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Dunham: So today is January 2, 2016 and we’re in the lovely home of Opal Nelson in Cottage Grove, Oregon. Thank you so much for inviting us today. We’re here for the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front Oral History Project. And we usually start at the beginning, so I’ll just ask when and where were you born?

Nelson: Well, I was born at home, of course, in those days—actually in the country, it was Jackson County, just outside of Huntington, Indiana, and I was the sixth child of seven, so I had a brother 6 years younger than I named Bill.

Dunham: How much age difference was there between the seven of you?

Nelson: Well, my mother had six children in eight years and six years later had Bill.

Dunham: Oh wow.

Nelson: So we were all just about a year and a half apart, except my youngest brother that was six years younger. Obviously, quite a surprise. [laughing] But I was—we lived on a small farm, about thirteen acres, but my dad Oliver P. Lord was a railroader. He worked on the railroad and my mother stayed at home. Actually, she started out to be a schoolteacher but didn’t have any formal education. But back then you didn’t have to. If you were a good student and got through high school then you could go ahead and start teaching. But she would have liked to have done that, I’m sure.

Dunham: You said in your bio notes that she was quite a scholar though, so she had taught herself?

Nelson: Oh yes, oh yes. And all her life she was studying and reading, both to herself and to us.

Dunham: Did you know her parents or your dad’s parents, your grandparents?

Nelson: Yes. My mother’s parents, Sam and Alvie Mason, were still living and in their eighties. My dad’s parents, {Wm?} Harvey and Rebecca Jane (Conoway) Lord, were both dead by the time I was born.

Dunham: Okay. And were they Quakers on both sides of your family?
Nelson: No, just my mother’s, my mother’s people. She was raised a Quaker and all of her siblings were pretty—they kept pretty close to the Quaker belief of peace and harmony and love for people, and so forth.

Dunham: So what was that like for you growing up in the Quaker tradition?

Nelson: Oh, it was very comfortable, because there was no conflicts in our family that I remember, and later discovered there was quite a few conflicts that had already been dealt with in my grandparents’ life.

Dunham: In your immediate family?

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: Is there anything you wanted to say about those?

Nelson: Well, not necessarily my immediate family, but my mother’s family. My dad—his mother died when he was four, and then after two or three years his father {Wm?} Harvey married again, to Liz (Elizabeth) Van Briggle, and had two daughters Hazel and Cecil. But he was very musical. He learned to play the guitar, and back then that was the entertainment. You had music and you had games, and that was what your entertainment was.

Dunham: Yeah, did you grow up—learn to play any instruments or sing?

Nelson: Well, my oldest brother was a pianist, and he was actually—later played in a band in the forties, and so forth. And we always had music around, both my dad Oliver on the guitar and my brother Paul on the piano.

Dunham: That’s nice. What did your father do for the railroad?

Nelson: He worked on a bridge gang, where they maintain the bridges on the Erie Railroad, ran from Chicago to New York City with a branch up to Buffalo.

Dunham: So would he have to travel, be away for—?

Nelson: He usually was away during the week and home on weekends, pretty much most of my life that I remember.
Dunham: So what was an average day like for your mom when you were growing up?

Nelson: Mostly we raised goats and were brought up on goat milk. [laughing] Mostly it was just—my mother was very, very concentrated on learning all kinds of things, books and magazines and experiences, and so forth. We took a lot of trips on the railroad, like we went to the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. We went to the New York World's Fair—I forget what year that was.

Dunham: What do you remember about the world's fairs that you were able to go to?

Nelson: Oh, fantastic! My mother gave each of us $0.50 and told us to meet back here at noon. Just go and look around, and we didn’t stay together even. [laughing]

Dunham: About how old would you have been then?

Nelson: Well, in ’33 I was eleven years old, and I don’t think I even spent my $0.50. I was just so amazed at everything that was there, I didn’t spend any or go to any shows.

Dunham: Yeah, do you have any particular memories of any exhibits in particular or anything?

Nelson: Well, there wasn’t—I don’t remember anything except I was absolutely amazed at the amount of people, the crowds! And of course there was a lot of exhibits that were really interesting too. But because we could get free passes on the railroad—and we traveled quite a bit, both on our railroad—well, the whole thing, because we went to Niagara Falls several times and always on a railroad pass.

Dunham: So was your whole family adventurous in that way, or were you particularly—?

Nelson: Well, no—I had three sisters and three brothers. My sisters weren’t as adventurous as I was, I guess, and they thought I wasted a lot of time running around, but my sister Elizabeth taught me to read before and went to school. [laughing] As a result, I was allowed to skip second grade and go on to the third.

Dunham: As a kid?
Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: So what kind of running around would you do?

Nelson: Well, like—it was after I got out of high school that I decided—I don’t even remember why, to go to St. Louis. I was there for two months. I just took a bus down, went to a—usually an agency to find a room, and then get a job in a restaurant, where you could always get a job.

Dunham: Had you already worked in a restaurant in your home town?

Nelson: No, I hadn’t.

Dunham: No, okay, okay. So—and you are sixteen at this time? Or—because you graduated high school at sixteen.

Nelson: Yeah, yeah, I was sixteen.

Dunham: And so how did your parents feel about you going off to St. Louis?

Nelson: Well, my sisters thought I was totally nuts, but my mother never made any objection and I wondered about that. But my dad—he didn’t want me to go. He thought I should stay home and behave myself.

Dunham: Okay, but so was there any discussion or debate around this? Or you just—?

Nelson: No, no, I just—we didn’t have any words or anything. I just got ready and left.

Dunham: Okay, so St. Louis. What happens in St. Louis?

Nelson: I got a job in a restaurant and got a room and felt my independence, I guess, because being the sixth in a family, you feel kind of overwhelmed, like you’re lost in the shuffle—all four of us girls slept in the same room, so that was my way of being independent, I guess.

Dunham: So you could afford your own room in St. Louis?
Nelson: Yes. I had a room in a house recommended by the YWCA and ate at the café where I worked.

Dunham: This is ’39?

Nelson: This would have been in ’40, I think, so I was seventeen, which is amazing, because there was no trouble getting a job as far as age was.

Dunham: And as a young woman traveling on your own, what was that like? Did you—?

Nelson: Well—

Dunham: Were you ever—you were never nervous about it?

Nelson: No, I didn’t even think about it. I was excited about going and I never—well, you didn’t have the knowledge of dangers back in those days. Just—everybody was honest and decent, and so forth.

Dunham: And you had been a lot of places, but the town you grew up [in], where you had the farm—was that a very small town?

Nelson: Yeah, Huntington, Indiana. It was only like fifteen thousand people.

Dunham: Oh, okay, okay but not—mid-size, okay.

Nelson: So it was a small town, but a big high school.

Dunham: Yeah, so what was school like growing up for you there?

Nelson: I went for—my oldest sister taught me to read before I went to school. And when I went to the first grade I could read and do things that most of the kids—there’s no kindergarten, of course. This is just you’re in first grade and you start. And so at the end of the first grade my teacher wrote a note on my report card that I was ready for the third grade, so I skipped the second one. And it was—I guess I’d call it a fairly small school, but it was consolidated. Twelve grades. And then the last year of my schooling we moved to town, and
then we were in a big school, a town school, and I really liked that. That was a lot of fun to meet a lot of other different kids, and so forth.

Dunham: Well, so what was it—when you skipped to third grade was that a challenge at all being—intellectually it was probably fine, but socially were there any challenges?

Nelson: Well, socially I had no problem, but intellectually I had some.

Dunham: Oh! Actually it was—

Nelson: I got my first F in the third grade. [laughing]

Dunham: Oh my!

Nelson: But then I caught up and made it the rest of the way.

Dunham: Did you have to get help from your siblings or mom to kind of make up the gap there?

Nelson: Yeah. My older sister was hopefully going to be a teacher, so she loved to read and teach, so—I probably wouldn’t have thought about learning to read and to count, and so forth, if she hadn’t have pushed me.

Dunham: Yeah, and how was your family impacted by the Depression?

Nelson: Pretty much, because there was a time, and I don’t remember the space, that my dad was laid off. And he just would work for farmers around there. I remember one year, for one week, he worked for farmers, two or three of them, in helping with crops and things, and he had made $7.00 for the week, and we thought that was—that we were pretty well back on track then. But the Depression was—we had no money, but we had food and we had vegetables and fruit, and so forth.

Dunham: Because you had, in addition to the goats you grew your own vegetables and fruit.

Nelson: And we had the goat milk, and so—
Dunham: Did you have to work on the farm growing up?

Nelson: My mother, Martha Lord, did most of the farm work, gardening, and et cetera, since my dad was away during the week. Yes, but I can’t remember that we got up at four o’clock in the morning and did all that, although I did the milking for quite a while. That was mostly in high school.

Dunham: And was the milk and all of the fruits and vegetables just for your own family? Or would you also—?

Nelson: No, it was just my own family.

Dunham: Well, what—when you were still in that relatively small town what did you do for fun?

Nelson: We danced, we—my dad was a square-dance caller, and every Saturday night there was this big old empty house out in the country and we had a dance there. But you had to pay $0.25 to get in, except we didn’t have to because my dad was the caller, and so my sisters and I got in free.

Dunham: Yeah, because I think I read that was your weekly allowance too, $0.25. Did you get—

Nelson: No, $0.25 every two weeks.

Dunham: Oh, every two weeks. I thought it was a lot for—

Nelson: When he got paid, then we got a $0.25 allowance.

Dunham: What would you do with your spending money?

Nelson: Oh, I saved mine. I was going to do something grand. I don’t remember what. [laughing] I saved up and bought a new bicycle.

Dunham: Okay. Had you saved that all the way up until the time you went to St. Louis? Was that part of your—?
Nelson: Actually, I think the allowance—I think that stopped before I got out of high school. But I did babysitting too.

Dunham: Okay. After your father got laid off probably? Yeah.

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Did you hear about the New Deal and the WPA during that time, and did it affect—?

Nelson: Well, the WPA was a very important thing, and of course we had the usual outhouse, and the WPA came along and built a new one with a concrete floor and all the new things to make it safer.

Dunham: So those are workers who just came and made those improvements?

Nelson: Yes. In fact, in the last few years they have restored that outhouse and have taken it from where our farm was down to the cemetery where most of my relatives are buried. It’s the Maple Grove Cemetery six miles out west of Huntington, in the country with no services.

Dunham: They’ve taken the outhouse and put it there as a historic artifact of this—?

Nelson: Yes. Actually, it is very serviceable.

Dunham: Oh, how interesting.

Nelson: It’s a little cemetery out in the country, you know, and it was a project for relatives.

Dunham: Have you been there since they’ve done that?

Nelson: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Dunham: Oh, okay, when were you last—?
Nelson: I go back there almost every year for either a mini-reunion—but the cemetery has to have a yearly report, and so at that time they make it a meeting and a semi-reunion, and I was back there last year. There was about thirty-five of us there. They have a formal meeting and take minutes, and so forth, and it has something to do with the nonprofit status of the cemetery.

Dunham: Well, I think you referred to yourself as a tomboy growing up? Is that—?

Nelson: Quite. Quite a tomboy, yes. [laughing] I loved to run and wear jeans, which was a new thing in the 30’s.

Dunham: In what ways do you consider yourself a tomboy then?

Nelson: Well, I don’t know. I did what girls usually didn’t back then in the 30’s. I rigged up a trapeze in the old elm tree out in the back of the house. In fact, there was a picture—oh, it’s in the other album of me hanging by my knees on the trapeze.

Dunham: Oh, I’d love to—maybe we’ll take a look at that. The early pictures are good to look at too.

Nelson: I’m hanging on by my knees, and I got so I could hang by my knees and then flip over somewhere or other and land on my feet on the ground.

Dunham: Wow! Had you seen trapeze artists live or in the movies?

Nelson: No.

Dunham: Where did you get the idea for that?

Nelson: No, I don’t know where I got it. But we just—we took an iron pipe and chains and made it a swing in the old elm tree.

Dunham: So who helped you? Somebody must have helped you.

Nelson: My brothers, yeah.

Dunham: Okay, and did they—so was it you and your brothers that played in it?
Nelson: No, none of the rest of my siblings were interested in it.

