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Dorothy Wright

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
David Dunham
in 2003

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Discursive Table of Contents—Dorothy Wright

Audiofile 1

Family and working life—born in Eugene, Oregon—her father was originally from Missouri and ran away from home to come to the West-- her mother was originally from Oregon—has an older sister and the four of them moved out to Oakland, California by ship—utilized the Methodist church for getting involved within the community and to find work—describes her father’s alcoholism—her parents divorced when she was eighteen—recalls high school memories of when she used to stand up for herself—she was very interested in sports—the schools she went to until high school were predominantly white and in high school there were many Portuguese—includes the many jobs that she worked for during high school—went to Cal but later dropped out due to a job offer with the telephone company—recalls how the Japanese were put into camps—quit the telephone company once she got married to Martin—worked part-time for the Oakland Recreation Development—later worked with Standard Oil.

Audiofile 2

Continues to talk about her days working at Standard Oil—married Martin for the second time—recalls when she was promoted to Mrs. Harrison’s office assistant—their company began to hire many women and describes the intensive interview processes for interviewees—illustrates how children were brought up by relatives as their mothers worked—lacked racial diversity among the employees—she enjoyed working at Standard versus the telephone company because they were more active—remembers the Port of Chicago explosion—describes her feelings about American propaganda and explains how the United States tried to cover up any weakness in order to keep everyone’s morale.

Interview with Dorothy Wright
Interviewed by: David Dunham
Transcriber: Erik Fuehrer
[Interview #1: March 26, 2002]
[Begin Audio File Wright 01, Wright 02]

00:00:00

Dunham:

We will start with an easy question, which is “What is your full name?”

00:00:07

Wright:

Dorothy Dell Tudder Wright.

00:00:19

Dunham:

Okay, and where were you born?

00:00:23

Wright:

Eugene, Oregon.

00:00:21

Dunham:

And When?

00:00:21

Wright:

December 14th, 1920.

00:00:25

Dunham:

Okay, and could you tell me a little bit about your parents? Where they came from and what kind of work they did?

00:00:37

Wright:

Yes, my father was from Missouri. Elmo, Missouri, very small town in Northwest Missouri. He came out West probably when he was about sixteen. He ran away from home because that's what people did in those days. My mother was born in Oregon, Albany, and working in Eugene at the time that they met, I guess. He was a house painter all his life.

00:01:23

Dunham:

Now, how did he get to California? What route did he come, do you know?

00:01:32

Wright:

Probably by spurts. He probably jumped the rails for some of it because that seems to go with running away, I think. He had an uncle, two uncles that lived out here, and I don't know what

part they took in getting him out. But he probably hitch hiked and walked. I don't think he had much money.

00:02:09

Dunham:

How did your parents meet?

00:02:10

Wright:

That's a really good question, and I actually don't know. Dad was eleven years older than my mother, and he was quite a roust about I think. He drank when he was young, and never did give that up. He had a motorcycle, and I know I have some pictures, kind of a big rangy looking motorcycle, with--looks kind of like an oversized bicycle now. He would take my mother riding out in the country out of Eugene on his motorcycle, and I am sure that was very thrilling and also very wayward for those days. Mother was working, she had gone to a stenographic school of some kind, so she was working in an office when they met. I am sure he, at that point, pretty much swept her off her feet, especially with the motorcycle.

00:03:34

Dunham:

What city was this?

00:03:35

Wright:

Eugene, Oregon.

00:03:37

Dunham:

This is in Eugene. Okay. And, then, do you have any siblings?

00:03:46

Wright:

I have a sister, four and a half years older than I. She was born in Eugene, and I was born in Eugene, and six months--when I was six months old, they decided to move to California where life probably was faster and had more jobs available. So, we came down on a boat out of Portland. Eleanor would have been five. I was in a basket. The ocean was rough, and I think everybody got sick immediately when they got out into the ocean except me. I was just coasting back and forth and having a ball. And they did not enjoy that trip all the way down to San Francisco. Then, when they pulled in the bay, of course, the ocean got calmer and they got over being sick. But I am sure they probably thought they had made a mistake during the trip coming down.

00:05:02

Dunham:

Then, did they move right into Oakland?

00:05:07

Wright:

Yes, they came into Oakland.

00:05:07

Dunham:

And where abouts did they live?

00:05:14

Wright:

I think out on Telegraph somewhere when they first lived--. They were renting, and I think Telegraph.

00:05:29

Dunham:

And this would have been in 1920, '21?

00:05:28

Wright:

Yeah, 1921. And there was available work for house painters.

00:05:42

Dunham:

So, how did your father find work? He was a contractor?

00:05:48

Wright:

Yes, they just went out and rooted it out. They talked to a lot of people.

00:05:59

Dunham:

Was your mother working as well, or was she raising you and your sister?

00:06:00

Wright:

When she got down here, she wasn't working for a while. She had the two of us. They--I think they joined a church when they were down here that probably gave them contacts.

00:06:18

Dunham:

What church was it?

00:06:20

Wright:

Methodist.

00:06:22

Dunham:

Methodist. And were you raised in the Methodist church there? Were you active in it?

00:06:26

Wright:

Very Loosely.

00:06:36

Dunham:

Very loosely. But as a starting point then, you think that's how they got into the community and got some job opportunities?

00:06:50

Wright:

How they got into getting work possibly, because that would have been a good place. Of course, always the bars for my father is probably a good place.

00:06:57

Dunham:

To find work. Did your mother drink as well?

00:06:55

Wright:

No, although, as a young person, you know--. When I was younger I can remember her drinking some, like at a party or something, but practically not at all.

00:07:13

Dunham:

Was your father's drinking, did that become an issue?

00:07:16

Wright:

Very definitely. He was really a full-fledged alcoholic through my growing up years. He was a--I called him a "crescendoing alcoholic." He would start softly, like you do in music, and then each day he would crescendo a little more until he would finally reach the glorious peak, and then the world would fall apart. He would maybe get out--maybe my mother literally kicked him out--after a while when I was seven and eight and nine and ten. This is what went on. Then, of course, he would feel very bad about it and promise never to drink again, and would return home and then the crescendo would start again.

00:08:31

Dunham:

Was abuse any part of that as well?

00:08:38

Wright:

Verbal, threatening abuse, not physical abuse--threatening always. Interesting enough, in Missouri they felt that the husband was king. He could do no wrong, and one of the stories dad used to tell to show what kind of power he had--. Because he thought he had a lot of power through the courts--legally. He had an uncle who horsewhipped his niece when she was twenty-one, and this was one of the stories that I heard. You know, "I can maintain law and order any way I choose because I am the king." He didn't actually enforce that. He did a little bit, but he enforced it verbally.

00:09:43

Dunham:

So, how did you feel about that?

00:09:47

Wright:

Oh, when I was really little, I bawled all the time when he would get into these things. He got meaner after the drunk. His orneriness would come after the drunk, probably guilty feeling, and he and my sister did not get along well. They were far too much a like, and she rebelled. She was four and a half years older, and of course, he didn't--he would try to control her. That would bring mother in on it. And as I got older, I would finally quit standing in the corner and crying, and get in on it too. So, we had some pretty rollicking verbal fights.

00:10:47

Dunham:

Did it continue then after seven and eight with your father coming in and out and thrown out?

00:10:52

Wright:

Yeah, back and forth. In his own way he loved us. Especially me, because he got along better with me, and I didn't rebel against him until later years. But, actually, by the time I was sixteen, he was out of the house for good. I think they got divorced when I was eighteen, probably. My mother remarried.

00:11:28

Dunham:

Did you maintain contact with your father though?

00:11:32

Wright:

Yes, but it was always trouble--always threatening. He was a very insecure man, and in trying to overcome it, he would take the control approach. You know, "I am right, you are wrong." That's another thing I heard as a little kid growing up. "I am your father. If I say black is white and white is black, that's what it is." And I can remember thinking about that when I was really little. How can that be what it is? How can white be black and black be white because dad said so. But that was the role he wanted to play, and attempted to play and it wasn't successful of course.

00:12:28

Dunham:

Well, tell me a little bit more about your mother. What was your relationship like with her?

00:12:36

Wright:

Mother was a very strong woman. She's the one that actually kept the family going and together. She went out and got a job at the start of the depression, the big crash, as a manager in a little grocery store. In those days, there were grocery stores on every little corner. They were McMars, no, no, they were Mutuels, and then they--. Somebody bought them and they turned into McMars, and then they turned into--there was one other name--and then they became Safeway. They were the start of the Safeway stores, but they were corner--little corner stores. And mother managed one close, just a block and a half from our house.

00:13:36

Dunham:

Did she do that all while you were growing up?

