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Rigelhaupt: It is June, 19, 2012. I am in Arlington, Virginia doing an oral history interview with Grahame Crichton Coffey. If I could ask if you could just say your name and the year you were born.

1-00:00:22
Coffey: All right. I’m Grahame Crichton Coffey. My first name is Ellen; that was my mother’s name. Ellen Grahame Crichton Coffey. I was born the 26th of May, 1921. And here I am.

Rigelhaupt: Where were you born?

1-00:00:40

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe the town?

1-00:00:50
Coffey: I can’t really. It’s a small town in central Illinois. I can’t tell you much about it. I was there only two or three times. Sometimes visiting my grandparents when they were there. I haven’t been there for a million years. I can’t tell you anything about it.

Rigelhaupt: Did you live there throughout your childhood and go to school there?

1-00:01:16
Coffey: No. I didn’t live there at all. We lived in Herrin, Illinois, which is down south of there. That’s where I grew up.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe Herrin, Illinois?

1-00:01:28
Coffey: There was a population of about 10,000 there, and it was also typical of so much in southern Illinois, lots of houses and lots of—shall I call them saloons; that isn’t what they were called. There were many Italian people—coal mines were the big organization there, and so many of the people who lived in Herrin worked in the coal mines. There were many Italian people there, from Italy, and that’s the reason we had so many bars, I guess. Perhaps it isn’t the reason, but we did have quite a few bars who worked at night. I can’t tell you very much more about that. There were shops. Everything was about two floors tall, not higher than three or four, certainly. I can’t really tell you much more about that.

Rigelhaupt: What did your parents do for a living?
Coffey: My father was a lawyer. He was the City Attorney and had been for a million years in Herrin. My mother didn’t work. Obviously at that time, one didn’t. She was a teacher; she taught at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. I think she was there when she and my father met. I don’t know where they met or when or anything like that. My mother was not working any longer.

Rigelhaupt: Had your family been in Illinois for a long time? It sounds like your grandparents—it was a generation before your parents in Illinois.

Coffey: My father’s parents came over from Scotland in around the 1870s, can that be right? They brought one son, Lawson, over, a little boy. I think they were in central Illinois. My grandfather was in with the coal mining, was a coal miner. They started out in central Illinois, which is around Springfield. Then they came down to Herrin. Why, I don’t know. They came over here with their son Lawson, and then they had two girls here, Cecelia and Isabel, and then my father George. So the three of them were born here in the United States.

Rigelhaupt: And your mother’s family?

Coffey: Oh, my mother’s family. My grandmother, Ellen Grahame Goodfellow Fleming, was a DAR. Her family came over in the 1700s at some point. They were on the east coast, I believe. I can’t tell you when my Grandfather Fleming’s family came over; I don’t know when, but my grandmother’s family came from England. My Grandfather Fleming’s family came over from, I think, England also. When exactly, I don’t know. They were in central Illinois; they were in Olney. I can’t tell you anything more about them except that I did know them very well.

Rigelhaupt: What are some of your earliest memories of the city of Herrin, the city you grew up in?

Coffey: The earliest I can remember we lived on 14th Street, and how old was I? Maybe three or four, I can’t remember. I don’t know exactly. I just remember that little house down on 14th Street. Then we moved to a house up on 13th Street. Ultimately, when I was about six years old, we moved over to our house on 12th Street, and we lived there forever. It was the house we always had. Then after my grandparents died, why, my sister Jane sold it. That was a long time later.

Rigelhaupt: Imagining about the age you were in kindergarten, five or six, around then, what was a typical day like for your father?
1-00:06:53  
Coffey: I know that he was a lawyer; I remember his office there down in Herrin. I can’t tell you too much about it. He wasn’t a quiet man, but he wasn’t a big talker anyway. He always walked home for lunch and then walked back to the office again. Since he was City Attorney—I think it was Monday night was the city council meeting. Was it every Monday? But he was always there. He was rather active with the Presbyterian Church there. What else? I’m trying to think. He wasn’t out at any sports of any kind that I remember. In fact, I’m sure he wasn’t. He would sit in the evening and read. It was before the days of television, of course, so did we have a radio? I don’t know. But he would do a great deal of reading. That’s the most I can tell you about him.

Rigelhaupt: About this same time, when you were five or six, what was a typical day like for your mother?

1-00:08:49  
Coffey: I don’t know. Five or six. Where was I? I was living on 13th Street, I guess. Mother was always busy with things around the house and taking care of the kids. She was active with the library. The Arlington Library was several blocks away, and she was very active with the library. I was trying to think of this; she was with a book club that met. I don’t know how often that met, but then I know that every once in a while we had ladies over for an afternoon meeting. Was it books, or was it something else? She was with the ladies in various ways. That’s about all I can tell about Mother. As I say, before she got married she was always teaching, first in high school and then at the University. English. That’s about all I can say. She was a very active person.

Rigelhaupt: Were your grandparents, on either side, professionals as well. Your father was an attorney; your mother was a teacher and a university professor. Were your grandparents also professionals?

1-00:10:25  
Coffey: No. I can tell you about my father’s parents. They had a house in Herrin, North Herrin. I know we had to walk seven or eight blocks to get there. I know that Grandmother—they had a fenced in yard out in back—and I know she had chickens. I don’t think she’d let me in with the chickens. [laughs] She had a garden and chickens. Then my grandparents were with the coal mining, and I don’t know how old I was when they died, seven or eight or ten when, I think, my grandmother died. And then my grandfather. I can’t tell you anything more than that.

Rigelhaupt: Did a lot of people in Herrin work in coal mining; was that a major industry?

1-00:11:40  
Coffey: Yes. It was the major industry.

Rigelhaupt: Were there any coal miners’ unions, do you remember?
Coffey: There was a great deal of activity down in southern Illinois. The unions would try to come in. I can’t tell you about it, but I know there had been a great deal of difficulty there when some men were killed, I think, in the mining. I can’t tell you anything other than that except that the unions tried to work their way in.