Dunham: Oh, they just helped you set it up and you were the one?

Nelson: Yeah, I just—they helped me set it up.

Dunham: Did you ever have any—never had any close calls or injuries out of it?

Nelson: No, and I’m amazed now, looking back, that I didn’t have.

Dunham: So you had an adventurous spirit from an early age.

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: What was dating like when you were growing up?

Nelson: Dating?

Dunham: Yes.

Nelson: Well, you didn’t—we weren’t allowed to date until we were sixteen, and by that time I was a senior in high school and out, because my birthday’s the first of July. I think sometime along in September, in my senior year, I met this fellow that was—actually he wasn’t our paperboy but he was a paperboy. [laughing] So two days older than I was, and this is the Carl that was in my life for five years. Actually, he and his boy friends and their girlfriends and so forth, we did quite a bit. Dancing and dating together.

Dunham: So you’d hang out on group dates? What kinds of things would you guys do together?

Nelson: Oh, mostly hiking and some dancing. Some of the kids didn’t dance, but we did a lot of hiking and swimming in the “lake,” an old stone quarry.

Dunham: The square dancing or other types of dancing?

Nelson: Square dancing and ballroom too.
Dunham: Oh! What types of ballroom dancing, do you remember?

Nelson: Just waltzes and foxtrots.

Dunham: Okay, would those be with live music or recorded music?

Nelson: Yes, live music. There wasn’t any records back then. [laughing]

Dunham: In the schools or in a community center of some kind?

Nelson: They had dances in the schools, but of course we were going to the dances in the old house there in Mardenis, a crossroad three miles out of Huntington.

Dunham: So was it—you met Carl after you’d moved from the smaller town?

Nelson: Yeah, he was going to the big high school.

Dunham: Okay, which is there where you were at that—so you said your senior year is when you came there? So was it a big adjustment to move to the bigger town?

Nelson: Well, it was kind of a new adventure. It was just really exciting and I’d get all excited about moving and having a new school—our house was about two blocks from the main street, and when I had so many opportunities in the bigger high school, and one of them was for a gym program. They had six weeks of riflery, which I had no interest in and I was horrible at, and six weeks of bowling and six weeks of swimming. Learning all the different strokes and dives.

Dunham: So you had to do—

Nelson: I had to do it.

Dunham: The boys and girls all had to do six weeks of riflery.

Nelson: And we had six weeks of bowling, which I enjoyed, and six weeks of swimming, which really changed my life I think, because instead of just dog-paddling like I’d been doing, I learned all kinds of different strokes and I enjoyed swimming the rest of my life.
Dunham: Did you have a favorite stroke?

Nelson: Well, just the regular freestyle.

Dunham: Freestyle or crawl?

Nelson: What do they call—freestyle, yeah. Although the backstroke was always good too, because when you do the freestroke on your stomach, and then when you get out of breath you can turn and do the backstroke and you can breathe instead of drowning.

Dunham: So long as you’re good at it.

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Did they have the butterfly back then?

Nelson: Oh yeah. I didn’t like the butterfly. I thought that was kind of a—it was too much activity for the amount of—what, the amount of distance that you could go.

Dunham: [coughing] Excuse me. What precipitated your family moving to the bigger city, do you know?

Nelson: I don’t remember. We were—it could have been partly that my dad always had trouble when he came in for the weekend. We had a Model T and I could remember one night we had to go in and get him when he came in on the railroad. My mother was driving the Model T, and the lights wouldn’t work, so we hung a kerosene lantern on the radiator cap and drove the six miles into town to pick up my dad. And how we made it because it was after dark—and I went along and I had my head out the window—it was wintertime—watching the edge of the road. It was a two-lane highway, concrete, and I would tell my mother when you’re getting a little bit off or you’re about ready to go off, or “Keep over that way. No, not that far!” Oh!

Dunham: Because she wasn’t an experienced driver? Or what was the issue there? I’m, did I—?
Nelson: Well, she never was a good driver. She’d driven horses and she knew how to hitch a horse to a buggy and how to harness a horse and everything. But even the Model T just scared her to death and she did not like to drive and wasn’t a good driver. But—

Dunham: So the move may have had to do with having to drive less? Because of the car troubles and—

Nelson: Having to drive in and pick him up every weekend.

Dunham: Oh, okay.

Nelson: And the house we found in town was $14 a month, which wasn’t any problem, so—

Dunham: Okay, and so you were able to keep the farm still? Or did you have to—

Nelson: Yeah, we kept the farm. In fact, for a little while they rented it out, but just to a young couple and they didn’t stay very long.

Dunham: Okay, I’m going to adjust this slightly. [technical interruption] I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your Quaker upbringing. Did you go to meetings regularly and was there a large Quaker presence in the community?

Nelson: Yes, yes, and my mother kept in touch with the Quakers and they—actually, they would have—not seminars I guess, but meetings of some kind every year where you went to, one time, you went to different cities and they had the, I don’t remember what they call them, but they were the regular—like a council meeting or something.

Dunham: And would you go to those meetings?

Nelson: I went for a lot of them, and it was over my head, of course, but it was just someplace to go.

Dunham: Did they have children’s group as well, as part of the—

Nelson: No, no, just all adults.
And so at what point did you—I know you mentioned in your story—well, let me ask first, so during the late thirties and before the US entered the war were you following news of the war in Europe and abroad on the radio or elsewhere?

[shaking head]

No, okay.

Had no idea it was going on until Pearl Harbor, of course, then—

Well, that’s—I want to get to that in just a minute. I wanted to—was there anything else—I wanted to kind of back up and hear more about your early childhood. But when you got to St. Louis—so you had already been dating Carl when you went on your journey to St. Louis, is that right?

Yeah, because I met him in high school. And after high school he got a job with the telephone company installing equipment, and so he was going mostly around northern Indiana, different towns, and then he’d just be here on the weekends.

Oh, so he was away quite a bit.

Yes.

But when you went to St. Louis you were there for a few months?

About two months I think and then I went home.

But you didn’t come home on the weekends. You were there the whole time?

Yeah, yeah. I stayed.

So was that your first job?

No, actually I worked at the neighbor’s when I was—what was I? Probably fourteen.
Dunham: Okay, what did you do at the neighbor’s?

Nelson: Just farm chores: getting the eggs, milking the cows, and that type of thing.

Dunham: And you were paid for doing that then?

Nelson: Actually, my brother got the job first, and he was getting $0.15 a week, and my dad’s eyes sparkled and he said, “Oh, why don’t you go with him and maybe you can make $0.15 a week!” which I did. It wasn’t very long, but I worked for a while.

Dunham: For a little bit.

Nelson: So that was my first job at about fourteen. My brother was a year and a half older, so he was fifteen and a half or so. But—

Dunham: We talked a little bit about your grandparents on your mom’s side who you knew, but do you know where your families came from when they first migrated to the United States? Do you know what countries?

Nelson: My dad traced—I can trace him back to—I think it’s King Richard III. But he was more an Irishman. The name that his mother, ended up as her maiden name, was Conwy. In North Wales there’s a castle that’s called the Conwy Castle, and that’s who my dad was descended from.

Dunham: Okay, and on your mom’s side, do you know?

Nelson: My mom’s side goes back to—if you go overseas it’s probably England.

Dunham: Okay, okay. And then did you know what the ethnic makeup of your community was, town—were there many recent immigrants?

Nelson: Oh, hardly any. Most of them were second- and third-generation farmers that had been there for a long time.

Dunham: Okay, and mostly English and Irish? Did you know of other—

Nelson: I didn’t even think about every—
Dunham: Yeah, okay. I’m just curious.

Nelson: Every different race—or not race, but—

Dunham: Right. So in St. Louis you were waitressing. What was that like? That must have been exciting to be there on your own.

Nelson: It was very broadening, because of course there were blacks that came in, but it was segregated at the time. There were black soldiers that come in and we couldn’t serve them! I always felt bad about that.

Dunham: So the restaurant in 19—

Nelson: —they didn’t encourage it.

Dunham: Okay, so in 1940, in St. Louis, they didn’t ban blacks formally.

Nelson: Yeah, but they didn’t cultivate that kind of a crowd.

Dunham: Did they discourage it? Were there ways in which you were serving them slower or something like that?

Nelson: I felt like they weren’t getting the service that they were, and usually they tried to encourage them to have takeout.

Dunham: I see. So what was your perspective on that at the time, your first time interacting—?

Nelson: Well, I was raised in a totally white community and I never even saw a black person till we started going to the Quaker seminars. And—

Dunham: Were there blacks within the Quaker groups at the seminars?

Nelson: There were a few, very few, but it was a new thing to me because I hadn’t seen blacks.

Dunham: Were race relations ever discussed at those seminars, do you know?
Nelson: I don’t remember that they were, but probably not specifically but by now there lots of talk of the war in Europe.

Dunham: So in St. Louis you had—did you ever have any challenges then, having to deal with that, dealing with blacks who were in the restaurant?

Nelson: Not until we got into the war years.

Dunham: Okay, well, let’s talk about that a little bit later, but yeah, I definitely would like to hear about those experiences as well. So what were you doing for fun in St. Louis?

Nelson: Actually I was working a long shift, and that was mostly it. I had a fun and friendly neighbor girl in the other room and we’d do things, movies and stuff together.

Dunham: Yeah, what shifts? What shifts did you work?

Nelson: It was the afternoon shift, where I think I went in like maybe at one and worked till ten and came home in the dark. But I had a jackknife that had a real long—I think of this. I think I must have been crazy! [laughing] But I had that jackknife in my coat pocket, and I figured okay, if anybody gets smart with me I’ll just take my little knife out. And I wouldn’t have had the nerve to even act like I was going to hit somebody. But I did the bus thing. I took a bus back and forth to work.

Dunham: From work to your apartment?

Nelson: To my room.

Dunham: Yeah, so was it a boarding house? Or what kind of room was it?

Nelson: It was just a big old brick house, probably from way, way back, and it had a lot of rooms. And a lady rented the rooms out. No food involved, but—

Dunham: Okay, so what were you doing for food at that time?

Nelson: Ate at the restaurant.
Dunham: At the restaurant. You were able to get, basically, all your meals there.

Nelson: Yes. And that’s it. When we’d go to a new town we’d always be able to get food because we’d get a job in a restaurant. [laughing]

Dunham: Well, that’s a good skill to have. Were you dating at all there in St. Louis?

Nelson: No.

Dunham: And was Carl able to come see you at all there?

Nelson: No. No, I was only there two months, and so that was not necessary. We wrote letters.

Dunham: Had you left with the idea of you were leaving indefinitely, or did you know it was just going to be for—?

Nelson: Oh no. It was just an adventure, to see a different state and have an adventure.

Dunham: And why St. Louis?

Nelson: I don’t remember why I went there. It just sounded like a big town, I guess.

Dunham: Yeah. Did you go exploring in the mornings or weekends or whenever you had off?

Nelson: Yeah. I had a bus pass and I could go back and forth and go to the parks and some of the museums and things like that.

Dunham: Were there any special memories of things that stood out that you came across there?

Nelson: No, except I was there over Thanksgiving, and I had an orange crate and I had a table—that was my table, and I put a towel or something on it and made a table. I had a complete meal on my “table” in my room. I don’t know how I got the food, but there was food on a plate and I took a picture of it I was so proud. [laughter] I don’t know why. I think it was the spirit of adventure – I could support myself.
And were you corresponding with your family or Carl?

Oh yeah, we always wrote back and forth a lot, every—at least every week and sometimes a couple of times.

So what made you decide to return home then?

It got to be Christmastime and I decided that I didn’t want to be alone at Christmastime, so I went home.

Okay, so this is—go ahead.

I told my boss and I can still hear him. His name was Rudy and he was so good to me. He knew what a hick I was, I guess. Anyway, I told him that I’d like to go home for Christmas, and he, “Well, that’s okay. If you decide to come back, you’ll have a job. But I don’t expect you to.” [laughing] So I went home.

Well, I guess before we leave St. Louis, so a young, pretty girl from the country in the big city, you must have drawn some attention, maybe, from men. Did you ever get—?

No.

Didn’t get sort of hit on, if you will, or you didn’t have to—?

No.