00:13:33

Wright:
Yes.

00:13:38

Dunham:
What was life like for you as a child? What are your memories of school?

00:13:47

Wright:
Actually, I always thought because of the problems we had at home, that I was much older than any of my other friends. They just didn't know what life was really about. I knew what it was really about because I was going through it. But, I--and my father was supportive of me in his own way. He was both supportive and non-supportive. And my mother was really busy; she didn't have much time for me, but she was supportive too. So, I came along as a fairly decided little girl.

00:14:33

Dunham:
In what ways would you say--?

00:14:37

Wright:
Well, I would decide what would be right for me to do. For instance, our grammar school was probably about two miles away from our house, over in East Oakland. Over rather rolling hills, and of course, the girls always walked to school, and the boys rode their bicycles to school. One day, it just didn't seem fair to me, I just loved riding my bicycle, so I got on my bicycle and decided I'm riding to school. And I rode to school. As I got closer to school, the little girls would just look at me [chuckles], there goes Dorothy, I guess. And the little boys were saying, "Hey, look what's coming down the road, it's Dorothy. Oh, and she is going to fall off her bicycle," and this kind of thing because nobody was doing it. I was just determined. And I rode the bicycle, and put it down in the bicycle room. We didn't even chain them up in those days. And the first day when I went back down, both of my tires were flat. Some little male urchin had let my air out of the tires, and that only made me more determined to ride it. So, I ended up by riding it, and they finally left me alone and accepted it.

00:16:04

Dunham:
How old were you then?

00:16:08

Wright:
Oh, I was probably in the fifth grade.

00:16:14

Dunham:
Did it affect what you had to wear or anything, or what you did wear?

00:16:13

Wright:
No, because it was a girl's bike, you know, and the dresses went down in front.

00:16:19

Dunham:

Did any other girls start riding their bikes?

00:16:24

Wright:

No. I was the lone star. But I always--. When I felt something wasn't fair or something--even though I was reluctant to do it, and shy in my own way I guess--I would always step forward and go to the teacher and try to fight the battle. And it paid off.

00:16:54

Dunham:

Is there an example of that you particularly recall?

00:17:02

Wright:

Even into high school. I started in with the newspaper at the Roosevelt High School because I liked to write, so I came along as a reporter, of course, first in the tenth grade scrum. Then, in the eleventh grade, there naturally a few of us who were doing this, and I was in a class that was different than--different hours than where most of the kids who were writing for the paper were in. I think it was only I and maybe somebody else in that class writing. When it came time to assign feature writer, then you start up the stairs, you know, feature writer, associate editor, editor and chief. I thought I would get that because I was, at that point in the class, and you know, the teacher was complimentary and all that. The teacher was a really strange little scatterbrain kind of lady, and when they assigned the class, I didn't get the feature editor. One of my friends got it, and of course, I was absolutely crushed. I couldn't believe it. So, anyway, I went to the teacher and said, "What's happening? You thought you were going to get that for me?" She just simply overlooked it because I was in the wrong hours, the wrong class. So, she assigned both of us as--we were two feature editors, and then from then on I went on to editor, and editor and chief. Had I not complained about it, of course, had I not gone to fight the battle, I would have probably dropped out of news.

00:19:18

Dunham:

And you were quite interested in sports, quite an athlete too?

00:19:20

Wright:

Very, very interested in sports. I lived about six blocks away from the junior high school, where I went to school, and they had a great--. Oakland schools had a really wonderful after school program. They had directors, they had games going, and they were great programs. Took a lot of kids, you know, off of running around not doing anything. I was always active in all of that, in all the sports. Baseball, basketball, tennis, handball, paddle handball.

00:20:01

Dunham:

Were all those sports co-ed in general?

00:20:05

Wright:

No, never co-ed. We played the little girls and boys. Got into some co-ed stuff, even in high school they weren't co-ed, but we would--. There were a couple other gals like I was that loved to play, and we would go after school at the high school and play touch football with the football team. With the guys in the football team, and that wasn't sponsored by the school at all. It was just great fun.

00:20:42

Dunham:

What was the makeup of the schools, the racial makeup?

00:20:49

Wright:

The grammar school I went to was very white, and we might have had one black student in there. The junior high school was the same way, we might have had two or three, and it was a pretty good-sized school. Then, the high school was the same thing with that, except with the high school we were over in a rather rough district. I used to have to ride two miles--I mean hike two miles to high school. I ran two miles to school and I walked two miles home because I was always late. Anyway, there were lots of Portuguese, some Italians, but the Portuguese were the big ones in the high school. They came, they lived in an area not far from this school, and they were rather rough, a lot of them. Okay, in fact I must of liked it because I seemed to end up playing ball with them. But in those days it wasn't so acceptable.

00:22:25

Dunham:

So, what kinds of things were directed at the Portuguese or Italians? Was it hard for them, or vice versa I guess?

00:22:34

Wright:

Yeah, they weren't selected in the scholastic, among the teachers and things, as favorites, which put the group I went around with in as favorites. They would, you know, ended up running the clubs and the paper and all this kind of things. The Portuguese people were in it too, but a lot of them just simply weren't interested in school either. They had an unfriendly attitude towards school.

00:23:11

Dunham:

Were they mostly recent immigrants then?

00:23:12

Wright:

No, no, they were mostly born here, and probably their parents were immigrants maybe, because that would put them around 1920, and that was big time for immigration.

00:23:36

Dunham:

So, your family was members of the Methodist church, but it wasn't--did you go often?

00:23:36

Wright:

No, by the time I was in high school. That was through grammar school and even my mother and dad quit going. My mother, of course, was working really hard and she's the one that actually supported the family. I think she was just getting worn out. She had a lot of headaches. As I look back at it now, she had a lot of headaches. She would come home from work for an hour on her lunch hour and put a cold rag across her forehead and lie down. As I look back on it now I can see that dad, and her responsibility in everything was just too much. It gave her headaches, but she was a strong person and she did it.

00:24:31

Dunham:

Were many of your friends, did they belong to churches do you recall, or were their particularly big churches in the area?

00:24:38

Wright:

Not really, no.

00:24:47

Dunham:

How old were you when you first started working?

00:24:46

Wright:

Well, I first started when I was in high school on Christmas vacation. I really started baby sitting for twenty-five cents a night 'till three o'clock in the morning. That was going in at supper time until three in the morning for a couple of neighbors. Then, Montgomery Ward's, they were about two miles from me, and I got a job over Christmas time with them. Incidentally, I was really unhappy with them because they had a huge complex down there, you know, six stories, great block, it was big. Even in today, it would be big.

00:25:42

Dunham:

This was in downtown Oakland?

00:25:45

Wright:

East Oakland.

00:25:46

Dunham:

East Oakland.

00:25:46

Wright:

And they were concrete floors, and we filled order from the catalog. And in order to--we didn't get paid very much of course, and in order to get us interested, they would pay us a bonus of a few cents if you got more things filled in your time. Of course, this huge complex, you are walking the length of a football field to get from one end to the other, and it was hard to make time to get much done. But, they let the guys use roller skates. Can you believe that? They let the

guys use roller skates, and the girls had to walk. And I had grown up on roller skates. I am sure I could have skated rings around those guys. [laughs]

00:26:41

Dunham:

So, why weren't you allowed to?

00:26:44

Wright:

That was just the rule and regulation, they didn't allow women to wear roller skates. They figured we weren't capable, and that really did bug me a lot.

00:26:55

Dunham:

Did you voice your opinion?

00:26:54

Wright:

No I didn't. I was, you know, a high school student, and I figured I better not start out as a troublemakers if I was going to have a resume that amounted to anything.

00:27:08

Dunham:

How long did you do that?

00:27:14

Wright:

Well, that was a Christmas vacation and a summer. And that was quite an experience. I worked in the department where they used to sow those tassels on, they run on cord and tassels hanging about that far apart, four inches, three inches, even closer. People were putting tassels on everything. They would have big curtains with tassels all along the edge, around sown on it. And we sold those tassels by the yard [laughs], and they would--. You'd take a big roll of red tassels or something, and you'd have to measure it off on a yard thing, so of course you are going like this, "One yard, two yards," and they have ordered fifty yards of tassels. So, lying at the foot of your table are this fifty yards of tassels, and then you have to wrap them up and send them down the belt to get to the customer. Well, fifty yards of tassels when they are dropped on top of each other lock, interlock, tie together, everything bad you can possibly imagine, and you had to get those undone and wrapped around something about this long. I mean, it was horrible. It was terrible. It was almost insurmountable. I am not sure whether it taught me patience or impatience.