Rigelhaupt: Your grandfather who worked in coal mining, do you know if he was a member of a union?

Coffey: I don’t know what he was.

Rigelhaupt: He didn’t talk about it a lot.

Coffey: No. He just didn’t talk to me at all. I don’t ever remember talking to him, now that you mention it. You know, I hadn’t even thought about it until you mentioned it. But then he wasn’t a great talker with little children anyway.

Rigelhaupt: So he didn’t talk about his work or what it was like.

Coffey: No, not to me.

Rigelhaupt: So your father went to college and to law school.

Coffey: Yes. He went to Washington University in St. Louis. It’s interesting. I think he was the Class of about 1911, someplace in there, and I don’t know why it was, but at that time you could get everything done in about three years. I think at the end of three years he got his college degree and his law degree. But it was at Washington University in St. Louis. Then he came back to Herrin.

Rigelhaupt: Did he immediately begin working as the City Attorney, or did he spend any time in private practice?

Coffey: I think it was private practice because to be City Attorney I think he has to be voted in. He was always voted in. As long as I remember he was always City Attorney.

Rigelhaupt: And your mother was teaching.

Coffey: I think the reason she got down in that area—did she teach at the high school in Herrin? I can’t remember that, but then I know that she then went over and taught at the university in Carbondale. English.
Rigelhaupt: Do you know why she stopped teaching?

1-00:14:43
Coffey: Because she got married. It was in about 1918, something like that. Where did she teach before she came? She taught someplace in Illinois. She had a sister, Georgia, whom I never knew. Women were always teachers there. I don’t know that there was much else that they could do. But her older sister Georgia was teaching. She got another degree. Bachelors. She also went on after bachelors, and she was also teaching at Columbia when she died, died of appendicitis. I didn’t know her. But then I think that her other sister, Rose Grahame, taught. They were all graduates of the University of Illinois, and I guess that’s just what you did; you taught.

Rigelhaupt: Did your mother ever talk about if there were a lot of other women with her at the University of Illinois? Or was it a smaller part of the student body.

1-00:16:03
Coffey: I met one woman who was with her at the University of Illinois. I think she came to our house one afternoon. But I didn’t meet any of her other—at Carbondale’s twenty miles away, I guess, from Herrin, so I didn’t know else she was teaching with there.

Rigelhaupt: Did she ever talk about what it was like being a woman student at the University of Illinois?

1-00:16:28
Coffey: No, I never heard about that. All five in her family went to the University of Illinois. I think they were living in Urbana for several years, maybe for all the years getting everybody through university. Might be, I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever get a sense if that was normal, that all the siblings of a family—it sounds like five; your mother had four siblings—would have all gone through a university.

1-00:17:05
Coffey: They all went to university. She had one brother. I guess there were four girls and one boy, yeah. They all went to the university.

Rigelhaupt: Did your mother ever talk about having to stop teaching?

1-00:17:22
Coffey: No, not to me. She never mentioned it. If she did, I don’t remember it.

Rigelhaupt: If I’m not mistaken, this was an era in which it was not uncommon for women to have to stop teaching if they got married.

1-00:17:37
Coffey: That’s right. They all stopped. Whether it was a requirement or not, I don’t know. But they all stopped teaching when they were married.
Rigelhaupt: Did you have a favorite subject in school when you were in elementary school?

Coffey: Well, I always liked English. Now that you asked that question, there’s nothing that—I always like English, literature.

Rigelhaupt: Did that continue in junior high and high school?

Coffey: Yes, I think so. It always was.

Rigelhaupt: So probably about the time you were eight, 1929 and 1930, the Depression began to set in in the country.

Coffey: Yes. I think that I knew there was a depression, but then I think that the parents—I don’t know that they tried to hide it, but they tried not to make it important to us. We were always—they fed us. I was told that there was a depression; I was aware of the fact. But then it wasn’t anything that—we did realize it, but it wasn’t too important other than that, except, I think, that part of it might be—I think one reason that we went over to Southern Illinois University is because it would cost too much to go up to the University of Illinois. It was never mentioned, but I think that that’s probably the reason that we went there, because it was too expensive to go upstate.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember talking with any of your classmates, or seeing anything at school, that would have indicated that some families were having hard times during the Depression?

Coffey: I think that we knew that, yeah, they were always the—the white people. I hadn’t mentioned this, but there were no black people who were allowed to live in Herrin. They all had to out of Herrin by 6:00 at night. So there were no black students in any of the schools; they were all white. That was one peculiar thing about Herrin, because of the coal mine difficulties. But yes, I did know. I know that sometimes my father would bring home things from the office that were most peculiar, like a cage with a bird in it or an old coat or something like that. He’d bring them in and hang them in the back closet because I think people who he was working with couldn’t pay, so they brought in objects of some kind instead to hold until they could get the money to pay. Obviously at the time the cost wasn’t very high anyway. If they could bring in an old coat.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember seeing any of those canonical, in historical talk, about the Depression of families being evicted from their homes, or people coming to your home asking for food?
Coffey: We did have people who’d come to the back door and ask for food, yes. I knew people who were taken out of their homes, but I did know that there were people in our neighborhood who were having difficulty. Yes, we always realized that people were having difficulty.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember seeing any foreclosures or evictions where people’s stuff was taken out of the house and put in the front yard?

Coffey: No, I didn’t see that, but then that doesn’t mean that there weren’t any, because Herrin was not—there was not much money there.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned that African Americans would be in the city either for work or for other reasons but had to be out by 6:00 o’clock.

Coffey: Yes, they came in for work. We had a laundress who would come in to clean. What the men were doing, I don’t know. But every day people would be coming in, and, yes, everyone had to be out by 6:00. I remember one time—we saw a great deal of movies; my father got constant movie tickets because he was City Attorney—I remember the time we were walking past the Baptist church to go to the movie, and there were black people sitting on the steps there. I asked my father why, and he said they lived over by the Wabash, and the Wabash had been flooded out. So they were brought over to Herrin to sleep that night, I guess. But that was a most unusual occurrence. I think that’s the first time I really realized that black people all had to be out.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how you heard about it? I imagine it was an unofficial rule rather than an official rule that African Americans had to be out by 6:00 o’clock. Do you remember, did someone tell you? How did you learn about a rule like that?

