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**Avis Blanchette**

**Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project**

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,  
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by  
David Dunham  
in 2004

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**TRANSCRIPT**

[Begin Audio File]

1-00:00:02

**Dunham:**

Okay, I'm David Dunham here with Avis Blanchette on February 13, 2004, to do an oral history interview with Avis. So, let's start with some easy questions. Can you just tell us when and where you were born?

1-00:00:16

**Blanchette:**

I was born in Outlook, Saskatchewan, Canada, a little town hardly on the map, but it's between Regina and Moosejaw.

1-00:00:30

**Dunham:**

And who was in your immediate family?

1-00:00:36

**Blanchette:**

My mother, my father, my sister, my brother Tom. We were all born there.

1-00:00:50

**Dunham:**

Where did you fall in your siblings?

1-00:00:53

**Blanchette:**

Pardon?

1-00:00:54

**Dunham:**

Were you the youngest?

1-00:00:56

**Blanchette:**

No, I was the—my sister was twenty-two months older than I was. So it was first my sister, myself, my brother Tom who was two years younger than I was—two, two, two—and my little brother Gordon was born in the United States.

1-00:01:20

**Dunham:**

Okay. And where was that?

1-00:01:22

**Blanchette:**

In—

[long pause]

1-00:01:30

**Dunham:**

Or if you don't remember, that's okay—

1-00:01:32

**Blanchette:**

Yes, I do, I do—

1-00:01:32

**Dunham:**

—but where did you first move, when you moved to the United States?

1-00:01:35

**Blanchette:**

To Minneapolis.

1-00:01:37

**Dunham:**

And what brought you to Minneapolis, with your family?

1-00:01:39

**Blanchette:**

My father was an inventor—

1-00:01:43

**Dunham:**

Oh, wow.

1-00:01:44

**Blanchette:**

—and he sold one of his patents to pay for the move to Minneapolis.

1-00:01:53

**Dunham:**

What was the patent, do you remember?

1-00:01:55

**Blanchette:**

It was—let's see, which one was it? He had so many inventions that I'm trying to think which one it was. I think it was the ironing board that came out of the wall.

1-00:02:07

**Dunham:**

The ironing board—oh, okay. So he invented that?

1-00:02:11

**Blanchette:**

Yes.

1-00:02:11

**Dunham:**

Wow. What were some other inventions of his? Were there any particularly memorable ones? We don't have to go through them all, but—

1-00:02:18

**Blanchette:**

He was very interested in inventing things that were practical. A towel holder, the first towel holder that you just put the towel over. That was the first one of them. And he invented a thing to put your car into the curb, and shift a gear, and it would pick the car up and bring it back into place. That didn't pan out, but we saw it on a science movie one time.

1-00:02:55

**Dunham:**

Wait, how did it work? Your car would actually go sideways, or—

1-00:02:58

**Blanchette:**

No. You'd either back it in, shift it, and bring the front to the curb, or you could do it the other way, but it would bring the car parallel. He watched people trying to park cars, and oh, it was so much—so that was one of his inventions.

1-00:03:27

**Dunham:**

And what were your earliest memories of your father?

1-00:03:31

**Blanchette:**

Let's see. Oh, probably, three years old, or something like that, probably.

1-00:03:44

**Dunham:**

What do you remember about him?

1-00:03:46

**Blanchette:**

Up in Canada, he would take my sister and me walking down the street, and people would say, "And what is your name?" And my sister would say, "[Osa?] Maxine Hall, Papa's lover girl." And I would say, "Avis Adelle Hall, Papa's sweetheart." And we'd always say that, and finally he had to tell us that wasn't part of our names [laughter].

1-00:04:16

**Dunham:**

And how about your mother? What do you remember most about her from your childhood?

1-00:04:23

**Blanchette:**

Only that she was a very sweet, loving, generous person. She was always kind to us. She was good. She was a good person. She loved to bake and cook, and take all us to Minnehaha Falls to picnics in a little red wagon, full of goodies.

1-00:04:59

**Dunham:**

Did she teach you to make the lemon pies?

1-00:05:02

**Blanchette:**  
[laughs] No.

1-00:05:03

**Dunham:**  
No, you learned that later. You were going to say something else?

1-00:05:08

**Blanchette:**  
She enjoyed watching people. So she would put us in the park in our little swings and things, and then she'd just sit there and just loved to watch people.

1-00:05:26

**Dunham:**  
Did she collaborate with your father at all on inventing, or—

1-00:05:31

**Blanchette:**  
No, no.

1-00:05:33

**Dunham:**  
So was he pretty involved in the raising of the children, with your mom?

1-00:05:38

**Blanchette:**  
Oh, yes. He was indeed, because she died very young.

1-00:05:43

**Dunham:**  
I'm sorry.

1-00:05:45

**Blanchette:**  
She was only forty-two when she died.

1-00:05:48

**Dunham:**  
How old were you?

1-00:05:50

**Blanchette:**  
Well, we were—okay, I can tell you. My sister Nickie was fourteen, and I was twelve, and Tom was ten, and Gordon was four. And so, he raised us all. He was a very good man.

1-00:06:18

**Dunham:**  
Did he work independently then, as an inventor? Was that his primary source of income?



1-00:06:21

**Blanchette:**

No, he was a barber. Instead of looking at racing sheets and things like other barbers did, he would sit there and observe people going by, and see how he could [laughs] improve things.

1-00:06:38

**Dunham:**

Mmm. And when did he first go—or when did the family—or when did you first come to California? What brought you here?

1-00:06:46

**Blanchette:**

Oh. It was the wartime. 1943, I think it was that my husband and I were in Valley City, North Dakota, running a little independent variety store, and he was going to be drafted into the army. The fellow who owned the store was head of the draft board, so he said, “I’d like to keep you here to run my store,” but he said that would be not possible. So then Ward said, “Okay, do you want to stay here and run the store for Mr. Henry, or do you want to go out to San Francisco where your family is?” And I said, “Well, I’d like to go to San Francisco.” So that’s what brought me out here.

1-00:07:45

**Dunham:**

And what happened then? What were your first memories of California? Do you remember the first day you came out?

1-00:07:54

**Blanchette:**

We landed in Berkeley, at my dad’s house on Milvia Street in Berkeley, and then Ward moved me to San Francisco and got an apartment for me and set me all up before he went to war.

1-00:08:13

**Dunham:**

Where was that?

1-00:08:15

**Blanchette:**

1447 Washington Street in San Francisco. [laughter]

1-00:08:22

**Dunham:**

And so how long was your husband out here before he had to leave?

1-00:08:28

**Blanchette:**

Just about six months, I think.

1-00:08:34

**Dunham:**

Let’s back up a little bit. How did you meet your husband?

1-00:08:41

**Blanchette:**

That's very interesting. I worked in a photograph studio, 614 Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis. When Ward graduated from high school in Marshall, Minnesota, he had had to work his way through by working, so he couldn't afford class pictures, and he couldn't afford the ring, and all the other things that went with graduating. So when he came to Minneapolis, he decided he was going to have a picture taken to send to his grandmother. So he came up to the studio where I was working. That was in August, 19—let's see, that would be 1941, in August. And we fell madly in love.

1-00:09:45

**Dunham:**

How old were you then?

1-00:09:47

**Blanchette:**

Seventeen. On New Year's Eve we went out on a date and he asked me to marry him. He said, "I can't afford to buy a license right now, but will you wait for me?" And I said, "Yes. I'll wait for you." So it was two and a half years before we could get a license and get married. 1934 we were married, by the justice of the peace in Robbinsdale, Minnesota. [laughs]

1-00:10:25

**Dunham:**

So, '34. What year did you meet?

1-00:10:30

**Blanchette:**

1931. We got married in 1934.

1-00:10:39

**Dunham:**

And what did you do after you got married? Where were you living, and working?

1-00:10:46

**Blanchette:**

He was ushering in a theater on Hennepin Avenue. So after we got married, we had an apartment on La Salle Avenue in Minneapolis. Then, he decided to go to work at the Majestic Hotel as a bellhop, and he did that. Then he decided that there was no future. He had a scholarship to Northwestern University to go study to be a lawyer, but he couldn't use it because he couldn't afford it. He decided that this was no future. So he went to work for the Woolworth Company, and started in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The Woolworth Company made you work twelve, fourteen hours a day at very low pay.

1-00:12:21

**Dunham:**

What was he doing with them?

1-00:12:23

**Blanchette:**

Well, he started in the basement, in the stockroom. Then each year they'd send him to another town and give a dollar raise. So, he started at \$16 and then he got to Jamestown, North Dakota, he was making \$17, and then the next town, \$18. That's the way it went.

1-00:12:48

**Dunham:**

Did you follow him?

1-00:12:49

**Blanchette:**

I did. And of course, we couldn't live on that, so I got jobs working for the S&L Company, the [S.S.] Kresge Company, wherever I could get a job. So between the two of us, we struggled along.

1-00:13:07

**Dunham:**

What kind of places did you—did you have to find different places to live with each job that they—?