You had your knife. You weren’t showing your knife, were you? [laughter]

No. It was in my pocket. But no, I never had any bad experiences with men, not even younger men. People that came in the restaurant time after time, you know, but there were several of those that—but they were just brothers to me. I didn’t have any romantic feelings at all. [technical interruption]

So you went back to home—

Went back home for Christmas—
Dunham: —for Christmas 1940.

Nelson: —and I stayed. By that time it was ’41, and then—

Dunham: In January it was ’41, right?

Nelson: Yes, that January. Then during ’41—let’s see, is that when I got—? I got a job at a little coil factory there, just a few miles from where we lived. I ended up buying a car, and two of my sisters got a job at the same place. And so—

Dunham: Oh wow. So were you making pretty good money there, to be able to buy a car?

Nelson: Well, it was good money for what I had been making in the restaurant. And I—let’s see—I paid $90 for a ’35 Plymouth sedan.

Dunham: Oh wow. That sounds like a lot of money.

Nelson: Oh, that was a lot of money, yeah.

Dunham: You had made that all on your own?

Nelson: Well, that’s after I worked at the factory for a while. And it was about ten miles away, so my sisters rode with me and another lady, and then they would pay me for getting them to work.

Dunham: Yeah, gas and expenses.

Nelson: I think it was $2.50 every two weeks.

Dunham: How did you learn to drive?

Nelson: I had a kind of a boyfriend in—when was that?

Dunham: A kind of a boyfriend before you were allowed to have boyfriends?
Yeah, right, right. [laughter] He had a Model A and he let me drive and told me how to drive, but it was so weird because it didn’t have a foot-feed pedal like it has now, it just had a little round thing sticking up through the floorboards, and it was very sensitive, so if I didn’t do it just right it would jerk and my foot would go down on the gas and the car would leap ahead, and then I’d take my foot off, and the next time I’d push it too hard and I’d be leaping across. But anyway, he let me drive his Model A—yeah, it was a Model A.

Okay, and was this—so when you got your car you already had it down?

Yes, I already knew how to drive. Of course it was a stick shift.

Right, right.

And so I drove back and forth to the coil factory then for about a year and a half.

Wow, okay, so what was that work like? This is—

It was little tiny coils, and I don’t know whether it was building up toward the war already, or what.

Do you know what they were used for?

I don’t know for sure. I assumed radios, because radios were beginning to be very popular at that time.

Did you grow up with a radio in the home, a personal radio for listening to?

No. We had a battery operated—what did they call it? My brother had a crystal set, which I had no idea what that was, but it had headphones and a little crystal thing where you found the radio station.

The radio station. Oh, okay.

But I worked at the coil factory then for about a year and a half.
Nelson: You just—you take a coil and you wrap the paper around it and stick it, and then you brazed two little wires onto it. You had a little gas fire here, and that’s what it was.

Dunham: Was it dangerous at all? Were there ever any injuries with the—

Nelson: No, no. There was a long table and everybody had this little gas flame to braze the wires.

Dunham: Did you wear gloves or anything?

Nelson: No, no, we just—hands.

Dunham: Okay, but was there any concern over burning yourself?

Nelson: Oh no.

Dunham: No? Okay.

Nelson: No. There was no danger to it at all. But my heritage kind of got in the way, and there was talk of war. I can remember that—but it seemed so totally far away and not ever would involve us. And with my Quaker background and the things that we believed in, and so forth—and I had a trouble with talking for all my life. [laughing] And apparently I was talking too much against the war, not only myself but my two sisters also. And after a while, when things were getting a little hot in some of the spots in the world, we were asked to quit our jobs. They didn’t ask us to quit talking, but they asked us to leave because of suspicion of—I forget. We had a letter about it one time. I don’t know what happened to the letter, but—

Dunham: A letter from your employer?

Nelson: Yeah, and it was kind of suspicious and we were talking against the war and talking that we were against it—

Dunham: Sort of allegiance.
Nelson: —the war or something, because my brother, two brothers-in-law, and a cousin were all conscientious objectors, and that was our belief.

Dunham: As pacifists.

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: Do you know about their process to become COs, to become conscientious objectors?

Nelson: Well, it was just their upbringing, I guess.

Dunham: But did they have any difficulty achieving that status, do you know? Or was—?

Nelson: My brother didn’t, and my two brothers-in-law didn’t, that I know of.

Dunham: So do you remember the conversations you or your sisters might have had at work, and speaking out against the war or against war in general?

Nelson: I don’t remember what we were saying, but some of the women would come up—of course you’re sitting at the table working and all you’re doing is talking. And some of the women would mention the fact that somebody joined the army or something, and we’d say, “What kind of a knothead is that that would join the army?” And just like—not with much intelligence, but just reflexes, when somebody would mention the war or anything about it, why we would—we would ridicule it as being something pretty stupid to do, and I think that’s probably what happened.

Dunham: So if you got a letter, does that mean that there was a warning? Or did they just all at once ask you to quit.

Nelson: No, they just asked us to leave.

Dunham: Okay, and maybe they gave you the letter at the same time that that happened. So did you protest, or was that just it?

Nelson: No. We protested at home, but we didn’t protest toward the business.
Dunham: Yeah, okay—what do you mean you protested at home then?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: How do you mean at home you did?

Nelson: Oh, just discussed it, you know, irritated but couldn’t imagine supporting the war in any way.

Dunham: Oh, okay, you complained to each other, sort of, about it.

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Well, that must have been a big deal, because you’d been doing that job a year and a half and I assume it was a pretty good income.

Nelson: It was a good income!

Dunham: And so this started in January of ’41, so this must have been about halfway into ’42?

Nelson: It was coming up into ’42.

Dunham: Do you remember where you were when you first heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Nelson: That was ’41.

Dunham: Yeah, December 7, ’41. It would have been a Sunday.

Nelson: Yeah, I remember where I was. I was in a grocery store, and somebody that I knew, a high school friend or something, “Have you heard what’s on the radio? Of course no TV at that time. And I hadn’t heard and she was telling me, and I said, “Well, how could they do that? Why would they do that?” And we were just commiserating over what had happened, and I had no idea of the implications to the world when that happened. But so that was ’41.
Dunham: Yeah, near the end of ’41. So when you had to leave your job at the spring factory, what from there?

Nelson: I tried to get a job at the General Electric plant in Fort Wayne, and I don’t remember what happened, but I didn’t get the job anyway. My two sisters were working there already. And so I belonged to the Church of the Brethren, which is kind of a branch of the Mennonite/Amish—not Amish, but Mennonite and what’s the other one? Anyway, they were having a work camp the summer of ’42. Six weeks. And we had a nursery for the children of the migrant workers. There was getting to be a lot of Mexican migrant workers coming up to Michigan to help harvest the crops from Texas and Arkansas. They were Hispanic, of course.

Dunham: For the Bracero program, yeah.

Nelson: And so I decided I would go and do that for six weeks, and we had a nursery with about twenty-six children, children of the migrant workers. And then in the evening we would, a lot of times we’d get together for a guitar, sing, or dinner or something.

Dunham: With the migrant workers?

Nelson: Yeah, with the workers themselves.

Dunham: So what was that like? Had you been exposed to Mexicans before then?

Nelson: Never.

Dunham: So what was that like?

Nelson: I loved it. The kids were so cute and they laughed at us trying to speak Spanish and et cetera. Most—oh, that was really strange. But one thing had happened at the work camp—really impressed me. Because one—we used to have, on weekends, we used to have people come in and talk, different people. One of them that came in and talked was this Dan West. He had this idea—he was white-headed, he was an older man—and he had this idea that—to help other people in the world and he was going to do it by shipping bred animals to different parts of the totally impoverished world and have them—like a pregnant cow, they would send it over. When the calf came they were to share the calf and start that way by spreading food availability and goodwill and
whatever. And so he already had it going, just with cows. And I thought oh, that’s a wonderful idea and he talked and talked about that. And actually what happened was that it turned into the Heifer Project—have you heard of that?

Dunham: Oh okay, that sounds familiar.

Nelson: And now it’s not only cows, it’s ducks, chickens, goats.

Dunham: Okay, so it started then and it has continued on?

Nelson: It still is going.

Dunham: So you heard him talk. You weren’t directly involved with that program, per se?

Nelson: No, I never got involved in it, except that I donated several times in my life. And—

Dunham: Well—oh, go ahead, go ahead.

Nelson: Another person that came and talked one weekend was a black fellow. His name was Bayard Rustin.

Dunham: Oh sure! I’ve seen a play on him.

Nelson: He was involved with the—what was it—? Civil rights and totally against the war.

Dunham: The civil rights movement. That would have been very early.

Nelson: Civil rights.

Dunham: You saw him back in ’42 speak?

Nelson: In ’42. He was a very young man.
Dunham: Oh wow, yeah, he would have been. Because then he was very involved with Martin Luther King ultimately.

Nelson: Yes, yes.

Dunham: And he also happened to be gay, which probably wasn’t known to you at that time.

Nelson: I didn’t—gay meant being happy. [laughing]

Dunham: Yeah, but did you ever know, just since that came up, of any gays or lesbians during those years or during the war years?

Nelson: I heard—

Dunham: I know it wasn’t as open as today, but—

Nelson: I had whispers once in a while, because so-and-so was acting strangely, and I found out my girlfriend’s mother’s beautician, who was a beautiful lady—a little rough and a little tall, and it turns out he wasn’t a lady. He was a man.

Dunham: Oh really?

Nelson: But nobody knew it and don’t tell anybody.

Dunham: Oh sure, sure, sure.

Nelson: It was just a total secret. But no, otherwise I had no idea there were such people.

Dunham: That’s interesting. But that was in your small town that you grew up in?

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: Well, what do you remember about—I didn’t mean to draw us off—about Bayard Rustin speaking at that time?
Nelson: Just—I was fascinated by him and his ideas. He was gung-ho to get this race thing straightened out, and I saw him later, a couple of years later at a meeting in Chicago, when he was beginning to be recognized and work toward the civil rights movement.

Dunham: Yeah, so this is all within this six-week summer program you’re doing?

Nelson: In the six-week summer program, yeah.

Dunham: And when you were doing the child care how was that? And was there a language barrier, I assume?

Nelson: Oh, it was so much fun. We learned a lot of Spanish. We learned siéntate—that means sit down. We learned all about the food names and so forth.

Dunham: Did you do any formal Spanish language training? Or you just learned on the job?

Nelson: Just learned on the job, and that was so much fun! [laughing]

Dunham: Was there, at the time, were the Mexican farmworkers looked down upon in a way? Or was this—

Nelson: No! I was fascinated with them, and I thought how lucky I was to be able to see a foreign person and be friends with.

Dunham: So you had—did you say you had music in the evenings?

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: And what kinds of music would be played then?

Nelson: Well, they’d sing their Spanish songs and play the guitar, and everybody would laugh and enjoy it, and we didn’t know what it was all about at all. [laughter] But it was interesting to see them having a good time. And they were very clean people, even though they were working in the field picking tomatoes or whatever. But they always appeared to be very clean.
Dunham: And were all the farmworkers the Mexican migrants? Or was it a mix of other folks too?

Nelson: No, it was all Mexicans there where I was.

Dunham: And where were you? Where was this?

Nelson: It was close to Mount Pleasant, Michigan.

Dunham: And were you staying in—what kind of place were you staying at there then?

Nelson: We were staying in an old farmhouse that was empty, but they had furnished it just barely with beds and tables and things, and that’s where we stayed. There was about nine of us staying there in the house. And we had three different centers. Our center, and then a few miles down the road there was another one. And we—all three of us had close to twenty-five kids in our center.

Dunham: Wow, and had you taken care of kids much before? Your little brother or—

Nelson: Oh, I love little kids! And I hadn’t actually been in charge of them for, ever—

Dunham: I mean, were you having to do all ages and diapers and everything?

Nelson: Yes. Well, we didn’t have very many actual babies. We had like from four or five up.

Dunham: Okay, all right. So that was—were there any other speakers that came through that you especially remember?