00:28:55

Dunham:

Taught you to avoid that kind of thing perhaps. So, all through high school you did that. Did you do any other jobs during high school?

00:29:03

Wright:

I worked for the ten cents store, five and ten cents store.

00:29:11

Dunham:

Behind the counter?

00:29:12

Wright:

Yeah, they were little counters in the back, between counters close together, they were small stores. That was quite an experience too. One of my first customers was a mute, there was a mute, deaf, and dumb home not far from where I lived, and he came in and ordered wreaths, probably about his big around, he ordered--he must have ordered fifty of those things for the whole home. We didn't have bags to put them in. They used to pull out paper and wrap them. Well, of course, I was as green as I could be standing back in this little place with a little table, trying to wrap these wreaths. [laughs] Finally, some woman working at another counter, who watched me as they were popping off going on the floor getting stuck in my arm and everything else, she came down and divided them down and helped me.

00:30:28

Dunham:

Do you remember what you got paid there or at Ward's?

00:30:27

Wright:

Oh, very little. I can only, let's see, I guess I would be guessing, when I went to work for the telephone company later, I was making seventy dollars a month. So, for those jobs, it had to be forty a month or something. You just, you know, every penny had value in those days.

00:31:09

Dunham:

Right, so what happened after high school?

00:31:14

Wright:

Well, after high school I wanted to go to college. Martin and I started going together in high school. He was the class president, and we were thrown together a lot in social things because there weren't a lot of us involved in setting up the social things because the Portuguese people just didn't get in on that, you know, they didn't want to bother with that. He had to work a year to save enough money to go to Cal, and I had to work two years. So, I got a job with the telephone company in the long distance office, and worked for two years. I saved every penny, literally every penny. I paid my mother, mother you know, was having always a hard time, so I paid her board and room. I think I paid her fifteen dollars a month, and I was making seventy after I got going. And, believe me, I knew where every penny was. I kept putting it away. It took me two years to save five hundred dollars, which the entry fee at Cal per semester at that point was twenty-six dollars. Then you had to buy your books of course. So, five hundred dollars.

00:32:53

Dunham:

So, what was your experience there like?

00:32:57

Wright:

At Cal? Well, first of all, it took me about six weeks--I used to go out and audit some of the courses with my friends because all of my friends seemed to be able to go to college when they got out of high school. Of course, I got away from studying, and so it took me about six weeks of floundering around like a fish before I could finally concentrate on the books and write my essays, and take a test and keep my mind on what I was doing, but I liked it. I liked Cal a lot. It was fun getting back into studying because I liked that. I majored in English, which, I don't know what I was going to do with it.

00:33:49

Dunham:

So, how long were you there?

00:33:56

Wright:

A year and a half, and then when my--I had another half a year to go to get my two years in, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, December 7th, 1941. And, the--I was taking finals by the way at that point, and that was tragic because we had a lot o Japanese students in our classes, and of course everybody was terribly upset about the war. The Japanese people, especially, They knew it was going to be bad and it was for them.

00:34:39

Dunham:

Did you know, were you friends with many of them?

00:34:45

Wright:

Not close friends. I went with my friends from high school, you know, the ones I was with, but I was certainly friendly with all of them.

00:34:56

Dunham:

Were there--do you know if there were any Japanese students in your high school?

00:35:02

Wright:

Yes. There's just one that I really remember. She was really a pretty girl, and she was going with the head cheerleader who was a blonde German, in high school. But, I don't remember. There probably were a few others. High school was a really busy time for me. I seemed to be on the dead run. But anyway, after--I called the telephone company, I had quit the telephone company, and I called them up and asked them if they would like me to come in as a long distance operator because I knew that everybody went to the phones in the war, and they said, "Please don't go to the phones, don't call anybody unless it's a major emergency." Well, everybody thought it was an emergency. As soon as the light went out somewhere it was an emergency. So, in those days we had these boards, telephone boards with the little round lights that would light up, and around those lights was a little rubber gasket. Like in front of you, you would have fifty, sixty, seventy, maybe that you would plug into the hole underneath. Well, when everybody would rush to the telephones and just stay on there, and there weren't enough operators to answer them, those rubber gaskets would start burning, and the smoke would go up because they were just on, you

know, they weren't built to be on indefinitely. Well, anyway, they hired me, of course, back right away for graveyard shift because there was nobody working graveyard. We were the operators for not only long distance, but we handled Moraga and Orinda and the first towns out through the tunnel. There were no operators out here, it was our board. So, anyway, I took finals and worked for the telephone company right following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Then the telephone company called me in and asked--they told me that--they asked if I would like to be a service rep., and when I was going to--when I was a telephone operator, you couldn't be a service rep unless you were a college graduate, and had also been active in some of the organizations. They were really aiming for the very top of who they could get as service reps. So, of course, it was a big offer for me. My record had been really good with the telephone company. They used to have monitors that would monitor calls that were coming in, long distance calls, you know, timing them and seeing that you did everything in a certain time, and I had a very good record with that. So, I took about a week. I just, I wanted to go on to Cal because I was getting now the fourth term would have been a breeze for me. It would have been drama and a lot of fun things because I had taken the harder courses already. I really didn't want to drop out of Cal, but it was such a offer, and they offered me higher wages than they were paying any new people coming in, and I think that those higher wages amounted to something like, I think it was still under a hundred dollars a month, ninety-five or something, but I mean, that was over seventy five. Twenty dollars a month was a lot of money in those days. So, I took that job, and I worked as a service rep. And that was a tough time too because they put me out--. First, I was a service rep over the telephone, and then they put me out in the field, so called, and behind a desk in East Oakland, and East Oakland was where all those Japanese farmers were farming, out in the San Leandro and East Oakland and through there. Of course, they got the orders to come in and shut down their businesses. They were putting them in the camps, and that was very sad, that was a hard--those people really suffered.

00:40:15

Dunham:

So, in your role there, what did you observe in terms of that?

00:40:18

Wright:

What did I observe?

00:40:21

Dunham:

Yeah,--

00:40:24

Wright:

Pain, pain.

00:40:29

Dunham:

What was your function as a service rep?

00:40:36

Wright:

It was to shut their business down. You know, have them come in and take care of their bills. You know, there were other people, of course, putting in telephone services. As a service rep you handled the bills of a certain area, you took new applications, you followed up on non-payment of bills, things like that. Really service rep is pretty much what it was. But that was unfortunate to say the least.

00:41:16

Dunham:

How did you feel about it at that time?

00:41:19

Wright:

Oh, pain. Yeah. I felt so sorry for them. They looked like just people to me. The reaction of the general population, of course, because of Pearl Harbor being so horrific, we had over two thousand men killed there and our fleet wiped out, everybody was strong patriotism which brings up racial hatred so easily, you know, flared up there was much strong feelings against the Japanese. So, any person walking down the street who looked like Japanese was the enemy to so many people. It wasn't a particularly good time for democracy. Of course they did have, it was big problem because there were people from Japan that were infiltrating, and for the good of the Japanese for the war. So, this is what happens in wartime. Like now for instance, with the Iraqis. There are the enemy among the Iraqis over here, and most of them are American citizens, the good people, and it's really hard to tell, so people tell by looks, you know, their reaction is by looks which is tragic again.

00:43:00

Dunham:

Did you know of any specific cases of Japanese infiltration at that time, or of--within the state?

00:43:13

Wright:

Well, we were getting it of course in the newspapers, but then we were getting a lot of propaganda in the newspaper. Of course, we got it right from the fella whose name I can't remember who was over here from Japan making peace overtures when they bombed Pearl Harbor. You know, the newspapers were saying these peace overtures, so and so was here working with the president and claiming that they wanted to be friends with the United States. In the mean time, they were sailing out to bomb Pearl Harbor. So, all of those things had an effect on everybody. And, then also fear, tremendous fear. Every time you could hear an airplane engine, everybody was sure it was the Japanese coming in to bomb us, and actually, had the Japanese come on in, they would have had an open shore to attack. We had no preparations up at all, our oil companies just wide open. Our military was in no way, we were extremely naïve about Japan ever bombing us because we knew it couldn't happen because we were Americans, and we were too far away. Well, they actually could have. And then, when they did, everybody had black outs and things, they became panicky, and ran tot he telephone right away. Everybody hit the telephone.

00:45:10

Dunham:

So, how long were you with the telephone company after?