1-00:13:12

**Blanchette:**

Oh yes, oh yes. They paid his transportation by bus, but I had to get there the best way I could. Because they really didn't like the idea of their beginners to be married in the first place, you know. And so, that's how we did for—

1-00:13:39

**Dunham:**

How did you get to your jobs? Did you take the bus as well?

1-00:13:43

**Blanchette:**

Oh, sure. But I had to pay my own way. But that's all right.

1-00:13:50

**Dunham:**

I guess you didn't get to see much of each other, given his long hours.

1-00:13:56

**Blanchette:**

Well, that's true. For many, many, many years, the Woolworth Company took their inventory on New Year's Eve, and we never got to go out on New Year's Eve. So finally when we got out of that, we celebrated New Year's Eve. [laughs]

1-00:14:15

**Dunham:**

Yeah, the anniversary of your engagement. Wow, so how long did he continue with Woolworth?

1-00:14:24

**Blanchette:**

He continued because they dangled a carrot in front of your nose. He was seven or eight years with them, you know, and when he got to where he was supposed to have a store to manage, there were no openings. They sent him to Milwaukee, Minnesota, to the biggest store that Woolworth had, and it was the only store in the whole chain that was owned by the manager. Ward ended up in the basement, carrying flats of plants around. So, [laughs] he came home one night, and he said, "That's it." He just quit. He didn't even show up for work Monday morning.

1-00:15:30

**Dunham:**

What did you do then?

1-00:15:34

**Blanchette:**

It so happened that my sister and her husband and my brother Tom had driven to Milwaukee to visit us. They said, "Why don't you just—we'll all pile in the car and we'll go to California." Well, Ward said, "Take us as far as Minneapolis," and he said, "You can go on from there." So we landed back in Minneapolis and stayed with an aunt of his in Minneapolis for two or three weeks, I guess it was. In the meantime, he had met this friend who ran Kresge stores in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and they had kept in touch with each other. So, he had transferred from Kresge to Butler Brothers, which was an independent variety chain back there, called the Ben Franklin stores. He said, "Ward, how would you like to go to Valley City, North Dakota, and run this Ben Franklin store?" So that's what we did.

1-00:17:20

**Dunham:**

How long were you there?

1-00:17:22

**Blanchette:**

Until we had to go to war.

1-00:17:23

**Dunham:**

And how did—. Was he drafted?

1-00:17:26

**Blanchette:**

Yes. The owner of the store was head of the draft board. [laughs] And that's when he said, "Ward, I can't show partiality. I'd like to have you stay here and run my store." So he asked me if I would run the store, and Ward said, "Well, do you want to stay here and run the store, or do you want to go to California?" So, off we came to California. That was it.

1-00:18:01

**Dunham:**

So we're back to California.

1-00:18:02

**Blanchette:**

Now back to California.

1-00:18:04

**Dunham:**

So you're in an apartment in San Francisco on Washington Street, and what were you doing? Did you look for work?

1-00:18:13

**Blanchette:**

I did. But, it was easy for me to get a job. I got several jobs. I was a secretary; I was this; I even got a job as a clerk in a liquor store. Everything I did, I just—oh, I just missed him so much. My brother-in-law was working in Kaiser Shipyard Number 3, and my brother-in-law said, “Why don't you come over where the action is? Things are going on over there. Why don't you come over there?” He said, “I'll get you a job.” So that's what I did.

1-00:18:55

**Dunham:**

Wow, and what job did you get?

1-00:18:57

**Blanchette:**

Well, he knew a Mrs. Lieutenant [Fredericka?] Totten, who was the head of all the girls in the plant protection department. It was called the plant protection in those days. So, my brother-in-law got me a job with her. And, therein lies the tale. [laughing]

1-00:19:31

**Dunham:**

Well, that's what we're here for, so, please tell. Please do tell.

1-00:19:41

**Blanchette:**

So, we had to put on peacoats and hats, and dress like that, and then we had to have a star, and we had to go patrolling the yard—the ships—and make sure that people were actually working and not fiddling around, you know. One day, I came into the office with a handful of knives, and she said, “Where did you get those knives?” “I was patrolling down in the double bottoms, and these guys were making knives instead of working on what they were supposed to be doing. So I took them away from them.” She said, “You what? They could have chopped you up in little pieces [laughing] and thrown you in the bay!” Oh, she was horrified. So she took me off patrolling. “That's the end of that,” she said. “You're going to get up here, and I'm going to keep my eye on you.” So she brought me into the office, and I was so bored, because she had me sticking little pins—red pins for fires, other colored pins for going to the hospital or something, you know? Ah. So, that's where I was, stuck in there.

And then we started having dignitaries come from Russia to see how we were building these huge ships. They were—some people called them victory ships, maybe in other shipyards, but our ships were C-4's, huge transport ships, for transporting soldiers. One day, we decided that we were going to take one of these big C-4's out for what they call the shakedown cruise, to see that everything was properly riveted together, I guess. We started out at six o'clock in the morning, and all the dignitaries—Clay Bedford, all the big shots, and their wives—came on board at six o'clock in the morning. There was a big fancy buffet set up, you know. And, “Oh, here we go.” We got outside the Golden Gate, and a huge storm, and this big C-4 without any

ballast went like a cork. All these fancy ladies in their orchids and furs and flowers and stuff, and the food and everything, you know. Just simply a mess. They had to put up ropes, you know, so that we could pull ourselves. Well, for some reason or other, I didn't get seasick. Miracle of miracles. So I was able to help a lot of them. But that was some day.

1-00:23:50

**Dunham:**

Yeah, there's a letter in the documents you shared with us thanking you for your help.

1-00:23:55

**Blanchette:**

Yeah—

1-00:23:56

**Dunham:**

And that was actually—was it after the war? Did that happen—was it still during the war years, that trip?

1-00:24:01

**Blanchette:**

Oh, it was during the war years. Oh, sure.

1-00:24:06

**Dunham:**

Okay, okay. Maybe the letter of recognition was dated, I think, after. It was in '46, I think.

1-00:24:11

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yeah, yeah.

1-00:24:12

**Dunham:**

So they must have sent the recognition afterwards. Were people injured on that trip?

1-00:24:19

**Blanchette:**

I think mostly—not seriously, but, you know, falling around.

1-00:24:29

**Dunham:**

Wow, that was quite an experience. Well, how long were you on patrol? You were taken off—well, first, let's back up to that incident with the knives. Your supervisor was so concerned. Did you have any trouble apprehending the knives from the guys who were making them?

1-00:24:48

**Blanchette:**

No, no. They knew that they shouldn't be—

1-00:24:50

**Dunham:**

Were they upset about being caught making the knives, or—?

1-00:24:53

**Blanchette:**

I don't think so, I think they just said, "Oh, well. [laughing] So, we got caught."

1-00:25:00

**Dunham:**

When something like that happened, did you have to write a report as well?

1-00:25:03

**Blanchette:**

Oh, I'm sure I did. Yes, we did have to write reports.

1-00:25:08

**Dunham:**

How long were you on patrol?

1-00:25:10

**Blanchette:**

Well—

[interruption to deal with a pet]

1-00:25:33

**Dunham:**

So you were on patrol? I'm curious about what other kinds of things you might have observed during that time, too.

1-00:25:40

**Blanchette:**

Well, all kinds of things. And I'd drive the ambulance to the field hospital. They had a field hospital down on Cutting Boulevard. I think it's still there.

1-00:25:55

**Dunham:**

What kinds of injuries—

1-00:25:58

**Blanchette:**

Oh, mostly, what they called, "We got trash in our eyes." You know, from welding or something, and maybe their glasses slipped or something. And then there were some drunks. We had to drive—I was driving the drunks to the jail. [laughs]

1-00:26:25

**Dunham:**

The employees, some of the employees were drunk at work?

1-00:26:28

**Blanchette:**

Yeah.

1-00:26:29

**Dunham:**

So how were they dealt with?

1-00:26:32

**Blanchette:**

Well, sometimes—I don't know, maybe they were dismissed, but anyway, we would just haul them off to the jail. The jail is still down there. A lawyer occupies it now.

1-00:26:45

**Dunham:**

Oh, okay. Wow. Were there ever fights, that you—? What kind of fights took place?

1-00:26:55

**Blanchette:**

Actually, I don't recall many, actually, fights.

1-00:27:03

**Dunham:**

What about—did you carry a weapon, when you were on patrol?

1-00:27:11

**Blanchette:**

Oh, no.

1-00:27:14

**Dunham:**

Did any of the security?

1-00:27:16

**Blanchette:**

We had to—did I tell you that we had to join the Coast Guard Reserve? [laughs]

1-00:27:21

**Dunham:**

Yeah, I saw that in the file. Yeah, I wanted to ask you and clarify exactly what your job title was. And so, what's the story behind that?

1-00:27:30

**Blanchette:**

Well, in order to work in the shipyard in the capacity of plant protection, you had to be cleared by the—was it the Coast Guard?

1-00:27:45

**Dunham:**

The Coast Guard Reserve.

1-00:27:49

**Blanchette:**

Yeah, so you had to belong to the Coast Guard Reserve, and they would clear your name to make sure you're not a person that would do damage, you know. Then I think I told you, in order to work in the shipyard, you had to belong to a union. And the only union that would take us was a



hod carriers union. So we belonged to the Hod Carriers' Union [International Hod Carriers', Building and Common Laborers' Union of America].