Coffey: I don’t know how I knew that. I just knew it. I don’t know who told me that or what the occasion was given.

Rigelhaupt: But people knew that rule.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: So it was mostly African American women who came into Herrin to work in domestic work.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: But do you remember if African American men worked in the coal mines?
Coffey: I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: Were there African-American communities near Herrin? Neighborhoods just outside the city? Do you know how far people had to travel to come in to do—?

Coffey: Several miles. I know there were several little towns around Herrin that were black, yes.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember the names of any of those towns?

Coffey: No. I should know all of them, but I don’t.

Rigelhaupt: That means that the schools that you went through were all white?

Coffey: All white.

Rigelhaupt: Were there different ethnicities of people? You mentioned Italians.

Coffey: Many Italians, yes.

Rigelhaupt: Was that major issue in high school?

Coffey: Not as far as I knew anything about it, no. I don’t know. There was a very active Catholic church there where most of the children went for grammar school, but not high school. I don’t think high school, just grammar school. But I think that high school was opened up to everyone, but not the blacks. It was interesting, I don’t know about high school, but at grammar school I know that we had to go home for lunch. Lunch wasn’t served at the grammar school. I still remember you’d go in the morning, then you’d walk home for lunch, then walk back again. Funny.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe the house that you grew up in? You mentioned there was one, I think—you went Fourteenth, Thirteenth, Twelfth. Was it on Twelfth Street that you—?

Coffey: Yeah, the house that we bought.

Rigelhaupt: That you stayed in a long time.

Coffey: Yes. Then we, I think, added on a bedroom upstairs and a bathroom upstairs. It was just one of those solid houses that had been there a long time.
Rigelhaupt: Could you describe the house as you walk in the front door.

Coffey: As you walk in the front door there’s a little hall there, and the living room is over to the left. If you went straight ahead there’s a big dining room, and over next to that was a bedroom. Go back to the dining room, and go through a hall there, and there’s a smaller room over to the right that was made into a bedroom. Then to the left you went downstairs to the basement. Ultimately, we built stairs to go up to the top floor. Well, the kitchen was back in that corner, and back in this corner was another bedroom, and in between that bedroom and the first bedroom was a bathroom that went between them. Back porch, and I remember there was a big block of ice that was put out on the porch every day, I think. And the milk was put out there every day. Then upstairs there was just one great big attic when we first moved in. Then we added a bedroom and bathroom up there. It’s interesting; I don’t know whether the house is still that way or not.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how old you were when you added the bedroom upstairs?

Coffey: I was in my teen age, but I don’t know exactly when.

Rigelhaupt: So somewhere in the middle 1930s would be—

Coffey: It might be. I really can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: Going to college, did you know throughout high school, or have a sense throughout high school, that you were going to go to college?

Coffey: I think so. I don’t think I was first in the class, but I was up high in the class. Yes, I knew I was going to college. My parents had gone. And what else do you do in Herrin? [laughs] Go to college.

Rigelhaupt: And you chose University of Southern Illinois because it was closer.


Rigelhaupt: Could you describe your first day on campus?

Coffey: No. It was a long time ago. I don’t know. I just remember where the buildings were, and I know the central building was straight ahead, and you had to walk up three or four flights. They had no elevators. It’s all stairs. I guess I had my English there. And the building over to the right was science of some kind. And the library was over to the left; I do remember that.
Rigelhaupt: Before asking more about what you studied, did most students live in dorms?

Coffey: No, there was only one dorm, Anthony Hall. I went back and forth the first year. What I remember, there was an office over here on the right when you come in. Dr. [Roscoe] Pulliam, P-U-L-I-A-M, was the head of the University, and I know that my sister Jane worked for him. She was taking classes, but she also was working for him. He was there for ages. I can’t remember, a long time. Did he know Mother? I don’t think so.

Anyway, my first year, I went back and forth. I did not join one of the sororities. In fact, I never did join a sorority. But then back and forth, and then I moved into Anthony Hall when I was about a junior, I think. That’s where I was when the war started. My sister Jane lived someplace in that city; she didn’t live right on campus. She was a year ahead of me. Jane is now on the third floor; she lives here.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned your sister, and I should have asked earlier, but do you have other siblings, or was it just you and your sister?

Coffey: I had a brother, who was younger than I. He’s three years younger. So he was still in high school. He has died; he died several years ago.

Rigelhaupt: You said you were living in Anthony Hall, in the dorm on campus, when the war started.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: If I could ask you to try and back up a little bit before that in terms of the war, you started college probably about 1939?

Coffey: Yes, I think so.

Rigelhaupt: Now, in those years before Pearl Harbor in 1941, was there any sense on campus, or did you have any discussions with other students? Was there a sense that there was a war going on?

Coffey: I don’t know. I just can’t remember that. I think we were thinking mostly of England at that time with the war. I can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: But there was an awareness that England was already involved with hostility with Nazi Germany. Did you have a sense that the United States would become involved?
Coffey: I can’t tell you that. I would assume that, yes, we would expect it. But then I can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: Let’s talk for a moment about the moment where the United States becomes most publicly involved with World War II, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. How did you hear about it?

Coffey: That I can remember very well. It was Sunday afternoon. We at the dorm, on Sunday afternoon we would always dance in the living room, you see. The girls would dance together, you see, and we were dancing that afternoon. When the music stopped, and the announcement was made about Pearl Harbor, oh, I remember that very much. That was when the war started for us.

Rigelhaupt: Did you know where Pearl Harbor was, where Hawaii was?