00:45:14

Wright:

Let's see, I quit the telephone company because Martin and I--actually, Martin and I got married twice. We got married September 23rd, of 1942, secretly without announcing it to the Navy because we wanted him to go ahead and be in the Navy and get his commission, so we went--we had an old air flow Desoto, and nobody can appreciate this unless they know what an air flow Desoto looks like. It looks like this, you can't tell whether it is coming or going, and we took a two-week honeymoon up the coast. We went up to my folk's in Oregon, and then got married, went over into Washington, and got married on the coast. Came back around by (Mt.) Rainer, and down to Mount Hood, and Crater Lake and Lake Tahoe and then back home. Incidentally, all the campgrounds were closed, so were camping in campgrounds that didn't have any water. They didn't have showers in those days anyway.

00:46:40

Dunham:

They were all closed because it was wartime?

00:46:47

Wright:

No, because it was that late in the year. In September, the camping thing pretty much closes up.

00:46:56

Dunham:

Your mom was back up in Oregon?

00:46:58

Wright:

No, she's--she stayed in California when she moved to California.

00:47:03

Dunham:

Okay, your grandmother's, was it your grandmothers?

00:47:04

Wright:

Yes.

00:47:05

Dunham:

Now you said--you'd kept a--

00:47:05

Wright:

And aunts and uncles.

00:47:06

Dunham:

Okay. You said you kept it a secret from the Navy because it would have interfered with Martin's commission?

00:47:12

Wright:

They would have dropped him from his, they would have not let go ahead and get his commission. And we figured he was just as capable of getting his commission if he were married or not married.

00:47:26

Dunham:

What was the rationale for that?

00:47:27

Wright:

To not let them get married?

00:47:28

Dunham:

Yeah.

00:47:28

Wright:

Well, you know what women are like. I mean, they keep getting in the way of men, so they figured to keep those women out of the scene until the men at least got their studying done. And then after that it was--they would have to just grow up. [laughs] Both of them, men and women. So, and I--that whole trip, I kept a record of the whole trip. The whole two week's trip cost us sixty dollars. Gasoline, staying--a time or two we went to a motel so we could have a shower.

00:48:08

Dunham:

Now, had gasoline rationing started by then?

00:48:09

Wright:

No. But it did start very quick after that. It started when I went back to Chicago. We had to get that in order for me to drive back to the west coast.

00:48:27

Dunham:

So, you were able to get enough or did you have to get special--

00:48:21

Wright:

Special stamps. We told them what we were doing and they gave us enough. It was a wonderful drive home by the way. There was no traffic on the road, just trucks and a few doctors going to their patients. We made a nice trip across the United States.

00:48:49

Dunham:

What do you remember about rationing and recycling?

00:48:52

Wright:

Oh, you know, always a hassle to start. You had to apply to the rationing board for your tickets. They also rationed meat. So, you had to get that in order to get meat.

00:49:10

Dunham:

Were there other kinds of exceptions or any other ways around the rationing?

00:49:15

Wright:

It was, well, doctors, emergency people of course, and friends of the governor's probably.

00:49:28

Dunham:

Okay. Were you aware of any kinds of abuses of it then, or--?

00:49:41

Wright:

Not particularly, although as I look back on it, I really can't remember. Standard Oil probably helped me personally get rationing, but I can't remember it as being an abuse thing. It might have been a little bit because I had to drive back and forth to work, and of course, I was crucial to the war effort.

00:50:08

Dunham:

But you drove--you were still at your mom's in Oakland?

00:50:12

Wright:

No, when I actually, when I came back from our first marriage, then Martin, what was Martin doing? He was, that was 1942.

00:50:35

Dunham:

Had he continued at Cal?

00:50:39

Wright:

Yes, he had continued at Cal. He and I went to Cal together for a while, but he graduated when I stopped. No, that spring he graduated, and then he got ready to go back to Northwestern University for his commission training. I decided that I should get a job somewhere. I didn't want to go back to the telephone company. Thought I would be able to get a job--better paying because there was starting to look like women should be getting more money. We were horribly underpaid up 'till then. [chuckles] And, so I got a part time job as a recreation director for the Oakland Recreation Department, which was after school and Saturdays. And of course I liked

this a lot. This was fun. And they gave me a rather rough school to be director in, and I seemed to do well under those--I always did get along with those little brats good. [laughs]

00:52:03

Dunham:

This was in '42, or '43.

00:52:04

Wright:

Yeah, this was '40--. I went to work for Standard Oil in '43. This was '43. No, '42. It was the end of '42.

00:52:14

Dunham:

So, how long did you do the after school?

00:52:20

Wright:

I did it about five months probably. I was staying with my mother at this point. I would ride my bicycle. If I were going to transfer on the streetcars, it took me three streetcars to go down the road, over and down again, and it really wasn't that far away. It was probably about four miles. So, I trundled my little bicycle out and blew up the tires and road my bicycle into it. And that was interesting. That was kind of like my other story about the guys saying, "There's Dorothy on a bicycle." Because I wasn't sure how they were going to accept me, and I road in on this bicycle.

00:53:10

Dunham:

Did girls still not, girls and or women still not ride bikes that much?

00:53:11

Wright:

No, they weren't riding them around the streets. They would do it for fun, for games and things a little bit, but not really for travel.

00:53:22

Dunham:

Had the schools changed much since the war started? The population, had it begun to grow?

00:53:28

Wright:

No.

00:53:27

Dunham:

Not yet. No.

00:53:30

Wright:

Not really. Anyway, I rode the bicycle in on this school ground and all these ages, little kids, you know, looked at me and "Who's that." [laughs] "Well, I am your new director." "The director?"

Hey look the director is on a bicycle.”[high pitched voice] So, they all had a reaction to that, but they all liked it actually, and again, they accepted it. I even rode my bicycle over to--when I was a service rep they assigned me to Alameda for a few months, and that was another case of being really awkward to get over there on the bus and streetcar, so I rode my bicycle over there.

00:54:22

Dunham:

How many miles was that?

00:54:24

Wright:

With nylons on. We weren't wearing slacks then at all. How many bicycles did I--?

00:54:30

Dunham:

No, how many miles was it to Alameda from where you were?

00:54:34

Wright:

Let's see. That had to be three--. Probably ten...nine or ten.

00:54:46

Dunham:

Wow, that's a good workout.

00:54:48

Wright:

Yeah, actually it was great. I was in good shape. I wish I could do it again. Anyway, my mother, and this was really hard on my mother because she was a very business like woman that felt that you should make up your mind and follow your schedule. Every Monday morning I would get up and get dressed, and look the best I could and go out to interview for jobs. I would look them up over Saturday and Sunday, and then I would go out, and then I would come back and then my mother would hopefully say, "Well, Dorothy?" And I would say, "Well, I don't think I quite liked that job. I don't want to sit at a desk all day long typing or whatever it was." Then she would shake her head. In the meantime, I was doing the sports stuff, and this went on for a few weeks, and I could see my mother getting more and more tense. My dad worked at Standard Oil Company, my step dad did rather. He had been out there thirty-five years. So, one morning, mother arose at the crack of dawn on Monday and said, "Dorothy, you are going out and going to Standard Oil and put in for a job." Gene's going in, and he will take you. And I--they had let me live there when I went to college without paying board and room when I stopped working, so I felt that I really did owe them something. So, I got dressed and went out to Standard Oil. Saw Mrs. Harris and took the test. She hired me on the spot, and I think the wages were, gosh, I think it was something like one hundred and forty-five a month. That was fifty dollars more than I was making anywhere else, or could have made. That was the starting of getting into the war. At that particular point, she signed me up for a class, because they gave classes, two weeks classes before you went to your department. At that point, they called me from the recreation department, and told me that I could have a steady job with them at a recreation area out in East Oakland, where you'd live. There was a house there, I would actually live in the house and control the recreation thing everyday of the week, you know, it was full time job. Well, that of

course, is what I was hoping for. That was what I really wanted a lot because I liked that, and I just couldn't go in and tell my mother, "Mother, I have got to take this other job." My step dad was a really loyal Standard Oiler, and--

00:58:01

Dunham:

Do you know what the rec. job would have paid full time?

00:58:09

Wright:

It would have been better. It wouldn't have been as high as Standard Oil, and I am guessing a little bit because it was so long ago, but I think I would have gotten about maybe around one hundred. And a place to live, which was, you know, big. They didn't have the fear then that they do now of letting a woman be out anyplace in a park. So, I passed that up, regretfully, and I went to work for Standard Oil, and of course, the way it turned out, it's a good thing I did.

00:58:49

Dunham:

So, you don't regret it today, but at the time you had very mixed emotions.

00:58:53

Wright:

Oh no, I got much more perks from Standard Oil than I would have gotten from them. And, you know, a job that just wasn't available for anybody.

00:59:08

Dunham:

Well, let's pause, the tapes about out, and it will be great, we will just start in on the Standard years.

00:59:16

Wright:

Have I worn you out yet?

