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Robert Gray

Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
David Dunham  
in 2012

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Robert Gray

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Interview 1: July 24, 2011

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Redman: All right. My name is Sam Redman, and today is July 24, and I'm in Emeryville, California with Robert Gray, better known as Uncle Bob. But before we dive in, can I just have you tell me your name, say your name out loud, and then spell it for me? I know it's a pretty straightforward name, but would you mind doing that?

01-00:00:25

Gray: My name is Robert Hamilton Gray, with an A.

Redman: Gray with an A. Thank you. And spelled like normal spellings?

01-00:00:33

Gray: Yes.

Redman: Okay. Then could you tell me your birth date?

01-00:00:37

Gray: September 15, 1921.

Redman: And where were you born?

01-00:00:41

Gray: Kankakee, Illinois.

Redman: All right. Excellent. Okay, so let's dive right in. I'd like to ask first, about life in Illinois in that era, and what your parents were like. Can you tell me a little bit about their background and who they were?

01-00:01:01

Gray: Well, we were—

Redman: Were your parents born in the United States?

01-00:01:08

Gray: Oh, yeah. My family goes back before the Revolution. They were all English, Scotch, Irish. The last of the Grays who came here to the United States came in 1820 and settled in Illinois. But there were Grays here before that. The Hamiltons, my mother's side of the family, been here forever. There's towns like Hamilton, Ontario; Hamilton, Ohio; Hamilton, Nevada; and Duke of Hamilton in England. Well, anyway, the Hamiltons are—

Redman: A long line of—

01-00:01:44

Gray: A long line of Brits.

Redman: Yes. Actually, I married a Hamilton, so I—

01-00:01:48

Gray: Oh, you did?

Redman:

Believe it or not, that rings somewhat familiar. But that's great to hear about. That's interesting. So they made it to Illinois. What did your parents do for work?

01-00:01:59

Gray: Well, my grandfather was a medical doctor; his brother [Fred S.] was a medical doctor; my Uncle [Edwin Goulter] was a medical doctor, who was the chairman of the American Medical Association, at one point. So I don't want to brag, but I would say that my family were the elite of the city.

Redman:

Sure. They had a lot of education.

01-00:02:20

Gray: Yes. My grandmother had her BA from Denison University, back before the turn of the century.

Redman:

Which was uncommon for women of her generation to have.

01-00:02:34

Gray: Yes, exactly. Well, three women generations of my family went to Denison. The granddaughter of one of the gentlemen here is attending Denison right now, and nobody's ever even heard of Denison. But it a century-and-a-half-old liberal arts women's— or was a women's school. But anyway, my mother and aunts were all educated women. My mother taught school until she was married, and my maiden aunt taught Sunday school as a vocation. Never got paid for anything, but that was just her thing, all her life.

Redman:

What was their religious affiliation?

01-00:03:18

Gray: Methodist.

Redman:

Okay, so they were Methodists.

01-00:03:20

Gray: Yes. I don't know that it made any difference, because I could never tell any difference between any of the churches.

Redman:

So one of my follow-up questions would be, did you attend church as a young man?

01-00:03:35

Gray: I attended Sunday School, church, Sunday School board meetings, Wednesday night prayer meetings, under protest. I did not believe the Protestant ethic or any of this other baloney at any time. After I was a grown man, I was talking to my Uncle [Edwin Hamilton], who was a medical doctor,

and he was asking me about what church I went to. So I said, “I don’t believe any of that primitive superstition.” But anyway, my Uncle Edwin told me, “Well, none of us do.” But it was just in that small town, it was practically necessary to belong to one of the three principle Protestant organizations.

Redman: About how large was the town at that time, would you say?

01-00:04:31

Gray: Oh, I would say Kankakee was about 20,000 and it’s still about 20,000. But Kankakee also had a suburb, Bradley. Bradley was a manufacturing city where they built davenportes and Bradley heavy equipment. The town of Bourbonnais—we called it Bur-bone-iss, but it’s now Bourbonnais—was a French Canadian settlement. It dated back, I would say, to the French occupation of the Northwest Territory, so that would have to be before 1765.

Redman: Now, you would’ve been a young man in October of 1929, when the stock market crashed.

01-00:05:17

Gray: Yes.

Redman: I understand from a lot of people, things weren’t terrific economically before that time, in places—

01-00:05:24

Gray: No, they weren’t.

Redman: But things quickly became much worse. Can you talk about that a little? In your experience, what that was like?

01-00:05:32

Gray: Well, it’s Keynesian economics run wild, in the 1920s. Borrow money and you’re going to make more money; and borrow money and you’re going to make more money. Leverage today, two or three times as bad; but at that time, you could get the margin up to 100% or more. Everybody was a millionaire. Then when it came time to pay it back, well, nobody ever said anything about paying it back. In our small town, my Uncle Howard was the head of the bank—the bank that survived, because the two other banks did not survive.

Redman: Sort of quintessentially, you think of these bank runs.

01-00:06:21

Gray: Well, first of all, banks did not have insurance at that time. You depended on the bank, on the honesty of the banker. I knew Mr. Stone, the president of the bank, from the time I was a small boy. He was a man of great integrity, and he was the only man in town who had a silk hat. But anyway, the banks depended on the integrity of the people that borrowed from them. The farmers, on the other hand, depended on the banks to loan them seed money, and it just happened that apparently, all at the same time, that— About 1927,

times got tough, and people could not begin to pay back— Now, I don't remember, exactly, but there may have been a bad drought around 1927 that made it impossible for farmers to pay back their loans. Then of course, it made it impossible for the guys who had borrowed money for their first Model T Ford to pay that back. It just pyramided because it was all the same relatively small amount of money. Illinois, at that time, had one-bank laws. That is, you could have one bank office and that was it. So they had relative relations with the big banks in Chicago, for very big things, but they were not owned by the big banks.

Redman: So there were a lot of these small banks.

01-00:07:52

Gray: So many of them were one- or two-man or family banks. City National, which my family owned, among other things, were— Oh, it was a pretty big bank; it must've had 100 employees. Had a capitalization of a million dollars, if you can believe that.

Redman: Which is quite large for a family bank in that era.

01-00:08:20

Gray: That was quite large in that era, any time.

Redman: Yes. So then actually, when the stock market collapses, you would've been a young man at that time.

01-00:08:34

Gray: Well, I would've been ten years old.

Redman: So do you recall what the feeling was like in your family at that time?

01-00:08:41

Gray: I've heard, being told many years later, that we were poor but we didn't know it. I imagine in Kankakee, it was about 25% unemployment. Because Kankakee was a manufacturing town that was not a manufacturing town; it was a farm hub. Oh, Gould Batteries had a big plant there, and Easy-Way Appliances and Krohler Furniture. These were branch factories from the big companies.

Redman: 25% unemployment. Do you see that, as a ten-year-old boy, when you're out and about during the day?

01-00:09:23

Gray: Well, no because, well, for one thing, unemployment was a different thing in those days. Farmers would be unemployed all winter long; but they'd go off and do other things. There were some of the factories that literally depended on the farm labor, when the labor wasn't on the farm. Here again, I'm not bragging, but the family had a number of farms. We used to go out to the farms regularly, get in my grandfather's big old Cadillac touring car—that



was Sunday afternoon, after Sunday dinner—go out and visit the farms. Most of the farms [were] within an area of about, oh, a radius of forty, fifty miles, so we could cover five or six farms in one afternoon. We would go out there and the farmers would be sitting around not doing anything, because there's nothing to do. The crop was in. At that time, on the small family farms— By a small family farm, that was the classic 160 acres, which was about all one man could handle, with a hired man. But those were still operated by farm-grown animals. I remember Daisy and Dixie, the last two beasts of burden on my Emmington farm. Beautiful, big animals. Carl Sankin, the tenant at that time, just cried. He just couldn't bear to [send the] animals away. But even he had to— About 1930, he bought his first tractor. And speaking of 1929, Carl Sankin bought a used farm-all, which was all of \$500. But he bought that at about a quarter of what it [would have] cost him a year earlier.

