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Willie Mae Cotright

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
Judith Dunning
in 2002

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Born April 11, 1913 in Barham, Louisiana. -- Parents and grandparents born in Louisiana. -- Memories of family life growing up on farm close to relatives and neighbors in Louisiana -- Description of mother and wearing high-heeled shoes working at home. -- Story of horse that froze after falling in a well during winter. -- Father died in the service in World War I and stepfather built house where family lived -- Going to Baptist Young Peoples Union (BYPU) service on Sundays at the Bethlehem Baptist Church. -- Return to Louisiana for family reunions and seeing changes in rural area of Louisiana where family lived. -- Raised sisters, responsible for washing, starching and ironing clothes. -- Ran away during high school to get married then returned to finish high school at age fifteen.

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Story of eloping to Texas to be married. -- Early school education and love of reading history and newspapers. -- Second marriage, to Otis Cotright and move to California. -- Importance of unions in getting a job in California.

00:30:05

Training in the shipyard as a welder for good pay -- Migrating to California on crowded buses and trains and crossing the Mason-Dixon line. --Sharing an apartment with shipyard workers on day and night shifts. -- Housing shortages and difficulty of getting an apartment alone with husband because he did not work in shipyard.

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Description of Richmond during and after the war. -- Worked as a hairdresser after the war. -- Opening Cotright corner grocery and liquor store with husband in Richmond. -- Description of running one of first black-owned businesses in Richmond in a racially mixed neighborhood for thirty years.

[begin audio file Cotright2 12-13-02 (with Webster).wav]

00:00:03

Mr. Webster, friend from Louisiana whose brother was married to sister, joins interview. -- Running the store seven days a week. -- Purchasing fresh produce from Leu Produce and selling high quality groceries. -- Involvement in city council and life membership in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). -- Working with NAACP to elect George Livingston, first African American mayor of Richmond. -- Story of first African American clerk in Richmond.

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Member of Black Chamber of Commerce. -- Population changes in Richmond after the war and people moving to other regions of the country. -- Historic importance of Richmond because of shipyards and shipbuilding in the war -- Closing of shipyards and pollution of bay from shipyards. -- Concerns about Chevron and other refineries, air pollution and high incidence of asthma. -- Fishing in the bay.

00:30:11

Mr. Webster's memories of World War II and bombings. -- Current community issues in Richmond and importance of education.

Interview with Willie Mae Cotright and Mr. Webster
Interviewer: Judith Dunning
[Interview #1: December 13, 2002]
[Begin Audio File Cotright1 12-13-02.wav]

00:00:06

Dunning:

Good morning. Today is December 13, 2002. We're doing an interview with Mrs. Willie Mae Cotright, in Richmond, California. My name is Judith Dunning.

00:00:20

Cotright:

My name is Willie Mae Cotright.

00:00:25

Dunning:

Mrs. Cotright, what year were you born?

00:00:28

Cotright:

April 11, 1913.

00:00:32

Dunning:

Where were you born?

00:00:33

Cotright:

Barham, Louisiana.

00:00:36

Dunning:

Do you know where your parents were born?

00:00:40

Cotright:

Glendy, Louisiana.

00:00:48

Dunning:

And how about your grandparents? Do you know where they were born?

00:00:55

Cotright:

A town, Toro, California.

00:00:59

Dunning:

Oh, so they were from California. Your grandparents were born in California.

00:01:01

Cotright:

I'm sorry. Not California, Louisiana.

00:01:05

Dunning:

Louisiana, okay. I thought, well, there's a story we should get.

00:01:08

Cotright:

[laughter] No, Louisiana.

00:01:11

Dunning:

Now, do you remember any stories that your parents or grandparents told you about their life when they were growing up? Did they talk about their childhood?

00:01:24

Cotright:

Well, mostly they were raised on the farm. They would talk about farm life.

00:01:32

Dunning:

Farm life in Louisiana.

00:01:33

Cotright:

In Louisiana, yes.

00:01:37

Dunning:

And so your parents, they came from a farm. They lived on a farm when they were growing up?

00:01:42

Cotright:

When they were growing up.

00:01:44

Dunning:

Oh, okay. How many sisters and brothers were in your family when you were growing up?

00:01:50

Cotright:

Three sisters, no brothers.

00:01:54

Dunning:

What was your place in the family?

00:02:00

Cotright:

I was the oldest one.

00:02:01

Dunning:

You were the oldest daughter. So you probably had a lot of jobs, being the oldest daughter.

00:02:06

Cotright:

Yes, I did. [laughs]

00:02:11

Dunning:

What do you remember about your childhood home? Do you still have a memory of what it looked like?

00:02:18

Cotright:

Yes, I still remember just growing up. During that time, no bathroom. We had to go to the outhouse.

00:02:29

Dunning:

How far was the outhouse from your house?

00:02:34

Cotright:

Oh, about as far from here to outside. It was close.

00:02:40

Dunning:

Not too far.

00:02:41

Cotright:

Not too far.

00:02:43

Dunning:

Was it a wood house?

00:02:44

Cotright:

Wood.

00:01:32

Dunning:

A wood house.

00:01:32

Cotright:

Yes.

00:01:32

Dunning:

Did anyone in your family build the house?

00:01:32

Cotright:

Yes, my stepfather.

00:01:32

Dunning:

Oh, your stepfather. Did you have much land around your home?

00:01:32

Cotright:

About as much as this here.

00:01:32

Dunning:

Oh, okay. I'm trying to get an idea of was it a neighborhood, were you close to other neighbors...

00:03:21

Cotright:

Yes. Oh, yes. Growing up, yes. Next-door neighbors, and so forth.

00:03:27

Dunning:

Okay. When I talked to Mr. Webster yesterday, he talked about his first home in Louisiana, and that all around him were his relatives. His cousins in one house, and other cousins in another house. Did you have your relatives close by?

00:03:42

Cotright:

Yes, I had. Most all of my relatives was close, yes.

00:03:50

Dunning:

I'm going to ask you a little bit about your mother. How would you describe her? What did she look like?

00:04:05

Cotright:

I would describe her as, my mother was not quite as tall as I am, but she was really, really neat. She would wear—even cleaning house—high-heeled shoes. The house we had was built up high, and you could go under the house. [tape interruption]

00:05:00

Dunning:

Mr. Webster, whom we interviewed yesterday, just came in, and he's going to sit along in the dining room and listen to you. You two are very good friends. I'm going to pick up where we were before. You were describing your mother. You said she was a neat woman, and who wore high-heeled shoes all the time.

00:05:21

Cotright:

All the time. The house was built up high. You know, you could go under the house. She would even go right under the house with high-heeled shoes. She wore high heels all the time. I remember when she first started getting sick, my niece brought her out here. She had on some low-heeled shoes. First time I had seen my mother in low-heeled shoes.

00:06:03

Dunning:

So she did all her work with her high-heeled shoes.

00:06:05

Cotright:

All her work, in her heels.

00:06:12

Dunning:

Can you tell me a typical day for your mother when all the sisters were living at home? Things you remember her doing the most?

00:06:30

Cotright:

Well, the most, you know, getting her children ready for school and church, mostly.

00:06:37

Dunning:

Did she have chores on the farm? Did you have any animals that you had to take care of, or big gardens?

00:06:51

Cotright:

We had a dog, and during this time we had a stepfather. I remember well, we had a horse in the yard. It was snowing real bad. In Louisiana, we get snow every year around Christmastime.

00:07:23

Dunning:

Snow, and lots of ice? Did you get a lot of ice?

00:07:25

Cotright:

Some. We had a well. Some way or another, that horse fell in that well, and when we woke up the next morning, he was froze.

00:07:40

Dunning:

Oh. That would make a big impression on you.

00:07:43

Cotright:

Yes. [laughs]

00:07:44

Dunning:

Must have been hard to get him out of the well.

00:07:48

Cotright:

Yes. Froze.

00:07:51

Dunning:

Now, you mentioned your stepfather. How old were you when he came into your life?

00:07:58

Cotright:

Let's see. I must have been about maybe twelve or thirteen.

