Oklahoma badlands out there [chuckles], and I had sardines and stuff like that. I always had a stash or something, and I stayed out there for about three or four days eating my sardines or whatever else I had, hard tack. And I was going through the country side and seeing, and I come across this one old house, dilapidated, looks like the old, there was a 1927 or 1928 Cadillac, jacked up in the front yard, the chickens were roosting in it, and the old man was out in the front porch smoking a pipe. And they were just old Okies from Oklahoma. Part of the past. It was like walking into the past, is what it was. But I got out of there, and when I got back to camp they said, oh, first Sargent comes down and says, "Oh, we got you now, Wilcox." He says, "You AWOLed." "No, I wasn't awoled. So and so dumped me out there in the"—so the lieutenant never ever bothered me anymore after that because he got ate out. They didn't tell me that I had a furlough until about, fourteen day furlough I had, they didn't tell me until seven days later purposely, because they knew that I had to go to California and that I wouldn't have time to get to California and back again. So I went to California anyhow, and I stayed a month or two. I met this gal from Frisco, Rose Lee Rainbow, and I fell in love with her, and man, we just went to the museums, and we went all over and what have you, and we was down in Lake Temescal one day, and there was a bunch of people down there, and I was there laying on the beach with her, and here come these three MPs down there, someday turned me in apparently, picked me up, handcuffed me, hauled me up, handcuffed me to the jeep, took me up to my house to get my stuff and took me down, and they says, "Well, you have got a good record, we'll let you go back on your own if you promise to go back to camp." I says, "Yeah, I promise to go back to camp." I didn't tell you when I might get there. I stopped off in every, I stopped in Arizona, I stopped off in a couple of other different, New Mexico, and road around town. I was collecting towels from the hotels [laughs].

I finally get back to camp. I didn't turn myself in completely, then, I was going to the shows and going over to the hospitals and eating over there. Then they pulled me up before the general, because I, they didn't know what to do with me. So, when I got in front of that general, I told them, I says, "You are a bunch of assholes." I said, "I don't mind dying for my country, but I'm going to die my way." I says, "I come from a sea-faring family, and that's where I want to be. You take me and you dump me back in here in the sticks where there is no water at all?" I says, "You take this army and you stick it up your ass because you can take me out in the field right now and you can shoot me, because, screw you!" Man, he called in four MPs, and they picked me up and hauled me

up to the nut ward with those guys who were dragging their knuckles up there, trying to get their Section 8 out of the hospital. That was good cooking up there. They cook your eggs anyway you want it and what have you, and then after that the general apparently found out that I really wasn't nuts, so then they throw me in and get me a court marshal. The first court marshal is a dishonorable discharge and five years, then it has to go to Nebraska to be approved, and it was disapproved. I got, supposedly get six months. Well, I spent six months in a stockade there, and apparently the general told the head of the stockade there, "Anytime this kid steps out of line, throw it to him," because one time I had the GIs, and I was the last one following in formation, and I wind up in the hole, the room four by eight, no clothes on, middle of winter, sugar on the floor, and bread and water for fourteen days. Good on the figure. I'd like to get back on that diet [laughs], but I don't [laughing]—and I've seen them beat guys to death in the stockade.

They had a Jehovah's Witness in there one day. I come in one night about 12:00, and these three or four MPs, one of them hit them, knocked them down the floor, and I can look through the crack one the door, and he said, "God forgive these men, for they know not what they do." And man, they just clubbed him to death. They said, "Oh, he fell down a flight of stairs," and that was the end of him. But if you shut your mouth when you are in that hole there, you are looking for trouble, because you had some of the loud mouth guys down there, and they would come in and lay them low. I kept my mouth shut, and ate my bread and water. I would up in there two times. The second time I was following in formation and I looked out of the corner of my eye at an airplane, I wind up back in there again. I got a picture of me when I got out of there. I looked like the Jews that Hitler had over there [laughs] just about.

2-00:36:06

Furey:

So when were you discharged?

2-00:36:09

Wilcox:

Well, let's see, I was the, I signed, let's see, the war it just ended in Germany I think, and they had a deal, you sign up for a year, you get \$400 or \$500 bucks. So I said, well, hell, if I get out now—let's see, Japan, it may have been over with Japan too, I'm not sure. Yeah, Yeah, it was, because when I was there was when Roosevelt was died. I was in Alabama, and I signed up for another year, and extra year, I figured, "Well, hell, everybody will be getting discharged, everything is going to be screwed up, I'll stay in the army. I'll make this \$500." I was in the engineers then, because I told them, "If I'm going to be in the army, you better put me where I am useful." I am a mechanic. I can do this, and drive and what have you. So, they put me in the thirteenth engineers, and within a years time I was a Sargent, you know. Which is, a radical climb, really, from PFC. They shipped me over to the Korean, occupation over there. When we left the boats, the old Koreans were throwing rocks at us and what have you. Went up into Seoul, the thirteenth engineers camps, the seventh division, and I drove a big heavy tank wrecker until my guts start coming out, those roads over there—no shocks on the trucks, and the damn hemorrhoids. I didn't know what the hell a hemorrhoid was, you know. Where, I could hardly walk, I said, "Oh, shit. There is something wrong with my ass." You feel

those cherries on the back of your tail there. So then I went into, they switched me over the cooking. So I become a cook in Korea there, and that is where I got my rate.