Redman: So people were trying to make money for used equipment and selling—

01-00:11:37

Gray: Well, look, they had to.

Redman: They had to.

01-00:11:39

Gray: They didn't own the equipment.

Redman: Can you describe the hired laborers, the farm laborers for me? Do you remember anything about them? Would they have been people passing through? Would they have been—

01-00:11:51

Gray: No. I don't remember much. Most of all, most farm families had four or five or six kids. The boys worked from the time they were big enough to work, and the girls worked. Most of the farms that we had were full-subsistence farms. In other words, we had grains, farm animals, domestic animals, truck gardens, everything. You never have to go into town for much of anything. Everything was produced on the farm. The lady of the family, besides doing all the housework, usually did the garden and raised the animals. Or not the animals, but small animals—ducks and chickens and rabbits. The father of the family, with the help of the oldest boys, took care of the animals, and during the seasons, of course, planted and took care of the crops. But when you ran a complete farm, subsistence farm, you had to be there all the time because the milk had to be milked twice a day and the animals had to be fed twice a day. If the blue blizzard came out of the northwest, you had to make sure the animals were protected.

Redman: Dairy farming's a lot of work. It's not like raising other crops, right?

01-00:13:21

Gray: Oh, no.

Redman: You have to be there.

01-00:13:23

Gray: Well, the classic farm, up until the middle of the twentieth century, was a family farm, and you could subsist on a family farm. There were a few things; you couldn't get sugar, maybe, grow sugar on your farm, or salt. But mostly, small farms, going back, I think, to the Homestead Act [of 1862], were 160 acres. Many of them were on, well, town sites. A township is six-by-six square miles.

Redman: So then what happens in your life, come age for junior high or middle school, when you would've been— before high school. Because I understand you do high school elsewhere.

01-00:14:17

Gray: Well, my mother died when I was a sophomore in high school, and my father remarried. So we lived briefly in Chicago. I went to high school at Senn High School in Chicago. Then my dad and his new wife moved to Denver.

Redman: Can we pause for a moment in Chicago? What was that like? Do you recall about what year? You would've been in the mid-1930s then, or early 1930s?

01-00:14:43

Gray: Yeah, that was the early thirties.

Redman: Was that a bit of a shock for a young boy from a small place—

01-00:14:49

Gray: No.

Redman: —to go to a big city? You were able to roll with it?

01-00:14:52

Gray: No, no, no. Kankakee, you don't know it, but it is only fifty-five miles from Chicago, the Chicago Loop. At the time that I was growing up there, there were three main railroads [that] went through Kankakee, en route to Chicago. There was a passenger train to Chicago at least once an hour.

Redman: So you could get there quite easily.

01-00:15:13

Gray: Oh, well, my mother would go shopping in Chicago at least once a month, sometimes twice a month, and we were taken up there. We went to the museums and the Shedd Aquarium and the Field Museum and the Art Institute. And the 1933-34 World's Fair, we went to frequently.

Redman: Can we pause for a moment? Do you remember— This is maybe a bit of longshot. In 1933, at the Field Museum— The Field Museum was founded for the earlier World's Fair, but then—

01-00:15:45

Gray: No. Now the Museum of Science and Industry.

Redman: I understand in '33, the Field Museum had big new exhibits next to the Shedd Aquarium , for the '33 fair site, near where Soldier Field is today.

01-00:16:01

Gray: Well, yes.

Redman: Do you remember visiting—

01-00:16:02

Gray: Oh, certainly. I know all about that. You got everything screwed up, I hate to tell you.

Redman: Tell me about the 1933 fair.

01-00:16:08

Gray: Well, first of all, the waterfront where the '33 fair was all filled in. The Illinois Central Railroad had all that land, and they had railroad yards there. The land where the Field Museum and the— Well, Soldier Field, I think, was out in the sea at that time, hadn't been built yet. But that was built after World War I, as the biggest stadium in— Well, they claimed it was the biggest in the world, at the time. The Field Museum was there earlier than that. The Field Museum was not part of the 1933 World's Fair. It has been there longer. And the Shedd Aquarium and the Adler Planetarium were built on fill that went on out probably a mile east of Michigan Avenue, which was right— Do you know Chicago at all?

Redman: Yes. Right there by Lake Shore Drive—

01-00:17:08

Gray: Yes. Yes.

Redman: —extending out into Lake Michigan.

01-00:17:10

Gray: Yes.

Redman: So that was all filled in.

01-00:17:11

Gray: Well, all that is fill. At the time of the 1893 fair, the Illinois Central Railroad was right along the edge of the water. Then over the years, there was a number of fills. But there was almost a civil war in Chicago one time, over something called Streeterville. I can get that in a minute, but let's go back to the World's Fair.

Redman: Yes, tell me about what you remember about that visit. Do you remember how it felt or things you saw and—

01-00:17:42

Gray: Oh, God!

Redman: What made an impression on you?

01-00:17:37

Gray: Well, one thing that made an impression on me was streamlined decent trains. Another thing that made an impression on me was television.

Redman: Technology. Seeing some of these—

01-00:18:00

Gray: No, this was *television*. Nobody even knew what the name was. Well, this was 1933, and it didn't become commercialized until 1939, I believe, was the first TV station in New York.

Redman: So there were exhibits where you could see, potentially for the first time—

01-00:18:17

Gray: Yes. Yes.

Redman: For most people, it would've been the first time.

01-00:18:19

Gray: Every country in the world had exhibits there. There was a hall of science. It had lots of things that we still don't know much about. It ran from 10<sup>th</sup> Street down to 39<sup>th</sup> Street, along the lakefront, and it had a lagoon in between. I couldn't tell you how big it was, but it was more than anybody could do in three days. So we were fortunate, because the Illinois Central tracks ran through Kankakee, and we could on the train in the morning and go and spend a day at the World's Fair and come back.

Redman: So it was the type of thing that you could visit multiple times.

01-00:19:07

Gray: Oh, *many* times, yeah, if you have enough money. It was not cheap.

Redman: Oh, okay. Can you contextualize for me? Do you recall about how much it would've been to get in?

01-00:19:21

Gray: I don't recall it. Let's say it was fifty cents. But fifty cents, at that time, was the equivalent of about \$50 today.

Redman: Okay. So it would've been like buying a concert ticket or something.

01-00:19:32

Gray: Yes, yes.

Redman: A significant amount.

01-00:19:34

Gray:

Yes. You went in, and almost all the exhibits were free. There were the commercial exhibits, the nightclub-type places; and there were the various villages, which— Every European country and some other countries had a small—maybe a block square—village, typical of their time. I shouldn't say their time, of their ambiance.

Redman:

Sure, certainly. Sure.

01-00:20:09

Gray:

Those, you paid to get into. Have you ever been to the Dickens Christmas Fair here?

Redman:

No.

01-00:20:19

Gray:

You probably never heard of that, either. Well, anyway, these were these replica towns that were life-size. I mean human size. You could go there and you could have a Belgian waffle, sitting beside the Manneken Pis; and you could go to— Well, my first Shakespeare was in the Globe Theater, in the English Village. It was a full life-size Globe Theater. The English Village was Dickensian, shall we say, and the Belgian Village was more Flemish than other. The French Village, I was never in because they had some rather nasty shows that ten-year-olds, twelve-year-olds should not know about. Since I was the oldest of my generation, I couldn't do a lot of things because Dickie [brother Dick] and Marshie, Lee and John [cousins Marjorie, Lee, and John] are not big enough for that, so Bobby, you don't get to do it.