00:08:08

Dunning:

What do you remember about your birth father?

00:08:14

Cotright:

Nothing, because he died in the service.

00:08:22

Dunning:

What was his name?

00:08:24

Cotright:

{Oscar Gilbert?}

00:08:27

Dunning:

Did he live at home with you ever?

00:08:31

Cotright:

I was a baby when he left and went to the army. Not a baby, but small.

00:08:38

Dunning:

So this was during World War I?

00:08:40

Cotright:

Yes.

00:08:45

Dunning:

Okay. A little bit back to your mother. What do you think are some of your mother's best qualities?

00:08:53

Cotright:

Mostly was going to church and doing church activities.

00:09:04

Dunning:

Church, was that a big part of your life growing up?

00:09:07

Cotright:

Yes.

00:09:08

Dunning:

How often would you go?

00:09:10

Cotright:

We had to go every Sunday to Sunday school, and then church service, and then BYPU [Baptist Young Peoples Union] service. You know about that?

00:09:28

Webster:

Yes.

00:09:30

Dunning:

Tell us about it. What is that?

00:09:32

Cotright:

Well, the BYPU service, they were like the kids, they would teach them. We had service and they would teach them. The pastor would teach them the Bible.

00:09:47

Dunning:

What was the name of your church?

00:09:51

Cotright:

Star of Bethlehem Baptist Church.

00:09:56

Dunning:

Was it a large congregation?

00:10:01

Cotright:

Not too large during the early years, but it's grew, grew, grew.

00:10:08

Dunning:

Was that the church you went to through your whole childhood?

00:10:13

Cotright:

As long as I was in [DeRidder?]. And I still go back. That's my church; I still go back.

00:10:19

Dunning:

When was the last time you went back?

00:10:25

Cotright:

July last year. We have a family reunion, and I went back.

00:10:30

Dunning:

So you still have a lot of family there?

00:10:33

Cotright:

I only have one niece left there. All of them came out to California.

00:10:43

Dunning:

How do you find it when you go back? What does it seem like to you?

00:10:46

Cotright:

Nothing like it used to be.

00:10:48

Dunning:

Really? In what way?

00:10:50

Cotright:

Well, a lot of the older people there moved away. Nobody's there to take care of property and everything. It has grown up. It's just like a wilderness.

00:11:11

Webster:

A wilderness.

00:11:12

Dunning:

Oh, a wilderness.

00:11:13

Cotright:

Yes, something like that now. He went not long ago. He could witness to that.

00:11:22

Webster:

Squirrels, and everything. There's one of them 'coons and everything, climbing the trees. When I grew up, everybody just about had a pecan tree or a hickory nut tree, one of them. Now, in every

yard, just about, there's a bunch, but they done tore the houses down, because there wasn't nobody there to take care of them. There's very few houses in the neck of the woods that we grew up in.

00:11:56

Dunning:

Oh, okay, because most areas you hear about get more built up, but it sounds like this area went the opposite direction.

00:12:04

Cotright:

No, they didn't build up there.

00:12:10

Dunning:

You mentioned that you were the oldest daughter. Now, what were your chores? You probably had a lot of responsibilities.

00:12:17

Cotright:

I did. A lot. I had to try to raise my sisters. Of my sisters, I'm the smartest one. They didn't like to work. I had to do most of the work. [laughs] During that time, the girls would wear starched dresses. We never could wear, you know, "wash and wear."

00:12:49

Dunning:

Right. No sweat clothes then. No sweat pants.

00:12:53

Cotright:

And I had to wash all those girls'—two little sisters—I had to wash all their clothes and iron all their clothes. And we had, like, starch. We had to starch the dresses. And I'm the one that would keep them looking clean.

00:13:13

Dunning:

So you were responsible for keeping everybody dressed.

00:13:15

Cotright:

Yes.

00:13:18

Dunning:

Would you sew the clothes, or buy them?

00:13:22

Cotright:

Well, my mother would either knit or sew them.

00:13:29

Dunning:

Tell me about your schooling.

00:13:34

Cotright:

I finished high school, but during that time, before I finished high school, I ran away and got married. When I came back, I came back and then I went and finished school.

00:14:00

Dunning:

How old were you at that time?

00:14:07

Cotright:

I was young, about fifteen.

00:14:12

Dunning:

Was that pretty common at that time, to get married young?

00:14:16

Cotright:

No, it wasn't.

00:14:20

Dunning:

What'd your family think of it?

00:14:23

Cotright:

They didn't think...[laughs]

00:14:27

Dunning:

It didn't go over too big?

00:14:29

Cotright:

No, it was so funny. My cousin, she helped me get ready. I was going to catch the train, going to meet my husband. She helped me, all that time, to get ready. And then, after I got on the train, she went back crying and telling my mother, but I had gone.

00:14:56

Dunning:

What was your husband's name?

00:15:00

Cotright:

{Robert Singleton?}.

00:15:01

Dunning:

Was he from your town?

00:15:03

Cotright:

Yes.

00:15:06

Dunning:

Did your other sisters expect you to get married young?

00:15:10

Cotright:

Nobody.

00:15:11

Dunning:

So you eloped.

00:15:13

Cotright:

Yes. Ran away.

00:15:16

Dunning:

Where'd you run away to?

00:15:18

Cotright:

Texas.

00:15:19

Dunning:

Why'd you choose Texas?

00:15:23

Cotright:

Well, my husband had been working down in Texas, so that's why I was going there.

00:15:31

Dunning:

Was he a little bit older than you?

00:15:34

Cotright:

He was about the same age.

00:15:42

Dunning:

At which point did you come back and face your family?

00:15:49

Cotright:

My mother had the police to meet me at that train, when I got off the train in Texas.

00:16:00

Dunning:

She didn't waste any time, did she?

00:16:03

Cotright:

It was so funny. The police say, "That's her," because she had described everything that I wore. [laughs] When I got off the train, the police say, "That's her." I said, "What happened?" I was shocked. So he told me. They were going to put me right back on that train, back to my mother, but I talked them into letting me speak to my pastor. They called him to the phone, and I told him what I had done and everything, and to talk to my mother and to see if it was okay for us to get married. So he did. He talked to her, and said, "Well, you might as well."

00:17:04

Dunning:

Where was your husband-to-be at that time? Was he waiting for you at the train station?

00:17:10

Cotright:

No. He had to come to the town down where I was.

00:17:15

Dunning:

Oh, okay. So you traveled back together to Texas?

00:17:20

Cotright:

No, I came back alone. 'Cause we got married in Texas.

00:17:28

Dunning:

How was your reception when you came back to Louisiana?

00:17:32

Cotright:

Well, they all were glad to see me. [laughs]

00:17:37

Dunning:

What was the period of time you were gone?

00:17:43

Cotright:

No more than a year.

00:17:46

Dunning:

That long? You stayed away for a year.

00:17:47

Cotright:
Yes.

00:17:54

Dunning:
Oh, okay. At that point when you came back, did your husband join you in Louisiana? Did he come back?

00:18:04

Cotright:
I came alone. He finally came.

00:18:07

Dunning:
Did you live with family?

00:18:10

Cotright:
Yes.

00:18:12

Dunning:
This started off because I was asking you about your schooling. So then you came back and you finished high school?

00:18:18

Cotright:
I did.

00:18:21

Dunning:
If you don't mind backtracking a little bit, I'm wondering if you could tell me about your first experiences in school. What schools you went to, and if there were any favorite subjects you had, and teachers.

00:18:40

Cotright:
My principal, {A. Leventon?}, he was the principal for a long, long time there. I asked him if I could come back, you know, married. I didn't know how it was going to be, got married and go back to school, but he said, "Sure. You can come back to school." So I went back to school and finished.

00:19:06

Dunning:
Was that the same school that you went to from like the first grade?

00:19:13

Cotright:
No, in the first grade we was in another town. Moved to DeRidder.

00:19:23

Dunning:

Do you have any recollection of those very early school days?

00:19:28

Cotright:

Well, the early days, it was just like—during that time they didn't teach like now. The teacher, she would go over your lesson and explain things to you, arithmetic and all that. But during those times is nothing like now.