Coffey: I knew Hawaii. But I don’t know, I think all of this was explained to us. I’m sure that we must have been asking something about it. “When did this start.” We must have been asking about it because I know the music stopped, and so we were all talking together about everything,

Rigelhaupt: Was there sense of shock, or what was the reaction?

Coffey: Oh, I think it must be, because it was just one of those devastating times, it must have been, for all of us. We never forgot that.

Rigelhaupt: Was there any sense that the continental United States was under any threat because Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Coffey: I don’t know. I think we were all so surprised that Japan got into this. Why did this happen? It was just something that was just so unreal to us and so devastating.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember if you listened to the radio after first hearing about it, like later that night to try and hear news.

Coffey: Must have done. I don’t know. Perhaps we might have been having conferences there at school too. That part I don’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: Or newspaper the next day. Do you remember seeing any of the pictures?

Coffey: Must have been. I can’t remember.
Rigelhaupt: My questions aren’t aimed so much at a specific that you should remember, or anything like that, but trying to understand what it was like to get news differently than we get it now.

1-00:40:07
Coffey: Yes. So much now I get on television. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: That’s one of the distinct differences, was learning about something like Pearl Harbor without television, that you learned about it from conversation. Were there any immediate changes on campus after Pearl Harbor was attacked?

1-00:40:40
Coffey: I don’t know how immediate, but then, yes, there were a great many changes. Of course, many of the young men had to go to the Army. I don’t know what the timing was on this, but we stayed pretty much as we were for the next several months, and then we were ousted out of the dorm. Those of us who lived there had to find other places to live. I know I lived in a house not too far away because the Army boys moved into the dorm. The Army came in, and they ate their meals there too, where we used to eat. I know that at that time I was working. I didn’t work in the kitchen, but I was helping to serve dinner at night behind the counter there. Several of us were doing that. That was the great change there. The Army had moved in, and the young men who were brand new Army.

Rigelhaupt: Do you know why the Army took over the building; was it part of training?

1-00:42:33
Coffey: I can’t remember. I can’t tell you what part of the Army it was, or what specialty. I don’t know. We met several of the young men at the time. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: That was actually going to be my next question. Was there any courtship?

1-00:42:58
Coffey: Yes. We got very friendly with some of the young men, you know? What happened to them after that I don’t know where they went.

Rigelhaupt: They may not have been on campus for long.

1-00:43:22
Coffey: I don’t know where they went. These people were from Kansas or wherever else. They were not local. And what part of the Army it was I don’t know. Can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: One of the other things that happens during World War II is rationing. Do you remember how that affected your experience at university, and then perhaps your parents and other extended family?
Coffey: I know that there was rationing. I can’t really remember too much, but one thing I do remember is one time when I was at home I think I was just learning to drink coffee. I’d never had coffee before. But then I know my father told me, “Do not put sugar in coffee. There’s not enough sugar here.” So I learned to drink coffee straight. That’s why I’ve always had it straight since then. I accused my father—well, my father put sugar in his coffee, and I said, “You’re taking my sugar.” [laughs] Anyway, I’m still drinking coffee without sugar.

Rigelhaupt: But you don’t remember any other rationing of gasoline, or tires?

Coffey: No. I wasn’t driving anyway. My father didn’t use the car very much anyway. He walked back and forth, so I don’t think that we—.

Rigelhaupt: Were there other noticeable changes in Carbondale besides the Army and soldiers moving into a dorm that was because of World War II?

Coffey: I can’t remember, but then I hadn’t been thinking about that. I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: But there wasn’t a change in industry or—

Coffey: Not that I know of.

Rigelhaupt: Other than the university, what was the main economic activity in Carbondale?

Coffey: I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: So it may not have been the type of thing that—

Coffey: Well, part of it might be coal mines, but not very much of it. I can’t tell you. I noticed in Herrin at that time, going out our front door and going straight down, there used to be fields there. Some business had come in and built in a whole building, some kind of machinery. Was it washing machines? Some kind of machine was started in Herrin at about that time. It became very important actually. But Carbondale, I don’t know. I can’t tell you.

Rigelhaupt: You said there were a fair number of Italian student in high school.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Was there a similar group of Italian student in college?
Coffey: I don’t know. I don’t remember. But there were black people there. Not very many. It was funny; I was sitting in Social Security class right next to a black girl. I was so startled; I just wasn’t used to that. She was very nice. We became friends. But there weren’t many blacks. There were a few who had the money to go. It’s interesting; I hadn’t thought of that.

Rigelhaupt: So the University was integrated to some degree.

Coffey: Yeah.

Rigelhaupt: Probably not as much as it is now, but to some degree.

Coffey: Yeah. The University of Virginia has women now. It didn’t used to have women. When my niece went to college, her boyfriend was at Charlottesville and she was in—. But that broke up anyway.

Rigelhaupt: You got to San Francisco in what year, 1944?

Coffey: I finished college in Carbondale, and I finished late summer, I think. I went up to Smith that fall. I went right into the WAVES, was accepted into the WAVES. So I was up at Smith in the fall of, when was it? When did the war start? When did we get into the war?

Rigelhaupt: Soon after Pearl Harbor, which was December of ’41. So really ’42.

Coffey: I guess ’43 I went up to Smith, yeah.

Rigelhaupt: One of the things that happened early in ’42 on the west coast was the internment of Japanese Americans.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Did that news make it to Carbondale? Was there any discussion?

Coffey: There were no Japanese there. We didn’t know what the Japanese looked like. There were no Japanese there. Not that I knew about.

Rigelhaupt: But do you remember reading about it in the paper? You knew it was happening.

Coffey: Yes.
Rigelhaupt: But it seemed like something happening far away.

Coffey: I guess so because it wasn’t anything that bothered us personally.

Rigelhaupt: So you graduated, it sounds like, in the summer of 1943.

Coffey: Yes. Must have been, yeah.

Rigelhaupt: Did you have a sense from before that time in 1943 that you wanted to go into the military?

Coffey: Yes. I think that was going to do my part, yes. So at what point I applied, I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: Could you say more about why you wanted to join, what you had hoped to do?

