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Maggie Gee

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
Leah McGarrigle, Robin Li, and Kathryn Stine
in 2003

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Oral History Interview with Maggie Gee on April 10, April 29, and May 20, 2003

for The Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront National Park

Interviewers: Robin Li, Leah McGarrigle, Kathryn Stine

Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock

audited by Shannon Page, 10-5-04

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00:32:32

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00:45:20

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00:00:17

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00:14:08

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BEGIN INTERVIEW 2

00:00:24

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00:16:38

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00:30:19

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00:44:53

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BEGIN WAV GEE 4

00:00:47

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00:15:07

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00:26:25

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BEGIN WAV GEE 5

Interview 3

5-00:00:07

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5-00:15:25

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5-00:27:55

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5-00:44:16

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[end file Gee 05 5.20.03.wav]

[begin file Gee 06 5.20.03.wav]

6-00:00:53

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6-00:14:41

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[end file Gee 06 5.20.03.wav]

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Maggie Gee, April 10, 2003

Interviewers: Robin Li, Leah McGarrigle, Kathryn Stine

Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock

audited by Shannon Page, 10-5-04

[begin file Gee1 04-10-03.wav]

1-00:00:13

Li:

It's April 9th, and this is Robin Li and Kathryn Stine and Leah McGarrigle, interviewing Maggie Gee. Do

you know what the Chinese character means?

1-00:00:32

Gee:

Yes—oh, I forgot what it means.

1-00:00:34

Li:

But it's in Cantonese?

1-00:00:35

Gee:

It's in Cantonese. Gee Mei Gue, that's my Chinese name.

1-00:00:41

Li:

What does it mean?

1-00:00:45

Gee:

Mei Gue. Mei is “pretty” something. I forget what is pretty. Everyone is Mei. Aren't you Mei-something?

1-00:00:52

Li:

No, I'm Yue Bin. Yue, like “happiness.” Doesn't sound as good in English.

Once again, we were talking about maybe just sort of starting in the beginning, talking about your grandparents, where they were from and how they ended up in California.

1-00:01:12

Gee:

My grandparents were from Guangzhou area, which is Canton I guess, in those days. They came here because of the Taiping Revolution, I believe. They came because of economic reasons. They didn't come to work on the railroads. They were fishermen. It was very unusual at that particular time; it was probably the 1870s. They came as a couple. I don't know whether anyone has looked at it, but when we talked to Sandy Lydon, he said that there were some Chinese that came over in junks. [laughs] Well, there were quite a few, and not very many got here. We could never prove it, though. There were some that came over as families, because at that particular time it was just men that came. Then there was the Exclusion Act—women couldn't come. My grandmother was quite a bit younger than my grandfather when she came to this country. She had thirteen children. They landed in Monterey; well, they probably landed in San Francisco, then they went to Monterey. There was a fishing community down there, of Chinese.

1-00:02:56

McGarrigle:

Do you think they would have known before they came that that was their destination, Monterey?

1-00:03:00

Gee:

I have no idea. I never got a chance to speak to them; my mother didn't talk about it. My mother was born in Monterey.

1-00:03:14

Li:

Were the thirteen children all born here?

1-00:03:16

Gee:

I believe all thirteen were born in this country, yes. Maybe there were more than thirteen, but the thirteen survived.

1-00:03:30

Li:

Where was your mother in the birth order?

1-00:03:32

Gee:

My mother was—I would think about the fifth one down. She was just one of the mouths to feed at that particular time.

1-00:03:46

Li:

Do you know when she was born?

1-00:03:47

Gee:

She was born 1895, I believe.

1-00:03:55

Li:

Would she talk about growing up in Monterey?

1-00:03:56

Gee:

No, she didn't talk. I picked it up. We used to go down to Monterey all the time to visit friends, but she never—well, by the time I became interested, she didn't talk very much about it and I didn't ask her, which was unfortunate. You know, as children you grow up and your parents are speaking, they're telling you things and you really don't listen very well. At least, I found myself not doing it. I regret it. I picked up most of the information just by being around my uncles and my aunts.

1-00:04:34

Li:

The family kept in touch.

1-00:04:36

Gee:

Oh yeah, the family kept in touch like most Chinese families, because at that particular time there was the isolation. There was a lot of discrimination, so the families were very close. All the brothers and sisters of my mother's generation were very close, as long as my grandmother was living, in particular when my grandmother was living.

1-00:04:59

McGarrigle:

Do you know what kind of house they moved to in Monterey? Where did they set up house?

1-00:05:04

Gee:

Well, we had a reunion almost twenty years ago. They were down in Seventeen Mile Drive, where the Tennis and Beach Club is. We had it there, which was really great fun. They were squatters; the Chinese couldn't own property at that particular time. I'll just generalize and say Asians could not own property. I'm not quite sure whether some people bought it in their children's name that were born in this country, but I'm not quite sure. Some people might have.

1-00:05:49

McGarrigle:

So squatters in the sense that they would into an existing home?

1-00:05:52

Gee:

No, no. Squatters in a sense you build something on land that you don't own, I believe. I don't think there are any houses there. It's beautiful property that Del Monte finally developed, though, and became Seventeen Mile Drive.

1-00:06:14

Li:

Did they work as fishermen in Monterey?

1-00:06:19

Gee:

Yes, as fisherman for the Chinese in San Francisco. They dried fish, went out and got abalone and dried abalone; it was just part of the Chinese community. There was a big Chinese community there in Monterey, Watsonville, and Salinas. They were all either fishermen or they had grocery shops. Some farming, but not much farming, I don't think.

1-00:06:57

Li:

Did your mother work with her parents?

1-00:07:04

Gee:

I'm sure all of the children worked, whatever they did. In fact, they collected abalone shells, because they kept them and they polished them, and they sold them in stands. I don't have one of them. My sister had one and they're just beautiful. When I was a child when we went down to Monterey, we used to go and pick these abalones off of the beach—they were very small. Nowadays you have to wait until they're seven inches and you have to dive for them. We would just boil them on the beach. We would get a fire going and we'd eat these little abalones. They were absolutely delicious, I remember that. You could just pick them up on the rocks, like you would be able to get mussels, but no longer. At that time, most of the otters had gone and now we have otters that have come back, because they're an endangered species. And so I don't have to eat abalone anymore; the otters can have it. [laughs] They don't commercialize them here, because they're so few and the otters go after them.

1-00:08:38

Li:

How did your mother come to leave Monterey?

1-00:08:41

Gee:

The family moved up. My grandfather died, I believe. He was quite a bit older than my grandmother. So they moved up to San Francisco Chinatown. I just don't know exactly how this happened, but my father came as a merchant from Hong Kong. At that time, there was the Exclusion Act and so the only people that could come to this country were professionals or merchants or businessmen. So he came. He was an importer. He had a company in Hong Kong and so he set up a company here. He wanted to get married, so who did he go to? A marriage arranger, a marriage counselor, whatever you call 'em. So it was an arranged marriage.

1-00:09:45

Li:

Had your mother registered, sort of, with the—

1-00:09:48

Gee:

I don't know how that works, I really don't. Usually it's families that know each other. This was something that wasn't, though. He was someone who had a little means. He was a young man and looking for a wife. Whether he looked through many of them and chose my mother—it was an okay marriage.

00:10:11

McGarrigle:

How old was she when they married?

1-00:10:14

Gee:

My mother, when she got married—if she was a '95, I would say she was twenty, at least. About 1915. Is that right?

1-00:10:27

McGarrigle:

That would be right.

1-00:10:29

Gee:

Did you get hold of the book by Xiao Jiu.

1-00:10:32

Li:

I was reading her book, because there's one chapter which is based almost entirely on that article. I was reading in there about your mother losing her citizenship when she got married. Would she talk about that?

1-00:10:47

Gee:

Oh, yes, but she didn't lose it until a few years later, in something called the Cable Act.

1-00:10:55

Li:

Right, so it's 1922.

1-00:10:58

Gee:

They were married for some time and then the Cable Act came and it was directed to really Asians. I'd have to look at the Cable Act. Is it specifically Asians?

1-00:11:15

Li:

It's any American woman who marries someone ineligible for citizenship, which is pretty much just Asians. So even if a white woman married an Asian—

1-00:11:24

Gee:

She'd lose her citizenship, yes. So my mother lost her citizenship. It really bothered her, as I remember, but she got it back. It was a big thing for that particular time. Where are you a citizen of, then, if you lose your citizenship? Are you a citizen of China? She had been to China I think, but that's about all.

1-00:11:54

Li:

Had she gone back to visit?

1-00:11:57

Gee:

She went back to visit. It had to be about 1920, because my sister wasn't born, just my brother. My sister was born in 1921.

1-00:12:24

McGarrigle:

So that was a long trip. Who went back, when they went back?

1-00:12:32

Gee:

My mother and my father and my brother. I think she had a baby there, which she lost, in China at that particular time. There was one child which she lost.

1-00:12:46

McGarrigle:

That might have been a business trip, then.

1-00:12:48

Gee:

Some trip. Business, I guess, because he was able to come back.

1-00:12:55

Li:

Do you know if they ever considered moving back to China, after she lost her citizenship?

1-00:13:00

Gee:

I don't think so. She really was an American, though, even though we lived in a Chinese community up till then. It must be after they came back that my father decided to move to Berkeley. They lived in San Francisco.

1-00:13:23

Li:

Do you know why he decided to move to Berkeley?

1-00:13:25

Gee:

Well, he wanted his children to grow up outside of Chinatown. He didn't speak English at all, but he commuted from Berkeley because we had such wonderful transportation here. I think I told you there was a train on Tenth Street, a train on Sixth Street, a train on Sacramento, a train on California, two on Shattuck Avenue. One went along Claremont to the Claremont Hotel. These are all trains to San Francisco. Pretty nice.

1-00:14:02

Li:

Did they run across the Bay Bridge?

1-00:14:04

Gee:

There was no Bay Bridge. There was a ferry. Where the toll gate is, that's where the ferry slip was. It was really wonderful. It took you about the same amount of time; faster, no traffic. It's a short distance. Have you ever taken the ferry to San Francisco? Well, do it. It's really a nice ride. You pick the ferry up at Jack London and it's only a half hour. What you do is you go along the channel, then you go under the Bay

Bridge. But in the channel is where all the container ships are and you see them loading them. It's really interesting. Then you come to the Bay Bridge; I think you get very close to Yerba Buena, I'm not sure. You go under the Bay Bridge, then you're at the Ferry Building. You park your car down at Twelfth Street, at the garage or on the street, then you take BART home if you don't want to stay. You can get off at Twelfth Street and you just walk to your car if you don't want to wait for the ferry, which runs probably every hour. You go over and have lunch, and then take BART back. It's more flexible.

1-00:15:21

Li:

When you were a child, did Chinatown feel close, even if you weren't living there?

1-00:15:26

Gee:

Yes, I think so. When I was a child, Chinatown was close, because all my relatives lived in San Francisco Chinatown. My uncle had moved to this side of the bay, lived in Oakland Chinatown. Everyone lived in Chinatown. There were so many restrictions of where you could live.

1-00:15:46

McGarrigle:

So Berkeley was kind of outside of that.

1-00:15:49

Gee:

Well, what happened was in 1906 there was a big earthquake. People came over to this side of the bay and a lot of people in Chinatown came over. The Chinese had these little truck farms down below San Pablo, I guess.

1-00:16:12

Li:

How did they get that land, do you know? Was it just sort of empty?

1-00:16:17

Gee:

I have no idea because there was no ownership. Didn't I show you my little pamphlet *Looking Back at Berkeley*? [Looking Back at Berkeley: a Pictorial History of a Diverse City. Berkeley, 1984] I want to

show you what Chinese—I just picked these up from the basement recently, because someone had asked me so I brought a whole bunch of them up. This was Berkeley Chinese. It's actually there. I'll give you this. Let me see if I can see those. This talks about the Chinese in Berkeley. I love this picture. In Berkeley? There it is, this one. It's down here on Hearst Street and Shattuck, I think. It's just like the Farmer's Market.

1-00:17:38

McGarrigle:

Comes full circle.

1-00:17:39

Gee:

[laughs] They'd bring up the vegetables in these, just like in China. You can have that.

1-00:17:46

Li:

Are you sure?

1-00:17:47

Gee:

I have so many copies of it. I still have a bunch of copies, that's why I had them in the basement and I said I gotta give 'em away.

1-00:17:56

Li:

It's amazing. It looks just like Berkeley; the houses look the same, and the street.

1-00:18:00

Gee:

Oh yeah, Berkeley hasn't changed. In this neighborhood everything burned in '23, but on your side, on the other side of campus, some of the same houses are still around.

1-00:18:14

McGarrigle:

What was your father's business at that point? Did it evolve?

1-00:18:19

Gee:

My father imported foodstuff from China, rice, and I guess the usual foodstuff, and then he exported soap products back to China. From China, the foodstuff, just like you do today, more so. At that particular time, America wasn't a rice-eating community. There was still Texas; I guess maybe in the South people ate rice, but rice was not a big item.

1-00:18:53

Li:

Did that make him an important member of the community?

1-00:18:56

Gee:

Oh, he was a businessman in San Francisco, yes. We used to go over there, I remember, to his warehouse—it was on Clay Street and he had one of these elevators, one of those things that open up in the street, on the sidewalk. You put the stuff down there and the elevator goes down. I guess you store it inside the shop. Are they still around?

1-00:19:25

McGarrigle:

I see that, yes. In other cities, also. More Eastern cities, where they load. Big steel doors open up and this lift comes up and they download everything. You see that more in the East.

1-00:19:45

Gee:

But you don't see that here anymore.

1-00:19:46

Li:

In Chinatown, they have them. In the restaurants, behind the restaurants you'll see all this bok choy—

1-00:19:53

Gee:

Is that right? [laughs] Going down there. It was practical. They had it on the sidewalk. I remember his on Clay Street. I think it was Clay Street, yeah, Commercial and about Kearny.

1-00:20:08

Li:

Was your mother staying at home at this time?

1-00:20:12

Gee:

She stayed at home. She had six children, so she stayed at home.

1-00:20:18

Li:

You said her first child was born in 1920? That's when your older brother was born?

1-00:20:24

Gee:

My brother was born in 1917 or '18. Eighteen, I think. No, it has to be 1917. I was born in '23 and he's six years older than me, so whatever that is. [laughs] That's 1917.

1-00:20:54

Li:

The youngest was born—

1-00:20:57

Gee:

The youngest in the family was born—probably '28.

1-00:21:08

McGarrigle:

She had six children in ten or eleven years.

1-00:21:10

Gee:

Every two years, that's what you do. You have sex, you just get pregnant. [laughs]

1-00:21:18

McGarrigle:

Did she maintain contact with her mother and all the extended family?

1-00:21:22

Gee:

Oh yes, yes. On her side, but my father died when I was quite young so that I really didn't know [his side of the family]. I just had a cousin that lived here and the rest were in Hong Kong, so I as a person, or none

of us in fact, had an opportunity to really know that side of the family. Part of it is communication. Today you would know. To go from China from here was a long ways.

1-00:22:03

Li:

What year did your father pass away? When was that?

1-00:22:11

Gee:

What was the Depression? '30, '31? Whenever the stock market crashed. He had a heart attack. That's because he had so much in the stock market. It's interesting. I think five percent was all you had to put down. People bought. Like a lot of Chinese, they gambled a lot. I think the stock market is gambling, somewhat. In those days, more so. Today we hope we're intelligent about it, sometimes we're not very intelligent. [laughs] But in those days, that's right. When the market crashed he had either a heart attack or stroke in the streets of San Francisco, came home and died shortly after that.

1-00:23:05

McGarrigle:

Was your mother then following up on his business?

1-00:23:09

Gee:

Oh no, she didn't know anything about it, but my uncles had worked for him. They were very smart. We owned a house, then, and they were smart enough to—when the market crashes and the margin, you owe people a lot of money. But they quickly arranged it so the house was in my mother's name. It was hard to tell how you do this, so she wouldn't lose her house. Someone loses when the market crashes, besides you, but someone else loses, too. Usually you have to pay off your margin and everything you have goes to pay off your margin account.

1-00:24:15

Li:

How did you parents come to buy a house in Berkeley, because of the restrictions?

1-00:24:20

Gee:

It was down in the flats, down by Sacramento Street. There weren't any houses down there to begin with.

Here's this little house with empty lots all around. It wasn't a big, established place. The only owner of the house was whether they built there or had it built, or whatever. I don't know.

1-00:24:46

McGarrigle:

What was that church on Acton Street that your mother had been active in? Isn't there a Chinese church—

1-00:24:55

Gee:

Oh yes, my mother was very active in that Chinese church. In fact, she moved from one part of Acton Street to the other part, and the church was in between. Have you ever visited that church?

1-00:25:05

McGarrigle:

We gave a talk about oral history to them once. I remember you telling me that your mother had been active there.

1-00:25:11

Gee:

Very active in that church, yeah. Do you remember the architect Roger Lee He was a fairly well-known local architect and he built that church. It's a nice church, yeah. This is not an interview about me, you know. This is background.

1-00:25:41

McGarrigle:

What was the denomination of that church?

1-00:25:44

Gee:

The church was very interesting. Now, my little book here—It was founded by the Mason-MacDuffie Ladies of the First Congregational Church, so it was a Congregational Church. It was on Addison. Do you know where Gertie's is? It used to be Gertie's Restaurant. The church was there. They owned the property there. It was a house that was used as a church, but also it was a big house. It had a large room;

that was the downstairs. Maybe they took out some of the walls. The upstairs was housing for students: Chinese students had a hard time finding housing here when they were going to school, particularly the Chinese from China. There were some students from China, so they lived there. So it was more. I went to Chinese school there. It was more than a church, it was a Chinese community center. Most of the people in Berkeley, at least the Cantonese, went to that church. So you knew everyone in Berkeley at that particular time.

1-00:27:09

Li:

You said you went to Chinese school there?

1-00:27:10

Gee:

Went to Chinese school there. It was Chinese school after school there.

1-00:27:13

Li:

When did you start going to Chinese school?