End Tape 1

Tape 2

00:00:03

Dunham:

So, this is tape two with Dorothy Wright this morning, and we were just starting to find out about her years at Standard, so let's see. Could you tell me I guess about, you mentioned about the tests you took at Standard. Do you remember what that was? Your initial interview process and all.

00:00:28

Wright:

Yes. Well, the interview was a typical interview for somebody interested in hiring you. And Mrs. Virginia Harrison was the lady who was doing the hiring for women at Standard Oil at this point. She was a very regal looking woman, tall, spoke oddly enough with a slight English accent, even though she was born in San Francisco, raised primarily in Paris I guess, but also in London. So

she had--you would think she was a Britisher. She had a regal manner about her that most people don't have. Anyway, the test was--two parts to the test. The first part included mathematics, included math type questions to solve to see that you could follow the gist of wherever it was going. And then the second was dexterity test, and I don't remember that too much.

00:02:14

Dunham:

Well, probably cause you didn't have much trouble with it.

00:02:15

Wright:

Yeah. [Laughs]

00:02:16

Dunham:

Like some people.

00:02:17

Wright:

I remember tightening bolts. They had us tighten bolts.

00:02:24

Dunham:

So, then you were hired, and you had a two-week training course? Is that what it was?

00:02:31

Wright:

Yes, for two weeks training, and the costume was--. They asked, they did request coveralls, but you didn't have to, jeans or something like that, shirt tails tucked in, and then a wrap completely around the hair, nothing hanging loose.

00:02:59

Dunham:

So this was specifically for women, this dress code right?

00:03:01

Wright:

Yes. Boots or good sturdy shoes, flat. I wore boots. And it was the wear that women started wearing for the Rosie the Riveter and all the people that went to work in jobs that supported the war effort.

00:03:30

Dunham:

Was your training there at Standard?

00:03:32

Wright:

Yes.

00:03:33

Dunham:

Okay, and was it all women in the training?

00:03:34

Wright:

Yes, they had a man training us, a foreman, and the class, it wasn't a very big class as I remember, maybe ten, and they trained us for two weeks.

00:03:47

Dunham:

For what, you were all going into the same position?

00:03:51

Wright:

No. We were all going to be operators, which is essentially--

00:03:58

Dunham:

Not the kind of operator you were before?

00:03:59

Wright:

No, not off of the switchboard. And--but we would be going into different departments, and of course the training in the departments would have to be specific for what you needed to know correctly so as to not blow anything up.

00:04:19

Dunham:

How was the training experience for you? Do you recall?

00:04:23

Wright:

Well, I liked it. First of all, I liked being in jeans, and everybody was friendly. It was going to be a new type of work, and also it paid better. I liked that a lot.

00:04:46

Dunham:

You said it paid one hundred and forty five a month, was it about that?

00:04:48

Wright:

I think it was.

00:04:50

Dunham:

Do you know about how many women had been hired already by that point?

00:04:55

Wright:

This was 1943. I went to work in January of 1943, and there were--Virginia had done all the hiring up 'till then, and you know, I don't really know how many women, but I would guess there were a couple of hundred at least, because they were replacing--the men were getting pulled out pretty fast. The draft was in operation, and the men were on their way out.

00:05:39

Dunham:

Do you remember your first day on the job?

00:05:45

Wright:

Oh, kind of. They assigned me to the SO₂ plant, the Sulfur Dioxide plant, and it was a large building with the treatment tanks and everything that had to be adjusted to make sulfur dioxide. They did do a few other things. They did pearl oil, but that was the main plant, and I was kind of disappointed when I went in because I realized I was going to be in a building, but the building had great big doors going into it, and actually, when we weren't actually taking care of our records or a valves or things like that, you could go stand, you know, over by the door and look out at the refinery. I had kind of hopes that I would be clamoring around all those big tanks.

00:06:57

Dunham:

Can you take me through a typical day in your operator position?

00:07:01

Wright:

Actually, going into it as I remember would be signing in, having the person who you are replacing take you around and show you the different meters and where they should be set, and what it should be set--we had places, you know, for writing it down. And then you literally followed the stock, the petroleum or the fluid around, being sure that all the meters were always set and nothing had happened to any of them. Of course, a lot of the operating of finery would go by smell because, for instance, sulfur dioxide is extremely strong, when it hits your nose you stop breathing. Ammonia is the thing that neutralizes sulfur dioxide, and every so often we would have a leak where we would all rush to the door to get out of it, and then they would have to come in with ammonia and neutralize it, and they would go to work on anything that was leaking.

00:08:32

Dunham:

Did people ever get sick from those kind of--?

00:08:36

Wright:

Not that I know of. I would have imagined there might have been some, especially now a days when people are so sensitive to every little odor, but the general odor--I like the smell of gasoline at that point. I used to--when I went up to Oregon to spend my summers on a ranch in Oregon, one of my aunts and uncles had a little grocery store and a little place to serve gasoline. One gasoline tank out front, real little country grocery store. I used to go out and stand and smell the hose. I actually liked the smell of gasoline. So the smells didn't bother me much at all. I got so I would associate them with certain departments, unless you got a real overflow of it.

00:09:36

Dunham:

Were you working in a crew?

00:09:40

Wright:

You worked, well there were always, there weren't a lot of people in the SO2 plant. There was always the foreman of course. He had a little office. The assistant foreman, and then the--seemed to me like maybe there was only three or four employees--other women.

00:10:09

Dunham:

They were all other women in your--?

00:10:11

Wright:

Or occasionally a man, an older man that was not draft age because the kept all their older--they kept everybody they could, they needed them.

00:10:25

Dunham:

Was it mostly locals, or were there a lot of people who would come from elsewhere?

00:10:32

Wright:

A lot of them came from the Midwest, Arkansas, Missouri. They came out.

00:10:39

Dunham:

What was that like? Was it a notable difference or how did people relate?

00:10:47

Wright:

There wasn't to me. There were some disparaging remarks, not only in the refinery, everyplace in those days about the Okies and the Arkies, you know, they were the California native looking down his nose at the Okies and Arkies because they had a drawl for one thing, and that would be something to make a little fun of. But nothing that I saw at the refinery that was ever vicious at all. Sometimes it was just fun you know. They got friendly enough so they would tease each other.

00:11:43

Dunham:

Did you join a union when you first--?

00:11:45

Wright:

No, there was no union.

00:11:47

Dunham:

There was not for anyone at Standard?

00:11:50

Wright:

No, they were trying to get a union going. It never got going. Standard always treated their employees really well, and it was hard to get a foot hold on something bad happening to get a union going, you usually need to be fighting a battle, I guess.

00:12:17

Dunham:

How did you get to work when you first started? Were you driving?

00:12:23

Wright:

Now that's interesting. I lived in East Oakland, and that's Point Richmond. When I first went out for my two weeks of training, I took the streetcar and the bus and the streetcar and the streetcar. You'd have to transfer I think four times. I took me three hours one way. I spent six hours a day travelling to and from work.

00:12:53

Dunham:

And then an eight-hour shift in between.

00:12:55

Wright:

And then an eight-hour shift.

00:12:56

Dunham:

Wow.

00:12:58

Wright:

But then I went on rotating shift work at the end of the two weeks, and they try to get you lined up with somebody where you can get a ride. Well, of course, I was living with my step dad, and they did, they put me on a shift that he was on, and he was in a carpool that would drive, so I would drive with him or whoever was driving, and that cut down about half the time. It was still a--

00:13:35

Dunham:

How long did it take?

00:13:36

Wright:

Oh, still an hour and a half each way probably. So, it was three hours instead of six. If we traveled really well, maybe two and a half.

00:13:51

Dunham:

Did you consider moving closer?

00:13:53

Wright:

Actually, I ultimately did. Especially as I started getting more active in things, because that would mean I would be driving. I didn't mind driving, but it would be nice not to drive so far. I did ultimately get a house--little two-bedroom house--on Panhandle Boulevard. Right not very far from--well, it was out of Point Richmond but it was--why can't think of some of the names of the streets--Cutting, it was very close to Cutting. Cutting crossed it I think. And the house that I rented was right square across the street from where they did all the switching for the West coast with railroads. The first night I stayed there, [laughing] I didn't realize this of course, I was in bed sleeping and all of the sudden this god-awful racket, and I stand straight up in bed. I thought we were having an earthquake or something terrible, and of course, they were just switching cars back and forth, and there was a lot of travel on the railroads. So this went on--it was really something, and it took me probably about a month to get used to it and then I never even heard it. It was still going on, and I was sleeping like a baby.

00:15:47

Dunham:

Did you have a hard time finding that place?