00:19:56

Dunning:

What do you see that's the biggest difference between then and now?

00:20:01

Cotright:

A lot is different, because during that time, when you finished twelfth grade, you could teach. Not now; you can't do that.

00:20:22

Dunning:

How do you feel about the kind of education you got?

00:20:26

Cotright:

Wonderful. I feel wonderful.

00:20:30

Dunning:

You learned to read and write, and...

00:20:33

Cotright:

Yes.

00:20:35

Dunning:

Yesterday, when we were talking to Mr. Webster, he said his favorite subject was history. Did you have a favorite subject?

00:20:46

Cotright:

My favorite subject was—well, I liked history. I like to read a lot.

00:20:59

Dunning:

Was there any particular part of history you liked to study?

00:21:10

Cotright:

What I was really interested in was learning the things in the world. What's going on, what had happened. I was interested in that.

00:21:20

Dunning:

Did much information about the world—how did you get it at that time? There wasn't TV. Some radio. Was there a town newspaper that you were able to get?

00:21:36

Cotright:

Yes, we had newspapers. We would read newspapers. We had a little newsboy came around every day with the paper. So that's how I got the news, from the paper.

00:21:54

Dunning:

So your family took the paper.

00:21:56

Cotright:

Yes.

00:22:00

Dunning:

How about your sisters? Did they go to the same schools that you went to?

00:22:03

Cotright:

Yes.

00:22:11

Dunning:

When you were a teenager, did you have ambitions or dreams about what you thought your life would be like? Things that you wanted to do?

00:22:24

Cotright:

Yes, I always did want to be able to teach the kids. Teach how to live and do things like that. That was my ambition.

00:22:41

Dunning:

Were you able to do that?

00:22:43

Cotright:

Some. Some of them, I did.

00:22:49

Dunning:

Do you think there are certain things your parents wanted you to do in your life?

00:22:56

Cotright:

In those days, the older days, they would think of getting your education. That's it, mostly.

00:23:08

Dunning:

That's real important.

00:23:09

Cotright:

Yes, the education.

00:23:11

Dunning:

Mr. Webster said the same thing yesterday, that education was very, very important to him.

00:23:17

Cotright:

Yes, that's exactly what they wanted.

00:23:24

Dunning:

When you think about your childhood, are there certain memories that you enjoy reliving? Do you think about certain periods of time when you were a child?

00:23:41

Cotright:

Yes, coming up—raising, coming up—I think about that. I always did want to have a goal. In my life, that's what I always wanted.

00:24:07

Dunning:

You had ambitions.

00:24:09

Cotright:

Yes.

00:24:12

Dunning:

And how about your young husband?

00:24:16

Cotright:

Well, not any ambitions that I know. Uh uh.

00:24:22

Dunning:

Was he your first husband, or did you have one husband?

00:24:26

Cotright:

First. He was the first one.

00:24:34

Dunning:

So you married him when you were about fifteen. How long were you two married?

00:24:46

Cotright:

Oh, maybe about three years.

00:24:55

Dunning:

What happened?

00:24:58

Cotright:

Well, he wasn't exactly what I wanted for a husband. No.

00:25:13

Dunning:

In today's life, you'd probably date him, rather than get married.

00:25:23

Cotright:

Oh, yes.

00:25:29

Dunning:

At what point did you come to California?

00:25:40

Cotright:

Well, then I went to the second husband then, when I came to California.

00:25:43

Dunning:

What was his name?

00:25:45

Cotright:

Otis Cotright. During that time, the shipyards—you know, they were building those ships. A lot of people migrated from Louisiana to California, because they wanted to get that big money. They weren't used to getting big money. You work, work, sometimes for not much a day.

00:26:17

Webster:

[laughs] Fifty, seventy-five cents a day.

00:26:19

Cotright:

A day. And coming to California, that was a big thing.

00:26:26

Dunning:

I had heard—maybe it was mistaken, what I heard—I heard that you came in the thirties. But you didn't come until the shipyard era? Until the forties?

00:26:41

Cotright:

I worked in the shipyards.

00:26:43

Dunning:

But when did you first come to California?

00:26:46

Cotright:

In '30, '34, I think.

00:26:50

Dunning:

Okay, so you came before the big shipyard period in the early forties.

00:26:57

Cotright:

Well, during that time—I don't know exactly. But anyway, I started working at the shipyard when I first got here.

00:27:07

Dunning:

Oh, okay. Is that what brought you to California, the thought of working in the shipyard?

00:27:18

Cotright:

No, not the shipyard. It was, in other words, you hear about "California, California." You could live so much better, better, better. So some people would come out, and they didn't like California. They said you had to buy a job. [laughs] But the thing was, they had to get in the union. I guess they were thinking that's why they had to buy the job.

00:27:50

Dunning:

To get into the union.

00:27:53

Cotright:

No, they think you had to buy a job to work. But it was only you had to get in the union to work.

00:28:02

Dunning:

Did you get into the union?

00:28:05

Cotright:

Yes, I had to get into the union.

00:28:09

Dunning:

And this was during the shipyard.

00:28:12

Cotright:

Shipyard, yes. I was on deck when they launched that first ship.

00:28:22

Dunning:

So you were there right at the beginning.

00:28:24

Cotright:

Right at the beginning.

00:28:27

Dunning:

Tell me what you remember about getting your job, and then what your first job was.

00:28:35

Cotright:

The first job was the welder on that ship, making that ship. We worked on that ship and worked on that until we launched it. That's the first ship that went out.

00:28:53

Dunning:

Do you remember the training that you had?

00:28:55

Cotright:

Yes. They were teaching how to weld. Like the cracks and things, how you had to—I said “sew 'em up”—but you had to weld them together.

00:29:17

Dunning:

Do you recall how long the training was that you had?

00:29:22

Cotright:

It wasn't like a training. When you applied for a job, you had somebody we called a leaderman over you. They would teach you how to work.

00:29:42

Dunning:

So there was probably a lot of on-the-job training.

00:29:44

Cotright:

Yes.

00:29:48

Dunning:

Were you in the first group of people who came? Because the population of Richmond went from twenty-three thousand to a hundred and twenty-five thousand in a couple of years. Were you among the first people who arrived from the South to work in the shipyards?

00:30:05

Cotright:

I was one of the first ones to arrive. That's why we came to California.

00:30:16

Dunning:

Going back to Louisiana a little bit, I know that they would send leaflets to people and they'd post them in the bus stations and in the post office. Do you remember when you first heard about the opportunities in California?

00:30:39

Cotright:

I came in '43, too, maybe '42. You know, they were saying about California: it's so great, you could do so much, make so much money and everything.

00:31:01

Dunning:

And it's sunny all the time... [laughs]

00:31:04

Cotright:

[laughs] And I wanted that, you know. 'Cause we used to work... What did y'all work for, a day?

00:31:17

Webster:

To come out here? When he was working out here?

00:31:22

Cotright:

Home, back home. How much you making then?

00:31:26

Webster:

Oh, about a dollar and a quarter, dollar and a half.

00:31:30

Cotright:

Something like that a day. We were doing that, and we were hearing how much in California we could make, so everybody wanted to come to California to live better.

00:31:43

Dunning:

Do you remember your trip to California, how you got here?

00:31:48

Cotright:

I sure do. [laughs]

00:31:52

Dunning:

Tell us about it.

00:31:57

Cotright:

[laughs] The first trip, let me see, what did we do? We caught a bus going to Lake Charles, and then from Lake Charles we got the train coming out.

00:32:17

Dunning:

Was it filled with people coming out to California to work in the shipyards?

00:32:22

Cotright:

Filled. I mean, sometimes they didn't have enough room for everybody. They had to wait 'till the next day, or some other time.

00:32:35

Dunning:

Would that take a couple of days, three days or so on the train?

00:32:39

Cotright:

I think about four days, maybe five.

00:32:45

Dunning:

What was the atmosphere in the train?

00:32:50

Cotright:

Well, during that time they had the—you heard of the Mason-Dixon line?