Coffey: I think that our being in the military was so important, our being in the whole worldwide war. But another reason is that I didn’t want to teach. I remember that. I did not want to teach. And I wanted to get out and see the world or whatever. So I think there were many reasons. I can’t remember that. It must have been I just wanted to get out and see.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned that you got accepted into the WAVES. Do you remember what the application process was like?

Coffey: No. I can’t remember. I don’t remember any of that, or what I did. Interesting, my sister Jane had applied also. She had been teaching. She was a couple of years ahead of me. She was accepted before I was. Did I want to do it because she was? No, that wasn’t the reason at all. I wanted to do it on my own. But then Jane left before I did, went up to Smith. I was about two months behind her, I think, in anything I did. So I went up to Smith that fall.

Rigelhaupt: What were your first impressions of Smith when you got there?

Coffey: I can’t—isn’t it interesting? I just remember it was a lovely place. It looked like New England, I think. Green and nice buildings. I can’t remember too much; it was a long time ago. But I was impressed with Smith. It was a lovely place. This might not have anything to do with it, but I was talking to a friend of mine, Marilyn Smith. She is the person that I met at Smith when I was there, and I’m still a friend of hers. She lives in Washington now, but I’ve been in touch with her—although she was in one part of the country and I was in another, it’s just interesting that when I was talking to her she said that we met
in the Registration Department at Smith, you see? She remembers that part; I don’t.

Rigelhaupt: So you were officially in the Navy, in the WAVES, when you were at Smith.

1-00:53:57
Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Did they arrange for housing?

1-00:54:00
Coffey: Oh, yes. And uniforms. Clothing. And housing, meals. Yes, everything was taken care of. When we got there they told us what to do.

Rigelhaupt: What was your housing at Smith? What did they arrange?

1-00:54:17
Coffey: Well, we were in one of the dorms. Who I was in the dorm with, I don’t know. But we were in a dorm. And we ate three meals a day at that hotel there that’s right next to campus. I still remember that it was awfully good food. And our meals were all on metal trays. Everything was on a metal tray, all the food, you see. It was funny, years later, when our daughter Elizabeth went to Smith Jack and I would take her up and I’d say, “We have to eat at the hotel there,” which is what we did. The food was just as good as it used to be, but the food was all on plates and bowls and cups. [laughs] No trays. I don’t know what happened to those trays.

[End of Audiofile 1]

[Begin Audiofile 2]

Rigelhaupt: It’s still June 19, 2012. I am on tape 2 with Grahame Crichton Coffey. Before changing tapes we were talking about arriving at Smith College for your training. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the training involved. You’re in the Navy, you’re in the WAVES, you’re at Smith. What did you learn?

2-00:00:27
Coffey: You know, that’s the trouble. I’m not sure I can tell you what I learned about the Navy. I can’t tell you anything about that. I’m sorry. I can’t tell you what I learned.

Rigelhaupt: Were your classes at Smith similar to your classes at Southern Illinois? Did you go into a classroom all day, learn specific things?

2-00:01:04
Coffey: Yes, it was always there. We always went in a group, you see, and in between times we went in file from one place to the other. I think that’s the one thing that I remember most about Smith or any of the other places there is tramping
in line. Always make sure I’m in the proper place. I’m sorry. I don’t remember what I learned in class.

Rigelhaupt: Were there things that you learned at Smith that became directly applicable to what you did in the Navy when you left Smith?

2-00:01:42

Coffey: I would assume that I did a much better job out in San Francisco because I did what I should be doing. I hope so.

Rigelhaupt: What was your first position after you left Smith in the Navy?

2-00:02:09

Coffey: I went to Holyoke, which is a women’s college close by, in communications. I had decided, I think, to be in communications, so I went there next. And I was there I think maybe two months. Is that how long I was at Smith? I think so, about the same length of time, about two months at Holyoke. Then after Holyoke, that’s when I was transferred to San Francisco to be in communications out there.

Rigelhaupt: Just before we get to San Francisco, do you remember what you—and I imagine it was other young women at Smith and Holyoke—what did you do for fun after class?

2-00:03:14

Coffey: I was wondering the same thing. I was trying to think of myself back in college there. What was it, seventy years ago, or whatever it was. You see, we didn’t wander around on our own; we always were with other people in file. And I think that we studied, did your homework, went to meals. Something I do remember, I had a bit of free time—that was the winter time—and was it there or at Holyoke, there was a pond there that had ice on it, and I remember I had never ice skated. Did I borrow ice skates? I can’t remember, but I was out on ice skates, the first time I’d ever been out. You know it never got that cold in southern Illinois. But I do remember that. It was a lovely pond, beautiful country up there in both schools. And then tramping around in studying in the classroom, studying in the bedroom that I shared with other people. That’s just about all I can remember about being up there.

Rigelhaupt: Do remember if you saw movies and other forms of entertainment?

2-00:04:48

Coffey: We might have done a movie. You know, shown it to—I really can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: You decided you wanted to be in communications. Did you have any decision in where you were going to be stationed?
Coffey: I would have gone anyplace, I think, other than Illinois. I was from Illinois; I didn’t want to go there. But I felt very lucky going to San Francisco; I’d never been in that part of the world. So I felt very glad about that.

Rigelhaupt: What was your first impression of San Francisco?

Coffey: I went out on a train, and there were many other families on the train, and I still remember how crowded it was. It was jam-packed, that train. And it went all the way to San Francisco. Perhaps there wasn’t a bridge to go over. We went down—. There was a boat—what is called?—waiting for us, and I know we got on this boat to get over to San Francisco from Oakland, I guess, the train went in. It was February, and it was sunny and nice. I remember being out on the deck there and just had a wonderful trip over to San Francisco on this boat. What is it; was there no bridge at that time? Why didn’t we go over on the bridge? Well, anyway, I was delighted to go the way I did and delighted to get to San Francisco. I’m trying to think. Was I met by someone? I don’t know. I can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: Where was your office, or what base were you on?