00:15:52

Wright:

A little bit. I wanted--I really wanted a place at Point Richmond. I couldn't find a place out that close, and this was after Martin and I were married the second time. So, the rent was fifty dollars, and in fact, I just ran across the notice on it. The notice from the rent board because the rents were controlled then, and they made the move back to forty-two fifty. From fifty dollars, the rent control.

00:16:38

Dunham:

So, you were living there by yourself? Did you consider having roommates or what was the climate like?

00:16:47

Wright:

Actually, I have always been pretty independent. Fitting in around a roommate while I was barely able to make it with my husband. Just made it with him. The interesting thing is that, as I was right at the edge of the area, the black area where the blacks lived, and of course, Richmond--Richmond has always had a rough element. They've got some pretty economically distressed black people down there, which explains it of course, simply. Anyway, I was kind of at the corner of that, right at the edge of it, and I just never worried about that. I am not even sure I locked my door at night.

00:17:46

Dunham:

Did other people worry? Either for you or for themselves?

00:17:49

Wright:

Yeah, yeah, that's always, everybody's always worried more than I have about things like that.

00:17:57

Dunham:

Did you notice--I mean there was a tremendous population growth in Richmond during that time--?

00:18:06

Wright:

Yeah, well they built all those little chicken shacks for them to live in. Cheap housing all out through Richmond going towards Point Richmond.

00:18:22

Dunham:

Yeah. Were there other--there's different things that sound like kind of also tent camps, and people sleeping at the bowling alleys and movie theatres. Were you aware of that kind of thing?

00:18:37

Wright:

Not that I really saw. No. I am sure there must have been because there were so many people came out to the shipyards, you know, between Standard and the shipyards alone, had to be thousands of people.

00:18:52

Dunham:

Well, tell me about--how long were you an operator for--? What happened from there?

00:18:58

Wright:

Okay, so I--it was about the end of May or the first of June--January, February, March, April, that's about four months, five months--and Mrs. Harrison sent for me to come up and talk to her. And I thought, What the devil have I done wrong? I must have done something wrong. Why would they be calling me at the main office? So, I retied my bandana so I was sure it was according to regulation, and went up there, and she said--she asked me how I was doing, very friendly, and then she said, "Well, you know, they are calling all the guys out of the refinery who are fighting age. We a losing a lot of young men, and we are just going to have to hire more and more women to take their place, and I am going to need an assistant to help me. When you came through and I hired you, I noticed that you had quite a bit of personnel work, and I liked you when you came through. And I wondered if you might be interested in being my assistant?" I am sure I must have looked very dumb at that point. My mouth probably flopped open. She probably thought she had made a big mistake when she made that decision. So, anyway, that's what happened. So, I went up with her almost right away. She took me up right away, and they put my name on the door, glass door going into her office as assistant, and I got launched into hiring women.

00:21:15

Dunham:

Yeah, so what exactly did you do in that role?

00:21:18

Wright:

Well, first of all they--she told me this--that they had called the foreman, the heads of the departments into the main office and told them that women were going to have to take over more, and to go back to their departments and figure out how many jobs women could possibly handle, you know, be generous. We are going to have to have them, and then we will get together and figure out how many women we are going to need. They came back up, and their consensus on the estimate was probably about two hundred and fifty jobs that women could handle, so they started off hiring women in 1945, when there were the most women over at the refinery, they had eleven hundred and thirty six. Eleven hundred and thirty six women were hired. So, that was a lot of women. And, of course, a lot of women interviewed who weren't hired too. So, anyway, we gave the test. We opened, I think we opened the employment office at nine o'clock, and she and I would both start interviewing at our respective desks. Then we would set up a time for them to--if they looked like a potential employee, a time for them to take the test.

00:23:13

Dunham:

What would rule them out from being a potential employee to begin with?

00:23:17

Wright:

What would rule them out?

00:23:20

Dunham:

Yeah, were there a number that you could rule out without them taking the test?

00:23:25

Wright:

Oh yes, and you know, it ends up being really kind of common sense. People who have real trouble expressing themselves would not be good because they have to be able to express what's happening with the refinery or they are going to get into problems. People, unfortunately with a very low education were not qualified for the same reason. They couldn't--

00:24:13

Dunham:

What was kind of the minimum level of education necessary?

00:24:16

Wright:

Oh, you know, it varied so much because from the South, they came out of the South from high school uneducated, you know. Our southern states were bad. I would say that they should have at least, that they had to have high school diploma, had to have passed high school grades, and even then, because--like for instance, now a days, a lot of people with a high school diploma can't do a simple math, and if they do it, they can't write it down so anyone can read it. Well, of course, those things were all out. They had to be able to function.

00:25:07

Dunham:

Okay, so after they passed the preliminary interview, then they took the test?

00:25:13

Wright:

Yeah, then we would set them up for their two weeks of training.

00:25:21

Dunham:

What percent do you think about would go into training of the applicants?

00:25:26

Wright:

Of all the applicants? Oh boy, this is really guessing, yeah.

00:25:32

Dunham:

Less than half, less than a--?

00:25:33

Wright:

Oh, I would say less than half definitely. I'd say [pauses] forty- percent maybe.

00:25:48

Dunham:

And where did the applicants come from? Were you recruiting?

00:25:52

Wright:

We did recruit through the Chronicle and the Oakland Tribune, and of course the employment office. They were working.

00:26:04

Dunham:

The city--is that city or county employment office?

00:26:08

Wright:

Employment office must have been state.

00:26:10

Dunham:

Did you have a relation--was that the Wartime Manpower Commission, or was there a relationship with them?

00:26:17

Wright:

Yeah, they would have been the employment office I guess. Because their the ones that helped set up some of the test. But primarily, when we would do a blurb in the newspapers, we seemed to get quite a few to come in then for a short time. That seemed to be the most effective.

00:26:42

Dunham:

So, you weren't hurting, per say? There wasn't a like, I didn't know if there might be a competitive aspect with the shipyards, for example or other companies around?

00:26:51

Wright:

No, not that especially showed up at all. We had a few people come from the shipyards, but not many, and I don't think that many of our people went to the shipyards either. Probably a lot of us was also word of mouth because Standard Oil has been such an old company out there for so many years, while the shipyards were juniors. They were new.

00:27:32

Dunham:

Right, right. But did you--the people that did end up working there, was it still, was it a pretty diverse pool of folks from all over?

00:27:39

Wright:

People coming in?

00:27:40

Dunham:

Yeah, or what was the tendency?

00:27:44

Wright:

Yeah, we seemed to have people coming in from out of town, especially the Midwest, and then a lot of people coming from--and not only the Midwest by the way. They came from Minnesota and all over the United States they were coming. California must have been doing advertising all over the United States for the shipyards and especially the shipyards because Kaiser was so big on that, and they needed so many people.

00:28:19

Dunham:

And some of that, even though it was far away was probably word of mouth too because one person from a family would come out.

00:28:26

Wright:

Yeah, somebody comes out, then their sister comes out or a cousin or somebody later. Also, the people around our area were like I was, just looking for a better wage. You know, a lot of people left low-paying jobs--who were locals--to come in.

00:28:54

Dunham:

Were the wages comparable with the shipyards then, do you know?

00:29:04

Wright:

Yeah, I think we were. I am sorry that I didn't really write those things down and have them, but I think we were comparable with the shipyards.

00:29:14

Dunham:

That's okay.

00:29:19

Wright:

Women weren't used to getting much at all up 'till then.

00:29:23

Dunham:

Yeah, well what was the makeup of the women? Were they mostly single women, married women? Do you have any sense of that? They were mostly young?

00:29:35

Wright:

Not necessarily. It seemed to be between twenty-one and oh, forty-five let's say. A lot of, you know, thirties and thirty-two and through there. So, you had mothers and they didn't talk about their kids very much.

00:30:06

Dunham:

Was there--did you know if they had young children? Do you know how the kids were cared for in any cases?

00:30:12

Wright:

In-laws. Rotating shift work. A lot of times they could work around with their husbands.

00:30:28

Dunham:

If their husbands were there?

00:30:29

Wright:

Yeah.

00:30:36

Dunham:

What was the turnover rate like for women employees at that time?

00:30:42

Wright:

It wasn't very high. They seemed to come out and stay, unless they were leaving the area. Yeah, they were pretty steady and pretty regular, and I couldn't guess as to what a percent would be. I would say low.

00:31:14

Dunham:

Were there any types of things that people were fired for though? Or issues that came up?

00:31:29

Wright:

You know, we did such a good job hiring them that they did their job, and they didn't have to be fired because they, you know, did their job. If they hadn't done their job, of course, they would have been fired.

00:31:54

Dunham:

Well, aside from the interviewing and recruitment role, what else did you and Mrs. Harrison do as kind of personnel managers?