00:32:56

Webster:

Yes. That's when everything from El Paso, Texas, that white and black didn't ride in the same car. After you passed El Paso, then everybody rode in the same car.

00:33:11

Dunning:

You knew that before you got on the train?

00:33:15

Cotright:

Yes, we knew that before we got on.

00:33:22

Dunning:

Were there white Southerners also going at the same time?

00:33:25

Cotright:

Yes.

00:33:28

Dunning:

Well, it seems like there must have been some excitement in the air, as well. People traveling, people leaving their home, and the opportunities that await.

00:33:39

Cotright:

The opportunity. That's what it was, just the opportunity. That we had, at least the blacks had, coming out. Be able to do things we had never been used to. Having more.

00:34:00

Dunning:

When you left Louisiana, did you leave with the feeling that you weren't coming back?

00:34:07

Cotright:

When I left there, I had the feeling I never did want to go back to live. I'd like to go to visit, like I do now, but never to live. I never wanted to go back to live.

00:34:29

Dunning:

And when you arrived here, what happened?

00:34:35

Cotright:

Disappointed. [laughs]

00:34:37

Dunning:

In what ways?

00:34:43

Cotright:

When I got off that little dinky train and looked, I could look out and—you know, I was thinking I was going to California, a big, big city. I didn't know we had to build that city up. I was thinking all the time of big—I was so disappointed. I didn't know we had to work on it and build it and build it. Like now, I have seen so many: El Cerrito hills, and all that built up all around. People have nice homes, and everything. But during that time, we were working in the shipyard. If the man wasn't working in the shipyard, well, you couldn't get a place to live. So anyway, his brother—

00:35:49

Dunning:

Mr. Webster's brother.

00:35:51

Cotright:

His brother and another friend came together. They was working at the shipyard, so they was able to get an apartment. So we had four people living in that apartment. Some would go to work at night, and when they get off, the one working days, they'd switch. The one working nights would go to sleep.

00:36:18

Dunning:

I've heard about those beds that were warm all the time. Someone would get out, and someone else would come in.

00:36:23

Cotright:

That's what we did.

00:36:25

Dunning:

Did your husband come out at the same time?

00:36:31

Cotright:

No. He had heard so many things about California, this and that, he said, "Well, I'm going to let you go." Me and his mother. "I'm going to let you all go out. I know I'll get the right information." It's so funny. My first check, I sent it back to him to let him know that everything was okay. [laughs]

00:37:02

Dunning:

That was the information he needed. How soon did he join you?

00:37:06

Cotright:

Oh, about three months.

00:37:13

Dunning:

In those three months that you were here, how did you get settled in?

00:37:20

Cotright:

During that time, we weren't far from the shipyards. I worked in Number Two Yard. It wasn't too far from where I lived.

00:37:31

Dunning:

What area did you live on?

00:37:34

Cotright:

I lived...

00:37:40

Webster:

Was it Seaport [Avenue]?

00:37:43

Dunning:

Was it near Canal?

00:37:46

Cotright:

No, no. We did live near Canal later, but this was—the freeway, this freeway, what do they call it? Nimitz Freeway?

00:37:54

Dunning:

Yes, right over by there. But it was right in Richmond? The apartment was in Richmond?

00:38:03

Cotright:

Yes. They used to have a little—I forgot the name—a little train. They would transport people from San Francisco.

00:38:09

Dunning:

The Key [System] route?

00:38:11

Cotright:

Yes. The Key train. That was our only transportation, that Key train, because during that time we couldn't buy cars and anything. [laughs]

00:38:25

Dunning:

And even if you did, you couldn't get gas.

00:38:27

Cotright:

No.

00:38:30

Dunning:

So what was your schedule like in the shipyards? Which shift were you on?

00:38:36

Cotright:

Number two.

00:38:40

Dunning:

What were your hours?

00:38:43

Cotright:

Let me see. I guess around eight to four, I think. Something like that.

00:38:53

Dunning:

What was the work like for you?

00:38:58

Cotright:

Oh, well, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed thinking about what I would be able to accomplish, so I enjoyed working and saving my money.

00:39:17

Dunning:

Well, probably getting that first check was pretty nice.

00:39:21

Cotright:

That was good. [laughs] 'Cause, you know, during that time we would do day work. You would get maybe a hundred—I don't mean a hundred.

00:39:38

Webster:

A hundred a month. [laughs]

00:39:44

Dunning:

Back in Louisiana.

00:39:45

Cotright:

Yes.

00:39:46

Dunning:

So it was pretty different.

00:39:48

Cotright:

You'd get about maybe two-fifty or three dollars a week. So you know you wanted to do better.

00:39:54

Dunning:

Did you feel rather well-to-do after you started getting your salary?

00:40:01

Cotright:

Yes, I did. I really did.

00:40:07

Dunning:

What do you recall about some of the other people on your crew? Were there other women?

00:40:21

Cotright:

On the crew? What do you mean?

00:40:23

Dunning:

When you were welding. When you were at the shipyard.

00:40:26

Cotright:

Oh, yes. I made a lot of friends during that time. That's the only way we could kind of meet people, during working, because, you know.

00:40:40

Dunning:

Was your welding team integrated? Were there all kinds of people working together?

00:40:49

Cotright:

All kinds, yes. We didn't have that, on the, no.

00:40:57

Dunning:

You didn't find that there was a problem.

00:40:59

Cotright:

No.

00:41:03

Dunning:

Since you were there from the beginning, do you ever remember—one of the people I interviewed a long time ago was Lewis Van Hook, who was a member of what they called the "Singing Shipbuilders." He was in a gospel quartet, and they used to sing during the lunch hours. They were four guys. I believe he was from Texas, and he said one of the reasons they had them singing was to sort of keep people in a good mood and ease some tensions around. Do you ever remember seeing them?

00:41:40

Cotright:

I knew some Van Hooks, but I don't know.

00:41:44

Dunning:

Big family. He came, and he and his wife had twelve children. They're a big Richmond family.

00:41:54

Cotright:

I remember some of the Van Hooks.

00:41:58

Webster:

There was a slew of them.

00:42:01

Cotright:

Did you know them?

00:42:03

Webster:

Yes, there was a whole bunch of 'em.

00:42:06

Dunning:

They're a big family, yes. Some of the people that you met in the shipyard, did any of them remain friends with you?

00:42:13

Cotright:

Yes. Let me see. I had two real good friends I met in the shipyard.

00:42:25

Dunning:

Are any of them still around here?

00:42:29

Cotright:

No, passed away.

00:42:32

Dunning:

So you're probably among one of the oldest people surviving from the shipyards, I would think.

00:42:43

Cotright:

Well, every now and then I would hear of different ones, you know, that used to work at the shipyards.

00:42:53

Dunning:

What happened when your husband joined you? Did you find new accommodations?

00:42:59

Cotright:

When he came, he didn't work in the shipyards, so he couldn't get an apartment. When he left home, he was a presser. When he came out, he went right into what he was doing.

00:43:22

Dunning:

Let me follow up on that a little bit, because you had mentioned earlier that you couldn't get an apartment unless your husband was working. Was that the case? Was it because you were a woman?

00:43:42

Cotright:

No, the man had to work in the shipyard to be able to get the apartment.

00:43:45

Dunning:

A woman working in the shipyard couldn't get an apartment?

00:43:48

Cotright:

No.

00:43:51

Dunning:

But could they get into war housing? You know, the projects that were just built for shipyard workers? The women, were they able to get their apartments by themselves?

00:44:04

Cotright:

You know, I never did. Did you? I didn't even remember the women.

00:44:12

Webster:

I wasn't here, I was in the army during that point.

00:44:15

Cotright:

Right. I don't remember just women getting an apartment.

00:44:18

Dunning:

One of the people I interviewed, after she and her husband split up, I think I remember her saying she couldn't stay in the war housing. She ended up getting a trailer with some other women, all the way out in Hayward. They would commute back and forth.

00:44:36

Cotright:

I just don't remember that, because we lived with the ones I mentioned. We stayed together. Then as soon as we could get an apartment, we got our own apartment.