Coffey: It must have been the Navy building on, I think, Market Street. It was right downtown, right down in that part of the town. So I was sent there. I was not in the code room. I was in the room right outside of the code room. I took care of the messages when they came out of the code room. That’s what we did. We decided what ship was to get the messages. And how many ships. I think the message that came through indicated where it was supposed to be going. We always checked that out and made sure the proper ships got the messages. Navy men from the ships were always coming in to pick up messages.

Rigelhaupt: Were these highly classified messages?

Coffey: Yes. They were all classified, yes. They came through the code machine, yes.

Rigelhaupt: The building you were in, was it truly owned by the Navy as a Navy building?

Coffey: That’s the feeling I had, but I don’t know. I know the Navy was there. How much, I don’t know. Our class, our department had specific times we were there. Our time was from 3:00 in the afternoon till 11:00 at night. Eleven to 7:00, 7:00 to 3:00. I guess your first day at work was always 3:00 to 11:00. Then the one to go to was 11:00 to 7:00. That was the one you were out getting to work. Anyway, that was what we did on our communications group, and we were classified. Whatever else it was, I can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: Did you ever read the messages and try to figure out what they meant?
Oh, yes. You always do. You’re always supposed to try to figure it out. Most of the time, somebody came for them. I know that there were a couple of times when there was nobody to come, and I remember a couple of times the ship was out in the bay. I’d have to have a chauffeur take me out, and then who got me out to the boat, I don’t know. But you always had to get the messages delivered some way or other.

Did you have a sense that there was a lot of military activity going on in the San Francisco Bay Area?

Yes, I think so. Well, there was always ships coming and going, yes. I should say. It was interesting. You mentioned that the Japanese had been gathered up and put in prison, well not in prison, but they were put inside. It was interesting about San Francisco; there was so many Chinese there; so much of it was Chinese. I know that on off days, off times, I remember walking around and seeing so many Chinese. I keep thinking of the little man down in the basement eating. I never saw any Japanese, but I saw a lot of Chinese there. San Francisco is a fascinating place.

When you said you were taking these messages out to ships, were these truly Navy ships as in destroyers or aircraft carriers, or was the Navy also directing Merchant Marine ships that probably would have been carrying weapons and other supplies to the Pacific front?

I don’t think I ever delivered to something like that. It would have been something smaller and less able. It was interesting one day a group of us took a trip on one of the big ships. Was it a destroyer? I can’t remember what kind of ship it was, but I remember we went out into the Pacific and back again. It was fascinating to be on a warship. But what it was I don’t know.

Was there any sense of imminent threat in the sense that there could have been Japanese submarines near San Francisco, or did your colleagues in the Navy feel relatively secure?

I can’t remember that, but I think that if that had been suspected we would have heard something. I think the Japanese weren’t around.

Where did you find housing? Where did you live when you first got to San Francisco?

It was interesting. When I went out with Mary Kay, whom I knew—her sister and her husband lived in a house south of San Francisco, and I think when we first went there we stayed with them looking around because you had to take a bus into—. Ultimately, Mary Kay and I, we were lucky, we found a flat in one
of the buildings—all of the buildings had only three or four floors—just a block in from the water, from the bay and we could see the Golden Gate Bridge right there. We were so lucky. It had one bedroom; it had two beds in it. And she and I were sort of on different shifts. So Mary Kay and I had that apartment; we were lucky, we kept it for several years. So I was there at that time. We were lucky. We could just walk up to the main floor, walk up several blocks to get a bus, I think, to go in ultimately to get to work. It was a very nice place. Since I’ve been back there several times—you know, the kids taking me back—I was going to go down and see that.

Rigelhaupt: So it was relatively close to downtown, the neighborhood you were in? Do you remember what neighborhood you were in?

2-00:14:50 Coffey: Well, it was several miles away, I think. But then we could get there by bus. We were lucky.

Rigelhaupt: But you were near the water.

2-00:15:01 Coffey: Yes, a block from the water.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember the name of the neighborhood.

2-00:15:09 Coffey: I should remember, and I can’t remember. It does have a name, and I know that we were close to the Presidio. It does have a name, a section, but I can’t remember what it is.

Rigelhaupt: Maybe the Marina District?

2-00:15:33 Coffey: I don’t know. It sounds very familiar. I don’t know.

Rigelhaupt: But I bet you could find it.

2-00:15:42 Coffey: I could find it, yes. So I fought the war there.

Rigelhaupt: Did you stay in the same type of position with the Navy handling communications throughout your time in the Navy?

2-00:16:03 Coffey: I think so; I think I was in the same place. I keep trying to think about what I was doing when I was with the Navy and what I was doing when I was out of the Navy. I was still there for several years. I was there when the war ended, because I remember that night I was going on duty at 11:00, so I had to walk up Market Street. It was just filled with people. The people and the Army and everyone else. It was just a jubilant place, and I had to walk up to the Navy
building to go to work at 11:00 o’clock. [laughs] That was when the war ended. That I remember. I was still there.

Rigelhaupt: Was that Victory-in-Europe Day? V-E Day?

2-00:17:24
Coffey: It’s when we were getting out of the war.

Rigelhaupt: Was that before the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan, or was that about the same time?

2-00:17:43
Coffey: Must have been at the time. Had to be. I know that was the end of war when I—

Rigelhaupt: Agreed. I have just also read that there were big celebrations when—

2-00:17:56
Coffey: Oh, it was a tremendous celebration.

Rigelhaupt: —in Europe. A few months earlier.

2-00:18:01
Coffey: Well, there was a celebration on Market Street in San Francisco.

Rigelhaupt: Let’s stay there for a minute, right about the end of the war. How do you remember hearing about the use of atomic weapons in Japan?

2-00:18:25
Coffey: I don’t know. Now that you mention talking about it, I don’t know how I know about it. I can’t remember that,

Rigelhaupt: But it didn’t create a sense that this was different from other weapons that had been used in the war.