And, we were doing pretty good over there. I think that we made the first hotcakes that we ever had, because we went down to the steel shop down there, and had that guy cut a big quarter inch cut of steel for us so we could cut hotcakes on. Then we took them up there and start breaking it in. We was down there one day and we had, making hot cakes before chow time, real early, and we would take them off the griddle when they looked like they were done, and sling them through the mess hall there, about fifty or seventy-five feet, and hit the wall, and dropped to the floor. We was testing them, you know [laughs]. And they would finally come up pretty good. Then the mess Sargent come down, and say, "OH, I've got a bunch of hotcakes, huh? Yeah." We had the ones that we picked up off the floor, we had them sitting there, and he took those. And we made a big joke about it. Just like one captain come in one day, one night rather, when we were cooking up some french fries, and there wasn't no real french fries over there. I went out in the road and I picked up, from this old family, who had some potatoes drying up out front, and they use human waste to fertilize their stuff, and they lay it out in the sun to kill the germs, apparently. So I picked up a bunch of those and took them into the kitchen there, and we shredded them up, and we were having French fries. The captain came up and said, "Oh, French fries, where did you get these?" He had a mouthful, and {I?} says, "Oh, they're gook fries!" Man, he spit them out, and ran out the door [laughs]. They were all right, nothing wrong with them. Then one time there the guys were saying, "Geez, what lump gravy." I said, "The gravy shouldn't be lumpy, I didn't make it myself, I didn't make it myself, but it shouldn't be lumpy." So I go over into the flour, and here they are, all of these big worms crawling around in there, big weevil worms, nice, fat, healthy. That is what it was, protein. I didn't do anything about it, but—

2-00:40:44

Furey:

[laughs] So when did you come back from North Korea?

2-00:40:47

Wilcox:

[pause] Well,—

2-00:40:53

Furey:

Was it 1945, sometime?

2-00:40:55

Wilcox:

Yeah. Yeah, it was about 1945.

2-00:40:57

Furey:

Actually, your discharge here says Department of Commerce, Euro Marine Inspection and Navigation.

2-00:41:05

Wilcox:

Yeah, that is when I went in.

2-00:41:06

Furey:

July 1943.

2-00:41:07

Wilcox:

Yeah, that is when I went in to the merchant marine. That is not a discharge from the army. That is a discharge from, if at all, it would be from the merchant marine.

2-00:41:16

Furey:

[inaudible]

2-00:41:16

Wilcox:

It would be, when was the war over? 1940—?

2-00:41:22

Furey:

August 1945.

2-00:41:24

Wilcox:

1945. 1946? Then it must have been the end of 1946 or the beginning of 1947, because my daughter was born in 1948. So, yeah, I come home about that time.

2-00:41:46

Furey:

Well maybe we could just kind of wind down the interview just with some reflections. How did this war time experience, and the home front experience, how did that affect your later life? And what do you think some of the bigger challenges were that came from that?

2-00:42:02

Wilcox:

Well, I think that it made everything work for me because I had all of these different experiences. I had done more than the average individual ever thought about doing, really, as far as I am concerned, and as long as you can remember, all the stuff that you have done, all of those experiences, you are going to benefit from them if you got ahead at all. When I came home, the buddy of mine, we went to work for Naval Air station. My girlfriend, or my wife at that time, we weren't married, we were living in a basement under my sister. We were paying her something like \$6 a month. It was a one-room thing. it was a dirt floor with linoleum rug laid over the top of it, and next to the old Temescal Creek, and we had two kids then. She had a kid from a previous marriage, she was married to a sailor. Then I had her pregnant with my daughter. One kid was in a crib, and the other was in a dresser drawer, sleeping. That is where I was then. Then we went to work for the naval airstation. We made \$27.50 a week, I think it was, which was better

than drawing that \$20.00 a week from the fifty-two twenty club they had. Did you ever hear of that one?