Nelson: I don’t remember any other speakers. I know that my mother drove up to Michigan—it was just out of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, a little town called Shepherd, Michigan, and my mother was real curious and she drove up and spent the weekend one time. And Carl came up and was there for the weekend one time too. But I don’t remember any other speakers. One weekend we went to—where in the heck was that? Went to a bigger town in Michigan where there was a political rally of some kind and there was a senator there. I’ve got a picture of it, but I don’t think I even have the name of the person. [laughing]
Dunham: All right. Well, that’s okay. Was Carl a Quaker?

Nelson: Oh no, no. He was a first generation Bulgarian. His dad had come from Bulgaria and moved into Fort Wayne.

Dunham: And what was their religion, if you know?

Nelson: [laughing] I’m not sure he had any! He was very—everybody was—there was no drinking and drugs and that kind of stuff. There were just nice people.

Dunham: Yeah. Well, did you have conversations about these new topics you were hearing about—Bayard Rustin and the heifer program, with Carl, with your mom—?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: And what were their points of view on these—

Nelson: Well, my mother was thrilled about hearing about it and wanted to hear more. And Carl thought that was kind of something that religious people did and he wasn’t too interested.

Dunham: And what did you say the name of the organization was, that you said it was Mennonites and there was a specific—

Nelson: It was the Church of the Brethren.

Dunham: Okay, Church of the Brethren.

Nelson: And the Mennonites and—there’s a third one.

Dunham: Okay. Well, we can look that up later. I just wanted to make sure we had the Church of the Brethren down correctly. So had you—and is that something that you just got into then, in terms of the Mennonites? Or were they connected with the Quakers?

Nelson: Well, in the Quakers—they’re all very similar.
Dunham: They’re all—yeah, okay.

Nelson: Oh—the only reason I got started in the Church of the Brethren is because when we moved to town the church was across the street. [laughing]

Dunham: Oh, so when you moved to the bigger town it was there and you checked it out.

Nelson: And we started going there.

Dunham: Okay, because then you didn’t—you were too far away from the Quaker group that you had—?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Okay.

Nelson: And so we went to the Church of the Brethren, who has very, very similar doctrine.

Dunham: So you come back from your six-week summer—oh, I wanted to ask, did you ever hear of the Women’s Land Army, or women or girls who went and did farming in the summer?

Nelson: No.

Dunham: Kind of like with the migrant workers. Because there were some places in the country where that was happening as well, so I was just curious. During the war.

Nelson: Oh! Oh yeah, yeah—I’ve met some of them in the Rosie club.

Dunham: Yeah, okay, terrific. Well, when you came back from that six-week profound experience what was next?

Nelson: Well, there was a little girl—well, she was twelve, in our center, and she had an older sister, two older brothers, and a Down Syndrome sister, and their mother was with her. The father wasn’t with them; I never found out why.
And while they were there the older boy, who was the only driver, got drafted and had to go from the tomato field to the army, and left them stranded and they had no way to get back to New Braunfels, Texas. So I offered to drive them back in their car, of course. They had an old Chevy—I don’t remember what year—’32 or something. And so when the season was over with and they were going back to their home, then I drove them back there.

Dunham: That’s quite a drive!

Nelson: It was, then. And we had a flat tire and nobody knew how to fix it. I did, but I didn’t want to do it—but I did.

Dunham: So what happened?

Nelson: Well, I put the jack under there and—

Dunham: Oh, you did it!

Nelson: —and took the wheel off, took the tube out, put the patch on the tire and put it back together.

Dunham: Wow.

Nelson: And so I stayed down there with them for a couple of weeks, I think.

Dunham: Had you ever been to Texas before?

Nelson: Never, never been down there.

Dunham: Aside from the flat tire were there any adventures on the way down there?

Nelson: No, and I don’t even remember how many days it took us, but I think it was about three days.

Dunham: Would you have stayed in motels along the way?

Nelson: Oh no, no. We couldn’t afford that.
So what would you do?

Just sleep as you were going.

You’d pull over and—?

Pull over and sleep.

Because you were the only driver?

Yeah.

So you’d pull over and sleep. Okay.

And the older sister and I went on down into Monterrey, Mexico, to see some relatives of theirs, and they lived in a shanty town. This—they had cardboard boxes, like refrigerators come in, and they made a shelter out of those cardboard boxes. And we stayed there—let’s see—I slept in a chair really, like this. We stayed overnight, and of course all they talked was Spanish, so I didn’t know what they were talking about, but they were rattling away. And then we went back to their home in New Braunfels and I stayed another week, I think, there.

So they were from Mexico but lived in the US?

No, the relatives were in Mexico and they stayed there, but the older sister—

But they were first generation—the older sister and her family were first generation in the US?

Yeah, in Texas.

All right. So what was it like in Texas then? Did you—were you just—?

Well, it was—I knew the family from the summer and we were really good friends. And this—Aurora—she was a gorgeous girl, had real long dark hair. So I felt like they were almost a relative, because I’d been working so close with them in Michigan.
Dunham: And they were bilingual then, the family? They knew English fluently too?

Nelson: The mother had trouble with it, but the children, her children, were all real bilingual.

Dunham: Because they had gone to school in the US and—yeah, okay.

Nelson: They talked fluent English.

Dunham: So then how did you get back home? Or is that where you went from there?

Nelson: I took a bus back home to Indiana, and I stayed there—let’s see, where are we?—’42. That was about the time that so many of our friends were going to war, and the war was escalating of course, especially in Europe. And so this girlfriend and I—Carl had already been drafted—no, he hadn’t been drafted. He joined the marines and he was out in California.

Dunham: How did your family feel about your boyfriend joining the marines? How did you and your family feel about it?

Nelson: They—in fact, my mother encouraged us to get married, and they said maybe—at the time they weren’t taking married men. And then pretty soon it was okay if you were married, just don’t have kids. And then finally, you were allowed, even if they had two kids—or maybe it was three—they could be drafted and sent off. So—

Dunham: So she encouraged you to get married originally as a way to maybe avoid being drafted?

Nelson: So he couldn’t be drafted.

Dunham: But he volunteered.

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: So how did you all feel about that growing up as you had?
Nelson: Well, I didn’t like it and my family didn’t like it, but he was going to—like all the young guys, they were going to go over there and settle it, get it over with.

Dunham: And as a first generation he might have especially wanted to prove himself.

Nelson: Yeah, yeah. [laughing]

Dunham: But that wasn’t something where like your mother said you can’t see him or something like that?

Nelson: Oh no, no.

Dunham: So it was never—

Nelson: She loved him too. [laughing] And—

Dunham: Okay, okay. So he had volunteered and then you—I wanted to ask, when your sisters—what was the job they did at the GE plant where you didn’t get a job? Do you know?

Nelson: I never did know what they did. I have an idea at that time it was probably something leading up to war supplies.

Dunham: Sure, sure. So Carl and a lot of other friends are joining or getting drafted.

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: And you came back from Texas and—

Nelson: Yeah, and my girlfriend—she actually was like a sister, because she had a very, very bad home life and she spent a lot of her high school years at our house.

Dunham: Do you mind if I ask what were the challenges in her home life?

Nelson: Well, her dad was—I don’t know what was in his head, but he was a very strict man and a little on the—I don’t think physically mean but verbally, and
she came home—she’s supposed to be home at ten o’clock. She got home fifteen minutes late and he locked the door and wouldn’t let her in! And that’s another time when she came and stayed with us.

Anyway, we got to talking one time, and, “You know, out in California there’s jobs! I mean lots of jobs! Besides, Carl is out there!” [laughing] And so we talked about it for quite a while and talked to—Mom was not in favor.

Dunham: Not in favor because you would be going so far from home? Or also because of wartime work?

Nelson: Both, both.

Dunham: Was wartime sort of—?

Nelson: I would be promoting the war, which she was totally against. And the—

Dunham: So did you have debates about that, if you will, or a long conversation? What was that like?

Nelson: No, I didn’t even consider that. I considered the fact that I would be independently wealthy. [laughter] But I didn’t even consider the fact that I was helping the war effort. But the weekend that Carl was supposed to leave, I didn’t know that’s what it was because he wasn’t supposed to tell when he was going to leave.

Dunham: Oh really?

Nelson: I had promised Mom that I would go to Chicago to a Quaker seminar. They were having a council meeting or something. I’d promised her, a couple of months ahead of time, that I would go with her. That turned out to be the weekend that he was leaving, and that did not go over very big, so we had a split.

Dunham: You and your mom?

Nelson: No, me and Carl.

Dunham: Oh, because you did follow through on going with your mom.
I followed through and went with my mom. And so he said, “Well, that’s it for me. I’ll just go by myself.” And he was an only child—well, he had two brothers but they had both died.

Do you know how they died? Sorry, I’m just—

I’m not sure. They were younger. They were—one was two years younger than him and the other was three. But I don’t remember.

Well, anyway, so he—

Well, I didn’t know the family that well.

Yeah, okay, so he was setting to go off on his own, if you will, and you were saying—and he was upset?

Yeah, he was upset. And so then after a while—let’s see, did I get the letter first? After maybe a month, I got a letter from him and he changed his mind. He says he was really mad at me but he couldn’t leave me either. So he said, “Well, at least we can write.” So we wrote back and forth for a while. But I got Eunice to—she had broken up with her boyfriend and she just says, “I’ll go with you.” So we, each of us—I don’t even remember where we got the money, but we had $20, each of us. So we got a bus ticket as far as the $20 would take us.

Oh, okay, the whole—?

Yeah. We got to Denver, Colorado. And we got a job in a restaurant and worked for about six weeks, got enough money to go on to California. So by March of ’43 we were on our way to California.

Any exciting times in Denver? Or what was—?

Well, it was fun.

You were there in the winter then, was it—?
Nelson: We met a lot of service men working in the restaurant and had a few dates, but they seemed more like brothers. They were all homesick and apprehensive about their future and where they’d be sent. Most just wanted to talk and have fun. And at that time there were so many servicemen, and that’s also when I discovered that the service was segregated. And the restaurant that I was working in would not serve black soldiers, and that really upset me.

Dunham: So the St. Louis restaurant you’d been in a little earlier actively discouraged serving all blacks, but this one in Colorado, in Denver, just didn’t at all.

Nelson: No.

Dunham: Did they have signs posted or it was just known?

Nelson: I can’t remember if they posted signs, but if a black soldier would come in they’d say we’re sorry, we can’t serve you.

Dunham: Yeah, not even to-go food for them?

Nelson: No, which is kind of strange.

Dunham: Do you know if they had somewhere else to go in town, or if the whole town—?

Nelson: I don’t know whether there was any black area where they could have gotten food or not. But that surprised me and it was really sad for me to have to tell them that we couldn’t serve them.

Dunham: I wonder if people ever snuck food up to them or other people bought it for them, or somehow—?

Nelson: I don’t know.

Dunham: Were you—so you were working the one to ten o’clock again there? Or what kind of hours—do you remember?

Nelson: Let’s see. No. I can’t remember what time.
Dunham: Did you do any, did you have time to do any socializing there, go out at nights or explore Denver?

Nelson: Well, at that point there was so many servicemen around, all you had to do was make eye contact and you had a date to go have a hamburger or something. And we met several guys there. Most of them were—oh, they were just lonesome. They just wanted to talk. And we got—there were several of them that we were friends with, and I have pictures of some of them.

Dunham: Even your friend, who had just broken up with her boyfriend, she didn’t—?

Nelson: She had a really nice guy there in Denver, and his name was Joe Matukonis. I don’t know what nationality that was, but he was a real nice guy. In fact, he bought her a ring, but then he got shipped out and she never could catch up with him and never heard from him again.

Dunham: An engagement ring?

Nelson: No, it was actually it was more like a—it was kind of like this ring, only it was gold. It was kind of patterned that way. I still have the ring!

Dunham: Oh, really?

Nelson: Yeah. [laughing]

Dunham: Were there USO dances or other types of dances around there?

Nelson: There were, but we didn’t go. We didn’t go to the USO dances, or we didn’t even do anything with the USO, because the minute we got to Santa Monica we went up and applied for a job, and this is about three o’clock in the afternoon—

Dunham: So did you—I’m sorry—you took the bus from Denver to Santa Monica?

Nelson: Yeah, we finally made enough money in Denver, we could take the bus and go to Santa Monica.
Dunham: And were you corresponding with Carl at this time and did you know where he was?