1-00:27:16

Gee:

Oh, I don't remember. When I was young, we used to have a teacher come to our house. It was really for my brother—so I was quite young—it was for my brother to know Chinese. The girls got a little bit of Chinese. It was important because it was an insult, if your children didn't know Chinese; you were ashamed of it. There used to be a name—I forget what the word is, a very derogatory name for people who did not speak Chinese in the Chinese community. As I grew up, my mother was ashamed, a little bit. [laughs] Not really, though, but you know, people would always mention “Your children don't speak Chinese.”

1-00:28:08

Li:

Did she try? She tried to send you to Chinese school.

1-00:28:11

Gee:

I went to Chinese school for a long time and hated it. [laughs] Because it was school after school. My regret was that I was not a better student. I went for a long time, I can't tell you how many years.

1-00:28:36

McGarrigle:

They spoke Chinese at home, because you said your father didn't speak English.

1-00:28:40

Gee:

Well yes, but see, my father died when I was relatively young, and my mother spoke English. She might speak to us in Chinese, and you answer in English. It's typical with that generation, though. But with my generation, you didn't want to speak Chinese, because you wanted to integrate. Didn't want to eat with chopsticks, none of that. "Why are we having rice all the time?"

1-00:29:10

Li:

Did you feel that separation from your home life and outside?

1-00:29:14

Gee:

A little bit, because we were not living in Chinatown. See, if you were living in Chinatown then it's all the same, pretty much. My friends in school were not Chinese, here. But if I stop and think about it, most of them, their parents were immigrants. This was in the twenties and I remember there was this one family who are plumbers, Italian family in Berkeley. Nice kids. Plumbing was considered kind of a lowly profession, and of course it turns out that it's the Jacuzzi family. [laughs] You start out as a plumber—everyone has to start someplace. They were smart plumbers.

1-00:30:18

McGarrigle:

The schools were integrated then and the neighborhoods—

1-00:30:21

Gee:

Oh yeah, the schools were really integrated. There were black kids; Walter Gordon lived down the street from me. Walter Gordon is a black man who was early, he was a lawyer, he played football. This was before civil rights, so he could only live in a certain place and he couldn't go places, stay in hotels and things like that. He was appointed by Earl Warren to the head of the probation board. I'm not quite sure exactly what it was. Then later on he was appointed by Eisenhower to be the Governor of the Virgin Islands. But he was black, and at that time they still could not do a lot of things. It took civil rights, and you still couldn't do a lot of things. But the community was pretty well integrated. We had quite a few blacks in Berkeley, and the reason why we had them was because it was the end of the railroad line and so the blacks worked as Pullmans on the trains. That's where Dellums comes from. I'm not sure that Dellums' uncle or his father was a Pullman porter. So they all had jobs and they all had houses, they had children like anyone else. They were middle-class. It was before the onset of the war that brought in lots of people from elsewhere. Berkeley was integrated, in that sense.

1-00:32:14

Li:

Even at that time, in the 1920s.

1-00:32:17

Gee:

In the 1920s, yes. There were blacks, whites living in the neighborhood, quite a few Japanese, and some Chinese. More Japanese in my neighborhood than Chinese.

1-00:32:31

Li:

Was your mother friends with all?

1-00:32:34

Gee:

My mother was pretty much friends with everyone. Yeah, because your children, I think that's part of it, in the neighborhood. She spoke English pretty well, spoke Chinese very well, so that was good.

1-00:32:50

McGarrigle:

Did she always cook Chinese at home, or did she adopt some other foods?

1-00:32:55

Gee:

It was either, sometimes Chinese and sometimes not. Okay, my mother—

1-00:33:05

Li:

How did her life change after her husband died?

1-00:33:08

Gee:

She had some money for a while. You own a house, that really made a difference. Today it does, too. She owned a house, it was in the depths of the Depression. She was in her thirties, if you kind of stop and think about it. She should have sent us all out to the orphanage or some place like that. [laughs] But she didn't. She didn't work for a long time; then she took in sewing. I remember she had this big sewing machine, so she'd sew during the middle of the night. A lot of Chinese did that. They'd go to the sewing factory in Chinatown and they did it by piece. She did that; then she went out and she did housework for a while. She was a terrible housekeeper; I don't know how she ever did any housework. Then the war came on, and that made a lot of difference. She had a real job. But we never lacked for money. There was not a lot of money around or anything like that, for anything we wanted, but we always had a automobile. I mean, I just don't know how it all worked. She learned to drive, by the way, when my father died in the early '30s. We had a '28 Studebaker, then my mother started buying Buicks, I remember, so there was a little money coming in.

1-00:34:44

Li:

Do you think you were getting support still from your uncles?

1-00:34:49

Gee:

She might have. That I don't know. She might have, because we had one uncle who wasn't married and he always came around. He was sort of the father figure around, one of her brothers. I don't know

whether he was older or younger. He was about the same age that she was. One thing I'll always remember, he was a hunter and he'd go hunting for deer. It really kind of amazes me now. Every year it seems like he shot a deer, before the days of *Bambi*. [laughs] And we'd have this deer hanging in the garage. Well, you have to hang meat for a while, and I can always remember that. I'm not big on deer meat, never was. I've never been big on deer or meat or anything, but I do remember that. That's very unusual for a Chinese man to go hunting. Now, who he went with, I have no idea. I just remember there was this deer hanging in the garage. One didn't have a freezer then, so we had a lot of meat.

1-00:36:15

Li:

Would your mother maybe cure it?

1-00:36:18

Gee:

Well, any meat is hung for weeks. You'd think it'd rot, wouldn't you? [laughs] But that's aging.

1-00:36:29

McGarrigle:

You had an icebox?

1-00:36:32

Gee:

We had an icebox then, though. So what do you do with all this meat? I guess a lot of people got a piece of it. He slaughtered it all alone. I think my uncle skinned it. Yuck. [laughs] Now that I stop and think about it—

1-00:36:48

McGarrigle:

Sounds like she was very independent, in that she learned to drive—

1-00:36:52

Gee:

Which was pretty unusual; that's right. She has these six kids? [laughs] Oh, my goodness. She learned to drive, she had a car; she never taught us to drive, none of us, and she was very smart. We knew exactly

why it was, because she didn't want us to be asking for the car, so she kept the car to herself. Smart. So we all had to learn how to drive on our own.

1-00:37:26

McGarrigle:

Were there messages that she imparted to you and the other sisters and your brother, from her experience about independence or about becoming self-sufficient?

1-00:37:39

Gee:

I think so. She really knew how to do things. As I grew older, I became aware that she knew how to change the lights—I mean, these are small things that we can do, but the light socket, she could fix, do a little plumbing; she could do simple things that a lot of women can't do, particularly of that generation. You had to. If you own a house, as you know, you don't have anyone to take care of all the little things. You learned how to do them yourself. My sister said she was really smart. See, I didn't have that sense. When you're a child, you're so wrapped in yourself. You have to kind of look behind. My sister not so long ago, when I was asking her, says, "You know, your mother really was very smart." Too bad she didn't have the opportunity for education.

1-00:38:37

Li:

Did you get a sense that she had other aspirations? Would she talk about things that she would have liked to have done?

1-00:38:44

Gee:

No, she really didn't talk a lot, no. Not to me. She always had a meal on the table. We always sat down and ate. What the conversation was about, you know, with all these kids around [laughs]—it's not very good at different ages. Although, you know, when you have your two kids, you know how it is when you sit down to eat, how chaotic it is. If you have six of 'em, well—[laughs] at all different ages. The older ones are telling you to knock it off a little bit.

1-00:39:24

McGarrigle:

Was there a kind of method she had for discipline that you remember, that she would do?

1-00:39:33

Gee:

No, I think we were all kind of disciplined. You had to, in a sense, in order to have a calm household. No prima donnas. They were too difficult.

1-00:39:46

McGarrigle:

Because she's at that time the mother and the father figure.

1-00:39:55

Gee:

I know, and she did the laundry and just everything. There were no dryers. [laughs] Now that I stop and think about it, there must have been big clotheslines outside. Everyone must have pitched in, had to pitch in a little bit.

1-00:40:12

Li:

When she started working, doing housework outside the home, would those other siblings take care of the younger ones?

1-00:40:18

Gee:

I think the older ones took care of the younger ones. Simpler times, you know. You probably could leave the house and not be too concerned about someone getting hurt or someone coming by. We lived in a stable neighborhood. No one's going anyplace, and there's no television or radio. You go out in the streets and play, or you play in the local lots and everyone sort of look after each other. In fact, we lived very close to San Pablo Park.

1-00:40:56

McGarrigle:

Did she distinguish, like your father had, between the sons and the daughters? Your father got the Chinese tutor for your brother to learn Chinese, and then you learned—

1-00:41:08

Gee:

I think that it was important. I don't think my mother, so much though, but I think when my father was alive the boys had to be—well, I have one brother at the top and one at the bottom, so the one at the top, a lot of attention was put on him. That was important. The girls are all right too, but it was important that he do well.

1-00:41:57

Li:

How did your mother transition from housework to defense work?

1-00:42:02

Gee:

You know, it's really surprising, though. I wish I knew. She realized, I guess, that there was need, and she started very early, I think when the war first started, to apply for a job out in the shipyards. It was a real job. I think that was the important thing. It was a real job and you did something for the war effort. Some one else must have told her, but she might have found out all by herself, because I don't think any of her friends went out to work in the shipyards. Maybe there was a group of younger generations, but I don't remember, though. Someone might have said, you know, there's good jobs out in the shipyards and you could do something for the war effort and make good money. She really enjoyed that. My sister was telling us. I guess I wasn't at home at that particular time, but she really enjoyed getting up in the morning, going to work, and feeling as if she were doing something and being out there with other people.

1-00:43:34

Stine:

Do you think that was a large part of why she, aside from wanting to have a real job, was that a big part, the doing your part? Do you think that patriotism had anything to do with helping in the war effort?

1-00:43:48

Gee:

I think it was a combination of all. I think that during World War II, almost everyone wanted to do something for the war effort. There was a tremendous amount of patriotism. Since it was an Asian

country that we were fighting, I think it made a lot of difference. It could have been the Chinese. It couldn't have been, but people felt that since the Japanese and Chinese look alike, it could have been the Chinese that attacked Pearl Harbor. I mean, there was no chance, of course, but you felt as if you wanted to do something.

1-00:44:37

Li:

Do you think being Chinese made you want to demonstrate your patriotism even more?

1-00:44:40

Gee:

I think so, yeah. Even though the Chinese and Japanese did not get along at that particular time, because the Japanese had invaded China.

1-00:44:56

Li:

Do you think your mother felt conflicted, because she had lost her citizenship earlier?

1-00:45:01

Gee:

She might have felt that this is one way of proving it, too. She did. You could work in the shipyards and not be a citizen. You could join the Army and not be a citizen and get your citizenship, too.

1-00:45:21

McGarrigle:

You said last time when we were visiting, that some of her Chinese friends looked down on her decision to go to work.

1-00:45:28

Gee:

I think so. Some of her women friends, because those were things you didn't do, but I don't think too many. It's just more gossip. [laughs] They did. It wasn't a closed society, but the families all knew each other quite well. In Berkeley, there were quite a few Chinese families there. I don't think anyone of her generation—my mother was one of the older people working in the shipyards, I believe. Women, that is,

working in the shipyards. She was in her forties. That's not very old today, is it? She was forty-five, at least.

1-00:46:31

McGarrigle:

She had already had adult children.

1-00:46:33

Gee:

Yeah, she already had adult children. She was an old lady, then. Your life expectancy then probably was sixty or something like that, sixty-five.

1-00:46:44

Li:

Do you remember her making friends at work?

1-00:46:50

Gee:

I think she did, but I didn't know any of them. She liked it, though. She really liked it.

1-00:46:59

Li:

What was she doing?

1-00:47:01

Gee:

She was a burner. And so, what is a burner? I didn't know the difference between a burner and a welder.

A burner has a torch, too. It's like light welding or cleaning up the welds and things like that. The welders did stuff in ships, and the burner—I suspect the burner works with the welder. I don't know, but I suspect that.

1-00:47:42

Li:

Was she trained on the job?

1-00:47:46

Gee:

Oh yes, they trained you on the job, so that you could come with nothing and learn. She was a fast learner in things of that sort. She was good with her hands. I never saw her change a tire, but she probably changed a tire. [laughs] I don't know who's going to change it for you.

1-00:48:10

McGarrigle:

Do you remember when Kaiser first came in and they got that contract to build all those shipyards, and how that transformed the area?

1-00:48:19

Gee:

Oh, yes. Well, with my mother, it was the first time. They had this wonderful health plan, the beginning of whatever you call an HMO nowadays. I do remember them, somewhat, Kaiser coming in. They had been around for a while. Benevolent, somewhat, I guess you'd call that. They'd take care of their workers. The workers did get hurt on the job, so they started an infirmary or something like that that just grew into something bigger. My mother had such a low number. She was so proud of it, that she had this low number as a member of Kaiser, as being one of the first. Just like the co-op. Do you remember the co-op?

1-00:49:06

McGarrigle:

Yeah.

1-00:49:09

Gee:

I had a number of 17,500 and something. My mother had 1044. And the co-op, that was a store that we had here. It's now Andronico's. It's all the new Andronico's.

1-00:49:27

Li:

Is that where she shopped?

1-00:49:28

Gee:

That's where we shopped. Berkeley. The Finns started here in Berkeley, the co-op. It really worked very well and everyone belonged. Your mother must have belonged.

1-00:49:42

McGarrigle:

My father did.

1-00:49:44

Gee:

Your father did. A good liberal community, you pay into it a little bit. They over-expanded, and then they sort of bellied-up, because they didn't stick to food. They should have stuck to food. They started a little banking, which is fine. Credit unions are fine. But then they wanted to do a lot of social things, so it became a bookstore, lost lots of money on that. Lost money here, lost money there, so they folded up.

1-00:50:18

McGarrigle:

It was a real institution in Berkeley.

1-00:50:22

Gee:

Maybe it lived its life. Sometimes things live their lives. It was a wonderful institution.

1-00:50:30

Li:

When did it start?

1-00:50:31

Gee:

When did it start, when did it end? I can't remember.

1-00:50:35

Li:

But your mother shopped there when you were a kid.

1-00:50:38

Gee:

Oh, yeah. But the co-ops, I'll tell you where they are, Andronico's bought all the co-ops. Someone else did first, but the co-op was where the University Andronico's is, and this one here, Shattuck, and then

there was one on the other side. Oh, I know, it's one on Telegraph and Ashby. It's a Whole Foods. They're all big stores, and those were the three big co-ops here. Big stores.

1-00:51:11

McGarrigle:

Would you conjecture what her politics were, your mother, at that time?

1-00:51:17

Gee:

Oh, I think my mother's politics were inclined to be on the liberal side. Pretty much so.

1-00:51:25

McGarrigle:

Do you think she would have been actively following national politics or voting in elections?

1-00:51:31

Gee:

I don't know. That's hard to say at that particular time. There was a group of Caucasian women and Chinese women that worked together for these Chinese orphanages. There was two of them; one for girls and one for boys. She worked with the Baptist Church to raise money for them, and the church actually did. They had these little church socials where ladies would make things and sell them. One of the homes for the girls is one of the dormitories for Mills College now. If you go out to Mills College and look at one of the dormitories, it has a little Chinese effect in it. It has these little curlicue things, the building. I think it has a tile roof. Out here in El Cerrito there is a private school called Windrush. Do you know it at all?

1-00:52:55

Li:

Is this the boys' orphanage?

1-00:52:58

Gee:

Yes.

1-00:52:59

Li:

I remember hearing about this. My grandfather taught there.

1-00:53:02

Gee:

Oh, he did? It's very close to the El Cerrito BART station. It has architecture, little curlicues on it. You can see it looks a little Chinese. Your grandfather taught there? Is that right?

1-00:53:23

Li:

Yes, when he first came here he taught Chinese at the orphanage.

1-00:53:26

Gee:

He taught Chinese there. It was a boys' orphanage, yeah. We used to go out there, Chung Mei Home, to look at all those good-looking boys. [laughs]

1-00:53:38

McGarrigle:

Go out there with your mother, you mean?

1-00:53:40

Gee:

Oh, yes. Because we were raising money for them and bringing them things. It was up 'till high school.

There were a lot of children that were not all Chinese. Not a lot. A few, because the families didn't want them.

1-00:54:33

McGarrigle:

So she had the six kids, even if some of you were out of the house, she still had kids at home, and she had full-time work and she did community work.

1-00:54:41

Gee:

Oh, she did a lot of community work. I don't know how she found the time. It's because she had a car.

You know, it really makes a difference, because she could run around. She never was home.

1-00:54:53

Li:

So when was this that she was working with the orphanage and the church, in this philanthropy?

1-00:54:59

Gee:

To me, it seemed like all her life. Probably more so during the war and then after the war. I don't think in the '30s; I don't know.

1-00:55:16

McGarrigle:

Those Kaiser medical benefits, were those lifetime? Did they give those to their employees for lifetime?

1-00:55:21

Gee:

No, you always had to belong and pay.

1-00:55:25

McGarrigle:

So when she stopped working in the shipyards?

1-00:55:27

Gee:

Oh, she just kept it.

1-00:55:28

McGarrigle:

She kept it, but she paid her premium?

1-00:55:29

Gee:

Oh yeah, she paid her own premium.

1-00:55:30

McGarrigle:

Did she have Kaiser the rest of her life, then?

1-00:55:32

Gee:

Kaiser the rest of life, yeah. It's really amazing, though. In a sense, Kaiser was good. When you're young, you don't need it.

1-00:55:46

McGarrigle:

It was meaningful, though.

1-00:55:48

Gee:

I think it gives you that security, a little security blanket that you have.

1-00:55:54

McGarrigle:

Did any of the people that worked in the shipyards have retirement?

1-00:56:01

Stine:

Not that I know of. Not in the beginning.

1-00:56:06

Gee:

What did they have?

1-00:56:07

McGarrigle:

No retirement for the shipyards.