Redman:

Okay.

01-00:21:29

Gray:

I resented that all my life. [chuckles]

Redman:

Is that right? Okay. So you were sort of on the verge of being able to do some of these things—

01-00:21:36

Gray:

Things that I could've done on my own, I was not allowed to do.

Redman:

I see.

01-00:21:40

Gray:

I was the last kid in grade school who was still wearing knickerbocker pants. I hated them. The only way I ever got out of them, I came home beat up about the third time, I told my mother, "I'm not going to go to school anymore, unless you let me wear long pants, because they're beating me up. They're calling me kid and sissy and all." It was terrible. But this was something, because my mother thought that I should not have long pants until I went to high school. Even seventy-five years ago, that was a no-no.

Redman: Before starting the interview, we talked a little bit about prehistory and human evolution and some of those topics. I wonder if, as a young boy, even not outside of visiting Chicago for the fair— You'd mentioned visits to the Field Museum. Did you learn anything about the evolution of humans or prehistory or race or physical anthropology in those days?

01-00:22:43

Gray: Well, it was huge, of course.

Redman: A big museum, big place.

01-00:22:49

Gray: The chief things I remember about it were the Egyptian tomb coverings. I was not aware at the time that these were tomb coverings, and I thought they were rather gross, rather poorly done, in contrast to the Greek and Roman stuff that was right in the hall next to it. It took me until probably college, when I learned a little bit more about Egyptian history, to know that these were not the fine works of Egypt, they were just sarcophaguses.

Redman: But some of the earliest introduction to those ideas may have come in visits to the museum.

01-00:23:37

Gray: No, the earliest introduction was finding Indian heads along the river. Or not Indian heads, arrowheads, arrowheads.

Redman: Arrowheads, sure.

01-00:23:47

Gray: Because apparently, they were still fairly common. I haven't any now, but at one time, I had a couple of very beautiful little small heads.

Redman: Farmers would certainly turn them up, on occasion, in the fields. That would've been common.

01-00:24:02

Gray: Yes. Then they'd wash down into the local creeks and—

Redman: It would've been common to find them as a young boy, I suspect.

01-00:24:07

Gray: Yes. So it was not uncommon.

Redman: Let's talk about your impressions of the other students in Chicago, for the brief time you were there. Were the students any different than— in your class?

01-00:24:22

Gray: Oh, basically they were more heterogeneous. In Illinois, in Kankakee, as I said, we were not the masses village. The school that I went to, Steuben

School, we would say was the equivalent of— The best people in town went there, the best teachers went there, and the college prep people went there. So we didn't have much to do with the North Side, which was the Franklin School; that was the black section. And the South Side was the idiot school. Now, they weren't idiots, but the South Side of the river was the Kankakee State Hospital, which was the largest hospital for the insane in the entire world, at that time. It looked like a beautiful college campus. So the people who lived on the South Side had the— Well, let's call it the campus, the insane asylum. They had their own little shopping center, a couple square blocks, and they had their own school, the Washington School. So we did not know those people. The schools were segregated. When I got to Senn High, that's an area of Chicago where there's a new ethnic group every two blocks or less. We lived on Argyle, which was 50<sup>th</sup> north. It's the street that you go right straight from the lake all the way out to O'Hare today. The last time I was through there was about seven or eight years ago, and I was fascinated at the fact that in the fifty blocks out to O'Hare, there were forty or fifty different ethnic districts. Well, [at] the time that I went to Senn High, there were quite a few of the ethnic types that I'd never met. The only Jews that I had ever met were the proprietors of the department store in Kankakee. There were a lot of Jews at Senn High, there were a lot of— Well, let's say they were Slavic peoples. They weren't known as that; they were known as hunkies and bohunks and slobs. They were. There was none of this political correctness. If somebody was a sheeny, they were a sheeny. They didn't like it, but—

Redman: These terms were tossed around quite freely and quite commonly.

01-00:27:16

Gray: Yes. It was not as derogatory; it was just saying, well, hey, he's an idtey. Well, now, is he an idtey, is he a damned Bolognese, or is he a dirty Calabrese, or is he one of those Sicilian bums? Among the Italians, of course, there's this differentiation, too. So I remember at that time, there were a few neo-Nazis. Germans, because Chicago was essentially a major German city, at one time. So I would say there was more derogatory conversation, but not less mean.

Redman: Right.

01-00:28:00

Gray: Nobody had their chip on the shoulder.

Redman: So you're only in Chicago for a short time.

01-00:28:09

Gray: Well, to live in Chicago, to go to school in Chicago, just for half a year.

Redman: And then you go to Denver.

01-00:28:15

Gray: Yes.

Redman: Now, was that a big change?

01-00:28:18

Gray: No, because here again, we went to East High School, which was the best high school, and I was in the college prep course. People in the college prep courses are not the people that go to manual training. I would say I was blessed with better than average opportunities.

Redman: Then eventually, you enroll at the University of Colorado, in Boulder.

01-00:28:47

Gray: Yes.

Redman: Can you talk a little bit about that?

01-00:28:56

Gray: Going to Boulder was not much different, because Denver was the big city, and most of the people who went to Boulder were from Denver. My freshman class at Boulder was, at least half of them, people that I had run across in Denver.

Redman: So you would've enrolled there at about 1939? Is that right?

01-00:29:20

Gray: '39, yeah.

Redman: So can we step back for a moment? I'd like to ask about your perspective on— We talked a little bit about the Great Depression. Can we talk a little bit about FDR and his response to the Great Depression? What were your thoughts and your father— Sort of what was around the house, in terms of conversation about FDR? What did your family think of him and his policies?

01-00:29:47

Gray: He was hated.

Redman: He was hated?

01-00:29:49

Gray: Yes.

Redman: Can you explain a little bit about why?

01-00:29:53

Gray: This is just the way it was.

Redman: Sure.



01-00:29:55

Gray: He was a Democrat. I was raised that Democrats had horns, a tail, and lived in the basement of the Catholic Church. My brother and I were afraid to go past the Catholic Church at night, because one of these demons would come out and get us. There was nothing good about FDR. The only thing good about him was that he wasn't somebody worse.

Redman: So can you talk then about—

01-00:30:24

Gray: I am Bowdlerizing quite a bit here. But this was the general feeling at the time. We all took the *Chicago Tribune*, which was the most arch Republican paper in the United States,

Redman: It was a harsh critic of his New Deal programs, in particular.

01-00:30:41

Gray: Oh, sure.

Redman: Can you talk about some of the sentiment of why the New Deal was criticized?

01-00:30:50

Gray: Well, one thing, the people who ran the village did not realize that these people who were out of work were really hurting. They were just out of work because they wouldn't work or because they were lazy or because they— There was an upper-middleclass superiority that looked down on people that worked with their hands. If a farmer had a bad crop, it wasn't because he had bad weather; it was because he hadn't worked hard enough. The core workers that Le High laid off, it wasn't because they didn't work hard enough. The real reason was that they weren't grinding up any limestone to build new buildings.

Redman: So there was maybe a perception there about the New Deal, that now in retrospect, thinking back, maybe some people didn't really know the extent of the problems of the Great Depression, do you think?

01-00:32:01

Gray: I don't think we still do. I think we're still struggling with the same problems. We're still struggling with Keynesianism, because Keynes hadn't even been around at that time, but it was called something else. ["Pump priming"]

Redman: Let's talk about what college was like. But first, I want to step back, because— [and] ask about the period of between 1939 and then 1941, when the war starts. I assume you would've been starting college in this time, but by December 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked and the war started, I assume that that's when you were in college; is that correct?