No? The readjustment pay for GI that came home. You get \$20 a week, for fifty-two weeks, readjustment pay. So I figured, well, I went to work in the naval air station, had this buddy of mine, and he just got out of the army too, he was my neighbor next door. So we buddied around, and we both worked there. When I went in to take the examination at the Navy, they said, "We can't hire you, you are colorblind." I said, "I am not colorblind." "Oh, yeah you are." I said, "Well, I'm not." So he said, "Well, here, take this paperwork, you go over across the way over there, and have them give you the test, the final test on it. So I went out the door and my buddy, I said, "Here, take my paperwork, and you go over and take my test." So he went over and took my test, come back, give me the paper, come back and give me the paper, I took it in there and said, "God, I swore you were colorblind." So I worked for the navy for a little while, until we were coming out of the gate one day and the MPs were always, people, when they come out, they are walking in the streets and in the sidewalks, and the MPs didn't watch you on the streets, so they come up and say, "Get up on the sidewalk." So we got up on the sidewalk and then, when they took off we got back down again because it was easier. And then they would come back again, and he had his hand on this 45, and he said, "I told you guys to get up on the sidewalk. My buddy said, "Yeah, I'll take that gun and jam it where the sun don't shine." So they hauled us up to the commander's office up there, and my buddy went up one side of the commander and down the other and told him what a big jerk he was, and all kinds of different words, and he said, "Why can't you be like Dallas over here?" He said, "How do you feel about this, Dallas?" I said, "I feel about the same way." So we walked out of the gate and never went back again. But they wanted us to come back to work, for them. The union, well, it wasn't a union there, if forget what it was, but they wanted us to back and fight him. We said, "No, it's not worth it," so we go to work for the Teamsters Union—

2-00:46:15

Furey:

So what do you think, what was the, what were the biggest changes you saw in Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond, before and after the war? How did the face of those cities change?

2-00:46:26

Wilcox:

Well, like, I think, Oakland, back in the old days, you would have a mayor. And the mayor made most of the decisions, you know. He didn't have all of these people underneath them like they do now. That is one of the reasons that we have so many damn problems. You got too much bureaucracy, I believe, with some of these cities, and nobody knows what the other one is doing. It is [voice in background]—

2-00:46:55

Furey:

Yeah [responding to voice]

2-00:46:58

Wilcox:

So, things really changed after the war because most women had become a lot of more independent than they were before, and people wanted things, like washers and dryers and stuff like that. So a lot of the people, both parents would wind up working, and then the juvenile delinquency goes down. It made a lot of changes. Actually, to come right down to it, when I was in grammar school, the beginning of the change I saw when they used to send you to the principle's office and swat you with a ruler or something. And this one girl stood up and she said, "You better not send me to principle's office, because my mother is on the PTA." So on the way home, when I got home finally, I come up to my mother and I say, "Hey ma, why don't you join the PTA?" You see how younger kids use all of these leverages. Because, I figured, my mother get on the PTA, I'll swing a little weight with the school teacher. That is when it all started, when the PTA started sticking their nose into something, and then the unions start—it's good to have unions, as long as the unions are up front, and not crooked, like the Teamsters and some of the other unions where, because you get unfair situations, like, what was it? Usually, ordinarily, at that particular time, well, let's see, when I got the teamsters job, I eventually quit that one. I took an aptitude test, this one gal gave me an aptitude test. She said, "What do you want to be when you grow up, Dallas?" I said, "Well, either an explorer, or a banker." She said, "Don't get wise with me." "She says, "Why don't you take this aptitude test, see what you're good for. So I took an aptitude test, and she called me a few days later and said, "I've got a job that you might work into. It's a linoleum layer helper." It was this Oklahoma guy out here, he had had artistic floors. He opened up a floor covering shop, and so it only paid \$5 a day, is what it paid. I was getting \$20 a day yet. So I said, "Well, I'll take a shot at that, that pays pretty good money if you are really up into it." I got to work for this guy, and a couple of weeks later the union comes out and says, "You got to fire that kid." The boss said, Crocker his name was, he says, "I'm not going to fire him. He is supporting two kids and a wife." So the unions guys go, "Well, we'll make a permit an apprentice out of him." No such rating or anything. I pay the union \$7 a month or something like that.

Then I wind up eventually, I work for Superior tile for a while, and after they broke up, and then he called me back again later on and wanted to hire me on back again because he was in business on his own. I went to work for him. Then I was working real good with him, I was making good money then. I was getting wagger, full wage. I think it was around, I forget what it was. I would have to look up my old paperwork. But, he ran off with his cousin, kissing cousin. Of course, if I had a cousin like that I would have run off with her too [laughs]. So his wife comes down and says, "I'm either going to have to close up, or you are going to have to run the business." I says, "Well, I don't know if I can run a business. You couldn't get along with him. How am I going to get along with you?" She says, "Oh, I'll keep my mouth shut. You just go ahead and do what you think is right." So I start running the business, and here I was pretty bashful yet, still, talking to other people. I stuttered a little yet, because that being forced to use my right hand when I was in kindergarten. Then I wind up buying her out. She wanted to sell out. So I bought her out. That was one of the best things that could have happened to me, because is what set me going. I made quite a few million dollars on real estate and stuff, because when I went in business on my own, I thought that I made \$2,500 the first year, then I had to pay