1-00:56:09

Gee:

Oh, I don't think so, no. Just Social Security, and that was never considered retirement money. That was

just to help you with your retirement.

[end file Gee1 04-10-03]

[begin file Gee 02 04-10-03.wav]

2-00:00:14

Stine:

This is tape two with Maggie Gee. I had a question.

2-00:00:16

Gee:

A question? I'll see if I can answer it.

2-00:00:21

Stine:

To go back with the Kaiser healthcare, I was wondering about the physical properties of the job that your mom was doing, burning. Did she ever get injured on the job?

2-00:00:34

Gee:

No, she never got injured on the job. Nothing major, no. She probably might have gotten burned or something like that, but nothing major.

2-00:00:47

Stine:

Did she ever have to use her healthcare while she was there?

2-00:00:50

Gee:

That I don't know. I don't know whether she did or not. I'm assuming that they probably checked on you, gave you a physical occasionally, but I don't know.

2-00:01:05

Stine:

And then beyond that, it sounds like it was a very tiring job, that it involved so much physical labor and such physical effort. Did she talk about that?

2-00:01:17

Gee:

She came home quite tired, but I always have to say that I wasn't home very much. But my sister said that there was always dinner, whether she fixed it ahead of time. She did the shopping, and there was always dinner. There were no fast-food places at that particular time. I find it pretty remarkable; if one has to do things, one does them. She had a very busy schedule. They worked long hours. At the shipyard, she started at the graveyard shift. That's when they first train you, and then you get a better shift, which is the evening shift, the early evening shift. It's the one where you leave at midnight, where you're on from about four o'clock. Actually, it works out well in a sense, if you have a family, because you can do many things during the day and then you can go to work. Then you can sleep from one o'clock to whatever time, ten o'clock. So that worked out. It worked out quite well. They had good public transportation out to the shipyards. As you know, or maybe you don't know, that there was this train. The trains came from the East; I think they were New York elevated trains. They ran along the existing tracks that we had from Oakland to Richmond. A lot of people didn't have automobiles then.

2-00:03:12

Li:

Were they brought in just for the defense workers? They brought them when the factory was there?

2-00:03:20

Gee:

When did they build these trains? They brought them in, actually. I don't think there were any existing trains going on those tracks when the war began. If there were, there were a few trains that went on it. They were brought in so that they could be used as commuter trains, to go to work. At that particular time, I was just trying to think—yes, we were getting rid of all our trains and streetcars here, because California, everyone wants to have their own automobile. So I think there were no longer trains that went to San Francisco. Of course, there weren't very many trains because the ferries had already left by then. There was the bridge that was built about 1937, '38. There were trains that went over the bridge from East Bay to San Francisco, but from Berkeley there was just the F Train. I believe that was the only train, the one that ran on Shattuck Avenue that went over the bridge. There weren't all these from all over town.

2-00:04:36

McGarrigle:

Did she go to that, what's now a restaurant, the depot at the base of University? About Fifth Street, is that where she caught the train?

2-00:04:46

Gee:

No, the train was on Sixth Street, I believe, Sixth or Seventh Street. I'm not sure, but for some reason I thought it was a little further. I didn't think it was way down there.

2-00:04:58

McGarrigle:

There's that building—

2-00:04:59

Gee:

I know, that's the old S.P. train station.

2-00:05:02

McGarrigle:

Do you remember when that was?

2-00:05:04

Gee:

Santa Fe train station—no, the Santa Fe is where the Montessori school is now. It was the S.P. train station. Yeah, it was a Chinese restaurant, then it was a fancier Chinese restaurant called Xandau or something like that. It went out of business.

2-00:05:24

McGarrigle:

Did Richmond seem a very far ways away at that time?

2-00:05:27

Gee:

Yes. Richmond seemed like quite a ways off. It was a different type of community. It was a small community, I believe. They had twenty-odd thousand people, then it went up to a hundred thousand. It was a blue-collar community. Standard Oil was one of the big employers there. The Ford Plant was there. Then there was the Pullman Company where the Pullman cars were built, I believe. Not quite sure, but they were refurbished there. I remember the Pullman cars, though. I don't remember the Ford, but I remember Standard Oil. I mean, we all know of Standard Oil. They're still there. It was a blue-collar town. It had one section where Point Richmond is—there is a very nice section when you go through the tunnel to Point Richmond, where all the houses are along the water. Have you ever seen them? They're very nice houses along there. A lot of Italians built there, as I remember, because it reminded them of the Riviera. If you've been to any of the houses, some of the houses go down to the water. They're very nice. All of a sudden you come through the tunnel and all these lovely houses, down on the right-hand side. In a way, it was not considered a desirable place to live because of the odor—that's the one thing I remember. There was a lot of odor, sort of gaseous odors of some sort. Wasn't really unpleasant, but you were aware of it. It was a thriving little community. Mostly Caucasians lived there, until the shipyards came. I was going to say it was a redneck community, but I won't say it. [laughs]

2-00:07:59

McGarrigle:

Do you think she would have ever gone there before she took the job? Would there have been a reason for her to visit?

2-00:08:03

Gee:

There were reasons to go there, oh yes. There was a big swimming pool. Well, we couldn't swim in the swimming pool, though. There was a whaling station there at Richmond. There was a ferry that left from there to go to where the bridge is. There was a nice ferry that went over to Marin County. So there were all sorts of positive things. My mother got in her car and we went over to the other side of the bay.

2-00:08:34

McGarrigle:

The prohibition was against any non-whites swimming in the pool, or was it specifically targeted at one group or another?

2-00:08:42

Gee:

Well, you know there was a prohibition for a long time for non-whites swimming in pools. But I can't remember when that was sort of lifted, though. It's a big pool there, a big Plunge there. It's been there a long time. I suspect non-whites couldn't swim there. That meant really Asians, at that particular time, because I knew that was at Neptune Beach over in Alameda County.

2-00:09:17

McGarrigle:

Did she talk at all to you or her other children about discrimination?

2-00:09:25

Gee:

No, she did not. I can't remember her talking about it. It's not vivid in my mind. Actually, I think in Berkeley her white friends, these would be the church ladies. They're there to help you, in a sense, because they feel that they want to do something for the Asian community. There was a great group called the Wah Mei Club, in which there were the Caucasian women and the Chinese ladies. They just took on projects and got to know each other pretty well. The Caucasian ladies were, I would say, upper-

middle class ladies. Their husbands were professional people. Like any church group, you're looking for a project and so they sort of adopted the Chinese church. The women remained friends for a long time.

When I was working at the laboratory I came across a young man and he said to me, "You know, my grandmother knew your mother." It was someone I knew. I said, how? He said, "There's an old real estate company called Forbes in Berkeley." His grandmother was Mrs. Forbes, and they owned this real estate company. They remained friends for a long time. After he told me, I called Mrs. Forbes up and we talked at great length. She remembered my mother quite well. My mother had died by then, so that was kind of nice. Any more questions, ladies?

2-00:11:47

Stine:

Thinking about Richmond, you had the perception that it was a little more redneck-y and out of the way, maybe?

2-00:11:56

Gee:

When I say that, it's that there is more discrimination. I always use San Leandro as a better community, in a sense. They were a blue-collar city and they really, up until recent times, it was very difficult for anyone besides the Caucasian people to even move into San Leandro. They just wanted to keep it a white community. They were threatened by the blacks moving in from Oakland and also the Asians, too.

Actually, when you see it, groups do take over. You look at Fremont; I remember seeing Fremont. It's really a melting pot of all of the various ethnic groups, because one moves in, everyone else moves there. Fremont is a melting pot. I mean, it has lots of Chinese, Taiwanese, lots of Afghans, lots of Hindus, lots of everything. So if you wanted to keep yourself a white community—and small—in those days, then you just not allow anyone to move in, except the whites. If you feel threatened, your job threatened—if you're a blue-collar worker, any new immigrant is willing to take your job for much less and they work harder, too. So there's always that kind of threat. The shipyards just made a change, because everyone came in at one time and there was such a shortage of help that people just moved in. I bet if I looked at Standard Oil, who was on their working roll in the '30s, I bet they were probably mostly white. Very few Hispanics, or

Mexicans, they would be; I guess that's what you called them at that particular time. Or Asians. But then on the other hand, there were fewer of our so-called minority groups, ethnic groups, at that particular time, too. It's not one thing that causes the other; there's many factors.

2-00:14:50

Stine:

Do you remember actually seeing the Bay Area change? This large population explosion that was centered in Richmond because of the shipyards, so do you have any kind of personal recollection of feeling all these people moving in?

2-00:14:53

Gee:

Oh, I think so. Things just seemed a little more crowded, that's all. You became aware of it in the stores. I didn't live in Richmond. I'm sure Richmond was really impacted. I saw a little bit of it when I was out at Treasure Island. I saw a little bit in Vallejo. That was a quiet, sleepy town once upon a time. When the war started, it took on a lot of workers. Not like Richmond did, because they were launching a Liberty ship a day. But it did have more people there. They say it was sort of a dying town, and then it became very vibrant because of the new people coming in. So I would compare it with Richmond somewhat, and I would say Richmond was just that much more. I'm just trying to think—did I go out Richmond very much? Well, I remember all those houses going up. That's the one thing I do remember. We didn't have much gasoline, but we had a little bit. We did, or maybe I did with my friends—at that time, I was much older then—we went over to Marin County. There were just a lot of things buzzing in Richmond with all these new houses. They must have been put up in a very short time. I do remember that there were jokes made about the shortage of housing. If you had a room and you had a bed, you could rent it out to three different people. One shift could sleep, and then another person could sleep the next shift, and another person. You did not have to change the sheets, I remember. The housing really was short. I'm sure that you've read about it. It's well documented. But houses went up very fast then. The war only lasted less than five years, and people came in, had to house 'em, feed 'em, then some of them moved out.

2-00:17:58

Li:

Were you a teenager at this point?

2-00:18:01

Gee:

No, I had really left home. I went into the war myself. I went out to work. Like any young person, you're really involved in yourself, more so, trying to figure out what you're doing.

2-00:18:23

McGarrigle:

After the war, did your mother find different employment, or was that the end of her working?

2-00:18:26

Gee:

No, my mother went to work in the post office after the war. I think she must have retired from the post office. I don't know how long she worked in the post office, but then she ended up helping {Homer Lee} who had this florist. They had a very nice article about Homer in the Sunday supplement: "From Rags to Riches." But he still lived the same. I called him after I saw it in the paper and I spoke to his son. I said, is Homer coming down to cook lunch for you? And he said, "Yes, he's not here yet." [laughs]

2-00:19:31

Li:

I was thinking about the influx of workers in Richmond. Was it exciting, as a young person, to have all these new people here?

2-00:19:39

Gee:

I think so. I think it was. People have to find things to do, entertainment, so there was just a lot of people around. Which there wasn't, though. What do you do at nighttime, after working all day? If you're young, you go to the movies or you look for something to do. There was a certain amount of excitement. How much overflowed into Berkeley, that I just can't remember. But Richmond had a lot of things going at that time.

00:20:19

Li:

Would you go to restaurants or bars in Richmond? Would you go out, there?

2-00:20:25

Gee:

I used to go to bars, sort of. [laughs]

2-00:20:31

McGarrigle:

The whole music scene there; did you go to any places where there was live music? There was a whole developing scene in Richmond.

2-00:20:41

Gee:

I think so. I used to like music. I wouldn't go out now to listen to music, unless it's the symphony or the opera, something like that. But just to hang out in bars, I don't. I used to; I think I was dating someone at that time and we'd go down and see what the action was, follow it. There was nothing going on here, go find some other place.

2-00:21:10

Li:

The people who were coming to Richmond, they were from—

2-00:21:13

Gee:

From the South. There were a lot of blacks, but they were from every part.

2-00:21:19

Li:

Did it feel really—

2-00:21:21

Gee:

I don't have a vision of it. I know a varied lot of blacks came in, and there had to be people from elsewheres. I think if I lived there, then I would have become much more aware of it, who had come to town. But they were just more people around.

2-00:22:05

Stine:

You didn't live in Richmond, but in a way that gives you a perspective from not being part of that community and knowing what the general perception of Richmond was, once all these big changes had occurred there. I was wondering how your friends or your colleagues would talk about it in a different way than maybe before the war. If it became some place that you wanted to go to, more? Or if it became some place that you—

2-00:22:33

Gee:

Wanted to stay away from? Richmond was not on the horizon when I was growing up, except for the Chinese home there and some of the people. The Chinese Boys home, Chung Mei Home, was there and we used to go out there quite a bit. That's really El Cerrito, right on the edge of Richmond. The boys did go to Richmond High School. No, I don't think that Richmond was a place I would go to, to seek out entertainment at that particular time. It was close, though. San Francisco was a place you go to seek out entertainment, but sometimes it's difficult to get to San Francisco.

2-00:23:33

McGarrigle:

I was just thinking about what you said about Standard Oil and I remembered there's a neighborhood in El Cerrito, close to Richmond, that had beautiful homes like you see around the Claremont Hotel. They were all owned by the Standard Oil executives. Large-scale, what would now be very, very expensive homes in the hills there.

2-00:23:55

Gee:

Richmond, in the hill area, there's some very large homes up on the top. I think there are several Maybecks up there. I haven't seen them, but they say where the Maybecks and the Julia Morgans are. I think there are one or two there. There are just very large homes, because of the Standard Oil.

2-00:24:22

McGarrigle:

So the children of those executives were in public schools with the children of the shipyard workers who came in. It must have been interesting.

2-00:24:32

Gee:

You've hit it on the head, in the sense that on the West coast, we don't have private schools. There's so very few private schools, so the children probably did go to public school. Otherwise, you have to be shipping them all the way to Berkeley. The private schools in Berkeley were really small. What's the one that was on Benvenue?

2-00:24:57

McGarrigle:

The Academy?

2-00:25:00

Gee:

California Preparatory School on College {CPS} was small there was another one called Brentley, just a house on Benvenue Street. That's the nice part about the West Coast: it's very liberal in that, because we don't have private schools. We do in San Francisco. There's some in San Francisco.

[end file Gee 02 04-10-03.wav]

Interview #2 with Maggie Gee, April 29, 2003
Interviewers: Robin Li, Leah McGarrigle, Kathryn Stine
Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock
[begin file Gee3 04-29-03]

00:00:18

Stein:

This is the 29th of April. We're here with Maggie Gee for a second interview.

00:00:23

Gee:

I was just trying to think, what was life like? I think that's the question, after Pearl Harbor? I lived in Berkeley, I lived with my mother and some of my brothers and sisters. Some of them had already left home. As I recall, the community—I'm talking about the neighborhood, really, right at the moment, is that we did have some meetings to see what we should be doing. We had been warned that what had to be considered about the Japanese that might land in the bay. We had some meetings, as I recall, in the neighborhood. There was a civilian—some sort of patrol. There was a bigger organization that was to tell what we, as citizens in this community, should be doing. In particular, we were on the coast, so since there was fear of an invasion of some sort, we had to have blackouts. That was the first thing as I remember, that we were told. We were able to purchase all this black material so we could put it over the windows at nighttime. We could have the lights on, of course, but you had to put this black material over your windows in case Japanese submarines or planes came over, that they wouldn't be able to see the community, or they wouldn't be led into this area. You think about it today; it was highly unlikely that the Japanese would land, but we didn't think that Pearl Harbor would happen, either. So what made it nice was we got to know each other much better in the community. At least, my mother did. She knew everyone in the area pretty much already, but we started looking after each other and there was that sense of community. Since I wasn't head of the household, so I didn't know how the stamps came, but I'm sure there was a form that was filled out, how many people you had in the house and whether you had an automobile; just a lot of questions, so that you were given stamps for various items. I knew about the gasoline stamps, but I didn't know about the other items. But there was probably shortage of oil. Someone else probably could tell you, or you could just read about it, what kind of stamps there were.

But I do remember seeing stamps my mother had, these books of stamps. Life went on, and we looked after each other quite a bit in the neighborhood.

00:04:00

McGarrigle:

Are there specific examples of how people looked after each other differently?

00:04:06

Gee:

Prior to that in the forties, and before the forties, people did know each other in the neighborhood. Today, so many of us want to be alone. There's lots of entertainment we have within our households, so we don't need our neighbors quite as much. When I said they looked after each other, they became aware of who the children were in the family and made sure they were taken care of. Also, as I remember, we had a relatively large family, so there probably wasn't enough for whatever you needed. I didn't know anyone who shared their gasoline stamps. I don't recall that ever happening, but some of the items that were being rationed at that particular time, I remember my mother and some of the neighbors wanting to know whether she had sufficient—maybe you can tell me, was sugar on that list? Yes. Maybe oil, sugar and oil?

00:05:21

Stine:

And meat.

00:05:22

Gee:

And meat—yes, meat was on that list. Oh, what happened then, horsemeat showed up. I don't know whether you had to have a stamp for horsemeat. Do you know?

00:05:40

Stine:

I'm not sure. I don't know if that would have been a replacement, maybe.

00:05:43

Gee:

I don't think so. I think horsemeat was plentiful. I had horsemeat, too. I wouldn't eat horsemeat today because I like horses, but horsemeat, as I remember, there were these funny stores that had horsemeat.

Some people bought it for their animals, but you also could buy it to eat. It was a very dense meat. I didn't like it, as I remember. So I'm quite sure that you did not need a stamp for that. In fact, I could almost tell you where that horsemeat store was. It was up in the Lorin area. That's up by Alcatraz and Adeline; there was a big horsemeat store there. I don't think the family had much horsemeat, because we weren't a meat-eating family.

00:06:49

McGarrigle:

Was there more emphasis on gardens then? Were people even more focused on growing vegetables?

00:06:59

Gee:

Yes, because there was a shortage. That's right, people started having Victory Gardens, though. In my neighborhood, there was an empty lot. In the neighborhood I grew up in, most of the people did have backyards, though. But there was an empty lot. People got together and grew vegetables and shared them. If you grow radishes, for instance, you have more radishes than you can eat, so you'd share them with your neighbors. So that was part of the community. As I said, there was more of a community than before the war.

00:07:50

McGarrigle:

I was wondering how you got information about what was happening during the war. Was it newspapers and radio?