Nelson: Well, yes, but we were kind of on the move so we weren’t getting letters.

Dunham: So it was kind of—you didn’t have a place to receive—okay.

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: And what did you know of jobs in Santa Monica or the West Coast? Did you have friends who had gotten jobs, or how did you hear about the opportunities?

Nelson: Just what we read in the newspapers is about all.

Dunham: So did you have a specific place in mind, or you were just going to get to the West Coast and—?

Nelson: Well, we were—I don’t know how we picked Santa Monica, Douglas Aircraft, because—well, you see ads everywhere, wanting workers.

Dunham: Yeah, so okay, sorry—you said it was about three o’clock in the afternoon.

Nelson: Yeah, and we got to—let’s see, we went through the process and did all that and they said, “Okay, we’d like to hire you. We’d like for you to show up tonight on the graveyard shift.” And that’s what we did.

Dunham: That night, that night, okay.

Nelson: That same night! And that’s what we did, and I worked graveyard then for the rest of the time.

Dunham: So did you have a training?

Nelson: No, I just walked in there and they said, “This is a rivet gun and here’s how it works, and here’s an airplane. Here’s what you’re supposed to do.” [laughing]
Dunham: Did they—so how was it then? How did you do that first night?

Nelson: Well, they gave me a partner. You’re supposed to work together, because he’s on the outside of the fuselage and I was on the inside. And he—in the first place, he didn’t like women working there and he didn’t like girls working. I think—he was an older—well, he was not older, he was probably in his forties or fifties, but older when you’re eighteen.

Dunham: Certainly.

Nelson: So he wasn’t too pleasant to work with, but he just—

Dunham: How did he make his disapproval of women and girls working there known?

Nelson: Oh just in his attitude and his talk. He wouldn’t talk to me at all, just—he’d say, “Are you ready?” Well, we had signs. I’d take my bucking bar and knock twice and—that I was ready for him to shoot the rivet. And if I’d do it wrong or something he’d yell at me and say, “I said to do this and do it this way!”

Dunham: That very first night it was like that?

Nelson: Well, I don’t think it started the first night, but he got pretty grouchy.

Dunham: Okay, but pretty quickly.

Nelson: But he got a little more human later.

Dunham: You won him over?

Nelson: Well, I don’t know what happened, but he changed his mind, I guess.

Dunham: Were there other—I’ve heard stories similarly where there were men who were pretty hard on the women at first. Were there other types of things you, or you knew of other women that experienced, that were pretty tough?

Nelson: No, I hadn’t heard of any of, what you see—like in that Rosie the Riveter movie. Have you seen that?
Dunham: Yeah, yeah.

Nelson: I didn’t, I’ve never seen harassment per se.

Dunham: And I’ve talked to a lot of Rosies who—a lot of whom didn’t have that, but a number of whom did have some pretty harrowing experiences. We didn’t use the word sexual harassment necessarily back then, but which—

Nelson: Yeah, just smarty stuff, you know. They yell at you when you’re walking by.

Dunham: What kinds of things, if you don’t mind my asking would you—

Nelson: You don’t pay any attention to them if they tease—and of course you’re wearing pants. We’re not in dresses.

Dunham: Did you have pants the first day? Or did they give them to you? Or what happened?

Nelson: Well, we had to go buy some.

Dunham: Okay, before that first night?

Nelson: Before the first night.

Dunham: So they gave you the dress code—so what was the dress code and was there any special equipment, protective equipment?

Nelson: No, a lot of them wore the coveralls and the bandanas, and so forth. I didn’t need to—I wore moccasins and a pair of pants and a t-shirt, and there was no dangerous situations.

Dunham: And for your hair, did you do anything for your hair?

Nelson: No, I didn’t even have to wear a bandana of any kind.

Dunham: Okay, and it wasn’t dangerous to have it—did you have long hair?
Nelson: Well, I had kind of long hair, but it wasn’t way down, but just to my shoulders probably.

Dunham: So was that literally like the same day you’d arrived on the bus? Or did you already have a place and were settled? How did you—

Nelson: No, we took a hotel room for $7 a week.

Dunham: Okay, in Santa Monica?

Nelson: In Santa Monica.

Dunham: Do you remember where it was?

Nelson: Yeah, it was on Third and Ocean Avenue, upstairs in a hotel, a little old hotel, two or three stories.

Dunham: And how far was that from Douglas?

Nelson: We had to take a bus, and after about a month we found an apartment about a block down the street and it was $30 a month, and so all we had was what we arrived with in a suitcase. And so we just packed our suitcase and walked down the street and rented the apartment, and that’s where we lived for the rest of the time.

Dunham: And so what was it like? Do you remember what you got paid?

Nelson: I don’t remember exactly, but it was somewhere around $22 or $23 a week. I don’t remember if there was an hourly wage.

Dunham: But pretty—probably the best money you’d made to this point.

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: And did you join a union?

Nelson: No, no. There wasn’t any union and I wondered about that.
Dunham: And what was the makeup of your coworkers there? Were they mostly local? Or were a lot of them coming from out of state like you?

Nelson: Most of them coming from out of state and about half of them were women.

Dunham: Okay, and that came more from the South or the Midwest like you, or all over?

Nelson: Just kind of all over.

Dunham: Okay, and were there different races there? Were there blacks and others?

Nelson: There were some, but not very many in the department where I worked.

Dunham: And this is in ’43. Is that right? Or December—let’s see, early ’43?

Nelson: March, March of ’43.

Dunham: March of ’43. Okay, so you were a couple months in Denver?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Okay, so California! What was—you’ve traveled a lot but this is your first time in California?

Nelson: Never been there before.

Dunham: So what was your image of California and what was the realization of it?

Nelson: Well, our image and the realization was pretty close. It was sunshiny and we were one block from the beach—[bumping microphone]—I’ve got to quit doing that.

Dunham: Oh, that’s okay. And if you need to take a break anytime just let me know too, or if this is—you’re doing great.
Nelson: So after we found the apartment, well then we got—it was furnished, just barely furnished, just a table and a bed. They’d taken a very small house and made a front apartment, and we had the back apartment downstairs and there was an apartment upstairs, out of this little tiny house. It wasn’t a very big apartment, but it worked.

Dunham: Yeah, so you’re working the graveyard shift and then when do you sleep?

Nelson: When we get through playing in the daytime. [laughing]

Dunham: Okay, and what playing were you doing and how did you get around?

Nelson: Well, like going to the beach. We did a lot of that.

Dunham: Did you already have swimsuits or did you get them when you came out?

Nelson: I don’t remember whether we brought it—no, I brought mine with me, I think. So we’d go down on the beach and just walk or lay in the sun.

Dunham: You were a swimmer. Did you go out and swim and play in the ocean?

Nelson: Well, I didn’t like to swim in the ocean. It’s salty and it burns your eyes.

Dunham: Was that your first time?

Nelson: First—well—

Dunham: First time experiencing—

Nelson: Well, one other time on a trip I’d been in the ocean, but I didn’t do any swimming.

Dunham: Well, so what else were you doing while you were exploring Southern California?

Nelson: Well, we went to Hollywood. We could take a bus and go anywhere. We didn’t ever have a car, but we’d take a bus over to Hollywood and just look,
and downtown LA, and so forth. And so—one time we went to Aimee Semple McPherson’s church, the Foursquare, when the Foursquare Church—do you remember hearing about her?

Dunham: Okay, I don’t know it. No, tell me about it. Was it similar to the churches you’d grown up with? Or what was it like?

Nelson: No, she was an exhibitionist, and she’d—I remember we went to her church one time and there was kind of a ramp coming down, about a story, and this lady comes down the ramp with her white robe floating and she’s the preacher. She’s very well known at the time. And while we were in church we had an earthquake.

Dunham: Oh wow.

Nelson: You could feel it moving. That’s my first earthquake. But Aimee Semple McPherson was the start of the Foursquare—what—denomination, I guess. And we went to see her one time.

Dunham: Had you already heard of—?

Nelson: Very, very dramatic.

Dunham: Well, you said exhibitionist, so you mean performer?

Nelson: Performer.

Dunham: So what did you think of it?

Nelson: I thought it was kind of strange. [laughing]

Dunham: Okay, was it a one time only thing for you? Or—

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Okay.
Nelson: It was just kind of a more or less I looked at it as a show more than a church. But they had a full temple, and they had a full church.

Dunham: Oh yeah. Did you find another church or were you taking a break from that?

Nelson: Well, we were all going to the Methodist, and so—the Methodist there in Santa Monica is where we went most of the time.

Dunham: Okay, okay, and was that okay with your mom?

Nelson: Yeah, and I can’t remember why we chose the Methodist, because it was one of the old-time churches and it was close, so we went there and felt like home.

Dunham: Did you write and tell your mom that you were working at Boeing?

Nelson: At Douglas.

Dunham: At Douglas, I’m sorry. Thank you.

Nelson: Well, yeah—I used to write every week and tell what we were doing, and so forth.

Dunham: Okay. Was she supportive by that point? Or was she still kind of conflicted?

Nelson: Well, she never said. She didn’t ever say. My dad did. When I—

Dunham: What did he say?

Nelson: When I put him on the train the last time before I left, he says, “I don’t want you to go.” And I said, “Well, we’ll make some money and we’ll save up, and so forth.” “Yeah,” he said, “You’ll meet some guy out there and get married and we’ll never see you.” I thought—that’s kind of weird. How am I going to get married with Carl overseas? [laughing] But my mother never said anything. She never said one way or the other actually.

Dunham: What kind of planes were you working on?
Nelson: I worked on the Douglas A-20. They called it the Havoc. It was a two-motor bomber and I worked on—they’d put it together on a jig and it would come down the jig and they would add wires and whatever had to be added to it. Then they’d get it down to the end of the jig and it would be in halves. They’d take the halves off and put it on a thing with wheels and bring it to our department, and we would put the rivets in that they couldn’t reach while it was on the jig. And then they would—the halves would leave our department and they’d join them on down the line somewhere and add extra things. So we never saw a completed airplane.

Dunham: And you were doing the bucking part?

Nelson: I was doing both. Some places you could hold your bucking bar on the inside and shoot from here. There was one place where there was a whole series of rivets that I’d put in by myself, and then there were other places where you had to have somebody on the other side of the half. You couldn’t see each other; you’d just have to make signals.

Dunham: You said you had signs?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: So it was verbally?

Nelson: No. If it was a good rivet you hit it twice. If it was a bad rivet you hit it three times—take it out. But and whenever, like if he was putting the rivet in from the outside, he would hit it once that he was ready. So I’d put the bar on the end of the rivet and he would shoot it, and then I’d knock twice—it’s okay.

Dunham: Did you say in your bio that he sometimes rushed you before you were ready? Or did I mis[read]—?

Nelson: No, no. He was pretty tolerant.

Dunham: Oh okay, I just think that might have been dangerous, but I must have misread that.

Nelson: Oh well yeah, that would have been bad.
Dunham: So if you had to knock and tell him it was a bad rivet, since he was kind of difficult in ways, did he take that okay? Or did that happen much?

Nelson: Well, no. He didn’t ever say very much, but he—I could tell that he didn’t like that, that he thought I wasn’t keeping up or something.

Dunham: So can you describe the Douglas—it was camouflaged, right, where you were?

Nelson: Oh yes! It was camouflaged, and as you’d approach it coming up Pico Street, as you come up Pico Street it looked like there was a hill, and it was a street, there were houses, there were flowers in the yard, and the whole plant was covered with this mesh that looked like, from a distance it looked like it was a street. And I’m sure from the air it did too.

Dunham: And did you have evacuation procedures or bomb shelter-type drills you did?

Nelson: Yeah, and they had a bomb shelter and they had exercises that they’d—every once in a while. It wasn’t very often. I think maybe—like once a month they’d have a thing where they’d ring a bell and everybody was supposed to go to the bomb shelter.

Dunham: So had they told you about that? Like the first time that happened was it a shock?

Nelson: No, they had told us that they would be doing that, and so—

Dunham: So you’d gotten some kind of—

Nelson: It was kind of spooky the first time we did it, but after that you get like it was old hat.

Dunham: So everybody—was it a pretty congested space you would go to then for the—?