1-00:28:23

**Dunham:**

What is that, hod carriers?

1-00:28:24

**Blanchette:**

That's where they—cement, you know, plaster.

1-00:28:32

**Dunham:**

So, why wouldn't the other unions take you?

1-00:28:34

**Blanchette:**

Well, I'm not sure.

1-00:28:36

**Dunham:**

Was it that they wouldn't take any women?

1-00:28:38

**Blanchette:**

I'm not sure, I'm just not sure about that. All I know is that we ended up belonging to the Hod Carriers' Union. [laughing]

1-00:28:47

**Dunham:**

The Hod Carriers' Union. Was there—did you go to meetings, or—?

1-00:28:53

**Blanchette:**

We were supposed to do all that stuff, but of course, we never did.

1-00:28:56

**Dunham:**

Yeah. Well, so, among your—. So, what was your title? Security?

1-00:29:02

**Blanchette:**

Yes, it was, you know—. They called us Officer Blanchette. All, everybody was last names.

1-00:29:15

**Dunham:**

And who else was among your group? Were there many other women?

1-00:29:21

**Blanchette:**

Oh yes. There was a Sergeant [Brennan?], so I guess they weren't all women.

1-00:29:38

**Dunham:**

Was there any issue around, you know, being accepted as female security?

1-00:29:47

**Blanchette:**

No, because there was such a shortage of men. That's why women were doing "men's" jobs, and they were liberated forever [laughing].

1-00:30:06

**Dunham:**

Yeah. Well, was it forever, or how did it go? It was a temporary contract, is how it was worded, for during war time, and then how did it go at the end of the war?

1-00:30:21

**Blanchette:**

As far as what?

1-00:30:23

**Dunham:**

Well, how long did you keep your job?

1-00:30:26

**Blanchette:**

Oh. Well, I kept my job long after the shipyard closed. The reason being that Lieutenant Totten, this head woman, wanted to keep me on a level keel until my husband came back from the war. [laughing] She had become fond of me for some reason or other. She lived in Point Richmond. She had a nice home on the beach, and that's how we got acquainted with Point Richmond. This house, during the war years, was occupied by—round the clock, people would take shifts on the beds because there was a shortage of housing.

1-00:31:27

**Dunham:**

Those were rented out, then? Do you have any idea how many people stayed here, at any one time?

1-00:31:39

**Blanchette:**

No, I don't. But I do know that they built a lot of temporary housing, down below.

1-00:31:47

**Dunham:**

Now, did you stay in San Francisco, all through that time?

1-00:31:52

**Blanchette:**

No, what happened was I was—first of all, I was on the day shift. Seven a.m. I had to be there. That didn't work. So I got shifted to the afternoon shift, three o'clock to eleven o'clock. So, here I had this apartment and after eleven, you know, we're not tired, so we start partying around, you know, afterwards with different people that we worked with. And I decided, this isn't good. Here

my husband is over there fighting a war, and I'm partying around here, having a ball. So, I moved to the East Bay, and moved in with my sister and her husband and family, in El Cerrito.

1-00:32:51

**Dunham:**

How long after was that?

1-00:32:55

**Blanchette:**

Let's see. I'm trying to think. I had that apartment for quite a while.

1-00:33:04

**Dunham:**

So you were enjoying life for a little while.

1-00:33:08

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yes.

**Dunham:**

So were you doing that over here in Richmond?

1-00:33:12

**Blanchette:**

No, in the city, back in the city.

1-00:33:14

**Dunham:**

So how did you get to and from?

1-00:33:17

**Blanchette:**

On the ferry.

1-00:33:18

**Dunham:**

How was that?

1-00:33:21

**Blanchette:**

Great. Wonderful.

1-00:33:22

**Dunham:**

How long a trip was that?

1-00:33:23

**Blanchette:**

Oh, it took quite a while. And then sometimes we'd drive. Somebody would have—you know, drive.

1-00:33:34

**Dunham:**

Did a lot of people working at the shipyards live in San Francisco?

1-00:33:38

**Blanchette:**

I think so.

1-00:33:41

**Dunham:**

Because the people you were partying with, were they mainly from the shipyards, or was it other friends in San Francisco?

1-00:33:47

**Blanchette:**

No, no, just people from the shipyard.

1-00:33:50

**Dunham:**

From the shipyards who went to San Francisco. So what were your haunts there, and what did you do?

1-00:33:57

**Blanchette:**

Oh, mostly drink and smoke cigarettes, I guess, at that time.

1-00:34:04

**Dunham:**

Do remember your favorite bars or locations? Was it in North Beach area, or—?

1-00:34:13

**Blanchette:**

Yes, in the North Beach area.

1-00:34:17

**Dunham:**

What was kind of the dating tendencies at the time? Was there a lot of romance, and—or maybe romance isn't the word for it—

1-00:34:35

**Blanchette:**

I think what was happening was they had these clubs for the servicemen going through—what did they call them? There was a name for that, do you remember?

1-00:34:48

**Dunham:**

The SRO? No, the Officer's Club? No.

1-00:34:53

**Blanchette:**

No. Anyway, they had those, you know. And so, that's some of the things we'd do. We'd go and dance with these soldiers that were either shipping out, or shipping in, or whatever.

1-00:35:28

**Dunham:**

And, would you stay out 'til morning, or—?

1-00:35:32

**Blanchette:**

Well—

1-00:35:32

**Dunham:**

Did you ever have any trouble making it back to work at three o'clock the next day?

1-00:35:35

**Blanchette:**

Oh, no. [laughs] That was okay, but the seven o'clock in the morning—. And then—did I tell you that I moved to El Cerrito and moved in with my sister?

1-00:35:52

**Dunham:**

You mentioned that, yes.

1-00:35:54

**Blanchette:**

Well, at that time, the shipyard was offering classes at the University of California at Wheeler Auditorium, I think it was. So, I thought, "Well, this is something I'll do." So, I took a course in business administration. After I moved over to El Cerrito that's what I did, I went to this—night classes. I was working in the daytime, and—

1-00:36:36

**Dunham:**

So no more partying?

1-00:36:37

**Blanchette:**

No more partying.

1-00:36:38

**Dunham:**

Went cold turkey?

1-00:36:39

**Blanchette:**

Cold turkey.

1-00:36:41

**Dunham:**

Was that hard? Was that a hard transition?

1-00:36:42

**Blanchette:**

No. During this time, I was a heavy cigarette smoker from the time I was fourteen until I was twenty-nine. And during this time, I had a—what do you call this throat, where you—terrible throat thing?

1-00:37:15

**Dunham:**

Well, you wouldn't get emphysema, that early, but—

1-00:37:19

**Blanchette:**

No, no, no—anyway, I got this, and it lasted for about a month, and I couldn't smoke during that time because it was just too painful. And so, my sister said, "Avis, you haven't had a cigarette for a month. Why don't see how long you can go before you take your first one?" If she'd said anything else, I would have gone right back to smoking. That was a challenge. I never took my first one.

1-00:37:51

**Dunham:**

Wow. Congratulations. So, did that coincide with the time when you moved in with her, and kind of stopped the all-night affairs in San Francisco, and all?

1-00:38:07

**Blanchette:**

I suppose.

1-00:38:10

**Dunham:**

I was just curious if it was all kind of a—

1-00:38:13

**Blanchette:**

And then there's Sergeant [Ben?], one of the men from the shipyards, attended these classes too, you know, at Cal—business administration classes.

1-00:38:26

**Dunham:**

So, were those free, if you were at the shipyards?

1-00:38:28

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yeah.

1-00:38:29

**Dunham:**

Did a lot of people take advantage of those?

1-00:38:31

**Blanchette:**

Yes, they did.

1-00:38:32

**Dunham:**

Did you take—what other kinds of things did people take, do you know? Or that’s okay, but so, did you take multiple classes?

1-00:38:42

**Blanchette:**

No, just that one.

1-00:38:44

**Dunham:**

Was it a significant experience for you?

1-00:38:48

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yes it was. I thought, “Well, when Ward comes back from the service and we go into business, maybe I can be of help by studying the levels of business.”

1-00:39:07

**Dunham:**

Well, back at the shipyards, so—you worked the day shift and the swing shift some, was there much difference between those shifts in terms of your job responsibilities and what you encountered? Did you ever work graveyard as well, or—?

1-00:39:25

**Blanchette:**

No. I never worked graveyard.

1-00:39:29

**Dunham:**

What other kinds of things did you encounter when you were on patrol? Was there much truancy, of people just not showing up? Did you have to deal with that at all?

1-00:39:46

**Blanchette:**

Well, one of the things that was troublesome was they were supposed to show their badge if you happened to be in the window when they came in the gate. They were always supposed to show their badge. And people did. But some of the big shots wouldn’t show their badge, and it was troublesome because they’d say, “Well, you know who I am.” They were kind of snotty about it, you know.

So then after she brought me into the office, of course, and then we had these dignitaries come visiting from Russia to see how we did our ships. That was interesting.

1-00:40:49

**Dunham:**

Did you ever have any run-ins, I was going to say, with those snooty folks who didn’t want to show their badges?