01-00:32:41

Gray: Yes, yes.

Redman: So can you maybe tell me a little bit about what life was like for you in college before [Pearl Harbor]?

01-00:32:46

Gray: Well, first of all, the war started in 1939. We did not get involved until December 7 of '41. In 1940, the government called up the National Guard and the Reserves, to active duty. Well, this was 1940, a full year before the war. This ruined a lot of fraternities at Boulder, because half the kids at Boulder belonged to the National Guard, and they were called up. This was a full year before December 7, 1941. So we knew that this was going on, and we knew that Roosevelt— Everybody blamed Roosevelt for everything, so I'll just use Roosevelt instead of the administration. But he gave the Brits fifty over-age destroyers that were surplus from World War I. This, of course, was a de facto act of war. But we were still neutral. The German American born, particularly in cities like the Yorkville part of New York and Milwaukee and parts of Chicago, were still— I won't say they were pro-Hitler, but they were pro-German. They were German, they still spoke German at home.

Redman: How did college students talk about these events?

01-00:34:19

Gray: Well, let's see. How are we going to get out to beer joint tonight, and do we got enough money for a six-pack?

Redman: So some of these are big global events that maybe a college student would've not paid attention to.

01-00:34:31

Gray: Exactly. We were busy with studying our particular specialties.

Redman: What were your professors like? Do you remember anything about them?

01-00:34:43

Gray: Oh, yeah. I had some great professors.

Redman: Can you tell me about what were your impressions of them when you arrived and some of your memories about them?

01-00:34:54

Gray: My freshman year were mostly the large classes, 100, 200 people, with quiz sections. I felt that the lecture sections were a little bit boring, because he was— Well, particularly modern European history. Came on at two o'clock in the afternoon. Everybody was groggy from lunch. But professor Eckhart was head of the department, and he actually gave all the lectures. I'm sure he was a learned man, but he was a little bit dry. However, later on, after I had him junior and senior classes, I found he had a sly wit about him. It was not quite

as academic as it had seemed as a freshman. I had a professor of Latin American history, Mexican history, who, as I look back on him now, he was imbued with the revolutionary spirit of the twenties. But he was a very lively guy. The best professor I ever had was a man named S. Harrison Tomsen whose degree was from Prague University, Charles University in Prague. He was an expert on Central European history. I guess we were juniors by that time, history majors. He gave us holy hell, because we didn't know where these places were. Well, we'd talk about Silesia; where's Silesia? Well, who ever heard of someplace over there? Well, he got me really thoroughly interested in historical geography, which I'm still interested in. When I talk to some of these people from Germany, who say, "Well, I came from Germany a hundred years ago," well, where? I then tell them that there were over 600 separate German states at the end of Napoleon's time. They can't believe that, that they were all separate states. They'll say, "Well, how about Prussia?" "Well," I'd say, "Prussia was a conglomeration of states in itself; but it also was the dominant of the German Kieserite.

Redman: This is clearly a topic in history that really left a mark on you at that time, as a young man.

01-00:37:34

Gray: Yes. If you don't know where you're talking about, no point in trying to talk about it.

Redman: That's really interesting.

01-00:37:44

Gray: Well, it's like he had me write a dissertation, which I'm still proud of, about the boundaries of Poland. Well, Poland, at one time, went down all the way to the Black Sea, and also around the Baltic, and well inland, into the Germanies. This was at different periods, of course. I did a lot of research on it and I wrote it.

Redman: Typing it out on a typewriter.

01-00:38:19

Gray: Typing it out very fast. He gave me a A, a big A, and then he said, "Mice, mice, mice, mice, mice." [Nice with an accent] He said, "You badly need work in your English language." Well, I don't know if you worked that hard, but as a senior, I was writing five papers a term, and we had ten-week terms. So there was an awful lot of research and writing to be done in a short time.

Redman: Can you tell me about what the reaction was like on campus when Pearl Harbor was attacked and the US officially enters—

01-00:38:56

Gray: Unbelief. I was taking an Oriental history course at that time, from a man, a professor who had been teaching in China. He spoke fluent Mandarin. I think

we only had about twenty people in the class. Oriental history was not a favorite subject. Then all of a sudden, nobody could get into the classroom. Everybody wanted to know what Professor Swisher had to say about it. He said he literally couldn't believe it. Unbelief on the part that the Japanese could have done this.

Redman: So more people would've crowded into the [Oriental history] classrooms.

01-00:39:53

Gray: Yes, everybody would. Then the next morning, half the kids didn't want to go to classes—it was getting ready for finals week—and other people wanted to postpone the finals or postpone the term papers or this, that, or the other thing. But it ended up maybe a quarter of the men went down and volunteered. Of course, they didn't need any more volunteers; at that point, they had more than they could handle. So basically, the original students disappeared gradually, slowly. The Navy had a major Oriental language school there, and they had a major officers training camp there. They took over the athletic facilities and used the field house as a dorm. So the university stayed about the same, but it went from being a well-mixed university to being, I would say, 80% military by 1943, '44. In fact, some of the guys that were— Well, my brother, for example, was an Air Force cadet, and they sent him to Macalester College in Minnesota for a whole year, just to get rid of him. They had too darn many cadets. So my brother was in the cadets in '42, and he finally got his commission in '44. One year, that was college.

Redman: Wow. Can you talk a little bit about—

01-00:41:35

Gray: I'm jumping all over the place.

Redman: Oh, no, that's fine. I want to hear a little bit more, then, about how campus must've felt after this transition, say in 1942, 1943, when you were a junior and senior. There are a lot of military personnel now on campus, taking classes. Does it feel different in classrooms? Does it feel different walking on campus?

01-00:41:57

Gray: No, because we were not in the military program. We were still in the regular academic program.

Redman: So there's segregation, in terms of—

01-00:42:07

Gray: Oh, sure. The engineers were still taking engineering and the historians were going to the library, looking up esoteric subjects. We knew the war was on, of course, and we knew who had been killed. Some of our friends had been killed, disappeared, or whatever. But basically, Boulder was still pretty much isolated from the war.

Redman: When faced with this choice, then, to continue on in school or leave for the military, you chose to stay in, I understand.

01-00:42:49

Gray: Some did, some didn't. I stayed on. I was not able to go in the military any.

Redman: Then could you talk a little bit about leading up to your graduation then, in 1943. Sort of your senior year, I'd like to hear about.

01-00:43:08

Gray: Well, senior year, I was taking, as I said, I think six or seven different courses. I never could have enough time to take all the things I wanted to take.

Redman: So you were an intellectually curious guy.

01-00:43:22

Gray: Yes.

Redman: It seemed like you enjoyed your time—

01-00:43:24

Gray: Oh, I did. I did. But the thing is that I got up to my senior year and I almost did not have enough upper division credits to graduate. They were all good grades, but I'd been so interested in— Well, for example, I took three different courses in political science, which I was very interested in: European political science, American political science, and local political science. These were all courses that I did not need, but I wanted to know about them, and they overlapped with my US history and American history, and then later, more differentiated European history. But I wanted to cover everything. That's why I got into anthropology, and I was fascinated with that; and getting back into taking geography, for example, both physical geography and historical geography. They're both part of this geography, but they're two separate sciences.

Redman: Eventually, you leave Colorado, after graduation, for the West Coast, for Vancouver Shipyard, in Washington. Can you tell me a little bit about that and how that came about?