00:07:58

Gee:

When things happened, the radio was always very much available. We listened to what was going on. But if there was a big event happening, a battle or something like that or something that the public should know about, there were these "extras." The newspapers would publish a special edition. They were young men, usually, or older men; they would come down the street and say "Extra! Extra!" and you'd come out and buy a newspaper to find out what was going on. There was a lot of human interaction, which was nice

in that respect. So they probably weren't young men; they were probably older men doing extras during the war, because the young men were out fighting in the military.

00:09:00

Li:

Did your mother read Chinese newspapers as well?

00:09:04

Gee:

Chinese newspapers, yes. I didn't. I can't read Chinese, though. But in Chinatown, I think there were several Chinese newspapers, and they really concentrated pretty much on what was happening in China.

00:09:21

Li:

Did your mother read them?

00:09:22

Gee:

My mother could read some Chinese, yes, but she didn't keep up with what was going on. She talked to her friends. I was very much aware, they were very much aware what was going on in China, what the Japanese were doing in China, because everyone had close families. They would send packages to China. They were our allies, also.

00:09:55

Li:

What kind of packages?

00:09:57

Gee:

I belonged to a Chinese church and there was a women's group. I think the supplies they sent to China were—I'm not too sure, but there was some clothing. Clothing is a little bulky, though, and it took a long time to get there. I mean, everything was sent by boat. A little hard to get there, I think. I don't know the details of that. Gosh, you gave me things that I didn't even think about.

00:10:58

McGarrigle:

Something about talking out loud to somebody triggers the memory.

00:11:03

Gee:

Is that right? Is that how it works?

00:11:06

Li:

I think it does. It works for me that way.

00:11:10

Gee:

I haven't even thought about these things for so long, so you have to kind of visualize what was going on.

You have all this information from so many other people now that's it a little different.

00:11:21

Stine:

Oh, but finding out from everybody's personal experience how you actually went through things.

00:11:27

Gee:

I just want to remember what my mother did with her driving around. We always had a car.

00:11:36

Li:

Would you shop with her after work? Would you go with her to the horsemeat store?

00:11:42

Gee:

My mother worked, and she worked in the shipyards. She worked at first the graveyard shift. I think everyone worked the graveyard shift to start with, because it's the least desirable. Then, as you get a little bit of seniority you can switch to the day shift. My mother did; she shopped. We did have a Safeway, I remember, in the neighborhood. It was small, but it was walking distance. At that particular period, people had neighborhood stores and even though there were chain stores, there were a lot of just small neighborhood stores, independently run. Then there was the local meat market. They were open late, and that would give her opportunity to go shopping. But she would send her kids out to go shopping, as I remember. We went and did some of the shopping.

00:13:00

Stine:

Do you remember hearing about Pearl Harbor and what that was like? That specific event, if you have any personal recollection or hearing the extra, what that meant?

00:13:14

Gee:

Having gone along life and having life pretty easy in a sense, and feeling very safe in this country, not even thinking about it, knowing that there was a war in England, in Europe. Really, I was young, so I was quite happy that we weren't in a war, even though we probably should have gotten in earlier, maybe. I can't pass judgement on that. When I heard about Pearl Harbor and when FDR got on the radio, it was really scary. I think if I had ever been to Hawaii, it would have been a little more meaningful, but all of a sudden I felt unsafe. I think that was it, that this was something that shouldn't have happened. Being very selfish, that it shouldn't happened to us, because we hadn't done anything to anyone. That's kind of ridiculous—that's a very naive statement to make today. Since I was young and not very worldly, I felt "What is going to happen? That we've got to fight this enemy, though—" I really felt that the Japanese were really the enemy. Then there were cartoons depicting these terrible Japanese. Cartoons worked very well for young people. I always can remember the cartoons with the glasses and the Japanese pilot with these little round glasses and big teeth, kind of very evil. That made an impact; I wasn't a child, though, but I saw many of these cartoons like that. All of us, the whole nation, including, I should say about myself, felt that "I got to do something. What can I do? What can I do to help this country?" That was for the moment and then you go on doing the things that you're doing, but behind your mind you think, "What are these options I have?" The options were to go to work; they were rounding people up to go to work. Or to join the service: Uncle Sam needs you, and so you don't want to be a 4F. Help this country. Made you feel very patriotic.

00:16:31

Li:

Would you and your friends talk about what you would do? Because you were young—when you would hang out with your friends, would you talk about it?

00:16:40

Gee:

We did, in the neighborhood. People were going—I was going to say the boys, but the men were beginning to have to. Women didn't have to do anything; the men had to sign up for the draft and they started leaving. I think there was much more chaos in their lives. Well, not chaos. They were more directed than the women—the girls were. We're talking about teenagers, twenty-year-olds. So you see your friends go. They're going out to fight this war. You felt that you must do something, too. I actually was in my first year in college, so I saw my college friends leave. Some of the women just continued going to college, the Chinese Americans—I was one of the few that joined something or did something else. Quite a few of our friends got killed, as I remember. It was kind of hard to believe that they were gone. Now that I'm older, of course I'm much more sensitive to all these things, but at that time I was sensitive and sad about it, though you just seem to move on. You move on easier, I think, when you're younger. You're more involved with yourself, because you have to direct yourself to do something with your life.

00:18:25

Li:

Why do you think you were one of the few Chinese who joined something?

00:18:33

Gee:

Well, only in hindsight, now, because I know there were very few Asian women—I'm going to blanket Asian women—that joined the forces. A lot of the young Asian girls worked in the USO here, which was good. They formed clubs. Things were segregated at that particular time, so when the Asian or Chinese soldiers came back to town, they would not go to the USO that the Caucasians did. They needed entertainment with the Asian community, so there were people that organized places in San Francisco and the East Bay for them to come to. So they had dances for them, and there'd be a type of entertainment, recreation type of entertainment, because they needed it.

00:19:34

McGarrigle:

What was your first organized activity along those lines? Was that working at Mare Island? What was the sequence of your involvement with the Armed Forces?

00:19:44

Gee:

I did some work at the Y first. I remember that the Y had some things. I'm not sure exactly what we did there. Later in my life, I did go work with soldiers. I ran—in Europe—a service club. I remember now that I used reference of having done organizational work at the Y during World War II for recreation for soldiers that came by. Also, we had soldiers on campus. I just did it for a very short time, the V5 and the V12 program. These were programs of education for soldiers. The International House was taken over by the Navy. They had a program there where the men were going to school getting, I think, degrees in engineering at that particular time. So there were things at the Y for them in their spare time. We'd hang out for a while, maybe just fed them a little extra, just talked to them. So that's sort of the first type of work that I did related to our volunteer work that I did related to the war. But I was busy doing something a little more—make some money, I guess, do something I could make some money. That's why they needed people to work in the shipyards, and U.C. had this program to train you if you wanted to become a draftsman, if you had trigonometry. You had to have a little bit of mathematics. If you had a little bit of trigonometry or you knew how to draw a line, or you had the concept of what a ship looks like, how to draw things. We had little, mechanically-minded. I must have read something in the Daily Cal and decided to go for this training and get this job. It was really more direct; one felt that it was more directly involved in the war effort. It was the war effort. You wanted to get involved in the war effort.

00:22:50

Stine:

How long of a course was that?

00:22:59

Gee:

It was all day, and it might have been six, or eight, or ten weeks. I'm not sure, now. It was just training to work as a draftsman. You're working as a draftsman, you're working with an engineer, and he needs

some drawings. You have to understand a little bit of what you were drawing, though. You were an assistant to him. You started out as an assistant to an engineer. I was pretty good at that, because I was mathematically inclined and I knew I could understand a lot of things that an engineer might understand, just as a lay person, so it didn't baffle me at all.

00:23:54

McGarrigle:

Were you at that point already a physics major?

00:23:57

Gee:

No, no. I wasn't anything. I just started college. A lot of Asians start pre-med at that particular time, because you can finish and you can have a job.

00:24:18

McGarrigle:

Did you consider medicine yourself?

00:24:20

Gee:

Oh, yes. In my particular family there are no medical doctors, but I have so many friends where everyone in the family is a medical doctor, it seems, in my generation. At least, there are four or five. My best friend, Julius Chang he's not a medical doctor, but all his sisters and brothers are and they're all married to medical doctors. They have four children. So it's not unusual. I wasn't interested in physics. But I was pretty good at mathematics at that particular time, so that's why I chose to train to be a draftsman.

00:25:15

McGarrigle:

Was it an application process that you had to go through before you got appointed as an assistant?

00:25:20

Gee:

Yes, it was a civil service job, so you had to take a civil service examination and have an interview. But I would say at that particular time they needed people, so it wasn't as if you were really competing with a lot of people. If they thought you knew how to do something, you were hired. Mare Island was the only

place that I looked at. I think there were places like Hunters Point and probably the Richmond shipyard, doing design work. Yes, of course they'd need engineers and draftsmen.

00:26:00

McGarrigle:

Were there very many other women then?

00:26:04

Gee:

In my group, there were three of us at Mare Island, in the engineering department. There were three young ladies.

00:26:16

McGarrigle:

Out of a total of how many, do you think?

00:26:19

Gee:

A hundred, maybe fifty to a hundred. Women just didn't do this. There weren't very many women engineers in those days. I don't think there was a single woman engineer there. The men who were there were exempt from the war and most of them were married. There were no young, young men. I would say the average age might have been mid-forties. There weren't a lot of old, old men either, then. I don't remember—maybe a few twenties, but not very many.

00:27:07

McGarrigle:

Did you take a leave of absence from university studies then, to do that work?

00:27:13

Gee:

I guess one had to. I'm going ask you: are we going on to—? This is not about Richmond anymore.

[laughs]

00:27:34

Stine:

We also just want to find out, since you were around in the Bay Area at that time, what it was like.

Another thing I was curious about was when you left your mother's home and how you found a place to

live, and what that experience was like, being a single woman and being out on your own for your first time.

00:27:56

Gee:

In the Bay Area. I didn't do that until later on. I lived with my mother for a long time. Like we all do; it's cheap. [laughs] It's inexpensive. When I came back from being in the service is when I—I'm just trying to think. I've lived around town in Berkeley, and Berkeley was a very difficult town to rent in, for non-whites. Very difficult. I think that was a discouragement, 'cause my sister and I had tried to rent, I guess several times. We really couldn't find a place to live, because there would be a place available but when we came to see them, the place was rented. It became very discouraging.

00:29:03

Li:

Were they pretty overt about why they weren't renting to you?

00:29:10

Gee:

Well, you knew already. I sort of gave up. My sister, she'd call ahead of time and say that she was Chinese. That kind of settled things, pretty much. It's sort of hard to believe today that that's the way it was. The Chinese church that I belonged to had housing, because for years Chinese students had a very hard time finding a place to live, unless they worked as a houseboy for someone. So the Chinese church bought a house, and that's where the church was. Also, there was a Chinese student club on Etna Street, a big house that was purchased by—it might have been the Congregational church. I'm talking about the regular congregational church, because there was no housing for Chinese students, men particularly.

00:30:15

McGarrigle:

Do you remember at the time, what your feelings were about that kind of discrimination?

00:30:21

Gee:

I was hurt, more than anything else. Many years later I served on a commission on housing discrimination in the city of Berkeley. This was actually before the Rumford bill, and that was in the sixties. You'd think

Berkeley, being a university city it's an enlightened thing—it's just like any other city, though. People are frightened. If you allow a minority person to live, it would allow all the rest of the other minorities in. It's really quite stupid. Economics really determines where you live. Yes, I was really disappointed in Berkeley.

00:31:26

Li:

How did Pearl Harbor affect Chinese Americans in particular, in terms of their treatment?

00:31:33

Gee:

America's always had a love affair with China. Why its had, there are various reasons, but I always felt that particularly the missionaries who went to China, because there's no religion in China, really, they converted all these Chinese to be Christians. But I don't know whether that's the real reason but I think that had a lot to do with it. I think that the Chinese here became more proud of themselves, because they were Chinese and it was the Japanese that were our enemies. You let people know that you were Chinese. I wish I had whatever I wore at that particular time; I don't know if they're around, saying "I'm Chinese." I don't see whether you had Chinese American. I don't think there was that expression, Chinese American. Just Chinese. I mean, they must have been around, a dime a dozen, like little Mao red books that you probably can't find anymore. So we wore them. We were proud.

00:33:03

Stine:

Did you wear those throughout the war?

00:33:07

Gee:

Oh, I didn't wear them throughout the war, but around here if you went over to San Francisco on the Bridge you wore them, but it was obvious after a while because all of the Japanese were moved out, then.

00:33:25

Stine:

I remember being very struck last time—we didn't get it on tape, but you had talked about how in your house you had thrown and broken things made in Japan. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.

00:33:37

Gee:

Yes. I mean, it's so ridiculous, though. There were a lot of things in this country that were made in Japan. Not a lot of things, but a lot of china-type things. One thing I remember about Japanese goods, they were poor quality. They do such fine quality things, but whatever they imported here, a lot of it was children's toys and little dishes and things. The workmanship, in fact, I will show you something I have that is Japanese that is a plate that is just beautiful handwork, but the quality of porcelain or whatever they used was just so poor. So the idea of taking everything and breaking it that was Japanese was ridiculous, though. There was just a lot of junk that we had, bottom line. We had no money; these were the very ordinary, just common things that you would buy, dishes. That's the one thing I remember, dishes.

00:34:56

Li:

Was everyone doing this in their homes? Was there an announcement on the radio?

00:35:03

Gee:

How did people start doing this? I'm sure a lot of it, among the Chinese, was just word-of-mouth. Just break all these things; throw 'em away, and I think people did. There was so much—do you know how the dislikes are? Here, I'm speaking among my Japanese friends, part-Japanese friends. [laughs] There was really so much dislike of the Japanese, from the Chinese. Not the people you knew, because I lived in a town where there were as many Japanese as Chinese, and we all went to school together. We were friends. I guess you didn't think of them as being Japanese, though. Japan was the invasion of China and Manchuria, them coming in. The military was so cruel to the Chinese. You didn't see it in the newspaper necessarily in this country, but since everyone had relatives in China that they felt it very personally. So one of the worst things you could do, that I could remember, [was] my sister dating a young Japanese schoolmate. I remember someone said, it's better that she dates a black man than this Japanese young person. But it was really frowned down upon. It's interesting; it's really stuck in my mind in a sense, though. There are so many marriages now between people of Chinese ancestry and Japanese ancestry, and

I think oh, that couldn't have happened with my generation. There aren't that many in my generation. I can't think of anyone.

00:37:26

Li:

Was there much other cross-racial dating? As far as dating people of different backgrounds, what were the sentiments about that?

00:37:38

Gee:

Well, I'll have to tell you a story, but I don't know if you want to keep this in, though. I had this friend of mine, and she started dating a Caucasian. This was, I would say, in the 1930s. Her grandmother was outraged. I don't know how it resolved, but it came out that [the grandmother thought] he was a lowly person, in a sense, a Caucasian, because he had so much hair on his body. [laughs] That was the feeling, though. It's a dumb story, but—

00:38:28

Li:

I've heard similar kinds of—

00:38:29

Gee:

Have you heard stories like that? Animals! [laughs]

00:38:36

Li:

Was there a hierarchy, a perception of one?

00:38:39

Gee:

Of course. The hierarchy was the Chinese were on top. [laughs]

00:38:44

Li:

Were the Caucasians the next down?

00:38:45

Gee:

Well, let me think. The Japanese certainly weren't there, and the Koreans have always been considered—because the poor Koreans have always been a conquered nation. The Chinese were over them and the Japanese were over them—I guess the whites were next, somewheres along the line. I would say the Japanese were on the bottom for a while. I guess Koreans didn't count.

00:39:20

McGarrigle:

Did your mother talk to you and your sisters and your brothers—

00:39:23

Gee:

Well, yeah. She didn't mind, in a sense, but what would her friends think? It's always that, isn't it? What do your friends think about anything? Less of you, for doing this. I had a sister that was dating very early—well, you live in a community and who do you know? You go to a high school, and there's a cross section of people. I'm talking about a young lady or a young man, there's no one there of your own race. Just people.

00:40:02

Li:

Was Berkeley unusual in that sense, 'cause it was such a diverse community.

00:40:06

Gee:

We always think of diverse communities. In a way, yes, it had all different kinds of people, but everyone stuck to themselves. Today, I always think of Hispanics, the Mexicans in particular, that they will integrate in one generation. I don't think so. They live within their own community, and they will marry other Hispanics, or I think Mexicans in particular. That's very important. There are very few that marry out of that group. One of these days you'll be speaking Spanish here. [laughs]

00:40:52

Li:

Last time, I think you had mentioned that you hadn't dated many Chinese boys.

00:40:58

Gee:

I hadn't. The reason why, I think is because I'm not very tall for today, but I was 5'6". I guess that I had grown up in Berkeley; I didn't know very many Chinese boys. There were quite a few in Berkeley, but we were never attracted to each other. We'd go out in groups and then I moved on. I was tall, too. Taller. You're tall, too, but everyone's taller now, no matter who you are or what your racial background is.

00:41:56

Li:

So when you say moved on, was that to college?

00:42:02

Gee:

Oh, when I "moved on?" I shouldn't blame you, that's a bad expression. Yes, in a way. I found when I sort of came back from the war, I had a different perspective on the world. I was more mature. I had a lot of very close friends in very short time who were not Chinese. I found that my Chinese friends who had gone to college here were still interested in things that I was no longer interested in. Their world had remained somewhat small. I mean, I have lots of Chinese friends still, quite a few. I just went to a reunion of one Chinese fraternity that was on the campus. It was two weeks ago. It was a hundred of my old Chinese friends.

00:43:29

McGarrigle:

What's that called, the Chinese reunion? What's the name of the fraternity?

00:43:34

Gee:

Pi Alpha Phi. There's a Chinese fraternity. There was just one Chinese fraternity.

00:43:40

McGarrigle:

That would be men and women, then?

00:43:43

Gee:

There was a Chinese sorority, too. Sigma Omicron Pi, or something like that.