00:32:03

Wright:

Oh, well then we--because we felt that it was--this was Virginia's idea. She felt that it was important that we started visiting the women out in the refinery, the two of us, not together, but separately. And, of course, on rotating shift work, it would take--. In three weeks to cover--you know, you had three weeks covering the three different shifts to try to get out there. So, it took quite a bit of visiting to hit everybody over a month's period. And we would go out. We'd hire in the morning, and we would go out in the afternoon or one of us, we would take turns and walk down--the big refinery by the way, huge refinery--and walk down into one of the plants where one of the women were working. And before we did that, we would pull the roll of the women working there, and look at their pictures, and we had their pictures and their roles and their absenteeism and everything that we kept track of so that we could call them by name when we went down. So, to try to do that as good as we could under the circumstances. And then we would go down and drop in and visit with them a little bit. And of course, at first this was awkward, and we were both ill at ease because we weren't sure how the men, especially old foreman who had been there for thirty years, and he looks up and here comes come gal from the main office in his department. [laughs] Their ownership meant a lot to them.

00:34:23

Dunham:

Did any conflicts arise out of that?

00:34:25

Wright:

No, actually, it really went extremely well. It took a while. Some of them were aloof. Some of them held off, and then when they realized we weren't down there trying to catch them at something they got friendlier and friendlier. And then, as I said in my story, then we got so they would call up and say, "Hi this is Zelmo from the low-pressure plant, and John our foreman is going to have a birthday this afternoon, and we got cake and coffee. Why don't you and Mrs. Harrison come down if you can, or one of you?" And we always tried to go, and it was very rewarding. As a result, when there were any problems that would come up, the women would come to us rather easily to talk to us.

00:35:25

Dunham:

So, yeah, how would that work if they--what kind of problems came up?

00:35:26

Wright:

Oh, it might be, there weren't many, but it might be that they felt that one of the guys was making life hard on them, being unfriendly primarily, for whatever reason. Or--

00:35:44

Dunham:

What kind of tensions were there between the men and women workers and or foremen?

00:35:54

Wright:

Well, I am sure the kind of tensions there usually are between men and women. No, the men accepted the women very much better than management thought they would. Of course, there was an occasional romantic flare, which in my life has always happened when there are men and women around. It's part of life.

00:36:31

Dunham:

Any particular challenges arrive from any of those instances?

00:36:38

Wright:

No, I think one--I think that if they got into anything, they usually resolved it themselves by the woman quitting, probably. You know, if it were something that was getting too intense, and I think we had one gal that we asked to leave. She was so darn good looking.

00:37:13

Dunham:

So, do you remember what happened with her?

00:37:18

Wright:

She just left. She knew. She expected it.

00:37:20

Dunham:

Was she a good--

00:37:22

Wright:

I think she went to the shipyards. Yeah, she was a good worker.

00:37:25

Dunham:

But she just drew too much attention, or--?

00:37:30

Wright:

No, she was extremely attractive, and the foreman got interested, and it was more than he could bear. Of course, he was a married man with--

00:37:43

Dunham:

So, she was fired just for that kind of?

00:37:48

Wright:

Well, asked to leave, and she did.

00:37:53

Dunham:

Well, at the shipyards, I have read from the Richmond Independent, I don't know, they may have been sensationalized a bit, but quite a number of fights including between women. Did you have any occurrences of that?

00:38:13

Wright:

No.

00:38:16

Dunham:

Not that you recall.

00:38:19

Wright:

Just didn't happen. Not that we ever knew about. No. But, once again, we--I don't remember how much freedom the shipyards gave their women, even though our feeling was loose and free, it really was--it would have been hard to pick a fight. You would have to do it really fast. If you are going to win, you better get in fast, get your licks in. I don't think the men probably would have allowed it, you know, working with them.

00:39:07

Dunham:

Was there much racial diversity among the employees, or what was that like?

00:39:17

Wright:

Not very much, no.

00:39:20

Dunham:

It was predominantly white?

00:39:22

Wright:

We were still, all of America was very definitely prejudiced through the war, and all you have to do is start looking at the history of the armed services to find out how much. Very badly

prejudiced. We had several black women working as operators. Not nearly what we should have had probably for the fairness for everybody.

00:39:57

Dunham:

So, was that a factor, would you say then in the hiring practices?

00:40:01

Wright:

You know, I don't even know whether the gal--a black gal, I didn't see many of them coming to be interviewed. They probably went to the shipyards. I think the shipyards opened up more on that.

00:40:19

Dunham:

Why--what do you think might have been the difference?

00:40:21

Wright:

Between the shipyards?

00:40:23

Dunham:

Yeah, that they might have been more open to?

00:40:26

Wright:

They maybe needed more strong help to do stuff. We didn't need physically--we needed healthy help, you know, somebody that could close and open valves, but we weren't looking for strength. The shipyards, they had kind of a tough job, that welding and everything that they had to do. So, they were probably more rugged, and if they are more rugged, they came out of families that probably settled things by fighting.

00:41:06

Dunham:

Well, that might have been a factor in that too. So, the positions--Well, how was it decided, you touched on it earlier about--they were being generous with which ones women could handle. So, that was based on physical, or other kinds of qualifications of what made it questionable about whether or not a woman could do certain positions?

00:41:29

Wright:

I am not quite sure what the question is.

00:41:30

Dunham:

Our most recent point just made me think of this, that since you said you felt the shipyard positions, some of them at least were more physically demanding, but the positions at Standard, which were traditionally men's roles, was that more relative to the physical aspect of it, or some other requirement?

00:41:56

Wright:

Higher caliber mentally I would say, that they just--you know, the job was handled from the mind, not from sheer strength. They didn't have to hold anything up for eight hours, you know, and do something that took real strength. They still had to be strong enough to open and close valves, but you had [persuaders?], you know, so you could do that.

00:42:22

Dunham:

Would the men have traditionally had a great deal more training than the--then the two week and then on the job that you had? Was that a factor of it being wartime, and needing to get people into positions quickly?

00:42:33

Wright:

The men had more training than our women?

00:42:38

Dunham:

Or traditionally, or yeah. Is that not clear? Let me think. The positions that they were doing, would it normally have had a greater training period or schooling?

00:42:49

Wright:

The men?

00:42:52

Dunham:

Yeah, or just not in wartime, I guess, when there wasn't such kind of a crisis.

00:42:56

Wright:

Yeah, they just a longer period at it because most of the men worked at Standard Oil--. It was considered a good job for a man, and they got it and kept it, you know. They didn't change jobs so that their familiarity with the job, they would be very comfortable with.

00:43:25

Dunham:

So, were there any shortcomings of women, you know, with so many women who came into the job in a short period of time, or was that not really a problem?

00:43:35

Wright:

Didn't seem to be, no. They--and you know, probably, you have to give credit to the men--they probably assisted them in a training type program for quite a while after they were on the--assigned to a department, assigned to a plant. The men probably get credit for keeping everything running smoothly too.

00:44:04

Dunham:

So, in your role as personnel manager, were you aware of any housing issues either, of challenges people had with finding housing, or they pretty much took care of that on their own?

00:44:14

Wright:

You know, they had a housing, a Richmond housing authority, state, and everything, and we didn't get into that. We would just—if any questions came up—we would refer them to the agency. Actually, they got things working pretty good for the war as you can tell by the results of everything that was turned out through the war. It is kind of amazing what happened in World War II.

00:44:50

Dunham:

Well, how did the women's softball leagues come to be?

00:44:53

Wright:

Well, I thought of that because I wasn't playing ball, first of all. I wanted to play ball. It just seemed like that would be a good social, upbeat activity for gals. Because a lot of the gal's husbands were in the war. They were over seas, and you know, they had a lot of problems, worry, just worry. So, I sent notices out through the refinery, asking women to sign up if they liked to play softball, and we got a good enough sign up to get a league going. And we would play once a week. Some of us, like the main office, of course, we could play once a week. Some of the rotating shift work, they could only play two out of three weeks, so they would have to have more people, and that was a lot of fun. We had people come out to hoot and holler for us.

00:46:08

Dunham:

Was there any initial resistance from management or anyone about--?

00:46:14

Wright:

Oh no. I was actually management.

00:46:17

Dunham:

I guess I meant from the other older managers who had been there.

00:46:20

Wright:

No, when I say I was management, they gave me great leeway, because--maybe because they were suspicious of handling women, who knows. But, from the general manager on down, they gave us great leeway in doing what we wanted to do. We could almost do it without getting any permission from anybody. But we had a boss immediately over us who was—can't even think what his title would be--a part of the--.