01-00:44:54

Gray: Well, basically, I graduated, of course, and I needed a job. Everybody needed a job. I took the civil service exam for the diplomatic service. And I was sitting around waiting; I thought, well, there's plenty of good jobs on the West Coast, and they make more money there than they do in Denver. I had a friend in Vancouver, said, "Well, come out. There's plenty of jobs." So I came out and got a job and in time, took the civil service exam.

Redman: Can you talk about what that would've been like in those days? Do you recall, did you study for the civil service exam in advance? What type of questions were on it?

01-00:45:47

Gray:

Well, no, no. I just assumed that having taken all these courses— I had gotten a copy of the basic exam from the State Department. At that time, you were supposed to present two languages. The exam was, I think, three or four days long, which is roughly a quarter of a bar exam. But I never heard back from them. All I got back was that I was eligible, and that was it. One of my friends, who was also a history major, did not make it to the State Department, but he was in the CIA—or the OSS, at that time. So obviously, we must've learned something.

Redman:

So you're out there in Vancouver, Washington, you take the exam, and you're continuing looking for work. How do you eventually find work?

01-00:46:54

Gray:

No, I wasn't looking for work. At that time, as you may recall, everybody who got a job was frozen in their job. You were not allowed to change jobs, because if you got fifty cents an hour in Denver, you get a dollar an hour out here. So everybody in Denver was running out here and everybody in the Southeast was coming to other parts of the country.

Redman:

So at a certain point, the government wanted to slow down, or at least try to mitigate—

01-00:47:24

Gray:

The government just plain told you your job. If you didn't like your job, too bad. But there were a hundred different ways to get out of it, you see, and people did. But the basic thing is that they wanted 30,000 people in Vancouver building aircraft carriers, instead of 300,000 down here wanting to be bartenders on the waterfront.

Redman:

So you got into working at the shipyard. Is that correct?

01-00:47:53

Gray:

Yes.

Redman:

So the shipyard was building aircraft carriers.

01-00:47:57

Gray:

At that point, yes.

Redman:

Now, that's, even at that time, a pretty massive ship to build, a pretty complicated, big ship to build. No?

01-00:48:08

Gray:

We turned about one a week.

Redman:

One a week?

01-00:48:10  
Gray: Yeah.

Redman: That's pretty incredible.

01-00:48:12  
Gray: It was.

Redman: So tell me about the workforce there. Was this a Kaiser shipyard?

01-00:48:17  
Gray: These were Kaiser shipyards. I thought we were going to talk about the Kaiser shipyards here.

Redman: Okay, so first—

01-00:48:24  
Gray: But no, they were all Kaiser shipyards.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:48:26  
Gray: I was in both the ones here and the ones up there, so—

Redman: Let's start with that one. Do you remember about what year you started there?

01-00:48:37  
Gray: Yes. Summer of '43.

Redman: Summer of 1943.

01-00:48:41  
Gray: Right after I graduated from college. I was not planning to make a career of it, let's put it that way. Well, I was looking for a career-type job, yeah.

Redman: So I've seen some footage of what it was like to go sign up for a job, that there would maybe be a short physical exam, they would ask you questions, you would get a security badge to enter and exit the shipyard. Do you remember about signing up for work and the interview process, or the healthcare signup or anything like that?

01-00:49:17  
Gray: Yes, I'm still bitter about that.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:49:21  
Gray: You did not go to the shipyard; you went to the union. You joined the union. Then the union decided where you were going to go. It was all union, all the way along. That's one reason I still hate Roosevelt, was what they did to

unionize this country, forcibly, during the war. It was not done just in the shipyards, it was done in the aircraft plants. If you wanted a job, you joined the union first; then you could get a job. But it was so blatantly, well, forcibly pro-union, I've been anti-union every since.

Redman: So you said it was offsite, so you went to a union hall.

01-00:50:07

Gray: Went to a union hiring hall, yes. Joined the union, gave them your hundred bucks.

Redman: Okay. Then eventually, after that—

01-00:50:16

Gray: Then they sent you out to the shipyards.

Redman: Okay. And I understand that your first job was as a shipfitter, and it was because you could read and write.

01-00:50:24

Gray: Yes. That's right.

Redman: Can you talk about that? How does that work out? How does that play out?

01-00:50:30

Gray: Well, because most of the able-bodied men were abroad getting themselves killed, we had a vast supply of Okies, Arkies, Alabamans. They weren't all black, but most of them were; but a lot of them were white. They could not read or write. They literally couldn't. Well, I'd had a little bit of mathematics, had a little bit of mechanical drawing in the course of my education. So I could read a blueprint, and that automatically made me a leadman. I could read. Some of these guys. I still think of this one fellow. I don't know whether he was stupid or just plain stupid. He couldn't read or write and I said, "Well, I can show you how to read." "I don't want to do that. That's just too hard." But I saw him downtown one night. He'd just bought himself a new outfit, a new pair of coveralls. First coveralls he ever had. Up to that time, he had suspender coveralls. He has this full jumper suit, and just face shining with stupidity. I thought, well, if this is the kind of guy that is building our ships, God save us. But we built fifty aircraft carriers in Vancouver. They were called CVE, carrier vessel escorts. They were not the big fleet carriers. But they would carry fifteen or twenty light planes and go along with the convoys, when they were taking convoys to Europe or the South Pacific. Because the Japanese, to some extent, and the Germans to a great extent, were using what they called wolf packs—you've probably heard of them—wolf pack submarines, so they could come in on a convoy, hit them from four or five different directions and be gone. So the aircraft carriers, the CVEs, were essentially an escort carrier. But they were equipped with a five-inch gun, which means they could blow a sub out of the water, and I think they carried



about twenty fighter planes or light bombers. I was fortunate enough to just luck into going on the trial runs of all these carriers.

Redman: Oh, wow. Okay, so tell me about whereabouts the trial runs would take place. Of the islands there, off of Vancouver?

01-00:53:02

Gray: No. Depending on the ship. Basically, Vancouver, Washington is right opposite Portland. It's 110 miles from the sea, at Astoria. It's all deep water, all the way up, so we could run the different tests that couldn't be done at the docks.

Redman: Now, can you talk about— It seemed like that growing up, you were often around people and in settings with education.

01-00:53:45

Gray: Oh, sure.

Redman: Literacy was celebrated, and intellectual curiosity was celebrated. Then as your first job as a shipfitter, you're around a lot of individuals that didn't have the education.

01-00:53:59

Gray: That's true.

Redman: That might've been a surprising thing, a shocking thing.

01-00:54:03

Gray: No.

Redman: Can you tell me a little bit more about that experience?

01-00:54:08

Gray: The main thing that shocked me was that there were that many people that got hired for jobs that they were incompetent to do. I'm trying to think.

Redman: Were there problems in that?

01-00:54:22

Gray: Sure.

Redman: Can you talk about, for someone who wasn't there, what some of the examples of what a problem might have arisen? It seems like a pretty basic issue, not being able to read a blueprint, having to have your lead person read it.

01-00:54:36

Gray: Well, that's why we had people like me, who are fish out of water, also. I was not a shipfitter. I didn't know anything about welding or burning or anything else, but I could read a blueprint. There were enough people like me, who

could keep things going. Every craft was strictly differentiated. A shipfitter was a guy who could put all the crafts together; read the blueprint and say, “Well, now, this has to be here, this has to be there, and these wires have to go there.” Then you’d have to go and get a burner to cut a hole in the wall; and you’d get a welder to weld up the patch; and you’d get an electrician to run the wires in. I won’t say that a shipfitter was the boss or anything. The shipfitter was not the boss, but he was the one who put the other crafts together. I don’t know if they still build ships that way, but Kaiser built ships on the Henry Ford assembly-line basis, and we put them out by the millions. Or not by the millions, but hundreds of thousands.