1-00:40:58

**Blanchette:**

Well, I don't know. I'd say, "Well, what can you do?"

1-00:41:08

**Dunham:**

Was there much issue of people who were not shipyard workers coming into the area? I mean, that, I assume, was why you were supposed to show your badge?

1-00:41:17

**Blanchette:**

Yes, you were supposed to show your badge, yes. And no, I think maybe the reason there wasn't is because they had gates, outposts, where—guards were stationed, you know, in these outposts—so that people couldn't come in from the hillside or some place—get in without a badge.

1-00:41:47

**Dunham:**

What kind of humor or hijinks things went on at the shipyard? Were there practical jokes or things of that nature?

1-00:41:57

**Blanchette:**

[chuckles] It was a lot of fun. Lots of fun. It was kind of a happy time, actually, for me. Sad in some ways, but happy in other ways.

1-00:42:16

**Dunham:**

In what ways? What were some specific experiences where it was exciting at times, or—

1-00:42:27

**Blanchette:**

Well, when they'd have these banquets, you know, and different entertainers. That was another thing, you know, that we had during lunch hours, we'd have entertainers come. Bands would come out, orchestras would come out, and entertain during lunch hours, and things like that.

1-00:42:51

**Dunham:**

Who do you remember most especially from those?

1-00:42:57

**Blanchette:**

I guess I can't recall, but I know we had a lot of that.

1-00:43:03

**Dunham:**

Yeah. Were you on duty, during some of those, then? Did you have a specific role, or were you on break and able to just go watch and enjoy?

1-00:43:11

**Blanchette:**

No, I didn't have to do anything.



1-00:43:21

**Dunham:**

Did you get specific training at the beginning of your job, and/or because of the union you joined? Did they make you do? I mean, I know it wasn't totally relevant to your job, obviously, but did you have to go through any specific procedures with them?

1-00:43:36

**Blanchette:**

[laughing] No.

1-00:43:36

**Dunham:**

No. Okay. What about once you started your job? Do you remember your first day on the job?

1-00:43:42

**Blanchette:**

Actually, I guess I don't remember the first day on the job.

1-00:43:52

**Dunham:**

Did you train other people at all?

1-00:43:54

**Blanchette:**

No. [chuckles]

1-00:43:58

**Dunham:**

Well, tell me about, when you were talking about kind of the boring office job you got to. It sounded like maybe there was some interesting tracking going on there. You were, you said, putting pins on who went to the hospital, or the fires that broke out.

1-00:44:11

**Blanchette:**

Fires that broke out—red pins for the fires that broke out, and blue pins, and green pins, and—

1-00:44:17

**Dunham:**

What were the other pins representing?

1-00:44:20

**Blanchette:**

Let's see, it was what other incidents would happen.

1-00:44:28

**Dunham:**

So that's one thing I'm curious about. What other kinds of incidents were you tracking? There must have been a variety of things. So many workers and so many different folks brought together in these—

1-00:44:44

**Blanchette:**

Yes, where the fires were and where the accidents were. What else? Anyway, that was a way of keeping track of where the fires were, what caused the fires—

1-00:45:08

**Dunham:**

What usually caused them?

1-00:45:09

**Blanchette:**

Well, I think sparks from, I think, from the welding.

1-00:45:19

**Dunham:**

Was there ever any foul play, not with the fires, but with other kinds of things? You mentioned about the story of the knives. Were there—we're not just trying to look at the dark side of life, but again, I know there must have been a lot of things going on, there was a lot of great work being done, but—[watch scraping microphone] Was there any incidence of gambling, or even prostitution that you knew of? Like those kinds of things?

1-00:46:05

**Blanchette:**

No. Maybe there was, but I wasn't—no.

1-00:46:13

**Dunham:**

That's fair. Just general drunkenness was about as bad as you saw?

1-00:46:20

**Blanchette:**

Yes, yeah.

1-00:46:21

**Dunham:**

What about just the issue of so many people came to Richmond—so you mentioned about this house was around the clock with folks in it. What other things were going on in Richmond as a result of this tremendous growth?

1-00:46:36

**Blanchette:**

What was very interesting was that you could walk anytime of the day or night, up and down the streets of Cutting Boulevard, or any place, and anytime, because there were so many people on these different shifts. Tonight, you wouldn't dare walk down Cutting Boulevard, or Macdonald, or those places at night, you know, because there's so much crime, that seems to be coming in from Richmond, into the Point.

[adjustment of mics]

1-00:47:20

**Dunham:**

Well, so with all the people who came to the shipyards, then, so, I understand it was bustling, so it felt like there were all these people around, so it felt safe—

1-00:47:45

**Blanchette:**

Yes. Yes. You could go out at any time. And restaurants were open all the time, and the department stores and everything was open. It was kind of exciting in a way, you know.

1-00:48:01

**Dunham:**

What was it like with the racial mix of people, with folks coming from all over?

1-00:48:07

**Blanchette:**

Oh, there were all kinds of people from Oklahoma and Arkansas, and the deep South. Lots of black people, and there was no discrimination whatsoever as far as being hired in the shipyard. They needed people. Really.

1-00:48:28

**Dunham:**

Was there discrimination elsewhere?

1-00:48:32

**Blanchette:**

I don't think so.

1-00:48:34

**Dunham:**

Okay. Well, I just mean in terms of hiring, did you hear of other places where, even though they were still desperate for workers, maybe other companies were less open to hiring certain people?

1-00:48:45

**Blanchette:**

No, no.

1-00:48:48

**Dunham:**

What about socially? How did different groups mix, either the different races, but also the new Southerners, Oklahoma and Arkansas folks, and also just people who had already been here? There were all these folks? What was your view of that new mix?

1-00:49:08

**Blanchette:**

I don't know. My recollection is that people just accepted people for whatever, during that time. Many, many people after the shipyards closed went back to their home states, and they were so used to this wonderful California weather that they'd come back. So we had lots and lots of people who came back. After they'd gone home once, they came back. So as a result we have quite a variety of, mixture of different ethnic groups, I guess you might call it.

1-00:50:16

**Dunham:**

So where else did people live, when they were here? What else did you observe?

1-00:50:27

**Blanchette:**

There was all this temporary housing—did I mention that they put it up? Temporary housing. It has since been torn down, all except Atchison Village. They built those so well that they went up for sale. People have bought them, and they are very happy living out there. I know a person, two people, that have bought those places, very reasonably. But the rest of that temporary housing has all been torn down.

1-00:51:05

**Dunham:**

And when you lived in El Cerrito, how did you commute then?

1-00:51:10

**Blanchette:**

There was a sergeant on the desk, a woman who came from either Berkeley or El Cerrito, or some place, and she'd pick me up at the house, at my sister's house, and bring me out. So that was very nice. [chuckles] When I was on the day shift—that was when I was on the day shift, and I'd come out, half-dressed, carrying a cup of coffee and some toast, and trying to dress while I was coming to the shipyard.

1-00:51:57

**Dunham:**

Because you went back to the day shift once you moved out—so you started at seven a.m. again?

1-00:52:03

**Blanchette:**

Yeah. Oh, terrible. That didn't work.

1-00:52:06

**Dunham:**

So, even though you weren't partying so much, it was still a struggle. You weren't a morning—aren't a morning person.

1-00:52:13

**Blanchette:**

I'm not. To this day.

[interruption to adjust equipment]

1-00:52:18

**Dunham:**

What else did you participate much in—or what did you observe about—you mentioned just kind of the bustling city streets and all. What about nightlife, social life, here? Clubs? Did you go to music clubs? Other places? What did you do for fun?

1-00:52:54

**Blanchette:**

What did I do for fun. I don't know, to me, just living is fun. [laughs]

1-00:53:02

**Dunham:**

That's a good attitude. What kinds of things did you cook and eat, then? Were there some things that were hard to find?

1-00:53:15

**Blanchette:**

When I was living with my sister, she insisted that I have a meal, you know. It had to be lamb chops, vegetables, everything. She wanted to take good care of me and she did. When I had my apartment in San Francisco, Ward had a cousin, Felix Blanchette, and his wife, Hazel, who would come and take me out to wonderful dinners in San Francisco.

1-00:53:57

**Dunham:**

Where did you go?

1-00:54:00

**Blanchette:**

Oh, there was a place out along the freeway, I think it was called Fireside, or some place like that. I think it's still there. Different places that they knew about.

1-00:54:18

**Dunham:**

So you had a lot of family here. Did you get together with family often?

1-00:54:26

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yes. Let's see. My brother Gordon was a lieutenant in the navy on Roi Island out in the Pacific, and he came in, and during this time—let's see, it must have been 1945, then, or '6 or something like that, after the—anyway, he came in and we belonged to the Berkeley folk dancers. We did folk dancing up at [John] Hinkle Park in Berkeley. We made our own costumes, Carpathian costumes, leather shoes, leather boots, and things. We had a lot of fun.

1-00:55:39

**Dunham:**

So that was something you did. Berkeley folk dancers in the park. Did you perform, or just get together?

1-00:55:47

**Blanchette:**

Well, a group, you know, in a group. I guess you'd call it performing. [laughing] Just an evening of dancing.