00:47:05

Dunham:

Well, from the management, since you mentioned that--. I know you said that they maybe suspicious, but were there any other, just during the whole thing of women in these roles, where there any particular concerns, warranted or not that were expressed by management? And were they already looking ahead to when the war ended and folks were--males returned?

00:47:34

Wright:

Well, they knew, of course, that that would ultimately come, but they--if they had any concerns, and I can't think of what they would have been, they seemed to turn them back over to Virginia and me, and then to me after she left.

00:47:55

Dunham:

So, what kind of--are there any specific examples you remember that might have been expressed to you or Virginia?

00:48:02

Wright:

Usually, if anything came up at all, it was us bringing it up because we were so much closer, but just practically nothing. I know I had one woman that came up, she felt that the foreman had been hard on her on something, and this ended up by being a fair, unfair type tactic. Not so much performance, but the attitude over a fair thing, and so she--. I took it to the management above me, not wanting to plow into something necessarily until I knew what I was doing. And they ended up by--they decided that because of this particular thing, that maybe this type of thing was going on a bit, so they called a meeting of all the foremen and me and had this business meeting about how you don't treat your--what you don't say around--you don't treat your women employees. That was at my suggestion, and I probably, I imagine the foreman who was involved didn't have too friendly a feeling toward me because it wasn't spelled out who it was, it was just generally spelled out.

00:50:00

Dunham:

So, do you remember what kinds of specific things he was saying or doing?

00:50:06

Wright:

No, it was one specific thing that he did. It wasn't a group of things, but he was kind of a tough old foreman too, so he could. And of course, women are much more apt to be subjective than objective, something that I found out at the telephone company by the way, when was working as an operator. Women take insults, or maybe make insults--I wish I could remember what that was because I would like to reexamine it now and see how I feel about it, but women are subjective--

00:50:53

Dunham:

You just remember the feeling of that from the telephone company? You don't remember the examples of it?

00:50:59

Wright:

In the telephone company? No, there was a lot of women working together like that, close together, develop a lot of jealousy's and harsh feelings and subjective feelings. That was when I first decided that I didn't care to work with a lot of women.

00:51:22

Dunham:

But, did that issue come up at Standard?

00:51:27

Wright:

No, because they were more active, moving around more, you know, it's the rats in a cage type thing. When you get them all together there is going to be trouble.

00:51:40

Dunham:

But that one instance with the one foreman was the only time you remember?

00:51:46

Wright:

Yeah, that was the only one that I ever did that they took steps on and forgot about, you know, afterwards.

00:51:58

Dunham:

Were there any other just individual complaints or women just coming to you in confidence to express a possible concern about?

00:52:12

Wright:

Actually, we had a really happy group of women out there. I wonder where they all are? I would like to gather them around me again.

00:52:17

Dunham:

That's a good question. What about, how were injuries handled on the job?

00:52:27

Wright:

Oh, we had a hospital and a doctor and a nurse, and they were handled immediately, of course, by them. We never had any serious accidents with the women. We had a few with the men, of course, every so often something bad would happen because it's oil.

00:53:02

Dunham:

Was that in part because of still a little bit more dangerous roles that some men were in or it just happened that way? Were the women equally at risk, they just didn't happen to ever have that serious of an injury?

00:53:17

Wright:

Probably. We didn't have many women in the cracking plant. That was one of the departments they kept from the women not going into, and I always thought it was because the manager of the cracking plant really didn't care to have women, you know. He thought it was a personal thing about not having women work there, but it is very possible that some of those jobs could have been more hazardous. But I know at the time when I working out there I thought it was definitely just discrimination against women. The management went along with him on that. They didn't assign women out there.

00:54:15

Dunham:

So, how did you feel about that?

00:54:19

Wright:

Well, of course, naturally, naturally, I certainly wanted to straighten those people out. But, I realized that I didn't really know. I hadn't worked at the cracking plant, so I couldn't guess, judge what type of thing was going on out there.

00:54:46

Dunham:

It sounds like, and from your background and what I know so far that maybe you would think that women could do most, if not anything men could do anyway.

00:54:56

Wright:

Oh, I did.

00:54:58

Dunham:

So--But, I haven't heard you necessarily have to take a stand or counter people saying that women couldn't do that. But did that come up? Because it seems like you would be a voice for the women could do anything?

00:55:13

Wright:

No, it really didn't. I do have to tell you that if I ever get into a fire, you know, in a building, ever was a victim in a big fire, I really don't want a woman to try to carry me down the ladder.

[laughs]

00:55:29

Dunham:

Okay, that's honest.

00:55:30

Wright:

I don't--in other words, I don't think women can do every job. Same way for a policeman. I think it's not fair to assume that physically women can do everything a man can do, because they can't, they are not built for them to do that. When I get into a fight, I want a man partner, not a woman partner. So, I'm--

00:55:59

Dunham:

Do you remember hearing about the Port Chicago incident?

00:56:06

Wright:

Oh yeah, I remember it.

00:56:09

Dunham:

Did that cause any special concerns?

00:56:12

Wright:

I had just stepped out of the house and heard the explosion. I was out in East Oakland. It was a tremendous, tremendous explosion, and of course, it took us a while to find out what it was. We didn't--we never heard any of the political arguments that came up about that afterwards, you know, where they were--I am sure everything is true--they were sending the black boys in, back into dangerous work, and court-martialed them for not minding--. That never hit any of the papers. We were fed very American propaganda through the war, including the battles and everything else. We never really got a true picture of what was going on because the papers tried to, and the government, glossed over everything.

00:57:25

Dunham:

You realized that afterwards, or also at the time through Martin's letters?

00:57:31

Wright:

No, he know anything about the Port Chicago.

00:57:35

Dunham:

Well, no I meant, you mentioned during the war, was he not--?

00:57:39

Wright:

Well, I have always been kind of cynical. I have always suspected, you know, that politics plays a tremendous--and then of course from Martin's letters too. Some of those things had happened over there never even hit the papers. They didn't want to do anything to undermine our morale.

00:58:02

Dunham:

What kinds of things would Martin have shared with you?

00:58:06

Wright:

Oh, like the--they had this huge typhoon over there after the war was over, or just at the end of the war, and the fleet was out in ocean, at risk of course, and they had, I don't know whether it was seven big ships, battle ships, or something. They were big ships with a commander leading them all, you know, telling them what to do. And he kept them in the trough, you know, like this,

in the trough, which you are not supposed to do, you are supposed to cross those. The other ships wired up to him saying, you know, this is bad. We are going to roll if we don't change, and this guy, bless his little heart, wouldn't let them change. One ship pulled out on his own, I mean, reason for big court-martial, he is disobeying orders. He was the only ship that survived. The other ships collapsed and everybody lost. Turned over and went down. You know, so those kinds of things happened through the war, and they didn't want to show that we had any weakness at all.

00:59:46

Dunham:

And Martin knew about that relative to knowing somebody on the ship?

00:59:50

Wright:

Yeah, well he was out there.

00:59:51

Dunham:

He was on the one ship?

00:59:53

Wright:

No, he was on a minesweeper. He was actually closer into shore, but he was there at the typhoon. One of the mine sweepers, in fact, I was just reading the article in here, one of the mine sweepers at another spot rolled and sank, and there was only one survivor. He didn't have a life jacket even, and he swam for two--this seems almost impossible--for two days and two nights he stayed afloat, and finally ended up on an island, an island inhabited by the Japanese. Of course, this was the end of the--I have got the article in here. But those type of things, you see, when they had problems, when they were firing at each other, like one of those, they didn't put it in the paper. They didn't want to ruin our morale, and you know, I guess it is important that they keep our morale up too, because we have to think we are winning all the time. They—you've probably seen this on some of the--do you ever watch the World War II?

01:01:13

Dunham:

Sometimes, I haven't seen a whole lot.

01:01:17

Wright:

The one where the Japanese and the Americans. They trapped the Japanese. They came along either side of them. The Japanese were in the middle and the Americans were firing across the Japanese at their other American ships. They were trigger happy because you get that way on a wartime. Martin mentioned a time or two when something of this nature happened, and they issued an order and everybody quit firing, you are taking out your own ships.

01:01:57

Dunham:

Well, this tape is just about to end as well. Well, I certainly think there is more to cover, but would you be open to doing that on a second day? Is there anything in particular today you did want to mention before we closed, or do whatever you want the next time too, so if there is

anything right on your mind right now? Well, anytime you're welcome. If not we'll just close for today. And I thank you.

01:02:33

Wright:

This leaves us at the end of Standard Oil.

01:02:38

Dunham:

About. There are probably a few more things I would like to touch on and look back and such, and if anything else in particular comes to your mind.

[End of interview]