Redman: My next question was, to what extent were they prefabricated? To what extent they had been assembled elsewhere, to what extent were you doing the assembly?

01-00:56:01

Gray: I would say they were all prefabricated. But they’re all prefabricated in the same yard.

Redman: Okay.

01-00:56:08

Gray: In other words, so it would be one section of the yard that ways. Now, we had twelve ways in Vancouver, and I think there were more ways than that in the four yards in Richmond. I think there were fourteen in Richmond, and I think ten or twelve in Vancouver. Then in the Portland yards, there must’ve been fourteen or fifteen more. So you had the equivalent of eight or ten shipyards all in one place.

Redman: It’s pretty incredible. With that, I have to pause and change tape.

Begin Audiofile 2 07-24-2012.mp3

Redman: All right. This is Sam Redman. Today is July 24, and I’m back with Robert Gray, better known as Uncle Bob. When we left off, we were talking about your work in the shipyards up in Washington, near Portland, in Vancouver Washington. And we were talking about building aircraft carriers and riding on them— Could you tell me a little bit more about testing the aircraft carriers before their official launch, what that process was like? How many men would have been on the ship when you’d test it?

02-00:00:39

Gray: I would say we had about 400 civilians on the ships. These were people to operate the ship, to clean up little odds and ends. And we had a lot of feather merchants that just went along for the ride. [Note – “feather merchants” a common slang term for Merchant Marines.]

Redman: These ships had been built really quickly, and we talked about all the ways that there could be problems. Would you ever discover that there were problems that needed to be fixed?

02-00:01:11

Gray: Well, yes. One ship—I don't remember which one it was, maybe CVE-15 or 16, I don't know which. We took off from Vancouver and we got down as far as the Interstate Bridge, and something was wrong and the engine stopped and we anchored. Then they fooled around most of the day; and eventually, some tugboats came out and towed us back. But they didn't tow the whole crew back. And my job on the ship was as transportation man, was to make sure that the crews got back, because we delivered the ships to the Navy at Astoria. Then we had a civilian crew of about 400 people that had to get back to Vancouver. My job was to go along and make sure that there were trains and buses and somebody to get everybody back.

Redman: Now, I can imagine in my mind, that that could've been— Well, not only would that be a trick today, to coordinate, but in that time, that would've been difficult to set up—especially with rationing. There must've been some sort of exemption for those crews.

02-00:02:16

Gray: Well, it was difficult because we had— First of all, if you had a troop movement or a train or a bus movement, that that was a postulate of national significance. So it was difficult to get a priority [permission] to use the phone. If I used [a priority to use] the phone, right away there'd be somebody someplace else, hey, they got a troop movement here in Vancouver. Nobody knew what it was about, but it was a movement of Navy personnel from Bremerton, Washington down to Astoria, Oregon; and then it was a movement on the same train, of people, civilians, back.

Redman: So they'd have to coordinate.

02-00:03:03

Gray: Yes. Also because some of the crew, about a hundred of the civilian crew, stayed overnight until the Navy took over. I had four busloads of Kaiser people that had to get back. They left at different times, when they were done. Right up till the time the flag went up on the carrier, we had some civilians on it. My job—and I just stumbled into this job by luck—was transportation man, and I went along all these rides. Now, I had an exempt badge, which meant I could go anywhere I wanted. And I ate in the officer's mess, and we ate fine filet steaks and had beautiful bowls of fruit. This is at a time, remember, when everything was rationed. I was going to talk to you—I thought about that last night—about if you know anything about rationing.

Redman: I'm curious then, in light of the fact that I understand that meat was rationed and milk was rationed—

02-00:04:08

Gray: Oh, yes.

Redman: So a nice meal at the officer's mess must have seemed like quite a treat.

02-00:04:13

Gray: Oh, boy! We had filet steaks wrapped in bacon, and we had Idaho baked potatoes with butter—and butter was something that nobody even knew about, or you couldn't get it. And we had these big bowls of fruit. I had never seen a nectarine or some of these other fruits that were just routinely in the officer's mess. As I say, I just lucked into it, because I had to stay overnight on the ship and make sure everybody got off the ship. I had a couple of adventures, when everybody did not get off the ship; we left some of them in Astoria.

Redman: There must have been some sort of process to check the ships before leaving and do some sort of headcount, but I can imagine that would be— There are lots of small nooks and crannies where—

02-00:05:08

Gray: Exactly. That's what it was.

Redman: Okay. So maybe an engineer or an electrician could get locked in on a task and you'd have to go find them before—

02-00:05:16

Gray: Well, this was the case, where a bunch of the trial engineers wanted to play poker.

Redman: [laughs] Tell me that story.

02-00:05:25

Gray: Did I tell you that story?

Redman: Would you?

02-00:05:34

Gray: Well, this was a case where we were delayed for some reason. Probably time. Sometimes we could come in in broad daylight, at four o'clock in the afternoon; other times, we'd be waiting out in the little swells until quite late at night. So this one time, there was nothing for the guys to do. The trial engineers had done everything, got their papers put away, got their briefcases full and ready to go, and we were still bouncing around in the ocean. So they said they'd set up a little game of cards and they'd be in the ready room. Well, I knew where the ready room was, but they were not in the ready room. This is three or four hours later, when we finally got ashore. There were communications all through the ship and these guys knew where they were, so they turned them all off. I looked over that entire ship and I called on their phones. Well, anyway, after an hour and a half of this, I sent the trains off because we're paying time and a half for 400 people, waiting for these guys to

show up. They were a little unhappy with me the next morning, when they finally discovered they'd been left. So I had to get another extra bus to get them home. It was their own damned fault. Fortunately, the uniformed guards that were aboard the ship confirmed that I had tried and they had tried. But these guys had just found this little nook and cranny, a beautiful place, turned off the public address system, closed the doors.

Redman: And just played poker.

02-00:07:26

Gray: Yes.

Redman: That is funny. So then we were talking a little in the interim about what prompts you, eventually— Well, let me first ask about shifts. Can you tell me how shifts would've worked at that shipyard? There was a day shift, a swing shift, and a night shift?

02-00:07:51

Gray: Yes. Yes.

Redman: What would a swing shift have—

02-00:08:00

Gray: The day shift worked eight and a half hours; they ate on their own time. The swing shift worked eight hours and ate when they wanted to. And the graveyard shift worked seven and a half hours.

Redman: Did they have a higher salary rate or pay rate?

02-00:08:21

Gray: No, they all got paid the same amount; it's just that you were on the job an hour a day less if you worked the swing shift than if you worked the graveyard shift.

Redman: Okay, okay. Now, in the interim, I asked a little bit about what prompted you to move then down to California. Could you tell that story?

02-00:08:46

Gray: The war was over. I knew that things were changing. I thought, well, San Francisco was the center of the world, as far as the West Coast is concerned. I didn't know what I wanted to get into. I knew I did not want to be a historian.

Redman: That's fine.

02-00:09:10

Gray: No, no. I had thought at one point, of going and getting a PhD. I may have told you this before, but I felt that I did not want to be a historian, the world's leading authority on something that I was the world's leading authority on

because nobody else cared about it. After you write your PhD treatise, it goes into the library and nobody ever looks at it again.

Redman: Right.

02-00:09:40

Gray: And I just felt that the academic career was not for me.

Redman: So you came down here in 1945, I understand, when the war ended.

02-00:09:51

Gray: Yes.

Redman: Okay. Let's go back to the shipyard then for a moment, and talk about the end of the war. We hinted at all of these different people coming to the shipyard and there being potential for some problems, in terms of people being able to work together. How about racially? With people from all over, were there any—

02-00:10:18

Gray: I knew you were going to ask that.

Redman: Were there any racial problems?