Nelson: Yeah, I think it was—it wasn’t body to body, but it was not a very big bomb shelter, and it was just—I think each department had their own bomb shelter, so you didn’t have to go very far.
And they told you in advance they were going to have a test?

Yeah. And then when the bell rang we dropped our tools and went to the shelter. They’d ring the bell again to go back to work.

But what was it like being on the West Coast in terms of—like that was a new type of thing to have a bomb shelter or blackouts? Did you—all that. So can you tell us a little about that?

Yeah—well, and all of the cars had black on the top half of their headlights so you couldn’t see it from the air. And it was—and of course there was—I don’t know how they subdued the streetlights they had, but they were fixed so that they weren’t visible from the air.

Yeah, okay. I was just looking at your—talking about your first night and seeing some of the signs and posters you saw on the wall. Do you remember some of those? What types of things did they say?

Yeah, A Slip of the Lip Can Sink a Ship was one of them I always remembered.

And did you buy war bonds? Were you able to do that?

No. I never bought a war bond.

What types of things did you eat there? Was there, did you—the graveyard shift. You had a lunch break?

We’d just take—yeah, we just took a sandwich and lunch. But we couldn’t—we had a badge. We couldn’t get in if we didn’t have our badge on. And as we went in they inspected whatever we took in, if it was a lunch or a—we couldn’t take a purse, of course. And then coming out we had to be inspected again. We had to—if we had a lunchbox we’d have to open our lunchbox and maybe our toolbox. I don’t remember.

But they didn’t search your clothes or body?

No, no. It was just that.
Dunham: Okay, and so what tools were you using?

Nelson: Well, I had wrenches and hammers. The rivet gun, of course, stayed there. But I had a few little hand tools that I kept in my tool box.

Dunham: Did you have to check those out each night? Or did they—that was something you kept?

Nelson: No, they were mine.

Dunham: You had a locker there?

Nelson: No, just a toolbox, a little toolbox.

Dunham: But not that you took home, but that was stored right there. Had you used many of those tools before?

Nelson: Well, yeah—I mean I was—I’d used a saw and a hammer and wrenches and stuff like that before.

Dunham: Was the work challenging?

Nelson: Well, it was because—in a way—because you had a certain amount of things that you had to get done in your shift. And you wanted to do it right, and so you didn’t just swish through it—you’d do it right as you go. The challenging probably would be to get finished, get your part finished before the shift was over.

Dunham: What if you didn’t finish?

Nelson: Well, then the next person would have to take in the slack, for what you didn’t do.

Dunham: When you got there at graveyard sometimes were the previous shift behind so that you had to—?

Nelson: Yeah, had to catch up to what you were supposed to do and then do your part, so that the next shift wouldn’t have to take over what you didn’t get done.
Dunham: Yeah, what was the hardest part of the job?

Nelson: I don’t know. But I’ve tried to lift the—I have a rivet gun. It was given to our club—a rivet gun, a bucking bar, clecos, and cleco pliers—and what else? I think three different types of rivet guns. So when we go and talk to a group or a church or a school or something, we make a display table. We can put these three rivet guns out. And I pick that thing up and that is heavy! [laughing]

Dunham: Yeah, and you weren’t that big then either, right?

Nelson: No, but I was young. I didn’t care whether it was heavy or not.

Dunham: So it wasn’t a problem for you to manage?

Nelson: No. And then too, besides the rivet gun, you’ve got the air hose and that follows you wherever you go and you trip over it and everything, and you don’t want that.

Dunham: So I’m amazed. I’ve heard it before, but arriving that first day and getting the job that first night—you must have had to ask questions or get some type of help or training in those initial days. So how does that take place, even if it’s informal?

Nelson: Well, my partner just very briefly said, “You put the right tip on your rivet gun that fits the rivet. Use these rivets and you put them in those holes.” And that’s about all he said.

Dunham: So your gruff, intolerant partner was the extent of your training?

Nelson: Yeah! [laughing]

Dunham: Were there other people nearby you could ask? Or it was pretty much you—?

Nelson: Oh yeah, yeah. We had a lead man and he was right there, and he was real good too. He was real patient and everything. His name was Archie Duncan. I remember that.
Dunham: You did say he shared your partner’s opinion, but he was a little more tolerant, I guess—right?

Nelson: Right.

Dunham: But he did make it known that it wasn’t his choice to have women, I guess?

Nelson: Yeah, that he didn’t—

Dunham: Is that how you’d put it?

Nelson: No. He didn’t like women there. [laughing]

Dunham: That must have been kind of hard to be hearing that.

Nelson: Well, my attitude was that I’ll just show him that we can do the job and do it right, the way they want it.

Dunham: Were there some women that struggled and didn’t make it?

Nelson: Yeah. Later on they brought some people in that didn’t—they just wanted the paycheck, I think, and they didn’t care whether they did anything or not. And that was—they didn’t last very long either.

Dunham: But just even—since they didn’t exactly train or vet you guys, I imagine there must have been some folks who got there and didn’t—

Nelson: Well, there was a lot of people who took six weeks training in a training facility somewhere.

Dunham: Yeah, I’ve heard that more often. But you never got that?

Nelson: No.

Dunham: Did you hear about that and wonder?
Nelson: Well, I heard about that because one of my lead men was Jim Nelson, who ended up being my husband!

Dunham: I recognize that name, Nelson. [laughter]

Nelson: He was right there in the workforce, and so anything I needed to know I could either ask him or Archie, because they were right there with the group.

Dunham: How many would be in your group or crew?

Nelson: Probably ten, maybe twelve.

Dunham: And about how many women and men then?

Nelson: Mostly—it was about half and half.

Dunham: And all white in your area, immediate area?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Did you see blacks or others around the company?

Nelson: Not a whole lot, not at that time.

Dunham: Maybe more later.

Nelson: Probably later.

Dunham: And you had said that there were maybe some challenges there later with races? Or what was the experience that you—

Nelson: No, I don’t—well, we never intermingled.

Dunham: Did you hear of any difficulty? In part, sometimes—because I’ve heard because there was such migration from the South, both southern whites and southern blacks, so you had that—not that there was great civility, even, in the
West Coast, but you had that greater intolerance and conflict almost migrating to California. But did you hear of any of those kinds of challenges?

Nelson: No. I never was exposed to anything like that. The few blacks that were there at Douglas—it was way off in another department, so I never did see them.

Dunham: Did you ever hear if there was openness to hiring blacks? Or more openness at other companies? Ever hear anything along those lines?

Nelson: I had no knowledge about that.

Dunham: What happened when somebody got hurt or injured?

Nelson: I don’t think anybody in our department ever got injured. And a lot of times—see, we’d get off at seven o’clock in the morning and several of us—it got to be a group thing. We’d maybe go ice-skating at the rink or went horseback riding in the morning or—

Dunham: Oh wow, so you weren’t—?

Nelson: —go to the beach, or whatever.

Dunham: You weren’t too tired? You weren’t exhausted then?

Nelson: No, no. Usually, according to what was going on we’d either go straight home and go to sleep or do whatever we wanted to do and then catch and sleep before the time to go to work.

Dunham: You wrote that occasionally you were a little sleep-deprived when you got there, and so you’d have to catch a wink in the bathroom or something. Can you tell us about that?

Nelson: [laughing] Yeah—oh, I didn’t intend to go to sleep, but they had benches in the restrooms, which was a mistake. [Dunham laughs] So if nobody was sitting on a bench you could stretch out for a little bit. But before you knew it you were asleep. But they had the matrons that toured the restrooms in the whole factory, and she—in fact, somewhere I’ve got a what do you call it—?

Dunham: Not a photo.
Nelson: A written note that says—

Dunham: A citation.

Nelson: A citation—you were caught sleeping in the restroom. [laughing]

Dunham: Would they dock your pay or anything?

Nelson: No, I never had any results from it, but—

Dunham: But maybe if it happened enough they could—might fire you or something.

Nelson: They might, yes.

Dunham: Aside from a little sleeping, did you hear about other people sometimes goofing off in other ways or any—?

Nelson: No, not usually.

Dunham: Sometimes I’ve heard even about maybe a little hanky-panky on the graveyard shift?

Nelson: No, not that I knew of.

Dunham: Well, what was the dating scene like now here on the West Coast?

Nelson: Well, that was about normal. It wasn’t—I did get hold of Carl when he was—he was on a weekend and I took the bus into LA one time. He had an uncle that lived—I knew where he lived at this little hotel. And so I went by, and Nick was down in the lobby-type place, and so I just tried to be real casual. “Well, have you heard from Carl?” “Yeah, he’s here this weekend. He’s up there in my room.” He says, “Go wake him up!” So I did and he was totally surprised, of course. And then the three of us went out and had lunch after that. And then things were kind of—improved, I guess. So he kind of forgave me for being gone that weekend he was leaving. And so—and we did like movies and weekend things when he was able to get off for the weekend.

Dunham: You did—okay. Where would you go to the movies?
Nelson: There in Santa Monica. Let’s see, there were three theaters, I think.

Dunham: Were they great big picture houses? Or no, not that kind.

Nelson: No, no. Just—there was one that was fairly big, but the other two were real small.

Dunham: Okay, okay. And were you following news of the war then? Either the news reels or paper or radio?

Nelson: No. Not a whole lot.

Dunham: Not so much, yeah.

Nelson: We didn’t have a radio and we didn’t take a paper. Once in a while we’d get the Santa Monica paper, but not too often. We were too busy working and having a good time. [laughing]

Dunham: So back on the job you talked about, in your bio, talked about everybody called each other by their last names and talked about—what was it you had—there was a Filipino man, you said, who—what was his job?

Nelson: Yeah, I don’t know what his last name was, but we called him *slave*.

Dunham: Oh, you called *him* slave?

Nelson: And he called himself *slave*. But he couldn’t say *slave*, he’d say *slabe*.

Dunham: With a B.

Nelson: With a B.

Dunham: And so he would say—

Nelson: “Okay, you *slabes* get busy,” he would say.

Dunham: What was his job?
Nelson: I don’t know. He was around in our area but I don’t remember what his job was.

Dunham: Did you see other Asians at the job?

Nelson: No, most of them were American types.

Dunham: Okay, and had you heard about Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated and/or did you know any Italian or German Americans who were?

Nelson: I heard of them, but I was too busy working and having a good time, I guess. I didn’t worry about it, anyway.

Dunham: Right. Made me think of something, hang on just a sec—what were the fashion styles of the day? Were things changing at all in terms of women’s fashion?

Nelson: I don’t know. I never was much about fashion. I was about comfort. If I—but I liked wearing the pants. That was real handy.

Dunham: How did you wear them, or what kind of—or not having to wear dresses, you mean, when you had to work?

Nelson: Yeah, not having to wear dresses, but whenever we weren’t on the job we wore dresses.

Dunham: Okay, so you never wore pants out?

Nelson: Oh yeah, often we would, but—

Dunham: Okay, because you’d go straight from work to playing and doing different things, you said, so would you wear—just keep your work clothes on?

Nelson: Just keep my work clothes on. I never got dirty, just because I never was in a dirty dusty place.
Dunham: Yeah, did men or anyone ever give you a hard time for wearing pants or comment on it, since it was sort of a new thing?

Nelson: I can’t remember being bothered that way.

Dunham: Okay. What did you like about wearing pants? You said you—

Nelson: It was just so handy. You could climb up on something or lean over something and you were safe! [laughter]

Dunham: So what else did you do for fun?

Nelson: Well, we used to go ice-skating and horseback riding, and then just kind of touring the area.

Dunham: Yeah, yeah. You had a story that was kind of dramatic about—let’s see, one night smelling fresh tobacco smoke? Can you tell us that story?

Nelson: Oh yeah, oh yeah. [laughing] That’s mostly in there.