00:44:58

Dunning:

Where was that first apartment?

00:45:03

Cotright:

I don't mean the first apartment.

00:45:06

Webster:

Was it in the Canals?

00:45:07

Cotright:

In the Canals; we lived in the Canals.

00:45:12

Dunning:

In the Canal area.

00:45:14

Cotright:

But then we were staying with somebody else during that time. We never was able to get an apartment ourselves. Always had to stay with somebody.

00:45:28

Dunning:

Was it a financial reason?

00:45:31

Cotright:

No, no, no.

00:45:33

Dunning:

Or racial?

00:45:33

Cotright:

Not racial, but just like I said, you had to work in the shipyard or something before they'd give you an apartment. You couldn't get an apartment.

00:45:46

Dunning:

Even though you were working in the shipyard.

00:45:47

Cotright:

Yes.

00:45:50

Dunning:

Did you have any children at this point?

00:45:57

Cotright:

No children, no. Raised nieces and nephews.

00:46:03

Dunning:

Oh, okay. I've met a lot of people who've done that. Tell me what Richmond looked like when you first arrived.

00:46:16

Cotright:

[laughs] This is funny. I was ready to go back home. I was disappointed. As I said, I was just looking for it coming into town, blooming and everything.

00:46:33

Dunning:

Orange trees growing, and palm trees.

00:46:38

Cotright:

Mmm. I had to see it grow. Had to help it, you know, grow. It wasn't like I thought it was going to be.

00:46:52

Dunning:

It had been quite a quiet town before the war. Chevron was the biggest organization here. But things got kind of turned upside down.

00:47:07

Cotright:

Oh, yes.

00:47:09

Dunning:

Did you have much contact with some old-time Richmond residents? People who lived here before the war? Did you meet many people like that?

00:47:24

Cotright:

No, I didn't. 'Cause everybody that I met was coming here and seeking, just like I was.

00:47:42

Dunning:

How did Richmond change for you when the shipyards closed?

00:47:48

Cotright:

When the shipyards closed... Let me see, the first thing I did, I went to beauty school in Oakland, took up cosmetics. I became a hairdresser. That's my first project. Then I worked in the beauty shop. And my husband came out, so worked in the beauty shop. Then we decided that we were going into a store. So my next project was the store.

00:48:32

Dunning:

Will you talk about that a bit?

00:48:36

Cotright:

Yes. We decided that we would go into the store business. So we rented this store. I think that first night, we only had a total of, I think we only made fifty-four dollars or something. [laughs]

00:49:14

Dunning:

What kind of store was it?

00:49:16

Cotright:

It was a grocery store, then finally we moved. Then we got a liquor license, so we had grocery and liquor.

00:49:27

Dunning:

Where was this located?

00:49:31

Cotright:

At 432 Barrett [Avenue], in Richmond.

00:49:33

Dunning:

So Fourth and Barrett. Not too far from where the Richmond Museum is. That's over one block, at Nevin [Avenue]. That's like Fourth and Nevin area.

00:49:50

Cotright:

That's Fourth and Nevin?

00:49:52

Dunning:

Yes. So you rented the store.

00:49:58

Cotright:

Yes.

00:50:00

Dunning:

What was that neighborhood like at that time?

00:50:03

Cotright:

At that time when we had the store, downtown was still kind of close.

00:50:19

Dunning:

By Macdonald.

00:50:20

Cotright:

Yes, Macdonald. So anyway, we did pretty well, because they didn't have too many cars so they had to walk to Macdonald. We was on the corner in the neighborhood, so we did okay. Finally, we got a liquor license.

00:50:40

Dunning:

That's a big deal.

00:50:41

Cotright:

Yes, we got the liquor license. That made it much better.

00:50:47

Dunning:

What did you name your store?

00:50:50

Cotright:

Cotright Grocery.

00:50:53

Dunning:

How many years did you have it?

00:51:00

Webster:

Don't ask me, I don't know. It was roughly—it was over thirty years, wasn't it? She didn't have a—you had a store when I got married.

00:51:16

Cotright:

Yes, it was over thirty years.

00:51:18

Webster:

And then she moved from that store building into another building on the corner of Fifth and Nevin.

00:51:25

Cotright:

Yes, it's over thirty years.

00:51:28

Webster:

It's a good thirty years or better.

00:51:32

Dunning:

Was it mostly you and your husband running the store?

00:51:35

Cotright:

We had help. We had to have help.

00:51:42

Dunning:

I was told that this was one of the first black-owned businesses in Richmond.

00:51:47

Cotright:

It was.

00:51:57

Dunning:

Who was your clientele?

00:52:03

Cotright:

It was mixed, because all around the neighborhood, they were mixed.

00:52:15

Dunning:

I've heard that there was a lot of Mexican, Portuguese, Italian...

00:52:20

Cotright:

Well, when we first moved, there weren't too many Mexicans. Not too many.

00:52:34

Dunning:

And were they mostly the people came from the small houses that I think are still there?

00:52:40

Cotright:

No. They're not still—just a very few.

00:52:50

Dunning:

Some. Well, Mr. Webster, I'm wondering if maybe you would like to join in the interview for the period of time where we're talking about Richmond?

00:53:00

Webster:

Well, I lived in the projects.

00:53:03

Cotright:

Oh, okay. We're going to change the tape right now. This would be a good time.

###

[begin audio file Cotright2 12-13-02 (with Webster).wav]

00:00:03

Dunning:

Well, Mr. Webster has joined the interview with Mrs. Cotright. We interviewed you yesterday. First, for the sake of the people watching this, tell us about when you two first met. It sounds like you've been friends forever.

00:00:23

Webster:

[laughs] I don't know, when did we meet? Around '39, wasn't it? Or earlier?

00:00:34

Dunning:

You met in Louisiana.

00:00:35

Cotright:
Yes.

00:00:37

Webster:
Yes. My brother was married to her sister.

00:00:47

Dunning:
Oh, okay. Was it your brother who came out here, or your brother who stayed?

00:00:51

Webster:
My brother came out here. He and a fellow named Stevenson came together. When I got here, my brother and his wife and Willie Mae and her husband was in the same apartment. I moved in with all of them. [laughter]

00:01:15

Dunning:
So you were living here with one of your sisters?

00:01:19

Cotright:
Yes.

00:01:25

Dunning:
So you two have been really connected.

00:01:27

Cotright:
Yes.

00:01:31

Dunning:
You're the godmother of Mr. Webster's daughter, Catherine?

00:01:34

Cotright:
Yes, right.

00:01:36

Dunning:
So you go back a long way. On the first tape, we were beginning to talk about your family store at around Fourth and Barrett, which was the first black business in Richmond. Any recollections that you'd care to talk about, either of you? You must have gone to her store.

00:02:01

Webster:
Yes, I've been to her store.

00:02:03

Dunning:

What did it look like? From the outside, and from the inside.

00:02:07

Webster:

A common building in Richmond; they all looked alike. It needed painting. [laughs] They stayed there. They moved from one store to this store, the last one they had. They fixed it up, painted it and everything. Rearranged the inside of it from what the person had it before they did. It was nice. She congregated good customers.

00:02:46

Dunning:

Would you have meats and produce and canned goods?

00:02:51

Cotright:

Everything.

00:02:53

Dunning:

Where did you get your meats from? Did you have your own butcher in the store?

00:03:01

Cotright:

No, no, no. Oh, yes.

00:03:04

Webster:

That's to cut up the meat, but to bring the half a cow or a quarter of a cow into the store, I don't know who y'all bought that meat from.

00:03:16

Dunning:

I just wondered where the suppliers were at that time, whether they came from Oakland, or...

00:03:22

Webster:

I don't know.

00:03:24

Cotright:

I'm trying to think.

00:03:29

Dunning:

Probably quite different from today, running a store today.

00:03:34

Webster:

Much different. Very few corner stores is around now. Most of them is all gone. The big stores pushed them out, and the young people didn't want to take the hassle to try to run them.

00:03:50

Dunning:

How about the produce? Your fruits and vegetables.

00:03:56

Cotright:

We bought them from Leu Produce. All of them.