02-00:10:21

Gray: Yes, I would say so. I don't know how much of it was all through the country, but there was very definite racial tensions in Vancouver. I think even more so in the Bay Area, because places like Richmond, 20,000 before the war, 100,000 during the war— And three-quarters of those were black, as I say, semi-educated or uneducated. They had been held down forever and they were up North and— They had what they called *push day*. I don't know if you've ever heard that term. The blacks would just get together and deliberately push white people on the sidewalk or push white people in a line. It was troublesome. There were some racial riots during the war.

Redman: So that would've been violence that would've broken out on occasion in some cities?

02-00:11:29

Gray: Yes, there were some cities that had violence.

Redman: Okay.

02-00:11:32

Gray: I cannot tell you, because I'm giving an oral history right now.

Redman: No, that's fine. Just in terms of what you experience. That's fine, that's fine.

02-00:11:39

Gray:

I know I went to jail one night, because I was waiting for a bus to go back to my apartment, which was in one of the so-called integrated communities. Had about 5,000 apartments. These two guys came up and they had never heard of standing in line and just pushed, pushed, pushed to get on first, when the bus doors opened. I did not take very kindly to that, so I just leaned against the side of the bus and they couldn't get by. So then finally, the two of them together pushed me out of the way and climbed up. Somebody on the bus, a white boy, said, "Who do those guys think they are?" And without even thinking about it, I said, "They're just a couple of ignorant Southern niggers." *Whop!* This is out of nowhere. So I went aboard. By this time, the one guy was on the bus, and I went after him. Oddly enough, there were police right there at the corner—which there usually were—so there weren't any blows struck, but we both went off to jail, and then we both had to pay a ten- or fifteen-dollar fine. But this was a little minor thing, but the police were around looking for that sort of thing all the time, because there was always some little—

Redman:

So the police there were cognizant of there being outbreaks of violence or fights and things like that.

02-00:13:16

Gray:

Oh, yes. Yeah.

Redman:

Okay. I see.

02-00:13:19

Gray:

Well, the blacks in the South, before the war, were really subjugated. They knew better than to whistle at a white woman or to push a white man. In some parts of the South, they even got off the sidewalk when a white man came by. When they got up to the North, where they didn't have that— Some of them just didn't know any better, and some of them were what, at that time, we would call uppity. I don't know whether you know that term or not.

Redman:

Can you tell me a little about that?

02-00:13:54

Gray:

That means that they'd come up from the South and they thought they were better than, or at least as good as the white people, and the white people at that time did not accept the blacks as that. Now, I've known blacks all my life, but— When I was a boy, they were the servants. We had black maids. My mother always had black maids. And we had black handymen. They were our friends. But I knew—I don't know how I knew—I knew there was a gulf between Bessie and me and Snowball and me. Now, Snowball was a black man who worked for my dad, and was married to one of our maids; I don't remember which one. In the depths of the Depression, Snowball came down the alley in his old junky truck, and he said, "You boys need a rabbit." He brought us this big fluffy rabbit, which we named Fluff. He gave it to us and

then came over and built a shed for the rabbit to live in. This is something he just did because he was a nice guy. The negroes that I knew as a boy were awfully nice; but on the other hand, they were probably nice because they knew they had to be subservient. This is going back halfway back to the Civil War. But racial relations are much better now than they were then.

Redman: Let me ask about another development that occurred during the war, is that a few months after December 7, the executive order is issued to take Japanese away from areas on the coast, to internment camps. Do you recall that happening at the time? Can you speak about that?

02-00:16:12

Gray: It was kept very quiet. Now, if you want to know about that, there are three people living right here [in this building] who were among those who—

Redman: Wow.

02-00:16:22

Gray: George and Lily; I don't know what their last name is.

Redman: I'd like to ask if that's something that then you've learned about.

02-00:16:27

Gray: It was kept very quiet. On West Coast, it was known about. The first that I knew about it was in my senior year at college, which would've been '42-43, we suddenly got a number of Japanese students, and there'd only been half a dozen on the entire Boulder campus before that time. Well, some of them were with the Japanese language school, which was a Navy school to teach Japanese language to Americans. But quite a few of them, it turned out as we talked to them, had been at Cal or Stanford. Because they were students, they could go inland to 1500 miles in; they weren't going to be signaling out at Point Reyes some night. So that's the first that I'd heard about it, and this was at least a year after it actually happened.

Redman: I'd like to hear about those students just for a minute, because they relate to Cal and the Stanford story, because a number of students, like you said, from out here transferred inland. Did that surprise you? So it seemed like that was the first you'd heard of it.

02-00:17:33

Gray: Well, what surprised me was the fact that I hadn't even heard about the detainment camps. A lot of people never did hear about the detainment camps. There's still people that are surprised that we had detainment camps. And there are people who would probably be surprised to learn that we had detainment camps for the Germans and the Italians, too. Did you know a lot of the old Italian families along the Carquinez Straits were interned?

Redman: I did not know that.



02-00:18:03

Gray: They'd been there for three generations and never bothered to get citizenships. Here's the old Italian grandma, speaking only Italian. I don't think that they were actually taken off to Manzanar or anyplace like that, but they were required to stay in their homes and couldn't go out on the streets.

Redman: Another thing that changes during the war that a number of women who were previously not—

02-00:18:33

Gray: That's right.

Redman: —in jobs at places like shipyards, en masse, start arriving at those types of industrial labor jobs. What was your experience in seeing more women, presumably, arrive at the Kaiser shipyard over time?

02-00:18:50

Gray: Well, my experience would not be apropos, because I had not really been working; I'd been going to college. So I was not aware of the fact that most factory jobs were men's jobs. Women wore high heels and dresses and sat in the office, and men wore the coveralls and went out and got dirty hands. I cannot say that any of this surprised me, because living in a small town— The ladies, or the women who worked at the New Mode Hosiery mills— And there were quite a few who worked in the hosiery mills. There were three or four hosiery mills in Kankakee. This was a job that a lot of girls right out of high school, which means they were sixteen years old and dropped out after their sophomore year, would go out and go to work at the New Mode or the Bear Brand or the Easy-Way. These were jobs that— They weren't like the foundry jobs, the quarrying jobs; they were women's jobs. But they were a step below women who went to— We had a lot of girls who went to business schools, and they would come out trained to type ninety words a minute and handle the business machines of the time. They were two steps higher than the mill hands.

Redman: Some historians have argued that the image of Rosie the Riveter, that has since become a symbol of women's labor during World War II, was somewhat overblown because women have always been in the workforce, to a certain extent.

02-00:20:41

Gray: Well, not in the heavy workforce.

Redman: So you would say that the war did encourage more women to that.

02-00:20:48

Gray: It pulled people of my family into it. I had a very lovely lady, an honorary aunt, who went to work in the shipyards, in the canvas shop. They cut canvas and sewed tops for lifeboats or tarps, anything like that, heavy. This is a lady who had never done anything any heavier than many mend a tear. But she

went to work in the shipyards. It was almost as if for the more genteel generation, they had more genteel jobs. The younger gals that were just out of school, they'd teach them welding or teach them burning or whatever. But the older ladies helping out with the war effort, some of the knit socks for the troops and some of them went to work in the shipyards and sewed lifeboat covers. Now, mind you, again, there's statistics and what I saw. I'm giving you empirical evidence, but I can't give you any absolute—

Redman: That's fine. I want to talk about what your life was like at the end of the war. Well, first, let's talk about the end of the war in Germany, when Germany surrenders. Did the perspective pretty quickly shift then to the Pacific? I imagine there wasn't much—

02-00:22:33

Gray: Yes, very quickly.

Redman: —of a sense of relief.