1-00:56:01

**Dunham:**

Wonderful. So you mentioned about, when you were in El Cerrito, you had kind of the more home-cooked meals, and all, but were there any foods that were short? Was there rationing going on? Did that affect you?

1-00:56:15

**Blanchette:**

Oh. That's interesting. Ward had another cousin on his mother's side that brought us from—he was on some kind of a ship—anyway, he brought us butter, oodles of butter—and what else?—off this ship.

1-00:56:46

**Dunham:**

So that was kind of under the table?

1-00:56:49

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yeah. There was rationing.

1-00:56:54

**Dunham:**

Was that just a one-time thing, or were you able to get that other times, through the connection with the ship?

1-00:57:02

**Blanchette:**

Let's see, I'm trying to think. I get the cousins mixed up. [laughs] Then he was out of the service, and worked and lived in Pleasant Hill, I think it was, or Walnut Creek, with his wife.

1-00:57:33

**Dunham:**

What about gasoline? Did you or your family—

1-00:57:38

**Blanchette:**

Oh, oh, that's right, there was—oh, that's another interesting thing. Speaking of my dad being an inventor, during the time when there was gasoline rationing—

[Begin audio file 2]

2-00:00:06

**Dunham:**

Okay, we're back on with Avis Blanchette, and she's just going to tell us about something related to rationing and your father the inventor, so back to you, Avis.

2-00:00:20

**Blanchette:**

My sister had this little baby boy, and with the gas rationing, my dad decided that he would invent a very lightweight collapsible seat for the baby to sit in, and then when she got on the bus, she could fold it up and hang it over her shoulder, and get on the bus and get off the bus and put him in this. And that has become the first one of what is now—everybody has one of these—very elaborate ones now, to push—well, that was the first one. And he did that because of gasoline rationing. So my sister could get on the bus with her baby and—

2-00:01:34

**Dunham:**

So did he market that or patent that?

2-00:01:40

**Blanchette:**

Well, that's another story. When my husband came back from the war, and he saw this, he said, "That is wonderful." And he contacted a man that he knew in San Francisco, who offered to manufacture them for my dad, pay him for each one that was sold. And my dad was a very stubborn Scotsman, and he said, "If he can do that, I can do that." And of course, with his little tools, in his little tool shop, it would take him forever to reproduce those. [laughs] And my husband said, "You really missed the bit there, Mr. Hall,"

because he really could have made himself a millionaire. If he would just give up, let somebody else mass produce it.

2-00:03:02

**Dunham:**

Well, what about recycling at the time? Do you remember doing a lot of recycling? No?

2-00:03:09

**Blanchette:**

I don't remember anything about recycling at that time.

2-00:03:17

**Dunham:**

Did you hear any stories of gasoline, you know, similar to your own—where you were able to get butter and stuff—where people had other methods for getting gasoline, beyond their allotment?

2-00:03:27

**Blanchette:**

I think so, it seems to me I do, but I can't remember what it was. People would probably trade—maybe somebody that didn't have a car would give their rations, or something, or sell them, something like that.

2-00:03:47

**Dunham:**

How did you—did you communicate often with your husband while he was away? What branch of the military was he in?

2-00:03:55

**Blanchette:**

He was in the 490<sup>th</sup>—I forget what it was called. They were attached to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, and what they did was fly, come down in parachutes, or whatever they were called, and distribute food. During the war, you couldn't tell somebody what you were doing for some reason or other, so he sent me this newspaper article, showing the invasion of, you know, from England over to the landing there. Because he could speak French, he was sent over behind the enemy lines, dropped behind the enemy lines, and he landed in a French farmer's backyard. Let's see. The Frenchman came out, "American! Blah blah [imitates speaking French]" you know, something like that, and he told him to come in, and he went down in the cellar, and brought up a big jug of Calvados.

2-00:06:04

**Dunham:**

What's that?

2-00:06:06

**Blanchette:**

It's a very concentrated liqueur from apple skins. Calvados. You can buy it today. He put this jug on the table. "Americans! Oh, you've come to save us. Oh!" And so his buddy Homer was flown with him, see, they were together. So they were fed this Calvados. And the next morning, they shook their heads, "Where are we?" They drank so much Calvados. And so, their lieutenant went looking for them. So he comes along in a jeep, and the farmer came out, and he said, "The last I saw of you," he said, "you said goodnight," you know, "and you left." They didn't go very far. [laughing] So the lieutenant came looking

for them. In the meantime, Homer, his buddy, was crawling along, and he fell in a ditch, and sprained his ankle or something. The lieutenant had come looking for them, and picked them up to take them back to where ever they were. They dropped Homer at a hospital, and he was laying there, and a general came though, passing out Purple Hearts to all these men in the hospital. So Homer got a Purple Heart for getting drunk on Calvados and falling in a ditch. [laughing] Funny story.

2-00:08:30

**Dunham:**

Wow. Well, so were you able to write to Ward while he was there?

2-00:08:34

**Blanchette:**

I was able to. But I don't know what happened to me. I was kind of tongue-tied writing to him, you know. So I'd write, but not very often.

2-00:08:51

**Dunham:**

Was part of it due to that initial period, where you kind of had some guilty feelings about having a good time?

2-00:08:59

**Blanchette:**

Probably. Probably. Probably. So, when he came home from the war—this is getting personal. He didn't come back to me. He went back to Minneapolis. Because he said, "I didn't hear from you, so I thought maybe you weren't interested anymore." So anyway, there he is, back there. Lieutenant Totten had been keeping me safe till he could come home. So she said, "All right, do you want to save your marriage or what?" I said, "Well, it was a very good marriage. For nine years we were very happy together." She said, "Okay." So she and her daughter got me all dressed up and they sent me back. And I looked him up. He couldn't believe that I still wanted him, you know. He had already gotten a job back there. So I said, "Okay. I'm going back to California. And you think it over. And if you would come out to California for just one year, and see how you like it, there's a job waiting for you. And if you still don't want to live in California, I'll go wherever you want to live." Well, it was an offer he couldn't refuse. So he did. He came out, and that was the end of the Middle West.

2-00:11:24

**Dunham:**

He liked it as much as you did, then?

2-00:11:29

**Blanchette:**

Yes, he did. He did.

2-00:11:35

**Dunham:**

Now did you go back to work, when you came back out here?

2-00:11:42

**Blanchette:**

Let's see, what did I do? I'm trying to think of what I did. [pause] I did. And then—this is interesting. George [James?] Galanos' father, who lived in either Idaho or someplace, came out and offered to put his



son George and my husband into business. Get him a dime store. So that's what happened. And he did. He set us up and everything, so Ward could pay him back, and this and that, and everything. George Galanos was not interested in the business, the variety store business. He wanted to be a clothes designer. He's a famous clothes designer, Galanos. To this day. So he wanted out. He told his dad, "I want out." So his father, of course, said, "Okay." So Ward went to the Bank of America, the main branch, down in Oakland, and Clarence Hearn was the manager down there. And he was so short. He came up to the counter, and said—he told Ward, he said, "You know, some lady said to me, 'At least you could stand up when you speak to a lady.'" And he said, "Madam, I am standing." [laughing] Anyway, he told that. So then he asked Ward's name, and, "Your wife's name?" "Her name is Avis." "Oh, Avis. That's what I have on my rose bushes." Anyway, he was a cute little guy. So he said, "You go back and make me a financial statement," you know. Okay. So we went back, and I made a financial statement. Well, he took one look at that, and he said, "Is mama spending something that papa doesn't know about?" [laughing] He could see that I fabricated it. [more laughter] I guess it intrigued him so much that he gave us a loan. [laughter]

2-00:15:22

**Dunham:**

Oh, really? And how did the business go from there?

2-00:15:28

**Blanchette:**

Oh, fine. We had this one, that was on San Pablo Avenue about a block from, not Ashby, but Alcatraz. We were there for a year, and we had a chance to go up to a huge supermarket that was being opened up. So we made that move, we were just there for about—. Ward sold it to somebody, and we took the money and went up to this big supermarket. It was the old car barn, on 51<sup>st</sup> and Telegraph. It had been made into a huge supermarket. We had the variety department in the front. There was a bar across from there; and there was a restaurant; there was a produce section; there was a grocery store, you know, everything. So we did very well there. And if we had stayed there we probably would have ended up very wealthy.

But, Ward decided that, "You know, if you have more than one store, you can probably have better buying power." So he not only had one, two, three, four more stores. Which was a disaster. Disaster. Because the one on End Shore Acres, the man had said he was going to build three thousand homes out there, and we opened up this beautiful store, and he stopped building after six hundred. So boom! There went that store. So then, he stored the fixtures next to the Santa Fe Market here in a vacant building. [chuckles] Some time later, he had a chance to take these beautiful brand-new fixtures into the Town Market down in Richmond. He was a man who was a man of his word. The man that ran the Town Market said, "Ward, if you will bring your variety store into the Town Market, you won't have to pay any rent at all, because you can be the overseer of the other departments in there." He should have had that in writing. Because we got all this stuff moved in there, and either he disappeared or something, I don't know. It never came to pass. So here we're stuck with rent. Oh God. And that was a disaster. Disaster. So one thing led to another, one thing led to another. Finally, the big market, the one that we had that was so productive, became non-productive, because the grocery department [interruption about equipment] decided to sell all our stuff. You can go into the grocery store now, any place, and get toothpaste, and all the stuff that we were selling. So that was a disaster.