2-00:18:58
Coffey: Well, obviously—I remember being in the office there talking to our boss, who was explaining about the atomic bomb. I can’t place that into—but I do remember hearing him talking about it.

Rigelhaupt: How long after the war ended in 1945 did you stay in the Navy?

2-00:19:36

Rigelhaupt: Did you do similar work over that year?
Coffey: When did this happen? I think when I was getting out, retiring, they sent me to Washington. I was here for how long, I don’t know. I was working down in one of those low buildings where the Navy was. I was down there for a couple of months, I think, and then retired, or got out, whatever, in Washington. And when that was I can’t remember. I know what I did after that.

Rigelhaupt: What did you do after that?

Coffey: I went down to Miami to visit my Rose Grahame. Then I went to Bermuda, and then I guess I went home to Illinois and my parents. I guess it was after that that I returned to San Francisco.

Rigelhaupt: What brought you back to San Francisco?

Coffey: Looking for a job. And I came back here and knew several people here with an awfully nice house, up the hill from where I’d been before. I know I was lying in bed looking out, and there was the Golden Gate Bridge right out my window. I got a job, secretary in one of the buildings down in the financial district of San Francisco. I was there for about a year or two, and then I joined the CIA, and they sent me to London.

Rigelhaupt: What led you to join the CIA?

Coffey: It sounded like interesting work, and I knew someone who had been with it, or who was with it. So I signed up. At that time they also were in one of the buildings on Constitution Avenue where the Navy was. That’s where they were too, and I know I went there working for a couple of months. Then they sent me to London. I was so lucky. [laughs] I got over there in the fall. I remember that date. It was the first of December, 1950. I went to London on a ship.

Rigelhaupt: Do remember any sort of training that you needed when you joined the CIA?

Coffey: I think that I went in as a secretary, which is something I was able to do, had done for several years. I guess that’s why they took me. They had lots of paper, still using typewriters.

Rigelhaupt: Is that the work that you did in London? You did secretarial work?

Coffey: Yes. Other than that, I can’t tell you. Yeah, I did secretarial work there.

Rigelhaupt: So this is 1950?
Coffey: Yeah, that’s a date I do know.

Rigelhaupt: The Cold War has started. Did you have a sense of what the CIA was doing in terms of the Cold War? We look back we know there was lots of spying and various things. Did you know that as it was happening?

Coffey: Something that I remember about London at that time is the fact that they were still on food rationing, and they were still in very bad shape. Nineteen-fifty. Very few cars out, no gasoline, no food. Something that was awfully good about that time was all these marvelous—the theater was so great, cheap and all these wonderful actors. We went to a lot of theater then. Every week, I think, we’d go to it. Maybe it cost ten shillings to go there.

Rigelhaupt: Did you have to keep your identity in the CIA a secret if you met somebody at a pub or something, and they said, “What do you do?”

Coffey: Yeah.

Rigelhaupt: What did you tell them?

Coffey: Oh, I told them it’s the State Department. We were with the State Department then.

Rigelhaupt: But you knew you were with—

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: But you told everyone you were with the State Department.

Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And that was pretty standard for other people working in the CIA.

Coffey: I would assume so, yes. Army or State Department, whatever.

Rigelhaupt: You’re still maybe not supposed to answer, but since it’s a long time ago did you handle any major secrets?

Coffey: Oh, I think there were a lot of secrets going through, yes. You just didn’t talk about it.
Rigelhaupt: But are there things as you look back now, that you read some letter that came through, or message, that you realize was very important in retrospect?

2-00:26:35
Coffey: Yes. But you just don’t talk about it.

Rigelhaupt: Even now.

2-00:26:38
Coffey: Even now, yeah. It doesn’t matter now, anyway.

Rigelhaupt: Were you married at the time you went to London?

2-00:26:51
Coffey: No, we were married four years later. That’s where I met Jack. He was my chauffeur. I don’t mean that. There were four of us there who did a lot of weekends together and go all over the country and see so many of the cathedrals and see the country, and went up to Scotland a couple of times, I think. It was easy then because you didn’t have to have reservations at the hotels. You could just go to the hotels because there weren’t people going around looking at that time. As I said before, Mickey Van Biesbroeck—she has died—and Phil O’Connor and Jack. Phil has died also as has Jack. But it was great. We saw so much and did so much. I learned to play tennis there too. The ambassador then didn’t use the ambassador’s house, which is a lovely place with tennis courts and so forth. We’d spend our weekends there going to cocktail parties and played tennis. Those were the days. That was only fifty, sixty years ago. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: Was it clear in your time in the CIA in London that the major part of your job was about the Cold War and about the struggle with the Soviet Union? Or were you involved with other issues?

2-00:29:16
Coffey: No, it was mostly just with Europe, what was going on there.

Rigelhaupt: Looking back, and this may be a hard question, even though—. [pause tape] Before the phone rang what I was trying to ask was if you were at all surprised that, just a few years before your time in London in the early 1950s, the US is in a very real Cold War with the Soviet Union but had been allies with the Soviet Union during World War II. And in just a few short years that changes.

2-00:30:12
Coffey: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about that change?
Coffey: I can’t tell you that. It just seemed to have been something—so many things were happening, and so much change that—something else. So I can’t tell you more than that.

Rigelhaupt: My question was not so much aimed that you could tell me specifically how or why but trying to get at someone who was in the military—you were in the Navy, just a few short years later in the CIA—what it was like to experience such a drastic turn in a sense of who’s and ally, who’s an enemy, and what it was like to try and make sense of that.

Coffey: It’s something that we, who were—just took what happened. No, I always admired the people who were in the position to do something to help us. We had respect for people who had the hard work to do.

Rigelhaupt: In looking back while you were in the Navy during World War II, did you have any sense that the US might end up in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, or were they seen as staunch allies?