00:43:49

Li:

Did you find then that most of your friends became the other people that had been part of the war effort?

That was a bond?

00:43:58

Gee:

Oh, yes. It's always like if you have a unique experience and even though it's a short period of time, it's something you always have, even though your values may be different. When I say your values, I have found that the women that I was in the service with for a very short period of time, that a lot of them are inclined—my close friends are inclined to be more conservative politically, so we never talk about it. [laughs] We know that. Actually, politics is more important to me, how the world goes. I'd like to see more social legislation and it's very important. I mean, this country needs all that. For them, they probably don't think much of it. They just think of taxes.

00:44:55

McGarrigle:

That's a majority/minority point of view, maybe?

00:44:59

Gee:

It's a majority/minority point of view. You mean to say within the group of women, or what?

00:45:03

McGarrigle:

Well, I'm just wondering to what you would attribute that to. Sometimes as minorities and having experienced discrimination, there's an awareness about the necessity for social legislation that's not always prevalent in the majority community, that hasn't, for example, not been able to get an apartment and experienced this very—.

00:45:27

Gee:

I can't say that completely, though. I think it's just people are different. They're more aware of things. Why I say that is because a lot of Chinese are very conservative, once they've made it because they feel that—I really feel that some people in this country will never be able to make it. With the Chinese, they

come to this country and they work very hard. A very large number—not everyone does—becomes successful monetarily. They have material things, and so they feel if they have done it, that the rest of society should be able to do the same. Well, it's not true. I mean, it just doesn't work that way. I personally have always felt that our society is rich enough that we can take care of everyone, and by not having everyone educated—some people you can't educate very well, but we have a better society if everyone is taken care of. I would benefit by it. I wouldn't have ill people on the streets begging if we would really address this problem in Berkeley, the homelessness, as an example today. I don't know how to solve these things, of course, but there's no reason why they can't be resolved much better than they are today. There are a lot of negatives in capitalism. I can use public transportation as an example. It would be cheaper, I think, and I think there's been studies made, if public transportation were almost free, everyone would use it. The streets don't have to be repaired, you don't have to use space for parking lots, but capitalism doesn't allow you to do that. Instead, what we do is we cut back on services and so fewer people will use them. But I've always felt that for those who really can afford a better system for themselves, that's fine, they can spend the extra money, but for most people you should have a bottom line that's a little higher than we have today for our society. You didn't want to hear all that.

00:48:36

Li:

Oh yes, we do.

00:48:37

Stine:

Most definitely. I think it's so important in the context of thinking about World War II, just to bring it back, I wonder if you could maybe speak to your emerging political identity at that time, if you had any thoughts about FDR, about New Deal programs, about the social services that implemented during World War II, if you had recollections distinctly of those, or how they fit into your own ideologies emerging.

00:49:05

Gee:

[laughs] That's a hard one. I don't know. I just felt it, though. If you look during the Depression, at that particular time FDR, when he was trying to get us out, we have so many wonderful lasting things that were done by some of the public works things that were done in this country. I only can give a few examples: some of the wonderful lodges and things, jobs were created. Also, some of the art that was created. Those were unfortunate times, but we do need the public sector in times that are very difficult, and I would say we were approaching this very difficult time now. I guess I don't believe in supply-side economics. I guess that's what you call it, or tax-relief things when things are very difficult. Is that what it is? Supply-side economics? I don't think it's ever worked, though. Today, our society seems to be crashing upon itself, if you look at the stock market. You look at corporations and you even look at the government agencies—where will we be in the next fifty years? Whatever the solution is—there are people who are Communists who are trying to make this happen. Whether that would be influential or not, I don't know.

00:51:14

Li:

Would you talk about these things at home? Would your mother talk about it?

00:51:17

Gee:

No, my mother was kind of quiet.

00:51:23

Li:

With your brothers and sisters—

00:51:23

Gee:

She was, but we would talk a little bit about it, you know. Where are we going, a little bit. The days of the Depression, I was young so I didn't have to worry about getting food on the table. That really makes a difference. There was always food on the table. Didn't have a lot. It didn't make any difference. You didn't have mass communications; you had movies that told you how other people lived, but they were

not realistic at all. Today, it's another story, what you can see. Of course, our society gears you into wanting things, just look at the advertisers. But that isn't what it's all about. We're not talking about that today; we're talking about what it was like in the thirties and forties, or during the war.

00:52:27

Li:

It's interesting how that leads up to the anti-communism that comes afterwards. It's an interesting arc, the whole story.

00:52:37

Gee:

Another thing that was very interesting at Mare Island—I don't remember whether it was at the shipyards, but they had these balloons like dirigibles, not quite that large, that were all around Mare Island to sort of protect it so that in case the Japanese came over and try to strafe it. There would be these balloons that would protect the island and the facilities. Have you seen any of that?

00:53:20

Li:

No. Was there high security? Did you have a badge to get to work?

00:53:25

Gee:

They were. They were considered very high security at that time. You had to have a badge to get in.

00:53:34

McGarrigle:

That period that you went to Mare Island, after that training that you did: how long were you working at Mare Island before you entered the armed forces?

00:53:44

Gee:

I worked at Mare Island a year, maybe.

00:53:49

McGarrigle:

You spent a while there.

00:53:50

Gee:

It was quite a long time, yes. Seemed like a long time. Ships were coming in. The ship that I worked on, and the one ship that I always remember, is the *San Francisco*. Ships were coming in that were to be repaired there. I think they did build some submarines. It was a submarine base, but the destroyers came in, that were shot up. We were really repairing, most of the stuff I was doing. I don't think I was on any construction at all. It was repair work to get the ships back, the destroyers, cruisers. It was exciting, in a way. It really is. That's terrible to say, a war makes things—well, it isn't terrible, but it does. A war creates a lot of activity going on.

00:54:44

McGarrigle:

A lot of adrenaline around.

00:54:46

Gee:

Oh, yeah. It gave you a sense that you were doing something. You felt that you were doing something for the effort.

00:54:57

McGarrigle:

How did those male engineers treat the very few women who were working there?

00:55:03

Gee:

We were girls. [laughs] They were very nice, but we were girls. No discrimination at that time. I mean maybe they would never promote us to anything, no matter how good we were, but we didn't stay around long enough.

00:55:24

Li:

Would you all hang out together, the girls?

00:55:25

Gee:

Oh yes, the three of us would hang out together.

00:55:28

Stine:

Do you remember what you wear to work?

00:55:35

Gee:

We wore skirts. I don't know whether we wore pants in those days. I never wore pants. But I think that you could wear slacks, yeah. You didn't have to dress up. You couldn't be quite as casual as you might be today.

00:55:56

Li:

Did you have a vision for what you were doing? A sense of yourselves as women doing this unusual—

00:56:11

Gee:

No, no. I didn't, and I don't think the other two women were either.

00:56:22

Li:

But it was exciting?

00:56:23

Gee:

I think it's not so unusual today that we think more about women's role in society, and the struggles, really, to get recognition. At that time, I would say there were a few women that did, but the majority of women, you accept your lot as a second-class citizen. You're lucky if you get the opportunity to go out into the world and get a job. There's nothing wrong with marriage and a family, but that's what is expected of you.

00:57:15

Stine:

Did you feel lucky have this opportunity?

00:57:19

Gee:

I think that World War II gave women a lot of opportunity to do things, much more. But when the war was over, the opportunities were taken away because there were more men back. They were jobs that the men could fulfill, and given the choice, a man would get a job, always.

00:57:49

McGarrigle:

Were those wages really good wages, that you earned at Mare Island? Was that relative to the other kinds of employment that were available?

00:57:57

Gee:

The wages at Mare Island were okay. They were civil service wages. They weren't a lot of money.

00:58:05

McGarrigle:

It wasn't like the shipyard wages, then.

00:58:09

Gee:

It depends on what you do. They were comparable. A man would get the same wage. I don't know how much the shipyard wages were. Do any of you know how much they got an hour?

00:58:21

Stine:

I don't remember offhand, but considerably more.

00:58:23

Gee:

Five bucks an hour?

00:58:25

Stine:

No, nothing that high.

00:58:29

Gee:

So it wasn't very much. But it was plenty at that time, because you could buy a dinner for twenty-five cents. For a long time, I didn't understand why bread was more than nine cents a loaf.

00:58:49

McGarrigle:

How did you end up getting from Mare Island in the draftsperson role to the flight training?

00:58:58

Gee:

I've always been interested in flying. I had money. See, money really makes a difference, so I could go learn to fly.

00:59:07

Stein:

That's such a big question that I'm going to stop the tape.

00:59:13

Gee:

Oh, I don't want to talk about the flying.

00:59:16

Li:

You don't?

00:59:17

Gee:

No, because we're talking about the war.

00:59:25

Li:

So many interesting things. As you're talking, I'm just writing down entire chapters. It's amazing.

00:59:32

Gee:

Now, when you're interviewing someone, people go off on tangents—

00:59:37

McGarrigle:

But it's all related.

00:59:40

Li:

That's where the best stuff happens, because I always feel that my questions are based on existing sources that I've already read. Then, when people go off on stuff that's new, that no one's ever known to ask about, the most interesting things come out of.

[end file Gee3 04-29-03.wav]

[begin file Gee4 04-29-03.wav]

00:00:20

Stine:

I wanted to talk about you joining the Armed Forces and how that happened, but I wanted to actually just go a little bit in before that. I'm always curious especially of the age you were when the war broke out, if you had a sense of what you wanted to be when you were in high school. I know you said you weren't quite sure what you were going to do in college, but if you had a sense of where your life was going and if you ever thought that you would be flying a plane.

00:00:48

Gee:

When I was in high school—I don't know. I think that I really didn't have a sense. There was always in the back of your mind, why don't you go to medical school because you'll have a job afterwards, but that was just vaguely in my mind. I didn't think I'd ever be able to afford to do it, so that really made a difference. So that was kind of removed from my mind. No, it just takes money to do so many of the things that one might like to do, and flying in particular. There was no way that could work your way to be a pilot, in the sense that it takes a lot of money and I never thought that I would be able to make enough money to learn to fly. It was sort of a dream; it's not an ambition, it's a dream that one has. Because of the war, I could earn a little bit of money to learn to fly. But it was being in the service that gave me the opportunity to do all the flying that I wanted to do, large planes. I think I'm no different than a lot of men, though. The war gave the men the opportunity, the young boys who wanted to be pilots, they got to see sort of a dream. They had to go fight and I didn't have to fight, and that made a lot of difference, because they could have lost their lives, and a lot of people did. Did I think I would ever be

able to do anything with it afterwards to make it a career? I knew there would be no opportunities. There were only a little over a thousand of us, let's say 1100. I would say, one percent maybe made a career flying. Less than five percent. There were no jobs, just absolutely no jobs at all. How did those who made a career flying is they owned airports or they set up something for themselves. So there was no way. They instructed, just kind of odd jobs that you would create for yourself.

00:03:29

Stine:

Is that something you would have liked to have done, was continue?

00:03:31

Gee:

No, I don't know what I'd like to have done. [laughs] Maybe just as well. I don't know what I could have done. What is there in flying you can do? You look at today, all you can do—well, I shouldn't say all you can do is you're a commercial pilot of some sort. Well, no, that isn't true. Well, I guess it is, pretty much so, whether it's a small commercial pilot, whether you're in Africa or whether you're in Alaska flying people around to get from here to there, it's pretty much the same. There's something about flying, though. There's a love of flying that I think I would have been happy if I could have done that. I really did like flying. It's hard to explain. It's a disassociation with the Earth, that's really what I liked so much. I felt as if I were above, looking down. But doing it for a living every day, you might have a different feeling about it, but I really liked that feeling.

00:05:02

Li:

Was it a completely different sense of yourself when you were flying, versus when you were not?

00:05:13

Gee:

Yeah. It's really hard to explain. My problems seemed to go away when I'm flying. It's so ridiculous to say it, because my detachment from earth. We've done so much since, though at that particular time I felt that I was in another dimension that gave me a sense of freedom. Today it still might; since I haven't done any flying by myself, it still might give me a sense of freedom. There's something very special about

being up there and looking down. When you're in a commercial plane, it's something else, though. But even in a commercial plane if you have a good window, a good seat, you're up there looking down—I can't say whether it's spiritual, but it is a little spiritual. It doesn't make me more religious, it doesn't give me a sense of who I am or anything like that, either. It's a different feeling.

00:07:02

McGarrigle:

Some of the astronauts talk about that experience when they're out looking at earth.

00:07:09

Gee:

Down there, I know. I can understand that. I think I told you, I did have the opportunity to be, a few years ago, at NASA where I went into one of their trainers with Eileen Collins. It's the same trainer that the astronauts have. We go out in space; it's simulated. This is where the astronauts get their training before they really go out. You have all the sensations of going out into space, where you're boosted up and then you lose the rockets and then you go out in space and it's very quiet. Then you see Earth. It really was nice. I flew with Eileen Collins. I think she was the first woman who had a crew of people that she took up in space. I don't know if you know her name, Eileen Collins. I can't describe the sensation. It was very unique, because I could look back and see Earth. I knew I hadn't gone anyplace, but I had all those sensations. I didn't have weightlessness, though. I felt very fortunate. Just by chance, two of us had been asked to come down to NASA. I wasn't to give a talk, but my friend was to give a talk. They showed us around. They treated us very nicely. Not very many people get to go to use the simulator. Most of the people there have not used it, but we got the opportunity. Not all the astronauts in training get to use it, not anyone can go into it and go out into simulated space.

00:09:36

McGarrigle:

So when you say just by chance, how was it that that connection was made, that you and your friend could?

00:09:43

Gee:

Well, they were looking for someone, so the two of us were—it's people you know, when they come across a name. I had not been asked; my friend had been asked to give the talk. They were looking for another person, so she had me come with her, which was very nice.

00:10:09

Stine:

How did you seek out the opportunity to get involved with the armed forces and flying? How did that happen, that transition from Mare Island to flying? How did you make that choice?

00:10:24

Gee:

There were three women, three girls, and we were looking for something else to do that was joining one of the services, but we were too young. I don't know whether I was eighteen or nineteen at that particular time. I was too young. I was almost nineteen years old by then. I think that also was by chance in a way, too. But I went to learn to fly on my own, because I had enough money to buy the flying time. I went up to Minden, Nevada to learn to fly. The recruiters for the WASPs at that particular time were coming through Reno, Nevada, so at that time I got interviewed. I passed all the examinations and qualifications, and I was accepted. There were twenty-five thousand women that applied, and I felt very fortunate. About two or three thousand of us were accepted, and then half of us washed out of training. I didn't wash out of training, I was lucky to finish.

00:11:49

McGarrigle:

What did the training consist of?

00:11:52

Gee:

The training was the same flight training that the men got, so if you failed a flight test or you didn't do things correctly, you were washed out. After they examined you, you were taken for flight checks.

00:12:11

Li:

Some of the friends you went with, were they friends from Mare Island? The other draftswomen?

00:12:15

Gee:

Yeah, the other two ladies. All three of us. They lost all their women.

00:12:22

Li:

You said that you had the money; was it from the Mare Island work you held?

00:12:26

Gee:

From Mare Island, that's right. Well, the money was eight hundred dollars.

00:12:32

McGarrigle:

That was a lot of money, if it was nine cents for a loaf of bread.

00:12:34

Gee:

It was a lot money, eight hundred dollars a piece to learn to fly.

00:12:38

McGarrigle:

And the men didn't pay for their own flight training.

00:12:41

Gee:

No, no, that wasn't for flight school. The men who were pilots though, they gave physical exams and they said they wanted to be pilots. I'm not sure how they were chosen to be pilots. They would go into training, those that they chose, and a lot of them washed out, but then they became foot soldiers. For us, they wanted us to have some sort of flight time, because you didn't know whether you wanted to fly or could fly, at all. But the first group of women that they took were the women who had commercial and pilot licenses. That particular pool was depleted quite early because there weren't very many women that had those licenses. Then they looked for women that had some flying time.

00:13:33

McGarrigle:

I see. And you had the private school time.

00:13:36

Gee:

I had the private school time, yes. But everyone had to have some flying time. Otherwise if they'd take anyone and it'd be a waste. You don't know, they'd get up in the air and they'd get sick. It would be a waste of expense to even try, so they wanted you to have some flying time, to know that you really liked flying and that you could do it.

00:14:01

McGarrigle:

Do you remember your first time up in an airplane, at the controls?

00:14:05

Gee:

I can't remember the first time up, but I remember when the instructor got out and said, "Take it around. It's all yours now." [laughs] Mine? "Just pretend I'm there." That's true, you know. I know you're there, you can tell me to do this, do that—[laughs] I remember that quite well.

00:14:36

McGarrigle:

What did your mother, at that time, think about your going off?

00:14:41

Gee:

My mother was very proud of all her children, like all mothers are. She thought if she were younger, that she'd like to do something more than what she was doing. She was one of the older women at Richmond, so she was doing her part.

00:15:03

Li:

What were your supervisors like, once you were accepted into the armed forces?

00:15:08

Gee:

Supervisors in flying, or at Mare Island, engineers?

00:15:18

Li:

At flying.

00:15:19

Gee:

Well, they were all different. They weren't supervisors—I guess they were. They were our instructors.

Some of them were not very nice to the women, though. The instructors, some of them were very nice and some of them weren't. Our instructors were older men, maybe, or men who couldn't get into the service.

They were all good pilots.

00:15:50

Li:

But for some reason or another—

00:15:51

Gee:

For some reason or another. The qualification was very high, to go to war. You had to have perfect eyes.

Even as a foot soldier, the qualifications were very high. Much harder than today, I think; I'm not sure.

Just seemed always strange that you couldn't wear glasses if you were a cadet in training in the Army or the Air Force. All kinds of things just always kind of baffled me. If you were good, you're out there to get killed. But they were very strict in your health and physical.

00:16:49

McGarrigle:

Was that training highly physical, then? What kinds of exercises and things did you have to do?

00:16:54

Gee:

Oh, I could do many push-ups then. [laughs] We had pretty much the same training. I never really learned to swim very well, but you had to jump into this huge pool with a bunch of stuff on. That's one thing I remembered, in case you parachuted and you landed in the water.