2-00:19:39

**Dunham:**

What was the name of your store? Or different names?

2-00:19:41

**Blanchette:**

He just—that's another thing. Montgomery Ward's had a great huge beautiful big round ball, light. And it was called Ward's, not Montgomery Ward's, just Ward's. So Ward got a hold of that for some reason or other, I guess they weren't using it or something, and put it up. And so he called it Ward's, see, because that's his name, Ward. So instead of Blanchette, he said, "This is Ward's Variety Store." Well that, as I said, was a disaster, because the grocery store started right away, right after we moved in, started selling all our stuff. My nose is beginning to run. Could I have a kleenex? [sneezes] All of this is on tape. [laughs]

[tape interruption]

2-00:21:14

**Dunham:**

So we were hearing of the trials and tribulations of your and Ward's business endeavors. Did you have anything more you wanted to say about that trajectory?

2-00:21:29

**Blanchette:**

Only that during the final days of his—he could see the handwriting on the wall, I guess you might say, that the variety store business was kaput. During the last year or so, he started to study real estate. He got a real estate license, and then he went for a real estate broker's license, and then he worked for several different real estate companies to see how things were handled, and then he opened his own office in Point Richmond. And he said, "I wish I'd gone into real estate many years ago, because," he said, "all those little bins, and all that work in those variety stores." You remember them.

2-00:22:35

**Dunham:**

Yeah. Well, what a great area to be in real estate, too.

2-00:22:39

**Blanchette:**

Yes. Unfortunately, his health gave out, and he had to give it up because he couldn't drive around and show houses anymore.

2-00:22:58

**Dunham:**

Did you participate in that business as well?

2-00:23:00

**Blanchette:**

Well, he helped me get a real estate license. I passed the real estate license. The idea was I was going to go down and work in his little office and help him. Well, real estate is not my cup of tea. I hated it. It was just—I said, "Oh." He said, "That's all right."

2-00:23:32

**Dunham:**

Why did you dislike it?

2-00:23:34

**Blanchette:**

It seems to me that it was such a vicious dog-and-cat fight over everything. I didn't like the competition of the—

2-00:23:55

**Dunham:**

That high-level sales competition?

2-00:23:58

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yes.

2-00:23:58

**Dunham:**

One big sell is so important.

2-00:24:02

**Blanchette:**

Yes. So, that didn't last.

2-00:24:06

**Dunham:**

I wanted a little bit, back at the shipyards. You mentioned how, was is Sergeant Chotten? Was that Totten?

2-00:24:14

**Blanchette:**

Totten. T-O-T-T-E-N. And she had a twin sister named Gus. And they looked exactly alike. [chuckles]

2-00:24:27

**Dunham:**

Was Gus also at the shipyards?

2-00:24:30

**Blanchette:**

Yes. She had a beautiful daughter. And Fredericka had a beautiful daughter, too. They had beautiful daughters.

2-00:24:42

**Dunham:**

Well, you mentioned how she kind of protected you and kept you on. Could you say a little more about that? I mean, others weren't so fortunate, I take it?

2-00:24:51

**Blanchette:**

No. The shipyards were closed, but there's a certain amount of—they kept the office open, you know, because there was a certain amount of cleaning up, or whatever it was, so she just kept me there.

2-00:25:10

**Dunham:**

What did you do, once the shipyards had closed, what kind of stuff were you tending to?

2-00:25:15

**Blanchette:**

Well, it seems to me we just had a good time. [laughing]

2-00:25:24

**Dunham:**

Okay. That's not so bad.

2-00:25:26

**Blanchette:**

I got acquainted with Point Richmond because she had this nice house on the beach, and she'd have parties, you know, for the girls in her house. It was a nice place to live.

2-00:25:39

**Dunham:**

Yeah. You were still in El Cerrito at that time, then, with your sister?

2-00:25:43

**Blanchette:**

Yes. Well, let's see. Well, I moved out of my sister's and into a little apartment that, the superintendent of the plant protection had a house next door, and he said, "There's an apartment right next to me. Do you want to move into there?" And I said, "Yes, I think I will." So that was where I was living when Ward came up—for a while. Then we were able to rent an old sea captain's house up on the other end of the beach. Because the people that owned it were in Iran or some place, I don't know, some place. And when they came back, of course, they had to have their house back. By that time, we loved it so much here, that we had to move up into the hills on Clinton Avenue in a very boring, brand-new house. And I'd get in my car every day and tour the Point, trying to find a place. And that's when I found the beach house. We lived there for ten years. It was one huge room. A [William] Wurster. The house was designed for the professor's weekend trips. It wasn't designed to live in the year 'round.

2-00:27:21

**Dunham:**

How long did you live there? For ten years, you said?

2-00:27:25

**Blanchette:**

Ten years. Yes, we did.

2-00:27:45

**Dunham:**

Well, what happened to all the other folks that did get laid off as a result of the end of the war? What kinds of things did they do? Your peers and all the folks around the shipyards?

2-00:27:59

**Blanchette:**

Yes. Well, actually, I kind of lost track of them. I was in touch with [Bailey?] for quite a while, and then I lost track of her. So I've lost track of them.

2-00:28:19

**Dunham:**

But in the immediate—right away, were any of them upset about losing their jobs, or concerned about how they were going to survive, if they were single, or otherwise?

2-00:28:34

**Blanchette:**

I don't recall that as a problem.

2-00:28:48

**Dunham:**

Okay. I was wondering about, more again about, sort of social life. Like, did you go to the movies and things during the war?

2-00:28:56

**Blanchette:**

My social activities? I think my social activities were more or less kind of drinking. [laughing] Drinking and partying with my friends.

2-00:29:23

**Dunham:**

Well, we touched on it briefly, but I was just curious, you know, just sort of what was the dating standards of the time, or the sexual standards? I mean, again, all these people coming together all at once, lots of drinking, a twenty-four-hour town, you know, did that play itself out in sort of wild ways? Not necessarily you personally, but you know, but for other folks?

2-00:29:45

**Blanchette:**

Well, a little bit personally, but you know, but, not too much. [laughs]

2-00:29:50

**Dunham:**

Well, back at the shipyards, again, I was just curious, was there any romance or hanky-panky? Again, twenty-four-hour job situation, men and women working together in places they hadn't necessarily worked together before. Were there, you know, issues there? Were there office or shipyard romances, during work hours?

2-00:30:15

**Blanchette:**

I suppose, but, I'm not aware of—

2-00:30:19

**Dunham:**

It wasn't something that in your security mode you came across, under difficult circumstances? Okay.

2-00:30:23

**Blanchette:**

[laughs]

2-00:30:27

**Dunham:**

Okay. Well, that's good. That's fair. I was wondering also, we touched on briefly sort of, but, again, all these people coming together, the mixture of races, and you said from your perspective it went pretty well, but were there any difficulties? Were you aware of—did you know of any Japanese folks at the time, and any that went away to the internment camps, or any folks that came back?

2-00:30:55

**Blanchette:**

As a matter of fact, I do know a very famous sculptor, Ruth Asawa. She does beautiful wire sculptures. She was sent to this internment camp. Yeah, she's Japanese. And while she was down there, she learned, I guess, to do this and she became famous for it.

2-00:31:28

**Dunham:**

So you met her after the fact. Years later. So you didn't know any folks of Japanese descent before they were interned?

2-00:31:38

**Blanchette:**

No.

2-00:31:40

**Dunham:**

No, okay. What about the Mexican community? Were you aware of any zoot suiters, for example?

2-00:31:49

**Blanchette:**

I don't think there were zoot suiters in those days.

2-00:31:56

**Dunham:**

Okay, okay.

2-00:31:54

**Blanchette:**

It just seems like the people that I saw were in their working clothes, you know, and I didn't really pay too much attention to what they were wearing.

2-00:32:10

**Dunham:**

What about at the bars, the bars you went to? Was there a predominantly white clientele or was there a mixture there as well?

2-00:32:22

**Blanchette:**

Well, let's see. At North Beach, I'd say it was mostly Caucasians.

2-00:32:32

**Dunham:**

Do you know if there were any rules at any of the bars about not serving other races?

2-00:32:39

**Blanchette:**

Oh, no. I don't think there was anything like that.

2-00:32:42

**Dunham:**

Well, I'm thinking about the romance again, romance during the years. I'm wondering, were you aware of much same-sex relationships, during that time, North Beach side or over in Richmond?

2-00:32:57

**Blanchette:**

No.

2-00:32:58

**Dunham:**

Or any special bars or pubs?

2-00:33:00

**Blanchette:**

But Point Richmond is a great place for that now. It's: "I'll mind my business and you mind your business, and anything goes."

2-00:33:15

**Dunham:**

Okay, okay. But that wasn't something that you were aware of during the war years.

2-00:33:19

**Blanchette:**

No. No.