Coffey: You know, at that time, being in San Francisco and so forth, I don’t think that the Soviet Union was very important. It was always the Pacific and Japan and what was happening at our end of the world. I felt that what goes on in Europe is going to be taken care of very well. We’ll win there. So I think that at that time—. You know, it was so long ago it’s hard. It worked out all right; I have to look at it that way. You know, there’s so much I just can’t remember.

Rigelhaupt: You were probably in San Francisco when a lot of Japanese Americans, or perhaps you had been re-stationed in DC—let me back up. Were you in San Francisco when former Japanese and Japanese American residents of San Francisco came home?

Coffey: Came back? No, not at all. We just weren’t conscious about the Japanese there on the ground. They were just always our enemies out there, the Japanese. We never saw any of the Japanese. They had all gone away. In fact, we have a couple of people here who were imprisoned during the war.

Rigelhaupt: So you don’t remember people coming home to San Francisco?

Coffey: No, I don’t.

Rigelhaupt: One of the major other changes in San Francisco and Oakland and Richmond during the war was a lot of African Americans moved to the region. There was a migration of African Americans to San Francisco and Oakland and Richmond for jobs during World War II.
Coffey: That’s something I don’t remember anything about.

Rigelhaupt: But you don’t remember people talking—

Coffey: During that time, no. I don’t. No.

Rigelhaupt: Was there a sense that people in different racial groups got along pretty well in San Francisco?

Coffey: I’m just trying to think about like in San Francisco in those days. I think all we saw were the natives, the Americans. I wasn’t conscious of anyone else being there. You know, the WAVES. No it was all the Army, the Navy. It was a lot of the people who were in the military. I’m just not conscious of anything. We seem to have lived a rather straight life there.

Rigelhaupt: The only reason I asked about questions of race relations in San Francisco is compared to LA—if you remember there were the zoot suit riots in 1943 and there were kind of race riots in LA and Detroit that not every part of the country—. Well, some parts of the country had more serious issue than San Francisco, but I’m just trying to see if you remember it being different or similar, or what you remembered about it.

Coffey: It was the war in San Francisco was all I—.

Rigelhaupt: You met your husband in London?

Coffey: I met him the first of December, 1950. I came over on the ship and then had to take a train up to the place there where the train comes in. Somebody was supposed to come pick me up, and I was standing out there waiting and waiting and waiting with my trunk. He was late. That’s where I met him. And four years later we were married. This is where I met Jack. You see, we were both staying in the same apartment building there. The State Department, I think, was taking over. So I got an apartment near Harrods Department Store and various departments there. He had an apartment down in Chelsea, or close by. Anyway, we were married four years later. That was my time in London.

Rigelhaupt: Did you stay in London for a number of years after you were married?

Coffey: No. We were married, and we left three days later because it was the end of his four years. And I’d been there four years. So then we came back here, and then went back again, ’73 to ’75. We were in Frankfurt, Germany ’58 to ’63. So, that part of the world.
Rigelhaupt: Were all those times with the State Department?

Coffey: Yeah. When we were in Germany we were with the Army.

Rigelhaupt: What did your husband do with the CIA?

Coffey: He was head of the {inaudible} and security and various other—

Rigelhaupt: Things you can’t tell me probably.

Coffey: Yes. [laughs] He retired in ’75 and went to work for a law firm here in Arlington. [pause tape]

Rigelhaupt: The question I wanted to ask was your recollection of politics and what you remember about FDR and the New Deal.

Coffey: Isn’t that interesting? FDR. He was tremendous. My father—we were Republicans, you see, and so I had to be very careful about them. I think FDR, we were very lucky to have him. But then I’m looking back on it this long ago, so I can’t tell you any more than that. At that time I thought he was a splendid president, but I wasn’t doing anything for him; I wasn’t out working for him.

Rigelhaupt: You said your father was a Republican.

Coffey: My father, yes.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember if he had a sense of opposition to FDR’s New Deal policies?

Coffey: I can’t tell you anything about that because I don’t know. He just was a Republican and always went strong Republican.

Rigelhaupt: How do you remember the early days of the Cold War—late forties before you went to London—affecting politics in the United States?

Coffey: I can’t tell you that. That far back, I can’t remember. I usually vote Democratic; that’s the side I’m usually on. Sorry.

Rigelhaupt: It was certainly a time in which some people felt threatened, and there was more a sense of fear. And I’m just wondering if you have any memories of how that might have affected people.

Coffey: Are you talking about FDR still?
Rigelhaupt: No, about the early Cold War. The sense of threat from communism—

2-00:43:02 Coffey: Yes, well at that time it was very worrisome but then not anything that anyone did anything about it. It’s interesting; something that’s affected me recently is the Watergate. It was very involved here. It’s something, I think, that we’ve all been thinking about recently: the Watergate and what happened there. And our President had to retire. It’s something that’s been quite a bit in the newspapers recently, and that was something that affected us here. We knew the man who was one of the five men who were imprisoned for having done the being in the Democratic headquarters, stealing. That’s something that’s bothered me. I think at the time we didn’t realize what a difficulty it was, what a disaster, really, it was at the time. And it affected all of us.

Well, I have to go, and you have to go. You’re going to be having dinner with your friends.

Rigelhaupt: Two last questions, and they may be very brief. The way I like to end is to, one, ask was there anything I should have asked and I didn’t, and two, is there anything you’d like to add?

2-00:45:48 Coffey: No, I think you’ve done a wonderful job of just going through everything. I think that I was having a hard time trying to remember anything that was happening during that time. But then you started at the very beginning and took me through everything, and I’m very grateful for that because I was able to think of things that I would have forgotten otherwise.

Was there anything else? I don’t think so. I’ve been scribbling this and that and so forth. It bothers me that there’s so much I forget. I just can’t remember anymore. But then, I feel I was very lucky about how things worked out. And I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve because I’ve enjoyed it. I didn’t expect to enjoy it, but I’ve enjoyed it. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: Thank you very much.

2-00:47:20 Coffey: I’ll probably think of something later on that I should have told you.

Rigelhaupt: Thank you.