00:04:06

Dunning:

Do you know where they came from?

00:04:11

Cotright:

No, I don't.

00:04:14

Dunning:

Would you ever take local produce? Because with so many of the Southerners coming in, like you came from a rural background. We didn't get a chance to talk about your vegetable garden, but lots of people had gardens. Did they ever sell their produce in your store?

00:04:31

Cotright:

No. Regular produce was what we bought from Leu Produce.

00:04:53

Dunning:

Today you find lots of fast food, pre-made meals, canned goods. What other kinds of things did you sell in your store?

00:05:11

Webster:

I guess everything Safeway sold, and Lucky. There were some other markets, but they folded. Anything that you could get from Safeway and Lucky, you could get at her store. It was nice.

00:05:34

Dunning:

Did you work pretty hard at your store?

00:05:38

Cotright:

Every day. Sunday. Every day.

00:05:46

Dunning:

From early morning 'till suppertime?

00:05:50

Cotright:

Yes.

00:05:53

Dunning:

Now, was that a big deal when you got your liquor license? It seems like that would be not an easy thing to get.

00:06:02

Cotright:

It wasn't very easy to get, because the State Board [of Equalization] wouldn't sell—anybody couldn't buy a license, but we was able.

00:06:14

Dunning:

Do you know why you were able to?

00:06:29

Cotright:

I'm trying to remember why. The State Board would interview you, and if we passed, you know—

00:06:41

Dunning:

You pass the inspections, and all that.

00:06:43

Cotright:

Yes, the inspections, then you could get it. Another thing: your neighborhood. They would come out and see if it was okay with them to have a liquor store in that neighborhood. Most time, they knew us, so they didn't object.

00:07:09

Dunning:

And your neighbors didn't object.

00:07:11

Cotright:

No, they didn't object.

00:07:15

Dunning:

Was that ever a problem for you, selling liquor? Because I know sometimes if you have a liquor store, it puts you at higher risk for robbery and some other problems.

00:07:26

Cotright:

We had one robbery. We only had one robbery. But most people, I don't know, were the kind that like you, they were real respectful of us.

00:07:47

Dunning:

You must have become very known in the neighborhood.

00:07:51

Webster:

In Richmond.

00:07:57

Cotright:

Yes. And one thing about my husband, he liked first-class meat. He didn't try to sell, like some people, junk. He didn't buy that. The most expensive meat, he would buy.

00:08:15

Dunning:

So you wanted quality in your store.

00:08:17

Cotright:

Quality. That's what our store was built on, the quality.

00:08:27

Dunning:

During this time, did you become active—[tape interruption for phone]. We were talking about how involved you got in the city of Richmond, being a black business owner. Did you get involved in city council?

00:08:49

Cotright:

City councilman, yes. City council, and I had a life membership in NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We were real active in—

00:09:11

Dunning:

You were very active.

00:09:15

Cotright:

Yes. In Richmond.

00:09:17

Dunning:

Did you ever meet a man, Cleophus Brown in Richmond? He was very active in the NAACP.

00:09:27

Cotright:

Yes, I remember him.

00:09:30

Dunning:

I used to live right below him. I rented a little apartment below him.

00:09:34

Cotright:

Yes, I remember him.

00:09:41

Dunning:

Do you have recollections about the recruitment of people into NAACP in Richmond? Was there a real high time for that?

00:09:51

Cotright:

Oh yes, you know, we would select—I'm a first cousin of George Livingston. We worked real hard for George Livingston.

00:10:07

Dunning:

You were a first cousin of George Livingston?

00:10:11

Cotright:

No, I said we worked—my club—real hard for George Livingston being the first black mayor.

00:10:26

Dunning:

As a member of the NAACP, what were some of the activities that you were involved in in Richmond area?

00:10:36

Cotright:

We were involved... Maybe there was a problem that the blacks would have, NAACP. And one thing I remember NAACP did, definitely, my niece was working for—during that time they didn't have blacks in the stores. [doorbell; tape interruption]

00:11:22

Dunning:

We just had a meals-on-wheels delivery. That's all taken care of. And we were talking about the NAACP and some of the activities.

00:11:31

Cotright:

Yes. During that time, Lucky's didn't have black people.

00:11:43

Webster:

Employees, at the store.

00:11:48

Cotright:

They didn't have blacks during that time. So what happened, I guess the blacks kept complaining about they didn't have a black clerk, and they were doing business with them. So what they did, NAACP came to Otis and asked Otis: could we use Sue to work? They hadn't never had no blacks.

00:12:25

Dunning:

In which store was this?

00:12:29

Cotright:

Lucky's. They didn't have any black clerks. Anyway, Otis told Lucky's okay, that he would let them try her. She did, and she worked real hard. Ooh, they made her work hard, hard, hard. But finally she passed. She was the first black clerk in Richmond.

00:13:08

Dunning:

Let me make sure—what is her name?

00:13:14

Cotright:

{Carolyn Sue Bluett?}. She was a {Bluett?} then. She's a Conner now, she got married. She's the first black clerk.

00:13:30

Dunning:

Is she still alive?

00:13:32

Cotright:

Yes.

00:13:35

Dunning:

And living in the area?

00:13:36

Cotright:

Yes.

00:13:38

Dunning:

Do you two ever see her?

00:13:40

Cotright:

All the time.

00:13:39

Webster:

That's her niece.

00:13:41

Dunning:

Oh, that's your niece. Well, she might be a good person to talk to as well. When I did an interview with some African Americans who lived in Richmond before the shipyard period, they felt that at that time everybody was kind of all mixed, and they didn't feel discrimination when they went into the stores. People waited on them. But they found after the shipyards closed and you had lots of Southern whites working in the store, that they had a real problem being waited on. No one would wait on them. They really weren't used to it. It sounds like maybe coming from where you were, you probably had that experience more in the South—

00:14:35

Cotright:

Oh yes, we knew all about that.

00:14:36

Dunning:

—than some of the old-time blacks that were here. Did you ever meet many of the old-time black families? There were only about fifteen of the families before the shipyard period. The Ellisons, the Graves, Harry Williams and the family. I don't know if any of those names ring a bell. Pat Grave?

00:15:06

Cotright:

Pat Grave, I remember that name.

00:15:14

Dunning:

So it seemed like the NAACP really had an impact.

00:15:18

Cotright:

They did. They really did. They helped blacks a lot. They did.

00:15:26

Dunning:

Was there a large membership in Richmond?

00:15:29

Cotright:

It was.

00:15:30

Webster:

Yes, real large.

00:15:33

Dunning:

Did you join, as well?

00:15:35

Webster:

Yes, and I joined something—what the other one name?

00:15:44

Cotright:

I don't know.

00:15:45

Webster:

Yes, I belong to the NAACP and... I can't remember it.

00:15:51

Dunning:

Were you a member of the Black Chamber of Commerce?

00:15:54

Webster:

Yes.

00:15:53

Cotright:

Yes, we were.

00:15:59

Dunning:

That was separate from the regular Chamber of Commerce, or was it a branch of it?

00:16:03

Webster:

They met once in a while, but there was two separate officers at the head of each one. They would meet, and then they would come back and tell the congregation what was going on.

00:16:22

Dunning:

I wanted to follow up, just for a moment, on something your wife said yesterday, that she was a member of the American Legion. Was that an organization in Richmond?

00:16:37

Webster:

Yes, but that's an organization of the whole United States. American Legion, that's the soldiers of World War I and World War II.

00:16:52

Dunning:

Do you recall when she joined, or why she joined?

00:16:58

Webster:

Well, practically everybody was, that had relatives or something into the armed forces and lost them in the armed forces. All of them joined in it. Before World War II, most of them that lost relatives from times back in World War I, they joined.

00:17:23

Dunning:

Do you remember any activities that she did in connection with the American Legion?

00:17:32

Webster:

I went to one meeting, 'cause we had World War II. It was just something that I was active in until I got married, and then work started. [laughs] I just fell out of it. I don't know what activities.

00:17:55

Dunning:

We were just wondering the different organizations people belonged to. I have met some people that belonged to the Elks or the Moose Lodge. Was that anything that your husband was involved in or you were involved in?