2-00:33:26

**Dunham:**

Let's see, I'll give you a chance to think what other things of importance that you'd like to bring up, especially during the war years, but it could be since then, about Richmond and the area.

2-00:33:48

**Blanchette:**

The property values at Point Richmond were very low. You could just buy almost anything for practically nothing because of the refinery. People were afraid of the refinery. So there's wonderful opportunities to buy. But now, I don't know, whether they just say, "To hell with the dangers," or—

2-00:34:26

**Dunham:**

So it's been a lot of years people have been living in close proximity. Are there a lot of people who do believe there are environmental impacts?

2-00:34:35

**Blanchette:**

Oh yes, I think so. I think some people do. I think they think that maybe something's—in the middle of the night sometimes, I have my window open. It smells like stinky cabbage coming from the refinery. They let it out in the middle of the night, when everybody's supposed to be asleep.

2-00:34:57

**Dunham:**

Oh, really?

2-00:34:59

**Blanchette:**

Yeah.

2-00:35:00

**Dunham:**

How is that monitored?

2-00:35:07

**Blanchette:**

Well, they claim that it's under control, and all that stuff, you know, and they do have air control people there.

2-00:35:24

**Dunham:**

Well, thinking back, making a parallel to the shipyards, when in some ways there were far less controls, and in a much busier time, not that, you know, I mean, Mr. Kaiser didn't have great vision around a lot of things, but what was safety like there at the shipyards? Because it was dangerous work, there were invariably a lot of accidents, but do you remember sort of what was the standard procedure, if you were dealing with driving the ambulance, around accidents, were there certain procedures you had to do?

2-00:35:55

**Blanchette:**

Well, mostly just driving the ambulance to the—or driving the station wagon to the jail.

2-00:36:08

**Dunham:**

Okay, that was your role? Now, never anything but a drunk—you never took anybody but a drunk to the jail, though, huh?

2-00:36:14

**Blanchette:**

It doesn't—

2-00:36:14

**Dunham:**

I'm just—I don't know why I'm so curious about that, but, you know, it's kind of interesting. I guess it's because, you know, I perused a lot of the *Richmond Independents* all through the forties and kept seeing all these things about, you know, I guess the news might have just been as sensationalized as ever then, but there's just all this stuff about this fight or that fight, and this



person went to the emergency room, and there were tales of guns and knives, and you know, but they could be the exception, most certainly, I understand.

2-00:36:51

**Blanchette:**

I think so. [laughs]

2-00:36:53

**Dunham:**

I see how the television news magazines sensationalize things today, so—

2-00:36:57

**Blanchette:**

Yes, they do.

2-00:36:58

**Dunham:**

—it's certainly possible. Well, I didn't ask at square one about your job, but what was your salary, when you started?

2-00:37:08

**Blanchette:**

Oh, magnificent. [laughs]

2-00:37:13

**Dunham:**

Yeah, it was quite an improvement, huh?

2-00:37:14

**Blanchette:**

Fifty dollars a week. Boy.

2-00:37:16

**Dunham:**

Wow, and what was the last job you did, what did you make before the shipyard, do you remember?

2-00:37:23

**Blanchette:**

What did I do before?

2-00:37:27

**Dunham:**

I'm not sure. No, you did a series of odd jobs when you first got to San Francisco, right? So what could you remember, about what an average wage was for any of those?

2-00:37:39

**Blanchette:**

Seemed like it wasn't as much as fifty dollars a week. Maybe forty or thirty-five, or something.

2-00:37:47

**Dunham:**

But you came in '43, so—

2-00:37:50

**Blanchette:**

There's a great show of Kaiser, right now, are you aware of that? At the Oakland Art Museum?

2-00:37:59

**Dunham:**

Yeah, I have not been, but have you been to it?

2-00:38:01

**Blanchette:**

I haven't been either, but they say it's just fabulous. Do you know—as you do know, that I worked in this plant protection, and the reason that [Ray Waddell?] was chosen to be superintendent of all the shipyards in the plant protection. He just had his main office where I was working. The reason was, Henry Kaiser had him up at Hoover Dam. That's where they met. So, when it came to supervising the plant protection for the shipyards, he called on Ray Waddell.

2-00:38:48

**Dunham:**

Did you interact directly with Ray Waddell?

2-00:38:53

**Blanchette:**

Oh, sure. He was in my office. You know, there, that was his main office. He had a secretary, and Lieutenant Totten worked in that office, and I was under her.

2-00:39:10

**Dunham:**

Did you ever have any issues with unions, with strikes, or walkouts of any kind?

2-00:39:20

**Blanchette:**

It doesn't seem to me we did in those days.

2-00:39:22

**Dunham:**

I mean, I've read about a few incidences, so I just wondered if it seemed like security might have had to be involved in that kind of situation? Did you, if there was criminal activity around the shipyards, was it your department that dealt with it? You made trips to the police, or did the police come—what was the division there, kind of?

2-00:39:51

**Blanchette:**

No, no, we—Ray Waddell handled it.

2-00:39:56

**Dunham:**

Okay. So it was his jurisdiction, essentially, and if something got to that level, he sent—well, you literally took them to the jailhouse, so—

2-00:40:06

**Blanchette:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, he handled it. He was a tough guy. He was a wrestler. He was built like a wrestler.

2-00:40:17

**Dunham:**

Well, if a mild drunk was the most difficult situation you ever had to encounter, what did you need such a tough guy for?

2-00:40:24

**Blanchette:**

Didn't. [chuckles]

2-00:40:26

**Dunham:**

You didn't. Okay, just in case.

2-00:40:27

**Blanchette:**

Just in case.

2-00:40:28

**Dunham:**

Just in case. With how many tens of thousands of folks, but never got out of hand. Well, I want to look, there's a picture of you with—is this with Kaiser? There you are [hands her the picture]. What was going on that day?

2-00:40:58

**Blanchette:**

Okay. This was the guys from Russia. This is Henry Kaiser in the middle. This is—I think this is Molotov, and that's Gramiko. Or vice versa. [chuckles] And this is Avis up here. And here's Sergeant [Brennan?] down here.

2-00:41:30

**Dunham:**

So were you a security escort/bodyguard kind of role in there, or—?

2-00:41:35

**Blanchette:**

No, more taking them from the restaurant to the shipyard. We had a nice luncheon, you know, for them.

2-00:41:47

**Dunham:**

Was this the day of the infamous C-4 test cruise?

2-00:41:52

**Blanchette:**

No. No. No. [laughs]

2-00:41:53

**Dunham:**

No, this was a different day, okay.

2-00:41:57

**Blanchette:**

Yeah, there we are. I think [Bailey?] is here, too. Yeah, there's Bailey over there, and there's Sergeant Brennan.

2-00:42:05

**Dunham:**

Okay, and here's Lieutenant Totten, too, in this one. Your supervisor all those years. There on the right. That's a great photo.

2-00:42:21

**Blanchette:**

Yes. Yes. This is Bailey in the middle. And that's Avis, and this is Lieutenant Totten. You betcha. Bailey had her hat on at a nicer tilt than I did. [laughing]

2-00:42:42

**Dunham:**

Now, what does that represent? Does that carry some special significance?

2-00:42:48

**Blanchette:**

I don't think so.

2-00:42:50

**Dunham:**

That's great. Well, just trying to clarify again about your job. So how long were you on the swing shift? Was it about a year, or just a couple months?

2-00:43:08

**Blanchette:**

Oh, no, I was on there for quite a while.

2-00:43:10

**Dunham:**

Okay. So if there was funny business going on, you'd have known about it, working the swing shift, I would imagine, because I'm sure after dark is probably when, if it was going to get interesting, like making knives, or that sort of thing, that's probably when it would have started, I would guess. Well, were any of the women there teased, or ever put in difficult situations by the men? Were there any men who had a hard time accepting women in various roles?

2-00:43:47

**Blanchette:**

I don't think so. So many men were off to—they were mostly 4-F's or so valuable that they had to be deferred, you know, like the big shots. They needed them, you know, to supervise the building of the ships. But as far as the men were concerned they were mostly 4-F's, you know, or they were turned down for some physical impairment.

2-00:44:29

**Dunham:**

What were Henry Kaiser and Clay Bedford like? Did you interact with them at all?

2-00:44:37

**Blanchette:**

They were wonderful. Wonderful. Henry Kaiser would roll over in his grave if he could see what they're charging now, the people that belong to the Kaiser Permanente health problem—oh, health program. It's a problem. [laughs]

2-00:44:58

**Dunham:**

Yeah, that didn't sound totally unintentional. [laughing]

2-00:45:02

**Blanchette:**

It's a problem. Because he meant it—he had a good—he wanted everybody to have good health coverage, reasonably, so that they could afford it. And now, my gosh! Roy can tell you that. He belongs to the Kaiser.

2-00:45:28

**Dunham:**

You don't?

2-00:45:29

**Blanchette:**

No. Because I'm so old, I qualified for the Health Net Seniority Plus. I pay ten dollars for a visit wherever I go, even the specialists.

2-00:45:51

**Dunham:**

That's good. Well, back at the shipyard, with all the women workers, some of the women had children, undoubtedly. How was that dealt with?