Dunham: Yeah, well no—everything that’s here I’d love for you to share with us today too, so we—

Nelson: Oh, what it was is—I mean—coming from where we were, we didn’t lock our door, we didn’t close our windows. We had our windows up, and I forget whether they—no, they didn’t have screens, because I’ve got one picture that shows us going to work and the other picture showing us coming home from work. We’re crawling in the window because—I don’t know, we must have locked the door that night or something, but we hardly ever did. And there was just—there wasn’t that kind of a threat. So anyway, we were getting up, getting ready to go to work at eleven, and we smell this cigarette smoke. And the window was here, the doorway was here, and I came to the doorway and peeked out and here’s this soldier standing here! And so I said, “What are you doing?” And he said, “Oh, oh—I was just going through to mail a letter.” And I said—and it wasn’t a place where it was open to the public. It was a private walkway. Anyway, I had a gun, but that’s another story.

Dunham: Yeah, I guess I should have asked that story first, but we can—
Okay. I got acquainted with this guy and he was trying to get into the movie business and had an excellent, beautiful voice, and he used to sing whenever we were on a date or something. Well, that went on for I don’t know how long—a couple of months. And we were sitting in the park one night and a policeman was coming down, just sauntering along. He made a movement and I didn’t see what it was. But anyway, after the policeman got by, Bob says, “I’ve got to get my gun.” He’d thrown his gun in the bushes because he didn’t want to get caught with it on him. So he got the gun and went—I never even thought about—any bad thoughts about him having a gun. I think that’s his business. Anyway, then Bob left town. He had to go—I don’t know where, whether it was home or somewhere else, and he came and he said he’d pawned the gun but he didn’t have money to get it out. So he said, “I’ll give you the pawn ticket, and if you would get it out for me I’ll tell you where to send it. I’ll send you a letter or something.” Never heard from him again, so I ended up with the gun.

Were you nervous at all about getting the gun?

No. I didn’t know how to work it. I never had a gun in my hand before except a .22 that I bought for Carl on his twenty-first birthday. It was just more or less a plaything for me. Anyway—

So you had it, this night.

I had it, and I told Eunice, “Get Rosco.” I called it Rosco. So she—

Why Rosco?

I don’t know. And so she got the gun and brought it to me, and I said—well, there’s an army post just about three blocks down the road there in Santa Monica. So I said, “We’ll just get you back down to your base.” And so I was walking along, and I unconsciously—I was kind of nervous. I was putting it on safety and clicking it off of safety all the time I was walking.

Was it loaded?

Oh, it was an old—I don’t know!

Oh, you don’t know if it was?
Nelson: I didn’t know if it was loaded.

Dunham: [laughing] Something could have happened.

Nelson: Yeah, anyway.

Dunham: So you’re pointing the gun at him to walk him back—

Nelson: We’re walking him back down to the—

Dunham: —as your prisoner, if you will.

Nelson: Yeah! [laughter]

Dunham: Because you thought he was up to no good, nosing around your place?

Nelson: Well, yeah, because he was in a very private place there. He wasn’t having reason to be there—so anyway, I turned him in there. They always have somebody at the gate, and the guy was writing down what I was telling him. He kind of turned to one side and of course he was snickering too. But anyway, then he said, “We’ll take care of him. We’ll settle this.” And it was night! It was just before we went to work at eleven o’clock. And the next day the neighbor came in and says, “Hey, come here.” We’d told them what happened. And instead of going “right foot, left foot,”—they always chanted something while they were marching, they were singing, “Pistol Packin’ Mama,” that song—and that’s what they were marching to. [laughing]

Dunham: So you were famous in their troop.

Nelson: So I guess it went all over the—there probably wasn’t maybe twenty-five guys that were stationed there, but they still had to do their marching and their practicing, and so forth.

Dunham: Did you know some of those guys?

Nelson: No. I didn’t even know the one that was by our window.

Dunham: Were you late to work that evening because of that?
Nelson: I don’t think so. I think we got everything all taken care of before time to check in.

Dunham: Were you ever late? What happened if you were?

Nelson: If we were—I don’t think they’d let us—I don’t think I was ever late, because if you’re late they wonder why, you know. And it was—so we just never—

Dunham: Was the bus a city bus? Or was it a Douglas special bus that would—?

Nelson: No, it was a city bus and we’d always be on the bus at a certain time in order to get to the plant on time.

Dunham: Did you, at your place, were you allowed to or did you ever—you or your girlfriend—could you have guests overnight or anything? Or would that have—anything like that?

Nelson: Oh, where we lived yeah, we could have guests.

Dunham: Yeah, you had total freedom.

Nelson: We could have guests if we wanted to, but we never did. A lot of times Carl would come up from Camp Pendleton with a friend for Eunice, and then we’d go to a movie or go do something. We’d go to work and they’d stay in our apartment for the night. We’d come home and wake them up and they’d go for breakfast at whatever. And then in July of ’43, my sister and Eunice’s sister came out. Eunice’s sister was only sixteen I think, so she couldn’t get a job.

Dunham: How old did you have to be?

Nelson: Well, I think eighteen.

Dunham: Okay. I’ve heard sometimes people faked it or they looked the other way, but yeah, but I think eighteen was the official rule.

Nelson: Yeah. So her sister couldn’t get a job but my sister did. And then after a couple of weeks or three, well—we sent her sister back home because she—
well, we didn’t want to leave her by herself at night while we were gone to work.

01-02:03:55
Dunham: Okay, sure, sure. Was she upset she had to go back home?

01-02:04:00
Nelson: Well, no—well, she was a little upset. She wanted to see if she could get a job, but it’s going to be—I think she wasn’t—she might have been fifteen, maybe she was sixteen, but she wasn’t—it was quite a while before she was going to be eligible.

01-02:04:20
Dunham: Did Eunice’s sister acclimate quickly? Or how did it go for her?

01-02:04:25
Nelson: Well, she was fun and we enjoyed having her, but she was quite a bit younger than either one of us, and so she—it was a relief when we got her to go back home.

01-02:04:47
Dunham: Okay. And was Eunice doing the same work as you were at Douglas?

01-02:04:53
Nelson: No, she was working in a tool shed.

01-02:04:57
Dunham: Okay, and how was her experience? Do you have a sense of it?

01-02:05:02
Nelson: She—it was good for her because she was making money and supporting herself, and that’s something that she had never been able to do.

01-02:05:15
Dunham: Right, because she’d had a challenging upbringing.

01-02:05:17
Nelson: Yes.

01-02:05:15
Dunham: But the work itself, working in the tool shed—was that similar to yours in terms of difficulty? Or easier or—?

01-02:05:25
Nelson: No, no, because what she did was people would come and borrow a tool that they had to do a certain little job for, and then when they got through they’d take the tool back to the tool shed. What she had to do was keep the tools organized so she knew where they were and what they were. That’s another thing they had in that Rosie movie was that they had tools that were not right for the job—that was kind of funny. [laughing]
Dunham: Did she have any particular challenges or anything that she shared from her job?

Nelson: No.

Dunham: Okay. When you—you mentioned dating the young man who was a singer who had had the gun—so was that while you were still seeing Carl? Or was that after he—

Nelson: It’s before I got hold of Carl.

Dunham: Before you got back in touch with Carl, okay.

Nelson: Before I ever caught up with him.

Dunham: Okay. When did you meet your eventual husband, and when did you know there was a potential—?

Nelson: Well, he was—actually, he was my, not lead man but the next level. And then later he would move to another department and be the head lead man. They’re responsible for getting the job done and keeping track of whether it’s done or not, or whether it’s done right.

Dunham: When did you first know there might be a romantic interest there?

Nelson: It didn’t take very long, I know that! [laughter] And then in July of that year Carl’s—his whole whatever you call it, department or division—

Dunham: Platoon or something.

Nelson: —or whatever it was. They were shipped overseas and they sent him to Guam. Let’s see, he was on Guam and Saipan and what—

Dunham: So he’d shipped out.

Nelson: I can’t think of the other. He’d already left. And then Jim turned on the charm.
Dunham: Did Jim know about Carl?

Nelson: Oh yeah.

Dunham: Okay, so you had—

Nelson: Yeah, because one day—how was it? Eunice and I were out with Carl and his friend, and—oh no, we had them for dinner. We were having lunch in our apartment, and Jim and his brother, his marine brother that had come home on leave, they came to see if they could take us to a movie. [laughing] We were oh my gosh, what are we going to do now! So I went to the door and I told Jim and his brother that—I said we couldn’t go out today. And I think they got a glimpse of a couple of marine hats on the couch or something like that, and they left. And Carl says, “What are you doing? Running a USO here?” He was kind of indignant. [laughing]

Dunham: How did you deal with that kind of comment, or what would you say?

Nelson: Oh well, I just understood where he was coming from and it didn’t bother me.

Dunham: Speaking of—you had a story about Eunice dating a sergeant named Herb and getting kind of serious with him and getting a big surprise, is that right?


Dunham: What happened?

Nelson: Oh, Herb was so much fun. He was so cute. And he was just like a brother. We never got romantic—rarely got romantically involved. Most of them were just—we knew they were away from home, they were facing going overseas, and we just treated them like a brother. But Herb, he was different and he really—well, he acted like he fell for Eunice and they dated every time he had a weekend off. And then one day—I don’t know how she got our address or what, we got a letter from his wife! And I can’t remember—for a long time I remembered what town she came from. It was in the States, of course, and it seems like it was Texas or Arkansas. Anyway, the sweetest letter. She heard that—I don’t know whether he’d told her or what, but she’d heard that he’d been seeing us and that she realized that Herb was very convivial and that wherever he went he made friends. But she just wanted us to know that she
was his wife and that he would be coming home to her. And I thought—I never heard—what does the word convivial mean? [laughter]

Dunham: So was that a shock to Eunice though? He apparently had not mentioned a wife.

Nelson: Well, it was a shock to find out he was married, because he never said anything about that, of course. They don’t mention that.

Dunham: Was Eunice upset with him and did she continue to see him?

Nelson: In a way she was, but she understood too. She just appreciated his attention, I guess. And then he finally shipped out, so we never saw him again either.

Dunham: So when did things progress with Mr. Nelson?

Nelson: Well, all through the fall—or from July on. And then let me think, let me get this straight—and then from July, I mean it was just constant. He’d—all the concerts and the plays—we saw Lena Horne, we saw “The Firefly” and several—every weekend a big show of some sort, somebody. And who was that man—we saw one of the real popular—

Dunham: [scanning] Is it in here?

Nelson: —a movie star or a singer or something.

Dunham: Bing Crosby?

Nelson: Anyway, and then on Christmas Eve here he comes with an engagement ring, and I thought now what’ll I do? He was a lot of fun and he was a very nice guy and I thought—Carl and I had had our ups and downs over the year and I thought well—So anyway, we decided to get married because it was the next year, ’44, was a leap year, and so we chose February 29 for our wedding. It was on a Tuesday and it was kind of weird. Anyway, so I still feel guilty that I sent Carl a Dear John letter.

Dunham: That must have been hard.
Nelson: You never know, but—and he wrote back and he was, naturally, really upset. And he says, “By the way, I have your ring and I have every letter you’ve ever sent me and I’ve got all your pictures. If you want them back, come and get ‘em. They’re down at the bottom of the latrine.” And I had to find out what a latrine was. [laughing] And I wasn’t too pleased.

Dunham: Was that the last correspondence you had with Carl?

Nelson: Yeah, until we were both probably in our—what, seventies maybe—sixties, when he came back from the war. By that time, see Jim was the lead man on the A-20, and they stopped making the A-20 and they started making the A-26, and a week later he got his greetings from Uncle Sam and he got drafted.

Dunham: Oh!

Nelson: And he was in the infantry, army infantry.

Dunham: This is after you got married on February 29—it’s later that year?

Nelson: Yeah, and on our first anniversary he was on his way overseas to the South Pacific.

Dunham: In early ’45.

Nelson: Yes. And he—yeah.

Dunham: How did you feel, and how are your feelings about war and pacifism? Have they changed? Muted? What are your—?

Nelson: I’m still a pacifist and I abhor war, because every war that there’s been, it has either been a mistake or a whole bunch of undercover things that has been just totally useless and nonproductive at all. You just lose a bunch of people’s lives and you end up worse than the way it was before.

Dunham: So were you both on a personal, individual level and a broader level upset that your husband was going away to war?
Nelson: Well, yeah! Let’s see—it was just a year. You know, I’ve got to make a phone call.