\$2,500 on income tax. The next year, I thought I made \$3,000 or \$3,500, and I had to pay \$3,500 income tax. So I go to Carl Odell, the bookkeeper, and he said, "Hell, you are not going to make any money, Dallas. It's all going to go into taxes. You gotta get write off." I said, "What the hell is write off? I'm a dummy, high school drop-out." He says, "write off, buy an old building or something. Rent it out and stuff like that. So, I wind up with about, through the years, about \$14,000,000 in real estate. I bought a ranch up in the country. A prune ranch on the river, Sacramento River." And my bookkeeper said, "Man, that is the best write off that I ever saw in my lifetime. You can write off every tree." So I never ever really paid any, I've had seven audits since I have been in business, which is more than the average should ever had, and I beat them all because I was fair. I was legitimate. But the only thing where it hurt me was just before I stopped business, I retired or what have you, I should have showed more money, because I've never paid too much in income taxes, but that was when I was in business.

2-00:54:10

Furey:

So what do you think about Richmond and Oakland and the places where you worked during World War II. How do you think that they have turned out now?

2-00:54:24

Wilcox:

Well, not bad, they've, I don't agree with everything that they have done, or are doing in the way that they run things, because you had this big deal here in Richmond last year. The fence limits. Four foot fences—that is not a fence. These people, a lot of these Mexican people coming in there, they have got their kinds and their dogs, and everything else, and a four foot fence, anybody can climb over there and grab your kids and run off with them. And they were trying to restrict the fence. The city went through, some of those people up there don't have the ability to really think, people. One guy had the guts enough to stand up, and I didn't have too much respect for him before, but I have this certain amount of respect for him, our people's lawyer. He stood up—

2-00:55:27

Furey:

The guy who had the commercials?

2-00:55:29

Wilcox:

Yeah.

2-00:55:30

Furey:

On TV?

2-00:55:30

Wilcox:

Yeah, him. He was on the city council and I think he saw the light. He finally stood up, about 12:00 at night because they were really hot and heavy at it, almost a revolution, you know. Because these Mexican people, they, I give them a hell of a lot of credit. He stood up and said, "Oh, I think I know what the situation is," he said, "Security. I am living in a

place, we have got a ten foot fence. I like my ten-foot fence, so, you should have at least a five or six foot fence.” I gave him credit for that, because he had come out and him and that other Mexican gal that is up there, Vermontes, they worked pretty good at that. But the rest of them up there, they were fighting because this went in originally, this was back from the twenties, this fence height. They set that in the twenties. But we are not in the twenties anymore. We are where we are now. 2000 something.

2-00:56:46

Furey:
2005.

2-00:56:46

Wilcox:

And they don't see what these people are striving for. They want protection for their kids, and themselves too. I know my great-grandfather, the old sea captain, he had uncles down in LA there that my grandmother was going to try to sue to try to get the land back because the squatters came in and took their land away from them, and the different laws that they had at that particular time, this is all clouded deeds, all of these grant deeds, are supposedly clouded. They are pretty well squared away now, but she was going to sue to get some of that land back from, I think that it was San Diego, or Los Angeles. I forget how many thousands of acres it was. But the lawyers, this is when she come in with this big chunk of money, when her money got killed by a cancer brick, what have you. And she got this lawyer, I got the paperwork on it, the lawyer all typed up a, all did descriptions of everything. He said, “This is going to take about fifty years to get into this, and it is going to cost about \$50,000.” So my grandmother said, “Oh, hell with it, just let it go.” So I still got that paperwork, and there houses were, these ranchos, were protected too, like Castro up here, my mother used to go visit the Castros, because they were friends of the family. She used to come from downtown Oakland where my grandmother had the hotel, and a buggy, and a horse and buggy. They would come up the old San Pablo Avenue and visit the Castros, because they were very good friends. And, well, my grandmother sat on General Vallejo's knee, and he gave her a parasol, because my great-grandfather was a friend of Vallejo, and they were all part of these land grants at that time.

2-00:59:20

Furey:
The old Mexican or Spanish families?

2-00:59:24

Wilcox:

Yeah, yeah, they were Spanish, most of them were, because my great-grandfather was from Castille, and, when the Spanish mixed in with the Indians down there you have got Mexicans, which are good people, they are hard workers, most of them are. You have got your Mafiosos and everything, you know, you have got your white Aryans and you have got your Chinese.

2-00:59:50

Furey:
Well, thanks a lot, I appreciate the interview, and the time.

2-00:59:53

Wilcox:

Yeah. Thank you kindly.

[End of Interview]