2-00:46:02

**Blanchette:**

Yes, they had wonderful care for kids. They had places where they could leave their children safely and they were—

2-00:46:16

**Dunham:**

Were all women with children, regardless of their race, or anything, able to—

2-00:46:21

**Blanchette:**

Oh, yeah. Yes.

2-00:46:23

**Dunham:**

How did that work?

2-00:46:25

**Blanchette:**

Whatever shift they worked on, this child care went around the clock. They could leave their babies, their children there, and go to work, and pick them up on the way home. That wasn't a problem of mine.

2-00:46:53

**Dunham:**

No. Was that, if you don't mind my asking, was that a conscious choice not to have children, or just—?

2-00:47:04

**Blanchette:**

I don't know.

2-00:47:05

**Dunham:**

Okay. That's fair. Did your salary go up much during the course of time you worked there?

2-00:47:17

**Blanchette:**

In the shipyard?

2-00:47:18

**Dunham:**

Yes.

2-00:47:19

**Blanchette:**

I don't think so, I think it was more or less fifty-some dollars a week.

2-00:47:24

**Dunham:**

Fifty-some throughout. Okay, that's pretty good. How much were those union dues, that all-important union you were forced to join?

2-00:47:35

**Blanchette:**

The Hod Carriers'?

2-00:47:36

**Dunham:**

The Hod Carriers'—how do you spell that, do you know?

2-00:47:38

**Blanchette:**

Just H-O-D.

2-00:47:40

**Dunham:**

H O D Carriers'.

2-00:47:43

**Blanchette:**

The Hod Carriers' Union, you betcha.

2-00:47:49

**Dunham:**

Never went to one of the Hod Carriers' meetings, though, huh?

2-00:47:52

**Blanchette:**

No. I don't even remember that we paid dues or anything. I don't remember paying dues.

2-00:48:00

**Dunham:**

Just in the beginning that was a formality. Was it a problem to get into that union?

2-00:48:05

**Blanchette:**

No.

2-00:48:06

**Dunham:**

No. And did they tell you right away, "This is the one to join, you can't get in the other ones?"

2-00:48:10

**Blanchette:**

That was it, yes.

2-00:48:11

**Dunham:**

Were the male security guards in that union, do you know? The male officers? Just curious, how it happened to be that one?

2-00:48:30

**Blanchette:**

I don't know. [laughs] It is kind of funny.

2-00:48:33

**Dunham:**

Was Lieutenant Totten, how much longer did she stay at the shipyards?

2-00:48:41

**Blanchette:**

Well, she was there, as I say, after the shipyards closed. They kept that guard station open for a long time, and—

2-00:49:14

**Dunham:**

Do you know what she did after she left that position?

2-00:49:20

**Blanchette:**

Oh, she retired. Her husband had emphysema, I think, and she was very busy taking care of him. He was a sweetheart. Nice, nice man.

2-00:49:43

**Dunham:**

Well, is there anything else you'd like to add today before we close? Anything? It could be about areas that you weren't in direct contact with, but things you were aware of, or think were interesting or worth noting, during the war years, or time there after.

2-00:50:07

**Blanchette:**

Well, I already mentioned this before, so many people went away, back to their home states, and then came back because they loved California and the weather, and the welfare—good welfare up here and everything.

2-00:50:29

**Dunham:**

By welfare, you mean—?

2-00:50:31

**Blanchette:**

I mean they could get welfare, if they couldn't have a job, or something like that.

2-00:50:38

**Dunham:**

And in other states, services were less?

2-00:50:40

**Blanchette:**

Well, probably not so good. Since they like to come here. But I think it's largely the weather.

2-00:50:48

**Dunham:**

That did remind me of another thing I was going to ask. Did your husband Ward utilize the G.I. Bill when he returned from the service?

2-00:50:59

**Blanchette:**

Let's see now. Maybe the G.I. Bill, I don't know, might have had something to do with our start, who knows? I can't remember, but it might have.

2-00:51:23

**Dunham:**

Do you remember where you were when you found out the war was over?

2-00:51:28

**Blanchette:**

Let's see. It seems like one war was over, and then the other war was over at a different time, wasn't it? Isn't that true?

2-00:51:46

**Dunham:**

Which war do you mean?

2-00:51:49

**Blanchette:**

I think the first one was European. And then the second one was the Japanese.



2-00:52:01

**Dunham:**

Right. Right. So when it was over over. Well, when did Ward come home, was it long after that? I know he didn't come straight here.

2-00:52:11

**Blanchette:**

Well, no, but even before that, because he spoke French they sent him to the Nuremberg Trials.

2-00:52:24

**Dunham:**

What was his role there?

2-00:52:26

**Blanchette:**

Just to cover it. I guess, as a—

2-00:52:30

**Dunham:**

As a reporter? Or as just an observer for the military?

2-00:52:34

**Blanchette:**

Observer, I think. Yeah.

2-00:52:37

**Dunham:**

Did he have any interesting stories about that or thoughts about that, that he shared?

2-00:52:44

**Blanchette:**

I guess he didn't—he mostly talked about the funny times. Once in a while, he'd—terrible—they way they learn how to behead enemies with piano wire. That's terrifying.

2-00:53:10

**Dunham:**

That's something they were trained to do?

2-00:53:12

**Blanchette:**

They were trained to do. Yeah.

2-00:53:14

**Dunham:**

And that he did end up doing.

2-00:53:16

**Blanchette:**

Yeah. What is amazing to me is all he went through during the war that he didn't become brain damaged, you know, go psychotic or something. But he didn't. He was a very strong—

2-00:53:45

**Dunham:**

But it did trouble him?

2-00:53:49

**Blanchette:**

Oh, it did, yes.

2-00:53:50

**Dunham:**

How did he feel about subsequent wars, and/or you feel about it?

2-00:53:55

**Blanchette:**

Well, I think he'd be horrified at this Iraq war. But of course, he's been gone now for five years. So that wasn't in the mix yet.

2-00:54:11

**Dunham:**

Did either of you have strong feelings during the Korean War, or the Vietnam War, or—

2-00:54:24

**Blanchette:**

Well, we had nephews, you know, that were in there, in both the wars. But they both came back, so, that was good. Ward had a cousin whose wife's brother was in the Bataan Death March, do you remember that?

2-00:54:44

**Dunham:**

Remind me.

2-00:54:47

**Blanchette:**

Oh, it was terrible. Over there in Japan, I guess.

2-00:55:03

**Dunham:**

Well, we should close on something a little more uplifting. Or not necessarily uplifting, but let me just ask a couple more things about Richmond. So right after the war—you've mentioned this theme of people leaving, going back to where they were, and reasons they came back, largely the weather. In fact, when I was downtown at a little real estate office down there, I saw an article posted from 1968 that talked about that very thing, and how a lot of people were coming back, even ten years later, or what have you. But right after the war, it had been such a hubbub, and then all these people left. You stayed in the area for a little while, before Ward got back. I mean, what was it like, what did it feel like then? I mean, the war was over, so that was a great relief, but was there also some sadness at the transition?

2-00:56:04

**Blanchette:**

[whispers] I don't remember.

2-00:56:12

**Dunham:**

I'm sorry, we got so into the sadness of war, sections. It's hard. But well, just thank you. Again, is there anything else that you would like to add?

2-00:56:34

**Blanchette:**

Did I mention about the property values here now?

2-00:56:39

**Dunham:**

Yeah.

2-00:56:40

**Blanchette:**

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

2-00:56:44

**Dunham:**

Despite the two a.m. whatever leaks they do.

2-00:56:50

**Blanchette:**

We had two lots over on the waterfront. Two forty-foot lots. We bought them at two different times, and we thought we could build on one and maybe sell the other one or something, but no. You have to have 6,000 square feet to build a house on. So it took both of those lots. Well, we bought those lots from a fellow that—his name was Arthur Alvarez and he was a bridge engineer at UC Berkeley, over the years. And he was an eccentric old gentleman. He would come and water, and he'd leave ten cents. [laughing] He'd leave ten cents to pay for the water. But anyway, so we got acquainted with him, and he had these two adjacent lots, and he offered them to us. One we paid \$4,000 for, and then he said, "The next year I'll sell you the other one." \$4,000. So we had \$8,000 in those two lots. And when we went, I guess you might say bankrupt, almost, you know, when our dime stores disappeared, Ward owed creditors something like \$22,000 or something like that, but he was such an honorable man that he said, "These people gave me credit, they are going to be paid." And so, he sold those two lots for \$22,000 to pay off the creditors. Now, they're \$300,000. [laughing]

2-00:59:26

**Dunham:**

They've been built on?

2-00:59:28

**Blanchette:**

They are just now being built on. Just now. Anyway, my brother Gordon is an architect, and he designed a house for us on those lots. But we couldn't afford to build on them at that time, so we didn't. And then when Ward finally sold the lots just to pay off his creditors, we gave them the house plans. But I don't think they used them.

2-01:2-00:19

**Dunham:**

I guess not. Not there, at least? Well, thank you very much, Avis. I guess we'll close there.

2-01:2-00:34

**Blanchette:**

And thank you for your patience.

2-01:00:35

**Dunham:**

Oh, absolutely.

[End of interview]