Dunham: Oh, okay, yeah, hang on. Let me—[interruption in recording] Okay, we’re back on. We have a little more time but we’re running a little late here because you have such a great memory. I wanted to ask when you started, you did this training for the Red Cross Nurse’s Aide [Corps]?

Nelson: Yeah!

Dunham: Is that right? What was that like?

Nelson: Yeah, it was a six weeks’ training, and we learned how to do—let’s see, well, like the—what’s the name of it?

Dunham: Like CPR?

Nelson: No, that’s before CPR. [laughter] Just the basics, like bathing and serving lunch and feeding people and that kind of stuff.

Dunham: And that was from nine to three every day, right? After you got off work?

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: So that must have been—that must have been hard.

Nelson: That kept me busy, yeah. But I enjoyed it so much, and I still have my nurse’s uniform.

Dunham: Okay, so then after the training you became—did you do that?

Nelson: No, I didn’t go ahead. I should have. I should have gone ahead and been a nurse, because I would have liked to have done that, but other things came up. Anyway, I—

Dunham: But you did do some of that bathing and work while you were doing the on-the-job training, I guess—is that right?
Nelson: So then I’d volunteer, maybe three hours a couple of times a week, either at Santa Monica Hospital or St. John’s Hospital, which was both there in Santa Monica.

Dunham: Oh okay, so you did do that as a volunteer.

Nelson: Yes.

Dunham: You describe—

Nelson: After I completed the course, then I did that for the rest of the time I was there.

Dunham: And I was—this first story of the first time you gave a bath, was that—would you mind sharing that?

Nelson: [laughing] Yes, I still think of that! We had the neatest instructor. She had a sense of humor and she said that—one of the directions she gave is that here you are, nineteen years old, and you’re giving this big, husky man a bath. Back then they did it in the bed. A bed bath. They didn’t take you to the shower, they just—you had to wash them in the bed—so you let them wash their face and then you wash their arms and underarms and the back, and then you wash their feet and then you wash their legs, and you hand them the washcloth and get busy while they wash the bottom parts. And our teacher said—“And for pity’s sake—don’t tickle when you wash his legs!” She said, “You’ve got to scrub!” and then it won’t affect him that much. I think of that even today, when I’m giving somebody a bath if I have to.

Dunham: Yeah, and the first time you did it with a man were you nervous then?

Nelson: Oh, he was a great big—I don’t know what was wrong with him, but he couldn’t get out of bed. It must have been a broken—not a broken bone. I don’t know what it was.

Dunham: And so then did you work at Douglas all through the war, the rest of the war?

Nelson: Yes. But after Jim was drafted and went to the South Pacific, then I was working on the DC-6. I had—I was there oh, maybe—I was living with my mother-in-law, and after Jim was gone maybe six months, maybe, I went back to Indiana and moved—I took all my stuff and went back to Indiana.
Dunham: Oh okay, before the end of the war? Or was that—

Nelson: Yeah—well, that would have been January of 1945.

Dunham: Let’s see, or right around—did you quit your job? Or did the job end first?


Dunham: Were you in Southern California for V-E and V-J Day? Do you remember the end of the war?

Nelson: No, I was in Indiana for that.

Dunham: So what made you move back to Indiana?

Nelson: Well, because Jim was gone, and me and my mother-in-law were—we tolerated each other. But she felt—and she even verbalized it several times in different ways—that I took her son away from her. [laughing]

Dunham: Oh, and he was an only child you said?

Nelson: No, Carl was an only child.

Dunham: Oh, Carl was—that’s right. Yeah.

Nelson: But he had two brothers. One of them was in a B-24 over Europe that crashed, and so she had already lost one son, so I couldn’t blame her for that. Anyway, I went back to Indiana and I was there a couple weeks then looked for a job.

Dunham: And it must have also—it must have also been a difficult adjustment having lived with Eunice for so long. And so was that just the expected thing, once you got married, that you had to live with your—was it the three of you?

Nelson: Well, yeah.

Dunham: You, your husband, and her for a while and then he went off—he got drafted?
Nelson: Yeah. And then—

Dunham: Was Eunice still at Douglas?

Nelson: No, where was she? She stayed in California about two years after I left to go back to Indiana.

Dunham: All right, so you went back to Indiana.

Nelson: And then I was only there about two weeks and I decided I’d get a job somewhere, and there was an ad in the paper for—what did they call it?

Dunham: Maybe it’s in here. [turning pages]

Nelson: Anyway, the railroad that my dad had worked on, the Erie Railroad, wanted—oh, a train porter! And I thought well, if I have to carry luggage I guess I could. So I got the job, but what it was—I liked to call it a stewardess job, but it was a janitor. I took care of the restrooms and I’d sweep the floor and take people warm baby’s bottles or whatever they needed. And I worked on the train and I would pick up the train at Huntington and go to Lima, Ohio and I’d get on at eight o’clock P.M. and get there at twelve. And at four o’clock A.M. I’d get on the west-bound train and come back to Huntington and get back at seven A.M.

Dunham: Now, was the pay much less than what you’d been getting at Douglas?

Nelson: No, it was more! It was real good pay

Dunham: And were the trains—were they integrated? Do you know?

Nelson: They were stuffed! They were so crowded.

Dunham: Okay, but in terms of race, did you have blacks on the trains and did they ride together, if so?

Nelson: Well, it was all blacks in the diner, but not Erie employees.

Dunham: So they were segregated maybe then.
Nelson: Yeah, not too much in the passenger line, that I remember. But then I had four hours in Lima, before I would come back to Huntington in the morning. So I got tired of sitting in the station a couple of nights, so I went down the street and got a job in a restaurant. [laughing]

Dunham: Instead, or in addition? Just those few hours? Okay.

Nelson: I’d just get on the train at eight, get to Lima at twelve, go to work at the restaurant and get off there ten minutes before the train west came in, and then worked the train on the way back. But the trains were so crowded, I mean they were—servicemen and people, families—it was just amazing.

Dunham: Is this after the end of the war? Or when?

Nelson: People—well, that would have been in September 1946 when Jim came home.

Dunham: Do you remember where you were on V-E or V-J Day at the end—?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: Where were you then?

Nelson: Well, we went to town. We were—I was back on the farm where I was born, and then we went to town when we heard about V-J Day, and it was—cars up and down the street and people yelling and riding on the hoods and everybody celebrating that it was over with.

Dunham: It was a big celebration. Did you or your family have any reservations about or thoughts about the atomic bomb droppings, or given your pacifist leanings?

Nelson: Well, I’m sure we did, but we didn’t discuss it very much. It had already been done. It was already finished.

Dunham: So you—how long did you work on the trains?

Nelson: I worked on the train until Jim came back in—he didn’t have enough points at the end of the war, so he had to stay in the Philippines another year.
Okay, because he joined so late.

So he didn’t come back until 1946 in the late fall. I think it was October.

Did you miss California when you came back to Indiana?

No. No. I mean—I loved that train job. That was so much fun.

So what was fun about it? You say so crowded, that doesn’t—

It was the people, the people. And the servicemen coming back, and of course you get all kinds of attention from them and offers of all kinds. And I always wore my wedding ring.

So you’re wearing your wedding ring, but what kind of offers are you getting?

[laughing] All kinds!

Short term, long term?

Yeah. One guy’s name was Lowell James, and he wanted to marry me and we’d have five kids—Jessie James, Frank James—he was naming all the famous people with James for a last name, and he was such a kick. [laughter] I just still remember him. But—and so many of them were coming back with problems and they want to talk and talk and talk and talk. And of course I was ready to listen if I had my work done. I had to—but it was just a really fun job because of the people.

And so you kept doing that until Jim came back?

Yes. He came back in—no, it wasn’t June. It was July 4 when he came back, and he sent me a telegram I think, because we didn’t have a phone there at the farm. He sent me a telegram and he said he’d be into LA on this date, and so the day that he was going to be there I worked on the train, went down to Lima, and when I came back just stayed on the train and went on to Chicago and I went out to LA. So I worked the train right up until he came back. And I have to remember that it was the Fourth of July and we went down to the beach to hear the fireworks—the boom, the boom, the boom—he had just come, he was on Okinawa. He was a replacement on April 6, whenever it was.
April, in spring he was—okay.

And he was on Okinawa for about six weeks until they had had finished up. And then they sent him to Mindoro and Minda[na]o in the Philippines.

So hearing those fireworks were traumatic for him, the explosion.

I didn’t realize it, but about two or three of them went off and he was just nervous as a cat, and he said, “I can’t stand this. Let’s go home.” So we went home.

Did he ever talk much about his war experience?

Always. He talked all the time and he was very positive. He didn’t get into the grimy part, except rarely. But mostly it was the camaraderie and the different guys that he’d met and where they came from.

From what you said earlier it sounds like you retained your pacifism perspective throughout your life.

Yes.

But did you—did you return to the Quaker faith? Or what religion, if any, did you continue with?

Well, let’s see—after he came home we were in LA for a couple of years yet, and then his mother—his dad died while he was over in Okinawa. His mother remarried and moved to Oregon, and so she was writing letters about how gorgeous everything was, and we came up to visit and decided to move up here, and so that’s how we got to Oregon.

Was he able to use the GI Bill to buy property?

I don’t think he ever used the GI Bill. We bought a place down in Douglas County—where did we get the money for that? Oh! He had been buying war bonds all the time and he had enough that we could buy over three hundred acres down in Douglas County, with a little mill shack on it, four rooms, no bath.
Dunham: And you’ve been here in this lovely home for fifty-seven, fifty-three?

Nelson: Yeah, but we were there, down at that place, for seven years—but the house burned. It was a house fire, and we got the insurance from the house fire and bought this place.

Dunham: Okay. Well, I know we need to wrap up, so I don’t want to rush you but I know you have a date. I just wanted to ask how you feel your wartime work, the opportunity to do so-called men’s work during that time, influenced your life and/or what you would like future generations to know about that time and your efforts.

Nelson: Well, I feel really proud of the fact that we opened the door, and instead of being a nurse or a teacher you can be a welder, a burner, whatever—a pilot, even a pilot! I know that—I have a friend who was a WASP and she flew planes back and forth between the manufacturer and the bases. You can be anything you want to! It’s becoming more and more evident as time goes on, and I didn’t really realize that until I got into the Rosies.

Dunham: Yeah, and you’ve become quite active. You’re president of the Oregon chapter of the American—

Nelson: I’m a state—what am I? I’m a state—I’m supposed to be going around starting new chapters. Yeah.

Dunham: For the American Rosie the Riveter Association?

Nelson: Yeah.

Dunham: And so what does it mean to have your and other Rosies’ legacy honored and to participate in that now?

Nelson: Well, it’s kind of baffling really. [Dunham laughs] Because for seventy—no, how long—sixty years we didn’t think about that time in our lives! We got busy, we married. In fact, Jim got home in July of ’46. In January of ’47 I had a baby girl. Thank goodness she only weighed two pounds, so I can prove she was a six-month baby. [laughing] But anyway—

Dunham: And she did okay? She was born prematurely but—
Nelson: Yes! Yeah, she’s sixty-nine, the biggest ray of sunshine you ever saw. She’s just a sweet doll. Anyway, and we didn’t think about that era in our lives. We were busy doing all these other things, and it just—since the Rosies came in, when I first heard of it, I joined in 2002. When I first heard of it I was there at the next meeting because I was interested. But—

Dunham: And you, what did it—what was your impression of the national park in Richmond that you visited?

Nelson: Oh, I was absolutely—what—bewildered really! [laughter] Because it’s so big and there’s so much there. We had such a good time when we were there. Everybody was so good to us and make you think—do they need me?

Dunham: Well, there’s so much more I’d like to ask you about your life, but I know we need to get going. So just in closing, is there anything else I didn’t ask you about today that you would like to share with us?

Nelson: Oh geez! [laughing] Well, other than the fact that I really—and it has been impressed on me—that when we worked in the war and we did the things that we did, that men usually do, women never do, that we opened the door and we made it possible for other women/girls/whatever to be whatever they want to do, and to follow whatever pursuit they want to follow.

Dunham: Yeah, well said. Thank you, Opal. It has been a privilege and an honor to meet you and help share your story today, so thank you. Thank you very much.

Nelson: Okay. [laughing]

Dunham: We’ll close there.

[End of Interview]