00:17:15

Li:

Must have been exhausting. It sounds so tiring.

00:17:17

Gee:

Yeah. At that age, you're in good physical condition. You can do all kinds of things, oh yeah. Push-ups and all those things, though; chin-ups, push-ups and what everyone does.

00:17:32

McGarrigle:

Then how did you make the transition? You said there were twenty-five thousand who applied.

00:17:38

Gee:

They chose about—I'm not sure. There were several thousand. Only eleven hundred graduated, so half of them washed out. I mean, they probably had a couple thousand that went through partial training, and only eleven hundred graduated, got their wings.

00:18:02

Stine:

And your other two colleagues, did they make it through?

00:18:04

Gee:

We loved it.

00:18:07

Stine:

You were with them throughout the whole time?

00:18:10

Gee:

We were good friends. Let's see who am I going to see, when I go East—no, I won't see any of my friends that I flew with.

00:18:30

Li:

Did your siblings serve in the military?

00:18:36

Gee:

My older brother did. That's how my mother got her picture in the local newspaper, because that was the only day she missed, when her son went overseas.

00:18:50

Li:

Did she go to see him off?

00:18:51

Gee:

She saw him off. I'm not sure how she saw him off, or how he went off. He just died this last year, and

I'm sorry I didn't ask him. Did he fly? Probably not. By boat, I guess.

00:19:06

Li:

How old were you, when he went?

00:19:11

Gee:

I was grown up. I was working probably out at Mare Island or some place like that. The war had started.

00:19:21

McGarrigle:

So can you describe to us what those days were like, once you were accepted and got your wings and started your flight missions? What kind of assignments did you have?

00:19:42

Gee:

I spent almost a year, not quite, I forget how many months, through training. It was good comradeship. I really felt it was an opportunity to meet people from all over. I think with everyone at that age, you really don't know very many people except within your own community, and now you meet women from all walks of life. Because you're living with them day in day out, and you're struggling with them, you bond with them. There's a lot of bonding there. As I said, afterwards we all went different ways, and we'd come from all different types of backgrounds, but nevertheless we always remained very good friends. I always felt that I could call upon a half a dozen women. We're all the same age, so we're all getting older, but when I was younger, even, I felt that I could call upon these women if I needed help. I'm not talking about financial help, but if I needed someone to talk to, or maybe those who did have a little extra, then I had financial help, but mostly emotional-type things. They're very close. I still have about three friends that are very close. What we're going to do this summer is that I'm going to fly to Boston, rent a car, and

my friend Elaine from Washington D.C. is going to come up there and we're going to drive down the coast and visit all our old friends. Both of us are in good shape. That's what we decided to do, and I said "We better do it in a hurry, though, while we're still in good shape." [laughs] So we're going to do that, and I must do all these other things first before I get to that.

00:22:39

Stine:

Why don't we just wrap up. Towards the end of the war, how that happened for you—how long were you with the WASPs?

00:22:50

Gee:

I was there one year, that's all. The war lasted how many years? Four years?

00:22:59

McGarrigle:

Four plus years.

00:23:00

Gee:

Was it four-plus years? Started in '41, ended in '45—less than four years, then. The WASP was around for about two years, is all. They disbanded the organization before the war was ended. The men pressured Congress to disband it, because they wanted our jobs. They just didn't like to see the women fly. When they came back from the war, there were so very few of us that some of them wanted our jobs that we had. Jacqueline Cochran says "We were never militarized." She said, "Militarize these ladies, or disband us." [laughs] So they disbanded us. Congress did away with us. Even though, there was no question we did a good job and there were thirty-eight women that were killed, which is a small percentage, relative to the fatalities amongst the men pilots. They were different types of things: some of them were accidents. Of course, they were all accidents. But there were planes running into each other. It's always hard to believe that planes run into each other, but they do.

00:24:42

McGarrigle:

How were your duties defined, the women's duties?

00:24:45

Gee:

The initial duties, why the organization was started—that was for the women at the very beginning—was part of the Air Transport Command. It was to get a plane from here to there. The first group went to England, but that's entirely different. The rest of the group, they stayed within this country. We were pilots towing targets, doing mock gunnery missions, delivering planes, instructing, and test pilots. Also, testing planes out. So there was a variety of type things that had to be done. It really gave you an opportunity to fly. I think the women who were with the Air Transport Command flew everything. Those were the very early ladies. Those were the ladies that really had lots of flying time, commercial. A lot of them had commercial pilot's licenses. So they flew every type of plane. Some of them were never checked out on them, though. Some of the stories that they tell are really quite exciting. They were asked to take this plane, never seen it before, from here to there, and they could do it. I admire them. So we have our hierarchy. We have the ladies who were very early and then as time went along, we became more service pilots. Instructing, and also flying mock gunnery missions. What is a mock gunnery mission? A mock gunnery mission is—I'll give you a phrase there—towing targets, so gunners could have practice. A mock gunnery mission is as if you're flying over Germany, a bunch of large planes, whether B-17s or -24s, flying in formation, going over to bomb whatever it is in Germany. These missions would have pursuits or fighter planes from the opposite side, really simple flying. Germans, making passes, trying to crash these planes. The gunners would try to shoot 'em down. So this was practice for the gunners in these big planes.

I recently, about two weeks ago, went up to Solano County, the airfield there, because they had some of the Doolittle Raiders, and they had their B-25s there. Do you know who Doolittle is? See, you don't know who Doolittle is, that's right. It's an entirely different generation. During World War II, Tokyo was bombed by Jimmy Doolittle and this group of Doolittle Raiders. That was a big, big, unusual project to do that. There was no way they could come back. I don't know which island they took off of in the Pacific. They flew over Tokyo and they bombed it, and then they were to land in China, places they'd never been

to. Some of the planes crashed; they weren't coming home again. I don't know the number of planes that made their airfield they had to go to, but that's public information. You can find out that. Some of them didn't go to the various airfields. They had never been to China, you know, small airfields. I think there were some that were captured. The Japanese were occupying China at that time. It was really not a suicide mission, though, but there was uncertainty of their coming back. So what they had up here, they were B-25s that did this mission. You hate even knowing how much damage they did and how many people were killed, but war, being so awful, is war. They had two of these planes that flew over. Today, I saw them—they were so slow, and they were so small! [laughs] And then they had a couple of old men there. [laughs harder]

00:29:54

McGarrigle:

You must have had a discussion.

00:29:55

Gee:

It was fun, because it was my generation. It was fun to talk and hanger fly a little bit. I said "My generation, I don't believe this! That old?" But the planes were the more interesting thing. When they came by, they went so slow, they made so much noise. That was one of the major battles. I don't know how much of Tokyo they destroyed. Of course, Tokyo was easy to burn.

00:30:33

McGarrigle:

All wood.

00:30:34

Gee:

It was all wood. It's very sad. Very sad, you know. You stop and think about it, because we're in a war right now. It's hardly a war, was it. I mean, people getting killed. Your president—did any of you vote for him? [laughs]

00:31:03

Stine:

You mentioned you did some instructing. Who would you instruct?

00:31:07

Gee:

None of us instructed cadets, but there were pilots coming back to renew their license, so those were the people that you instructed. Instrument license and things of that sort.

00:31:27

Stine:

Men, or women?

00:31:29

Gee:

Men. Oh, no, women didn't. Because you're servicing the Army—we were Army pilots—so someone had to instruct these fellows, because they have to renew their special licenses.

00:31:46

Li:

Did you do all these different jobs, then? You would do a little bit of everything.

00:31:49

Gee:

I did some of that for a while. There were different jobs, yeah. Now, the fun job to have been in was the Air Transport Command. Those were the ones that were very early, the women that had lots and lots of [flying] time.

[end file Gee4 04-29-03.wav]

Interview #3 with Maggie Gee, May 20, 2003
 Interviewers: Robin Li, Leah McGarrigle, Kathryn Stine
 Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock

[begin file Gee05 5.20.03.wav]

5-00:00:07

Stine:

It's the 20th of May, and we're here with Maggie Gee. This is interview three, with Robin Li, Leah McGarrigle, and Kathryn Stine.

5-00:00:17

Gee:

I really would like to tell you a little bit about an organization that I belonged to during World War II.

Today it's called the WASP. It's the Women's Air Force Service Pilots. Well, in 1942 is when the WASPs began. There was no Air Force, so we were just part of the Army Air Corps. At the beginning of World War II, we had very few male pilots in this country. The war was in full bloom in Europe and there was bombing of Germany, from England. So there really was a need for pilots, so this country—I don't know how many male pilots they produced during a month, but they were just grinding them out. Not so long ago, when I was in Los Angeles, I was talking to a friend of mine who was in the Army Air Corps during World War II. His name is Delbert Wong and today's he's a judge. We were just chatting about the days of the war. He wasn't a pilot, but he was a navigator. He said that he went to navigator school and went to officers training, OTC or whatever it was called, and they sent him overseas immediately, which was quite a surprise to him. But they were sending everyone as soon as they trained them overseas to the Air Force. He said, "We were so young and we started flying missions over Germany." We really lost a lot of people, because there was a war going on, but everyone was very green, young, eager. So at home there was need for pilots to do the more mundane things at home, like taking the planes from the factories to the point of embarkation, and also there was a need for instructors. Jacqueline Cochran, who is a well-known pilot at that time, had decided that she wanted to form a women's group, use the women at home to do the domestic flying, so she talked the generals into that. It was very difficult at that particular time, but she finally did talk them into it and Congress decided to allow women to fly. So what

she did with the first group of women was, she asked all the women who had pilot licenses, the commercial and the private license, as many as possible, to join with her to form this women's group. There weren't very many. These are women who flew before the war, and she finally depleted that entire group and they decided to reach down in age and in the requirements. So they reached down to eighteen and a half, and I guess you had to have a minimum of thirty-five hours of flying time, and that's when I got in. I was nineteen and a half or twenty, I don't remember. I knew I couldn't get into the other services; I was too young, and I did have my flying. I learned to fly in Minden, Nevada.

5-00:04:43

Stine:

How many hours did you have?

5-00:04:45

Gee:

I had about fifty hours. What I did was, I had gone to Minden, Nevada to learn to fly. You could buy fifty hours worth of flying time with six months training—I don't know whether it was four or six months training. So, when they came around to do the interviews, I was interviewed. I passed the physical, and I was accepted.

5-00:05:17

McGarrigle:

Was that the farthest away from home you had been at that point?

5-00:05:20

Gee:

The furthest away from home I had been was Nevada. I hadn't been out of the state of California, so it was a big move for me. I had to go back to work because they didn't call me right away. I went back to my job as a draftsman, and then they called me and I went to Sweetwater, Texas. I had to pay my own way. We were part of the military, but we weren't in the military. We had all the rules and regulations of the military. That's how all the women organizations started. The WACS started as Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, and the WAVES the same thing, too. So I got on this train in Berkeley, at University and I don't know what street it is. Probably First Street, the train station. I think I stood all the way to Texas. I

was on a train that was full of Army people, and you know, we were moving troops around. That's the one thing I remember, just never sitting down except on my suitcase. It was interesting. I don't remember the details of it, but I remember that it was very crowded because troops were moving.

I got to Sweetwater, Texas, took probably a day and a half or something like that, because I had to transfer. I don't know whether I transferred in Barstow or Texas, or someplace. This little cow town—I mean, it's out in no place, in West Texas. Big skies, just like they say. Big skies, and very flat. There were trees there, but they looked like bushes. They were called mesquite trees. It was hot, but it was dry heat. I got there, there were other girls on the train, so we found our way to the Bluebonnet Hotel. I think we walked there; I don't think they had any taxis, and we spent our first night there. Then they came out and got us the next day to take us to the airbase. This airbase only had women pilots. It trained about two thousand women, and we got the same training that the fellows got. You know, we went through basic, we learned ground school, instrument training, and then we went into advanced. We went cross-country, we did everything that the fellows did, but we didn't go to war, to battle. We all did different things. During World War II, after a certain number of missions, I think it was fifty missions, you were sent home. By 1942, going on to '43, a lot of the men had gotten their fifty missions, so they rotated home. Fifty missions, if you're out almost every day, you could do in about three months. If you survive, you know. You're lucky to have survived. The Air Transport Command, when I graduated was no longer taking women, but the first group of women that did graduate, they went into the Air Transport Command. The idea of the organization was they picked up the planes at the factory, and the factories really were on the West Coast, and they flew 'em to the East Coast, all kinds of planes. All of the military planes, whether they were checked out on them, or not. So everyone had great adventures, great, great adventures. Then after you get the plane to the destination, then you got to find your way back to the base. Some of them partly by bus, hopping rides and trains and things. There were no commercial planes or anything like that to take you home. So that was part of the adventure of those days. For me, I was stationed at Nellis Airbase Field. I did a bit of cross-country while in training, which was really nice. So I

did get to see some of the Southeast, which I had never seen before, Atlanta, Georgia; Stuttgart, Arkansas, Greenville, Mississippi; all those places. So many of our airbases were in the South. It was nice. I had not seen that part of the world, and it's different. These small towns are very different than they are out here, at that time. I had no problems in these towns. If I were black, it would have been a different story. We had no black women in the WASPs. There were qualified black women, except Jacqueline Cochran told the women that she could not take them, because it was hard enough just being a woman in the service, but if you're black in the South, they'd have to have separate quarters for them. It just couldn't be done. It really was unfortunate, but in a sense, in those days it had to be that way. There were black women who were pilots at that time, with commercial licenses. Well, I think there were three. Not very many, though, but there were some. Some of them had applied. Two had applied, I think, and she turned them down.

5-00:12:28

McGarrigle:

Did you ever meet those three women?

5-00:12:31

Gee:

I never met them. I gave a talk recently about early minority women in flight, and that's how I knew about some of these black ladies.

5-00:12:41

McGarrigle:

That was at the Berkeley City Club?

5-00:12:45

Gee:

It was Zonta Club at the Berkeley City Club.

5-00:12:50

McGarrigle:

When you went back to work as a draftsman, was there a reaction among those men who you worked with, now that you had your training? Were they aware that you had been trained as a pilot?

5-00:13:01

Gee:

Oh, yes. They thought it was great. They thought it was very nice. The draftsmen were just a little older.

The fellows who were the draftsmen, they just thought it was great. None of them were; they were all 4Fs.

Not all 4Fs, though, but they were an older group of men. I would say, they were in their thirties and forties. At that particular time, that was considered old. During World War II, it was interesting. You had to be in perfect condition to go to war. We had a lot of people, 4Fs, who had bad eyes. They wanted to go to war, but there were COs, too. I knew people who wanted to be in the service who couldn't be in the service, because of bad eyes or something, or maybe a little bit of a heart condition, but nothing major, as I remember. I mean, they were still young, they still could go out and fight, but the requirements were very high. The requirements aren't so high today.

5-00:14:36

McGarrigle:

Do you recall your mother's reaction to your leaving on that train trip?

5-00:14:39

Gee:

Oh, yes, I remember that. I was so proud of her. She said, "If I were younger, I could do something like you are doing." That was pretty good, for her. But then, after all, she did go out and work in the shipyards, too, which very few of her friends did. None of her friends, but there were other women. She was one of the older women—she might have been the oldest. She was in her forties at that time, to be working in the shipyards.

5-00:15:14

McGarrigle:

Does that strike you as an unusual reaction that she had, that kind of enthusiasm?

5-00:15:20

Gee:

Oh, I think she always had that. She learned to drive when she was quite young.

5-00:15:25

McGarrigle:

I was just wondering if some of your cohorts as you were flying, if that had that kind of support from their mothers, or what kinds of reactions—

5-00:15:35

Gee:

Some did, and some did not. I've had several friends where the parents really didn't want them to go.

You're young, you're stubborn, you wanted to go now. It was something that girls didn't do. Also, even in those days, people were concerned about a lot of women getting together; there might be homosexuality. That's hard for me to believe, but recently a friend of mine told me—and she was a very good pilot—she had her instructors rating when she went into the WASPs, and her parents didn't want her to go because they were concerned about that, which really kind of surprised me, because I didn't even know what homosexuality was then.

5-00:16:31

Li:

Would parents talk about that that openly? Would they say, this is what would happen?

5-00:16:33

Gee:

Well, she told me that, yes. I was really surprised that there were a bunch of—what do they call women at that time—you called men “queers” at that particular time. You didn't call ‘em “gay men,” though. I don't know what the expression was. “Butch”? I don't think the expression “butch” was there at that particular time. I said, why didn't you join much earlier? And she said that her parents did not want her to go. She was in the class after me, in fact. Some of the women were married. There are always, you know. If you have a thousand people, there is— I can't think of anyone I know that didn't get married in the end except myself and maybe another person.

5-00:17:38

Li:

The women that you were in the WASPs with, were they all from similar backgrounds?

5-00:17:43

Gee:

No. I think the first group of women were quite wealthy women. Not only wealthy, they had enough money to fly, but they were also independent girls. Except, the first group was older. The maximum age was thirty-five, and it was sort of twenty-one or twenty-two to thirty-five. They'd been flying. They were—when I see the pictures—good-looking women, good-looking young girls, right. I always remember, I'd seen this Life Magazine where they featured the girls. Well, just being young helps. Most of them came from well-to-do families. There were opportunities to learn to fly at the Piper Cub company in Ohio, where they made planes, the Piper Cubs. I cannot remember the name of the town right offhand. I should, because I visited. If you worked for the company, they would give you flight time, so women went to work for the company and they would be able to get some flight time. That's a very special type of woman, too, if you do that. Those women—girls, they were really girls—who didn't come from a bit of wealth and learned to fly. Most of them, I would say, were educated women, a little bit educated, that went on.

5-00:19:39

Stine:

Would you ever talk in training, or just in downtime, about your ambitions?