00:18:13

Webster:

No, I wasn't.

00:18:15

Cotright:

No.

00:18:23

Dunning:

I'm kind of interested in what Richmond looked like after the war. A lot of people expected everybody to just leave and go back to where they came from. Some people left, but then they came back with more family members.

00:18:42

Cotright:

Yes.

00:18:43

Webster:

Yes.

00:18:44

Dunning:

Did you see the population shift after the war?

00:18:51

Cotright:

A lot of people left. I don't know, they wanted to go back home.

00:19:02

Webster:

Lots of people left and went to different parts of the United States. Lots of our mens and womens completed their education out here. They had relatives on the East Coast and the central part of the United States. Lots of them left here and went to Denver. I always wanted to go to Denver and see what it was like.

00:19:25

Dunning:

To Denver.

00:19:28

Webster:

Yes, but I never did. Lots of them went to work up there.

00:19:34

Dunning:

Did either of you ever seriously consider going back to Louisiana, other than for a visit?

00:19:43

Webster:

I didn't.

00:19:44

Cotright:

I never did want to go back. Only to visit.

00:19:50

Dunning:

Would you get homesick for Louisiana?

00:19:56

Webster:

When I did, I'd go back home to visit. My mother and two sisters were back there, and my brother and I were out here, so one of us would go back and bring them the news, and everything would settle down.

00:20:15

Dunning:

What did your family that stayed back in Louisiana think of this whole thing, coming to California and starting a new life?

00:20:26

Cotright:

I had a niece. I guess she's been out here about now maybe two years. A lot of her relatives, her sisters and brothers were coming to California, but she never did like California that much about coming. But now, finally we got her out here. She's out here now. We only have one niece that didn't come to California. All the rest of my relatives in California, but she stayed.

00:21:08

Dunning:

Did many of your relatives stay in the Richmond area, or did they move to other parts of the state?

00:21:17

Cotright:

Most of them stayed.

00:21:19

Dunning:

Stayed right in Richmond. Same with you?

00:21:22

Webster:

Well, I have more relatives in the Los Angeles area than I do up here. I had some come out here and stay in Los Angeles, turn around and they moved back to Dallas. [laughs] But that's not

where we were born at. We was born up in Good Pine, Louisiana. But they wind up sticking in the outer edges of Dallas and made it their home, raised their children.

00:21:55

Dunning:

Yesterday we talked a little bit about the changes in downtown Richmond after the war, when it went from a twenty-four-hour town, everything was bustling, to lots of buildings being torn down and demolished during urban renewal, and then the move to Hilltop [Mall]. Did that have an impact on you, Mrs. Cotright? Or your store, when the shopping area left downtown?

00:22:31

Cotright:

No, it didn't. Not for me.

00:22:35

Dunning:

Would you go shopping downtown, when they had the [J.C.] Penney's and the Macy's?

00:22:42

Webster:

Yes, I did.

00:22:46

Cotright:

Yes, Macy's. Just a visit.

00:22:50

Dunning:

Did you miss them when they left?

00:22:52

Cotright:

I did.

00:22:53

Webster:

Well, I did too.

00:22:57

Cotright:

I missed them when they left because, usually when—there was a Macy's on Macdonald and I had to pass Macdonald going to the bank, to make the deposit for the bank. Every time when I passed I'd be stopping at that store. [telephone; tape interruption] All the time when I go by the bank. But that daughter of his, every time I go by I'd see something pretty, I'd be stopping by there, buying something for her. Every time! I'd pass right by there going to the bank. I always liked to go up there and see something pretty.

00:23:52

Dunning:

So you spoiled your godchild.

00:23:55

Cotright:

Yes.

00:23:56

Dunning:

In a nice way.

00:23:56

Cotright:

Really spoiled. Still spoil.

00:24:01

Dunning:

That's pretty nice.

00:24:03

Webster:

Yep, she was really a good godmother, mostly a mother.

00:24:13

Dunning:

Do you consider Richmond a historical place? Do you think it's important in history, this town?

00:24:30

Cotright:

I think so.

00:24:32

Dunning:

In what way?

00:24:35

Cotright:

The reason I think so, because we came out thinking about we could be able to make a good living for the family, and everything. I think that's it. Which we weren't able, back at home. We wouldn't be able to accomplish the things back there that we do out here. So I think it did.

00:25:17

Webster:

I think Richmond is historic, because the shipyards—they took more organization than anything. And shipbuilding. The only thing that I don't like about that: they did all that war effort, but after the war was over, they wouldn't clean the bay up. All these piers and things they built to build ships on, they just walked away from them and left them. It looked like a dump. But now the city is beginning to get it. But they still don't look like you ever built a ship on it.

00:25:57

Dunning:

Have you worried about pollution and all the toxins that were left in the bay from both the shipyards and then all the industry after, before there were strong regulations? I know a lot of people worry about the emissions from Chevron and the other refineries. Has that been a problem for you?

00:26:23

Webster:

Well, yes and no. Chevron, yes; but some of the other factories, they was a little bit cleaner than Chevron, because Chevron could hire so many people and they would just walk away from it. If you go to the meetings and talk about it, they say, "Yep, we'll do that," and they'd write it down and say we'd have that the next meeting. That particular person that was pushing it then, he didn't show up at the next meeting. If you ask about it: "Yeah, he got the flu. I'll talk to him as soon as the meeting's over." And it just died. Lots of things they say they could have done, but they didn't do.

00:27:11

Dunning:

Do you feel like the air quality has affected you? I know you mentioned yesterday your daughter has asthma. It sounds like maybe she was born with it, but were there conditions in town that ever worried you?

00:27:27

Webster:

Yes, when my daughter was about six months old. I used to have to work. My wife would take care in the daytime and at night. There was only one time she scared me; I come in and I picked her up from the wife and I sit on the couch, and her breathing was so loud I could hear it. You could hold her, behind right there in her back. That you could feel it moving; that scared me. We got the car and took off to the doctor's. I don't know what all kind of stuff they did give her, but it eased her where she could breathe. So many persons got asthma and other kind of breathing condition from Standard Oil, because of the pollution.

00:28:50

They still putting pollution in the bay. You can't even see a fish in the bay. On the back side, coming over from San Rafael back out to the river, they catch pretty good-sized fish. But on this side of the bay, you don't catch nothing. Pollution is bad. You can go down to a city meeting, where they're supposed to be talking about the bay, and they wind up talking about something in the streets. I liked to went off on them, but I said, "No, it don't make sense." They're the officials supposed to be correcting it. Far as I can see, I think they're taking shakedowns. The kids used to go fishing from Pepco, San Rafael, where the bay bridge {Richmond-San Rafael Bridge?} crossed, all the way back to Parchester Village, all along, and catch nice perch. Larger than my hand, great big ones. You won't even get a bite.

00:29:35

Dunning:

When was the last time you went fishing?

00:29:37

Webster:

In the bay?

00:29:38

Dunning:

In the bay.

00:29:42

Webster:

Oh, about a month ago.

00:29:45

Dunning:

Where do you go when you go fishing?

00:29:46

Webster:

I go up in the rivers and sloughs.

00:29:53

Dunning:

You go up in the [Sacramento-San Joaquin] Delta?

00:29:55

Webster:

Right, in the back side of the Delta. You can catch nice catfish, but very few bluegills. Really mostly what you get is catfish and carp.

00:30:11

Dunning:

Is there anything else either of you would like to add about Richmond? I think I asked you the question yesterday, about do you have an idea of the future of Richmond? I'd like to ask you that question. Where do you think Richmond is going?

00:30:38

Cotright:

Since I first came, it's really growing. Really growing. I have seen it grow, grow, grow, grow.

00:30:55

Dunning:

Are there changes in Richmond that you would like to see?

00:31:25

Cotright:

[pause] I'm trying to think...

00:31:35

Dunning:

I asked Mr. Webster yesterday about how he felt about the city services, the police and fire department. Have you been pleased with the police? I know the police have had rough periods of time when they were called the "Richmond Cowboys." I think that's changed a bit. Have you had any interaction with the police?