5-00:19:46

Gee:

All we wanted to do is fly. That's what made the organization so good, because everyone loved flying so much and they wanted to do it. So we had this commonality and [were] very supportive of each other. That's important. If you had a bad day, everyone knew about it and they sympathized. We helped each other. It was really nice. We bound together. We remained friends all our lives. It's like if you live in a dormitory, I think that whoever your dorm mates are for those four years or three years or whatever time, two years, they've suffered with you. Exams, personal—none of them are really tragedies, but your personal experiences—

5-00:20:50

McGarrigle:

Did you interact with the male pilots when they were either training or returned from their missions?

5-00:20:56

Gee:

No, we interacted with our instructors; we had to. We're not supposed to, but I have to say that like anyone at a young age, we would sneak out and we would have parties with them, but we weren't supposed to. It's a dry area. I can just tell you about some of the things we did, though. It's a dry area; Texas is dry, no liquor, but you always could find it. I really never drank; I drank very little, but one day we were going to the instructors' house to party, and wanted to bring some liquor. Some one had a car, and we drove to this place and we knocked on the door, and someone looked out from this little window in the door to see if we were okay, then we went in. Just like the speakeasies. We bought some liquor, then we went to the instructors' house for a party.

5-00:22:06

McGarrigle:

Was there anything that you encountered or heard about that was reminiscent of what we would call sexual harassment today?

5-00:22:13

Gee:

There was a lot of sexual harassment, but we just accepted it. You wouldn't accept it, the nonsense that I even went through when I started working. [laughs] It's really changed. A lot of sexual harassment, yes. But that's the way society was.

5-00:22:39

McGarrigle:

There was no recourse, then.

5-00:22:42

Gee:

Oh, of course not. You gave in in order to continue.

5-00:22:50

McGarrigle:

I would think that would further bind you to your women friends.

5-00:22:54

Gee:

That's part of it. It's true. I guess that's true, but we didn't even know. We didn't even think about it. We wanted to finish and do well, and get our wings, so you took anything anyone gave you, anyone, any nonsense. No one had to go to bed with anyone.

5-00:23:16

McGarrigle:

That's what I was going to ask you.

5-00:23:17

Gee:

I don't think so. Some of them, I'm sure there were romances and things of that sort, but you could get washed out. If you were caught with an instructor, you could be washed out, so people were very cautious about that. And some people were.

5-00:23:36

McGarrigle:

And somehow it stopped short of this requirement that the women pilots sleep with the instructor.

5-00:23:43

Gee:

So they could pass.

5-00:23:45

McGarrigle:

Didn't go that far.

5-00:23:46

Gee:

Oh, no. It wouldn't have paid off either, because if you were not any good, you had check rides by the Army, and there was no sleeping with the men who gave you the check rides who were in the service, because they were—sounds ridiculous, but they were all married men and they'd really had little social interaction with us, just to check you out, so that you'd go on to the next step. Or, if you had an accident, they check you out to see whether you're really a decent pilot or not.

5-00:24:35

Li:

What would a normal day have been like, when you were a WASP? How early did you get up?

5-00:24:42

Gee:

Got up at six o'clock, we cleaned up our Bay just like in the Army, maybe it was 5:30, but it was early.

There must have been the horn that told us to get up, reveille. We took care of our bay, cleaned it up, then got out and lined up and marched and marched to breakfast. We marched everywhere. I can't remember whether we'd have P.E. in the morning. We learned to march, just like in the service, and we had classes in aeronautics, and also a class in weather. We learned the Morse code. Those were the days that everything was done by Morse code, so you know where you are. That was our communication with the ground. Then we'd go to the flight line, either in the morning or the afternoon, just depending which flight we were. Then at nighttime, you had to study. March here, marched to lunch, marched to dinner. A little bit of recreation time. So it was a very full day, but it was interesting. You were tired at the end of the day. It was interesting. We were in Advenger Field, that had only women pilots there. But we had so many forced landings by other men pilots from other fields. They'd come to see us. They'd have forced landings. [laughs]

5-00:26:50

McGarrigle:

They'd come to call on you?

5-00:26:52

Gee:

Well, just to come and see us. They landed because they were having "trouble with the airplane."

5-00:27:00

McGarrigle:

What would happen?

5-00:27:02

Gee:

They'd just come down, whatever it is. You know how they come and we look at them and they look at us, and they get out of their plane. I remember that. We had so many guys. They weren't supposed to

come there. Texas is full of—at that particular time—airfields. That’s where they learned to fly, because probably 363 days a year, it was clear. I didn’t get to know any of the fellows. I don’t know how some of the ladies got to know some of these fellows. We had time off. They would meet in town on weekends. No pregnancy that I know of, but romances.

5-00:27:55

McGarrigle:

Did you see segregation in the parts of the South where you were?

5-00:28:02

Gee:

In the little town that I was in, there were Mexicans, I think, but not too many. It was such a small town.

It’s a larger town now, because they found oil there after the war, but in that particular town it wasn’t obvious. It’s interesting; I’m sure that if you’ve been to the South, the Caucasians in the South are really very, very nice and warm people. They’re inclined to be very kind, more so than in big cities. They spend a little time with you, as long as you’re not black, I’m sure. So that’s the one thing I remembered about the South. I didn’t have any trouble. My brother, when he was traveling through the South, since he’s dark like I am, a little darker, so he had to stay at all the black places. The black Y, because you look a little bit like you’re a Mexican, and I guess the Mexicans weren’t able to stay in public places where the Caucasians were. There aren’t very many Asians, but I think that’s where they put them.

5-00:29:31

McGarrigle:

You and I have talked in the past about the difference for minority men, how being a minority male was different at the time we’re talking about, then being a minority woman.

5-00:29:45

Gee:

I even think that during World War II that was true. I just gave the example of my brother. I have found that it was much easier as a woman to mix with all groups. I guess that much is true today, too. You see with the African-American women, they can move ahead, where it’s difficult for the male African-American. It was that way at that time with the Asians, too. So the reason why, I really don’t know, but

women aren't a threat to society as much as a male is, an economic threat or a sexual threat, I guess in a way. That's the feeling of a lot of white Americans.

5-00:30:54

Li:

I was watching this documentary, *The Forbidden City*, which is about that dance club that was in San Francisco called the Forbidden City, with an all-Chinese revue. Some of the dancers, Chinese-American women were saying that when they would tour in the South, they were sometimes treated as colored people, and sometimes not.

5-00:31:13

Gee:

Is that right, in that particular group?

5-00:31:15

Li:

I was wondering if when you were traveling in the South—

5-00:31:18

Gee:

See, I wasn't with a group of people. I'm just an individual. I find that very interesting, though. They were all such pretty girls. I knew some of them. But they were a novelty—that's interesting, Forbidden City. They were very different. You don't find at that particular time women who were in that particular group, out there dancing without too much clothes on. Do you ever write about Noel Toy?

5-00:32:06

Li:

Yeah, I have.

5-00:32:08

Gee:

See, I remember her. I knew her at Cal at that particular time.

5-00:32:12

Li:

She was a fan dancer.

5-00:32:12

Gee:

A fan dancer, yeah. She was a smart girl. I don't know what happened to her, finally. I knew someone out of Livermore, and she was a programmer. Her mother danced at Forbidden City and her father was one of the pianists there. She said her mother never talked about it, as if it were something of shame. I was really surprised. I said, that was no shame. I mean, good for her being out there so early.

5-00:32:48

Li:

Did you ever have people react as if you should be ashamed as a woman wanting to do something so manly as flying? If you'd walked around in uniform in public, were people generally supportive?

5-00:33:02

Gee:

I never noticed if that happened. When I stop and think about it and look back, people probably thought a lot of the women were tomboys or lesbians, because they were doing a man's job. That was sort of underlying, because people didn't talk about things like that in those days, about men who were gay or women who were lesbians. They were tomboys, and maybe the expression "tomboy" meant the same. You see it today, women who are in golf or tennis, any sports. Part of society does put them in that particular category as being lesbians. Some are, some aren't, like anything else, though.

5-00:34:17

Stine:

Do you remember what kind of reactions you would get, say, when you would fly into a small town in uniform?

5-00:34:22

Gee:

I loved it. [laughs] We all loved it, because we'd fly in and you don't know who's coming in. Then you get out and the crew looks at you, you know. [laughs] That was always kind of nice, a nice shock. I think we all loved that shock value. "We can do it, too!" you know. "Look at us!" It's true. Forgot about that.

5-00:34:54

McGarrigle:

I wondered if you heard stories from the men about their bombing missions and what was happening on the day to day of the war.

5-00:35:06

Gee:

I didn't get to know too many of them. It was scary, and not. I think when they were flying the missions that you were really concentrating, so you know there's danger, but you're there and so you just do the job. You always hope; there's always a certain amount of luck, but you hope that you make it back.

5-00:35:41

McGarrigle:

And you lost women in your group, also.

5-00:35:46

Gee:

Yes. They were lost in various kinds of accidents. There was another Chinese woman who was quite well known—she's getting to be better known now, who was killed. Her name was Hazel Ying Lee. She was very early in the service. She was killed in an accident. She came in for a landing and someone landed on top of her. They were in Fargo, North Dakota and there was a big storm there, so lots and lots of planes were at this particular airport. They were trying to get them out very quickly, and there was just a lot of confusion. So women were killed different ways. Some were killed during the training, and some were lost. Some of them ran into other planes. There were thirty-eight that were killed.

5-00:36:56

Li:

How would that affect morale, when you lost one of your own?

5-00:37:01

Gee:

It was very sad. Also, you think well, it could be I, too. Just as well, whatever the circumstances are—since we were a small group of women, though. Our percentages of death or accidents were smaller than the men.

5-00:37:28

McGarrigle:

Was that something that you discussed all the time?

5-00:37:31

Gee:

We always said that.

5-00:37:33

McGarrigle:

There must have been a great awareness about statistics like that. Was there an awareness about the perception of—

5-00:37:45

Gee:

Yes. Women are more careful, though. Even though we do dumb things; I mean, we do a lot of dumb things. We did a lot of dumb things when you're out there by yourself. You know, you're buzzing this and you're playing around, but with a little more caution. It's the nature of women, that's it. We don't drink, is the thing. You're not supposed to drink and fly, and women just didn't do that. They knew that.

In fact, the days when you had your period—today, it wouldn't make any difference. We didn't fly during our period. We were told we shouldn't fly, and at that time, we didn't.

5-00:38:32

McGarrigle:

Why was that, that they told you so?

5-00:38:34

Gee:

Because you're sick at that time, aren't you? [laughs]

5-00:38:37

McGarrigle:

So there was this awareness that you would be—

5-00:38:39

Gee:

You're different, that's all. Your hormones are acting up in some way.

5-00:38:43

McGarrigle:

So how would you make it known that you were having your period?

5-00:38:47

Gee:

We just didn't fly, that's all.

5-00:38:49

McGarrigle:

You didn't have to tell somebody so they wouldn't schedule you?

5-00:38:52

Gee:

I think you'd just say you're not feeling well. At least, sometimes. If you don't have any problems in your period; some women do have problems with their period. So they really aren't feeling well.

5-00:39:07

McGarrigle:

Did the women who you were flying with want to fly the same missions as the men, or were they relieved not to have the same status?

5-00:39:24

Gee:

This is 1940, though. You have to remember we were so lucky that we were able to fly that we didn't even feel that we wanted to do the same things that men did. Just to have the ability to fly. It took the women a long time with the new Air Force even, to be able to fly combat. There are certain types of missions they don't fly, but I think they fly almost everything now. But it took a long time to accept women in war; always the fear that women might be captured and whatever happens to a woman is pretty devastating. I mean, being captured for anyone, but a woman, sexually it would be very bad in most cases. We never had that problem at all, since we weren't flying combat. It was always in this country. We all felt we were very fortunate because we could do what we were doing.

5-00:40:43

Li:

Could you have friends and family come visit you?

5-00:40:47

Gee:

I didn't, no. People didn't travel then, not very much then. We had a few people visit at graduation time, but just a few. Very few. I think it was difficult to travel.

5-00:41:05

Stine:

Probably with rationing—

5-00:41:06

Gee:

Is that right? I think so. You certainly couldn't drive, because they didn't have the gasoline.

5-00:41:14

McGarrigle:

How long was it, between the time you left and the time you saw your mother? How long were you away without seeing her?

5-00:41:22

Gee:

Oh, I don't know. Probably a year or something. I was too busy. At that time, it was a long time, because nowadays people go far away for a couple of years, not seeing family. But then, people did not. I guess I'm kind of sorry my mother didn't come to graduation. In fact, I thought about that, but there was no way that she could have come, unless she was willing to stand up all the way. [laughs] Assuming she could get a ticket. There were planes flying in those days, prop planes. Let me see—the first time I crossed-country it took quite a while.

5-00:42:15

Li:

On a commercial flight?

5-00:42:17

Gee:

A commercial plane. It took quite a while. Did I fly across country before the war? No, because the first time I went to Nevada was when I went to learn to fly.

5-00:42:30

Li:

I was reading in {Xiao Jin's} book about you and the three women who you were working as draftswomen. You all went together to Nevada?

5-00:42:40

Gee:

We all did. There were just two of us. One of the girls didn't get in.

5-00:42:45

Li:

Did you stay with them the whole time you were—

5-00:42:49

Gee:

No, I was the only one that finished. Jean didn't finish; she washed out. After the war was over, we sort of went our own way, and then we got together again for a short time. But we never really lived together, so there really wasn't that closeness. One of the women, she was part Filipino. We stayed fairly close, off and on. The last ten or fifteen years, we did get together. We saw each other. She died a few years ago. But talk about a small world—I was having dinner in a local restaurant, it's a restaurant that's called Downtown. The top chef there came by to see me and said, "I am Mary Stevenson's son." He said, "I recognized you from the pictures." So one of the three women that I flew with and was a draftsman with, her son has become a well-known chef in Berkeley. Well, he was over in San Francisco, now he's a top chef here. Small world.

5-00:44:16

McGarrigle:

Do you recall the first election that you voted in?

5-00:44:20

Gee:

Yeah, I voted for FDR. He's the only person that I knew. I'm trying to remember where I voted. I don't remember. Was it after the war? It must have been—he came in '32, four years is '36, 1940—was I twenty-one by then? No, I wasn't. So it had to be '44. So it was some time afterwards. No, that was during the war. The war was going in '45. Who was running against him? I can't remember; it was no

question. When he died, that was the sad part. I think I felt like a lot of other people, that I just can't imagine this country going on without FDR. There were some people that really hated FDR, because they really thought he was ruining this country, as you know. He did so many wonderful things, and even at that particular time, I had worked before the war and I don't think I paid—was there a withholding tax? I guess there was withholding tax; it had just come in. I just can't remember whether I had to come up with some money at the end of the year for income tax, or whether it was withheld or not. But you know, there were so many wonderful things that we were able to do at that time. Social Security—I have a relatively low Social Security number, because you got one when you got any job, very early. I actually have worked very little in Social Security, but I worked enough because all I needed were 16 quarters, which is equivalent to four years in Social Security, to draw Social Security. I had those, from odd jobs here and there. I put hardly anything in Social Security, and what do I see a month? I see about four hundred and thirty-six dollars a month in Social Security, having put nothing in to speak of. Worked at the dime store, worked as a waitress, just odd jobs. Pretty remarkable system. As someone said, if you really feel that you shouldn't get it, just give it back. [laughs] I should go off once a month and treat myself, instead of just putting it in the bank, just having it sent to the bank, don't even notice the small increment.

5-00:47:51

Li:

Do you remember your mom's first election, because she got her citizenship back, right?

5-00:47:56

Gee:

She did, yes. She got her citizenship back, and she was really happy to do it. She had to take a little test, I think. I don't think it was much of a test, but a little test.

5-00:48:07

Li:

The naturalization test, I think?

5-00:48:10

Gee:

I don't know what it was. I just don't remember exactly, but maybe she had to apply and answer some questions. I think people did get it back.

5-00:48:23

Li:

Do you remember when that was?

5-00:48:24

Gee:

No, I don't. Thought it was in the '50s sometime. I wasn't living at home. I know my sister kind of pushed it, or saw to it, how to do what she had to do.

5-00:48:41

Stine:

Were there any other programs that were started during the war that you remember as being kind of—

5-00:48:49

Gee:

Good programs?

5-00:48:51

Stine:

Or important to you, personally.

5-00:48:53

Gee:

I can't think of anything right offhand, from the outcome of the war. When the war was over, it was an empty feeling. This is a terrible thing to say, in a sense. There's joy, and I think with a lot of people, we knew what we had to do during the war. Then, everything is over. It's up to you go ahead and do something with your life and if you're not directed, in a sense you were a little lost. During times of war, there's a certain amount of excitement. It's not good excitement, but there's something going on all the time. You're more aware of what's going on in the world, and then it's all over. I mean, there's a great deal of—people are coming home, you're happy that this is happening. No one's getting killed anymore, but then on the other hand, it's a little bit of a let-down. I mean, it's a nice let-down, of course.

5-00:50:20

McGarrigle:

When did your brother come back from his service?

5-00:50:23

Gee:

Pretty much right after the war was over, yeah. He was in China at that time on the CBI, the China-Burma-India front, where General Chennault was in Chongqing. He came home, that's right, and we were happy to see that. But he was married, so I didn't see much of him. He settled down, in one's routine again. I think he had a job to come back to. He was an accountant.

5-00:51:12

Li:

When you talk about the let-down, I remember you talked, the last time we talked, about the sense of everyone coming together and pulling together for the war. So did some of those connections stay strong even after the war, or did people stop doing such community-cooperative things and turn more to their own families?

5-00:51:35

Gee:

You're talking about within the community?

5-00:51:39

McGarrigle:

You were talking about gardens last time, and preparing for air raids and that kind of thing—

5-00:51:44

Li:

Yeah, and the philanthropy, working with the Chinese orphans, or just people pulling together—

5-00:51:47

Gee:

They were pulled together, very much so during the war, but I think afterwards things just kind of began to fall apart, a little bit. But you got to know people a little better already. There was no commonality to do something. Today, in this neighborhood, I know quite a few people. More, when we decided there was crime out there, where we formed a neighborhood watch, so that now we're not so concerned about the

neighborhood. We know each other. I think after the war, people begin to go their own way, and they don't want to be bothered, because we all have our own lives. I don't know. Do you know a lot of your neighbors? You know a lot of your neighborhood neighbors because of the children. If you didn't have children, would you think you would know this many neighbors, at all?

5-00:52:50

McGarrigle:

No, and when the children didn't go to the neighborhood school we didn't know the neighbors.

5-00:52:54

Gee:

So it does make a difference, yeah.

5-00:52:58

McGarrigle:

If you look back on your political identity, when would you date it—

5-00:53:05

Gee:

Why am I a Democrat, yes. I guess it's where I come from. I've always felt that our society is rich enough to take care of everyone, and so I felt that the one party, even though a lot of Chinese-Americans—I called them Orientals at that time—identified with the Republicans, because these were the business people. People more of wealth. But I just never identified with that group. I just felt that our society was rich enough to take care of everyone. I felt that I could take of myself, but there should just be a lot of social legislation, more social legislation. Maybe at that particular time, I could become a Socialist. I remember watching Norman Thomas. I used to listen to Norman Thomas. I never joined the Socialist party, but he made sense to me. Our society is moving in that direction, part of it, very slowly, because we do take care. We do have programs for people in need. We talk about having medicine for everyone. We do take one step forward in that direction and a couple steps backwards, but we seem to move forward a little bit all the time. It may be changing now, but I think it will move in that direction.

5-00:55:00

McGarrigle:

What is the point at which you became politically active?

5-00:55:05

Gee:

I remember working for Henry Wallace a little bit. Henry Wallace ran against Truman. I joined the Berkeley Young Democratic Club, and I was living in I-House [International House] at that particular time. I just felt that I wanted to do something. I guess I was also attracted to people who were politically active, and then I got involved in Berkeley's politics in the '40s. We had a neighbor, and that might have been somebody influential as well. His name was Byron Rumford. My mother had a neighbor named Byron Rumford, and Byron Rumford is the one that did the California Fair Housing and he was our [state] assemblyman. It was someone I knew when I was young, before I could vote. I knew his wife; they were a little older. They were schoolteachers. His wife was a schoolteacher who couldn't find a job at that particular time. She had two sisters who were schoolteachers, too. They went over to San Francisco State, took the ferry over in those days, and became schoolteachers. There was no job for them. It took a few years for them to get jobs as schoolteachers. I think two of them became principals in the Berkeley school system in the sixties and the seventies. But Byron Rumford was somewhat influential.

5-00:57:15

McGarrigle:

Did he talk to you about—

5-00:57:18

Gee:

Oh, we just followed him. Yes, we talked. I mean, he lived behind my mother, the backyard was pretty close.

[end file Gee 05 5.20.03.wav]

[begin file Gee 06 5.20.03 wav]

6-00:00:21

Stine:

We were just talking about politics and the influence of the war, or lack thereof. Maybe we could talk a little bit more about the end of the war?

6-00:00:36

McGarrigle:

Also, what we said off-tape about the black community, reflecting about Byron Rumford and what was happening in Berkeley.

6-00:00:53

Gee:

Byron Rumford—we all know who he is, now. He was the assemblyman.

6-00:00:59

McGarrigle:

We talked about him being an assemblyman and the Fair Housing but you then mentioned—

6-00:01:06

Gee:

The black community here. I recently had a discussion with local politicians about the black community here. The black community has somewhat integrated, but not really. In the very early days, if you were a non-black it was difficult to get into the black community as a politician, that you had to deal with someone. In Berkeley there was a man called D.G. Gibson, and he was powerful. Maybe it's like the big city—what's the word for in Chicago, you have these ward leaders. You had to deal through D.G. Gibson at this particular time if you wanted to talk in the black community. The community, I believe, considered him their political leader. There was one political leader; in fact, it was he, I am sure. So he dealt with the so-called outside world of the non-black community. He was an interesting character, as I remember. You had to kind of wheel-and-deal with him if you wanted to get into that community. I think today you can do it through the churches. I'm looking for words to try to explain myself. He had control, I guess that's about it.

6-00:03:14

McGarrigle:

What would the reach of his control have been?

6-00:03:17

Gee:

I think if D.G. says, or whoever the leader is, you should vote for the person—a WASP-y type—that was running for city council or mayor, that you probably would. They would vote as a group, as a bloc. I can

remember that people just courted him. That's the one thing I always remembered. Very important individual. Byron Rumford wasn't that way. I'm just trying to think, how did he ever get elected? Once you're elected, it really makes a difference, because you just get reelected. He educated himself. He was a pharmacist. He was a businessman; he had a pharmacy down on Sacramento Street and people congregated there a great deal. But then he went back to school and got a degree in public policy. I don't remember whether he ran for any other office except for the assembly. I can't remember. I know he wasn't in the city council. I guess he just decided to run for Assembly, and he got the support of the community, feeling that it was time to have a black person. I don't remember; see, I'd have to think about it. Now that you just asked me—I'd probably have to talk to someone to find out exactly how it all went.

6-00:05:16

McGarrigle:

But this is early on that you were paying attention and were closely involved.

6-00:05:21

Gee:

I enjoyed the people and the politics, and it was early. I was paying attention to politics in Berkeley, to see it change. We had all Republicans here. Well, that was in the Assembly, that was a little different. Earl Warren was around in those days. Another person that influenced me—I grew up in a black neighborhood, and there was a man named Walter Gordon that lived on my street. He had a law degree from Boalt, but also he was a football player. He was a pretty good football player. He played for Cal. I'm trying to think; he must have practiced law in the black community, but he was appointed by Earl Warren to head the State Probation Board, I believe it was. Senator Knowland was our senator for a long, long time. They were part of the [Oakland] Tribune family. They owned the Tribune, so they were very influential. And then Earl Warren, who was a district attorney, then he became the governor of California. He was considered more—he was a Republican—more of a liberal Republican, that's how we classify him today. But he was a Republican and had certain values. Then he became on the Supreme Court. He was a very good Supreme Court justice. Chief of the Supreme Court, I think. He was a person who moved our society forward. Then, on the other hand, I guess he was governor at the time the Japanese were asked

to leave and move a hundred and fifty miles, or be interned. He interned the Japanese. So it was kind of a mixed bag. But I just became very much aware of what was going on and I felt that I wanted to get involved, never run for anything, but be behind the scenes with various people.

6-00:08:58

McGarrigle:

Did you know Cecil Poole, who was in Pat Brown's administration?

6-00:09:02

Gee:

Cecil Poole was about at that time. He was in Oakland. There were a lot of people who got involved and moved up forward, at that particular time. He was involved in sort of grass-roots level.

6-00:09:26

McGarrigle:

You mentioned Berkeley Democratic Club from early on. What kinds of things were you involved with organizing?

6-00:09:33

Gee:

Berkeley was run by Republicans, so we wanted to replace all the Republicans with Democrats. We finally did that. Started with Bernice May. I don't know if you know that name, but she was a very good woman. She had been the president of the League of Women Voters throughout the state. She was smart about how politics should be, how to run government. The League, once upon a time, was a place where women learned about government, particularly women who stayed at home. Most of the people that I knew that ran for city offices and then they moved on, too, started with the League of Women Voters. They were housewives who had time and wanted to learn about government. Today, the League has a little bit of problem finding young women to join them, because young women work. People don't start at the bottom anymore. They just move up to the top. If they're going to run for something, you decide run for president or run for senator.

6-00:11:04

Li:

Do you see that as a change, then, from what you remember when you came into being political? When you became political, was it different? Did you work your way in?

6-00:11:14

Gee:

There were very few Asians that were involved in politics when I was working in politics. You just kind of work your way in. But you can start at almost any level. You don't even decide to run at various levels, but you can always stay behind the scenes, when they're running for office, be on their campaign committees.

6-00:11:42

McGarrigle:

You must have been asked this a lot of times, but did you contemplate running for statewide office?

6-00:11:48

Gee:

I thought of it at various times, but no. No, I guess not too seriously. Thought about it. There was one Chinese woman that did, whom I knew, March Fong Eu. She became Secretary of State. We're about the same age. I remember she was in high school in Richmond when I was in high school here. She had a family; she started with the school board and she moved up. A lot of people do that today still, too.

6-00:12:28

McGarrigle:

Why was that not appealing to you?

6-00:12:32

Gee:

It just didn't appeal, that's all. Why would I run for school board? She had children, and I think that's how you get involved, really. Or if you live in a neighborhood where changes are being made, if you own a house or something like that, and you didn't want a neighborhood to change—a lot of people start at the planning commission. Then, you don't want changes. You don't like to see the changes that are happening, or you want to make the changes according to how you would like to be, so you find that just

being on the planning commission is not enough. You have to be where you make real policy, by being on the school board. Then you just kind of move up.

6-00:13:23

McGarrigle:

What were some of the positions that you held? You held positions in Berkeley politics but also state and Democratic party politics.

6-00:13:33

Gee:

Oh, yes. I've always held some sort of position, yes.

6-00:13:38

McGarrigle:

What was the first one?

6-00:13:40

Gee:

The positions you get, if you're not running for things, you serve on commissions. You get appointed to commissions, you serve. I've served on most of the commissions in Berkeley, like the rent board. I was on the rent board, housing commission, public works. That's what you do. You do get an opportunity to make a little policy that way. Then I ran for one small thing, and that's the Democratic Central Committee. You have to run for that. I do that every year; I'm an incumbent, so it's just automatic. Most people don't even vote for it, and I'm the incumbent. Makes a difference. That gives you the opportunity of going up into the state level.

6-00:14:41

McGarrigle:

We could focus several interviews on Berkeley politics, but if we want to go back to post-war employment and career, do you want to talk about that? We could propose a whole project and come back and talk to you about Berkeley politics, but within the scope of our time today—post-war, can you describe your return? You took the train, standing room, to Texas. How did you come back to Berkeley after the war ended?

6-00:15:12

Gee:

I came home after the war—how did I come home from where ever I was? I hopped rides. We could do that.

6-00:15:22

Li:

On airplanes?

6-00:15:22

Gee:

Hop rides on airplanes, yeah. I hopped rides on airplanes for a long time afterwards. You go to the airfield, and you just wait around to see if there's a plane available, coming your direction. That's how everyone got home, if someone were flying in this direction from the airfield. That's it. Hitchhiking, in a way. After the war, when I could get my uniform, I did it a couple of times. As far as checking your ID, I just had my uniform on and I went back east once. I went over to Novato; there's the airbase—Hamilton Field. Just sat around, waited for a ride. Someone had a seat in their plane—people did that for a few years after the war. It was easy to do. So there was a little excitement there.

6-00:16:48

McGarrigle:

What was the first job you had after you came back? I'm not sure of the timing of when you went to work in Europe.

6-00:17:07

Gee:

Oh, that was a couple of years afterward. Everything was kind of hodge-podge for awhile, with the end of the war, I think.

6-00:17:20

Stine:

Amongst all the WASPs, the other women that you were working with, did people have a plan?

Everybody knew that the war would end at some point, and how did people deal with it?

6-00:17:33

Gee:

Some women were married, so their husbands were coming back. There were not very many, but a few.

But a lot of the women got married afterwards with men they met while they were in the service. Couple of my close friends met their husbands while they were in the WASPs. So they married and then they settled down. They started families just like anyone else.

6-00:18:06

Li:

When you came back, were you welcomed as a veteran?

6-00:18:11

Gee:

No. I wasn't really a veteran; I didn't become a veteran until much later. No, everyone had been away, so you just sort of came home, that was it. Your generation just sort of came home, and then you move on. I must say that I had the feeling that all the people who went away and came back, I had a feeling of—kind of felt close to them, in a way. We were a little older than just out of college, or just out of whatever it is. We had sort of a different-type experience. I wondered what was going to happen in this world, and then the Korean War came. I thought, oh my goodness, I felt everything was falling apart again. That's the one thing I can remember. The Korean War didn't happen until—was it 1951, or something like that? It was a few years later, but things had not really settled. Europe and Japan were not rebuilt by then, and this war that we got into was terrible, just terrible. People I knew that fought in World War II and stayed in the reserves went to Korea. That was a bad war, and I guess it hasn't even finished yet. So there was uncertainty. I knew other people felt: why start a family? Why settle down, because the world is so uncertain. Well, of course you do. You settle down, you do all those things. The world was uncertain, but it might be okay. You might feel the same today; I don't know. If a person comes back and sees what's happening to this country or the uncertainty about [are] my children going to live in a world where there are nothing but terrorists around? We hope this will blow over some way, in the next twenty years or ten years, or whatever it is. We don't have a big enemy; I can remember when we felt the Russians were going to come over and take us, and they're going to send those missiles and big bombs and things like

that. There was a period where a lot of people built shelters. Even out at Livermore, I remember there was a big community shelter. So when that whistle goes off, you all go to the shelter. You couldn't even imagine that, today. It sounds like a dumb thing to do.

6-00:21:18

McGarrigle:

Did that happen when you were out there?

6-00:21:20

Gee:

No, the whistle or the bell never went off and said that there was a missile coming in, but the shelters— people built shelters. There are some in Berkeley. I'm not sure what my point is, but even though you feel that the world may be coming to an end, it isn't coming to an end, but you don't want to live in this type of situation, that things do change. After the war, after the Korean War, there was a very peaceful time in our society, and then the Cold War came. People did fear things. There are so many things that happened. There was the McCarthy era and there were just so many things, but you just go on living and doing your best.

6-00:22:22

McGarrigle:

I think people want to know: how do you stay optimistic in the face of all of that?

6-00:22:29

Gee:

You mean, today?

6-00:22:31

McGarrigle:

You had the consciousness and the sensitivity to know all of these things, but you stay involved and you stay engaged, and you stay optimistic.

6-00:22:42

Gee:

How do you stay optimistic? Because you see a few changes that happen. You just want to keep working at it. I have the time, and I have the inclination. I have the inclination; I mean anyone can make the time.

I'm very optimistic about the world and people, even though it doesn't look very good right now at the moment, but it will be all right, if you only manage to survive. [laughs]

6-00:23:14

McGarrigle:

I think that's an interesting question, because some people like you remain engaged in the face of all of this difficulty.

6-00:23:23

Gee:

I want to get Bush out! [laughs]

6-00:23:26

McGarrigle:

There's a strong motivation.

6-00:23:30

Gee:

You can make changes, though. They're small changes. I think just one small person can make a little bit of change some place. You rally the troops. I think what you have to do now, today, is to really educate people. In the paper the other day, it was 67 percent approval—it was in *The New York Times*—of Bush. You talk to anyone you know, and you wonder: who are the 67 percent? That's because we live in a different world. You have to see the rest of America. We don't have any confidence in this man. I'm sure, even the person that read that that aircraft carrier out there had to stop and go back a little bit, so he could come in and fly onto this carrier, if you even read that and you were for him, you would think it's okay. People just think it's okay. I mean, he looked so great, got out of that plane, carried his helmet here and he struts a certain way, he's just an all-American boy. We love that.

6-00:24:59

Li:

Do you think that your mother—because you seem to say, [she was] so positive in terms of rededicating herself to new challenges that came up—

6-00:25:07

Gee:

It has to rub off a little bit on everyone, I think. The world could be a bad place. I mean, she had a lot of difficulties. Having six kids at the age of thirty-something, widowed, in the middle of the Depression; sounds terrible to me.

6-00:25:29

Li:

She continued to work after the war ended?

6-00:25:33

Gee:

She continued to work. She was involved in her club, in the church. She continued to work. She had to be involved.

6-00:25:46

Li:

Where was she working?

6-00:25:47

Gee:

She worked in the Post Office, and she worked afterwards for a friend who has a florist. He was a widower, so she worked in the florist. She really liked that, because she liked to fix flowers and things and also people coming in to talk.

6-00:26:08

McGarrigle:

That was the florist on University.

6-00:26:09

Gee:

Yeah, it's still there, Lee's Florist. The one next to the co-op. It used to be the co-op; it's Andronico's now. It was interesting; there was the Sunday supplement about two months ago had an article about the florists. Homer Lee was the owner of it. He'd come over with nothing, and he bought much real estate in the city. And yet he still goes down there every day and has lunch. He cooks a little bit of something. Typical Chinese. He's probably tight. [laughs] I mean to go down; I have to do it before. I'll be sorry if I

don't go and tease him. I'll have him join the Berkeley Community Fund and leave a house to us. [laughs]
 And say, we'll remember you. I'm going to do that. I'm going to do that! I'm going to say, give us some
 money for a scholarship and we'll name the scholarship in your name. That will be nice. Nice for him.
 [laughs] He can designate it—no, I don't think so. We have to decide who's worthy of it. That has
 nothing to do with anything, you know.

6-00:27:45

McGarrigle:

I think we could talk to you about other things for future projects.

6-00:27:50

Gee:

There isn't much, but this has been fun. Thank you very much, though. I thought we'd talk more about
 my mother, except that I can't say too much about her. I think it happens with many generations, that the
 community really liked my mother a lot, thought she did a lot for her children. Because it's your mother
 and she's telling you what to do, you don't appreciate her until you get a little bit older. Or your parents; I
 know that's not unique at all. You're fortunate if you're a parent, that your children, all their lives, have
 an appreciation of you. I guess it depends on how you handle it. So, Leah, you're the mother now. You
 want your children to stay your friends, and not be critical of you.

6-00:28:52

McGarrigle:

It's a very long-range expectation.

6-00:28:59

Gee:

I want to thank you. It's been enjoyable; it's been very nice meeting you all. And Leah, it's always good
 to see you more often. Leah, I have a chair for you like that. Do you still want it?

6-00:29:12

McGarrigle:

I do. I definitely do.

6-00:29:14

Gee:

I have it there and it's probably never been used, but it's worn out.

6-00:29:22

McGarrigle:

That's okay; I'm going to have it refurbished. I have someone. Thank you. That's very special.

6-00:29:33

Gee:

I have to get it from the basement. I've got to start cleaning out the basement. Famous last words.

6-00:29:38

Li:

Thank you so much.

6-00:29:38

Stine:

Yes, thank you.

6-00:29:45

Gee:

Thank you. And good luck to you.

[end file Gee 06 5.20.03.wav]