00:32:07

Cotright:

No, I haven't.

00:32:13

Dunning:

You've stayed out of trouble? [laughs]

00:32:17

Cotright:

[laughs] I most certainly have.

00:32:21

Dunning:

Oh, good! Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything that you forgot to tell us yesterday that you—

00:32:32

Webster:

I couldn't tell you. [laughs]

00:32:34

Dunning:

You couldn't tell. [laughs] Okay, I'll take your word for that.

00:32:40

Webster:

It was yesterday I think I almost started crying about Saint-Lô.

00:32:47

Dunning:

When you were in Europe during World War II.

00:32:52

Webster:

And Aachen. I don't why they bombed it so flat. Doing all that bombing, the people who had basements, I thought could be now just getting some of the bodies out of the ground. They flattened that town, I mean flattened it, just like a dump.

00:33:09

Dunning:

It seems like an experience that you'll never forget, and it impacts you still.

00:33:13

Webster:

Yes. And Aachen, Germany, was the same way. That's where they go from Belgium to Germany. At the Siegfried Line—no, the Siegfried Line was further in Belgium. This was the—what did you call that? Hitler called those concrete bars and things they built along there some kind of line that they couldn't drive a truck or a powerful tank through.

00:33:45

Dunning:

Have you been involved in any veterans' groups?

00:33:48

Webster:

Not lately. I was when I first got out. Most of all the peoples in service when I was in, they've gone to the happy hunting ground. The young ones come out of this peace programs they have, they're not—at least if they are, I never heard about them pushing the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

00:34:23

Dunning:

In closing, do either of you have ambitions for what you'd like to happen in your life from now on? Are there things you'd like to do, or places you'd like to go?

00:34:40

Webster:

I would like to see an ambition: get rid of the drugs. It's killing so many peoples. It's just killing so many young peoples unborn, that won't be born on account of... The doctors are trying to, but they won't give them enough money. Appropriating money for the doctors, they turn around and take him. You get all the peoples in your side of the county that's in trouble, get their names and all that stuff. And so your salary is going to be eighty-five thousand a year. What the heck? Eighty-five thousand would make him happy, but it's not going to make these kids that's on these drugs and things happy. Or sisters got brothers—there's somebody at the front door. [tape interruption]

00:35:44

Dunning:

I had asked you about your ambitions, and it wasn't a personal ambition you had, but it was more for the community and about the drug problems.

00:35:53

Webster:

Right. Well, the drug problem. They appropriate all this money for Contra Costa County, then they put so much away for the city of Richmond or Pittsburg, like that. Then they turn around and hire somebody to oversee it, and he gets near a hundred thousand dollars a year. For what? To write papers? Go through the neighborhood and look? He's never called a meeting. They appropriated so much money for North Richmond and Richmond, period. They had somebody to head it, and they put the money in somebody's hand and it never got out in the neighborhoods. They could meet with him downtown and the guy that's in charge of it come walking in with a four-hundred-dollar suit on and diamonds on his fingers, and all that stuff. That's not helping the kids in the neighborhood.

00:36:49

Dunning:

What do you think will help the kids in the neighborhood?

00:36:52

Webster:

To put somebody in charge that's interested in the peoples.

00:36:55

Dunning:

That's right there and is going to be seeing the kids.

00:37:02

Webster:

Well, put some older person that would be interested in these kids, period, from I guess about nine years old up until—some of them don't grow up until they're thirty. Some of them grow up and die before they get grown, from drugs. They get a whole bad batch and they undercut the good stuff and put this on the market, and the people die from it. They never found out who did it. If they do, they don't prosecute. What they should do, is put somebody out there in charge and help the parents get the kids to go to school.

00:37:24

Dunning:

This is back to the theme that keeps coming up from both of you, is the importance of education.

00:37:33

Cotright:

Yes, that's right.

00:37:40

Webster:

They don't seem to give a darn about it.

00:37:56

Dunning:

Well, we appreciate your talking about this, because it's very important for everybody.

00:38:07

Webster:

Right. It's not only the black kids that's getting sick from it or dying from it, it's the whites dying from it, the Latinos. Everybody in Contra Costa and Alameda County. Not too much of it in Vallejo. They get sick, but their parents is able to try to keep them off of it. But here, the kids get so crossed up they don't know if they're going crazy or lying.

00:38:37

Dunning:

Mrs. Cotright, do you have anything you would like to add? You look like you're ready for the holidays in your bright red outfit. [laughter] Have you started going to parties yet for holidays?

00:38:51

Cotright:

Yes, we started yesterday.

00:38:59

Dunning:

Anything either of you would like to say?

00:39:03

Webster:

Do you meet with any of the peoples downtown?

00:39:09

Dunning:

I haven't. I don't, for this. I'm just working in a piece of this project, but certainly people from downtown, I think, will be listening to these tapes.

00:39:18

Webster:

Do you be there when they listen?

00:39:23

Dunning:

I'm not sure whether I'll be there. Is there a message you'd like us to say?

00:39:29

Webster:

No, just let me know when the tapes are going on and I'll go to the meetings. You have my address. Just drop me a card and tell me where they're meeting at, and I'll go.

00:39:41

Dunning:

Okay. It might be down the road a bit.

00:39:46

Webster:

That's okay. It could be after the holidays.

00:39:49

Dunning:

Well, I mean like after a few seasons of holidays, because I think one of the reasons this is being done now is because of the National Park Service, and they're going to use some of this footage in their new visitor's center, which may or may not be by the old Ford building on the waterfront. But we will try to get you a copy of your video so that you can watch. That would be great.

00:40:19

Cotright:

Yes, it'd be good.

00:40:22

Dunning:

Well, thank you so much.

00:40:25

Cotright:

I enjoyed it. I enjoyed speaking to you.

00:40:26

Dunning:

Jess and I both really enjoyed meeting both of you, and we appreciate that you were so flexible in seeing us. It was kind of fun to have you both together.

00:40:39

Cotright:

Yes. It's really nice, because you see, I would like to see Richmond grow, grow, grow. Then, that we'd be able to visit our neighbors. Now you're afraid sometimes it will all be gone.

00:41:02

Webster:

Yes. I'd like to see all that stuff they're building up at Hilltop and Pinole, Appian Way, and in between Hilltop and Appian Way, way over the right-hand side going to Vallejo. They could put some of that stuff in downtown Richmond. Only thing they're working on is the old Bank of America, and I don't even know what they're doing there. Central Bank, they done nailed that up.

00:41:37

Cotright:

A lot of things they're taking out of Richmond.

00:41:44

Webster:

And putting it up on the hillside.

00:41:47

Cotright:

A lot of things. A lot of the stores we used to could go to, they closed up. Not much in Richmond left.

00:41:58

Dunning:

That's difficult, because it's much harder for people to go up to Hilltop, especially seniors who aren't able to get in the car and drive. It was much easier to take a cab downtown and be close by.

00:42:14

Cotright:

Yes, they've taken a lot away from Richmond.

00:42:19

Webster:

Downtown is going to hell in a handbasket, and nobody trying to stop it or improve it.

00:42:31

Dunning:

I think that message came out loud and clear.

00:42:35

Webster:

[laughs] Okay.

00:42:37

Dunning:

Thank you very much.

00:42:38

Cotright:

Well, I enjoyed it.

00:42:43

Dunning:

We really enjoyed visiting with you, too.

00:42:44

Webster:

That interview yesterday bring back a whole lot of things, back to the first man I seen shot dead. Had license to kill. That was something. I forgot all about it.

00:43:06

Dunning:

That's kind of what happens when you start remembering, other things come into your mind.

00:43:14

Webster:

That was a rough spot. That's the reason I didn't mention Saint-Lô and Aachen, because the safest place around Aachen was in the cemetery. Some of the peoples that was killed, they just laid them out there. They hadn't buried them. I saw about ten or fifteen dead peoples, or more. I saw hell on earth.

00:43:52

Dunning:

Thank you.

00:43:57

Cotright:

Thank you both, too.

[End of interview]