02-00:22:35

Gray: I remember VJ Day. Marched up and down—

Redman: By that point, had you come to the Bay Area?

02-00:22:45

Gray: Yes, I'd come to Chevron [in Richmond, California]. I left Vancouver not long after VE Day. As I told you, my brother'd been shot down. Well, he was recovered and got back, and then I quit my job up north to go back to Denver to visit with him. I had only been back to the Bay Area for about three days when VJ Day came.

Redman: Can you tell me what your reaction was when the announcement of the dropping of the atomic weapons, in particular— I understand that people didn't see images of what had happened.

02-00:23:22

Gray: No, no. All we knew, that it was a bigger bomb. All these pictures were taken many, many years later, and shown. This was very secret.

Redman: So what was your reaction to that at the time?

02-00:23:36

Gray: Well, my reaction was, we knew there was something going on up there. Because there was the three cities up in Central Washington, where they did a lot of the bomb work, the atomic cities. Then there was the secret city at—

Redman: Oakridge, Tennessee and Los Alamos.

02-00:23:57

Gray: Yes, Los Alamos, Oakridge. People generally knew there was something going on, but you just didn't ask too much because it was none of your business. "*Don't you know there's a war on?*" That was the catchphrase for five years.

Redman: Don't you know there's a war on? So that sort of phrase could discourage people from asking too many questions.

02-00:24:21

Gray: Yes. Well, "*Loose lips sink ships.*"

Redman: So that's another phrase.

02-00:24:27

Gray: Yes, don't say [things like], "Hey, my buddy shipped out last night," because there's a German spy sitting down on the corner and he's probably got a radio. There was an awful lot of propaganda. It was so juvenile that even those of us who went through it thought it was ridiculous, but there was somebody in the federal government that thought we've got to be treated as children.

Redman: So you thought some of the advertising and the slogans and the posters came off as patronizing?

02-00:25:01

Gray: I did.

Redman: Okay.

02-00:25:03

Gray: But it worked for Germany. It worked for Mussolini.

Redman: Tell me then about your reaction to the end of the war. Obviously, it's very shortly after the dropping of the second bomb. What was life like for you at that moment?

02-00:25:30

Gray: Well, I had just gotten a job at Chevron Research, which was a job that I wanted because I wanted to travel overseas, and I thought if I get a job [with] any of the Standard Oil Companies, I can transfer to Aramco or one of the overseas plants. So I had just started on my very first day, on my job at Chevron Research, on the swing shift.

Redman: In Richmond?

02-00:26:00

Gray: In Richmond. When I left the dormitory, the shipyard dormitory, the war was not over. When I got to work, half an hour later, they said, "Well, the war's over. Everybody take three days off." Well, this is great, because I'd just had

about ten days off; I was running out of money. I figured, well, I'm not going to get paid for that. So the first thing I did was get dressed and go over to San Francisco, and I marched up and down Market Street with all the mobs. I didn't know San Francisco at all, because I'd just been here for three or four days.

Redman: So was that a pretty amazing moment, then, to be able to see?

02-00:26:48

Gray: Well, the fact that the streets were full and there were these kissing lines of what they called the Treasure Island Commandos, if you've ever heard that term.

Redman: No. *Treasure Island Commandos*.

02-00:26:59

Gray: Yes. Well, these were the brand new Navy recruits. Treasure Island maybe housed 10,000 of them at a time, during the war. They got a twenty-four hour leave. Go. So most of them were pretty young and they formed the kissing lines in front of the St. Francis Hotel, and every woman that came by got kissed. Then the second or third day, they got a little nasty and had some windows smashed and cars broken. The thing is that they were called Treasure Island Commandos, but they really weren't; they were just newly recruited kids who had never been to the big city before. That's what, to me, it was.

Redman: Right.

02-00:27:52

Gray: But it also could be very nasty.

Redman: Some of these kids couldn't handle having too much of a good time, no supervision, in a big city.

02-00:28:01

Gray: Yeah.

Redman: Place me Richmond in 1945. There's been this massive influx we talked about, of people from around the country, into Richmond. Richmond grows and expands. In many ways, the city's not ready for it, it's not prepared.

02-00:28:26

Gray: There was no city.

Redman: There was no city [before the war].

02-00:28:30

Gray: No. There were vast amounts of Santa Fe lands, all the way from Point Richmond clear out to San Pablo Avenue, which is seven miles, was duplex housing apartments that were built.

Redman: At one point, there was a streetcar village of Native Americans from New Mexico around there. Do you recall that village, by any chance?

02-00:29:01

Gray: Yes. That was long gone. That was not a streetcar village, that was a group of track hands that worked on the Santa Fe Railroad. They were recruited from the Indian villages in Northern New Mexico. They actually had something set up as a pueblo, which is down— The area doesn't even exist anymore, but I remember seeing it the first couple of times that I walked around that area. It was a New Mexico pueblo; there's no doubt about it. It was run by— [pause to fix lights, conversation about turning on lights and continuing interview redacted]

Redman: Let me ask then, can you describe for me how Richmond changes after the war? What happens to Richmond after the war?

02-00:30:32

Gray: Well, El Cerrito, for example, was practically unbuilt. A lot of houses went up there. The public housing that's in Richmond today, Atchison Village and one other, are still there. But they were built as permanent, and fifty years later, they're still there. But the rows and rows of those apartments that were built, basically along Cutting Boulevard for six miles out from Point Richmond to San Pablo Avenue, and for about two or three blocks on each side of Cutting, were on, I think, railroad land. The government just went in and built these cookie-cutter apartments. Then there were others. There was another, Corbanisas Village, over in Berkeley [now University Village]. I think graduate students ended up living there.

Redman: So initially, it was wartime housing, that had to be converted?

02-00:31:36

Gray: Yeah. Yeah.

Redman: Okay. Can I ask a big question? And you can take a moment to think about this. I'd like to ask first about the Great Depression, then I'm going to ask the same question about World War II, if that's all right.

02-00:31:53

Gray: Sure.

Redman: The Great Depression, that experience, did that leave an impression on you, a particular kind of impression on you? Can you talk about that?

02-00:32:02

Gray: Well, as I said earlier in the interview, that we were poor but we didn't know it. And we were only poor in relationship to the fact that we no longer had colored servants, we no longer had Cadillacs. My grandfather, I'm sure, was a very wealthy man, because besides being a retired doctor, he owned large amounts of land. But I'm sure that he was hurting badly because if you did

have a good crop, the price of corn and wheat was so low that it didn't afford you to harvest. It's like the corn crop this year. It may be so bad that it'll cost you more to harvest it than you can sell it for.

Redman: But your recollection is that the droughts the previous years before 1929 were really harsh and bad.

02-00:32:35

Gray: Oh, the droughts, the Dust Bowl years broke a lot of people. There were people who, if they'd had just normal years, would've been okay. But when you have two or three years in a row, nothing comes up. And you don't put a crop in for free. That's something a lot of people think, well, the farmer just sits back and it grows. But you've got to—

Redman: You've got to invest in that—

02-00:33:15

Gray: Well, I still have one farm. It costs, oh, close to \$50,000 a year to put in a crop.

Redman: Wow.

02-00:33:26

Gray: That's just to put the crop in. Then you still hope it's going to rain and you're going to get a good crop.

Redman: Right. Now let's turn to World War II. What sort of an impact, then, did World War II have on your life? [When you think of] those years, what do you think [about]?

02-00:33:44

Gray: I would say just sort of normal. Wars were going on all the time. We grew up when the Fourth of July parade or the Memorial Day parade would have a small carload of Civil War veterans. The Spanish-American War veterans could still put a platoon out on the street to march in the parade. The American Legion had an award-winning 400-piece drum and bugle corps. For a small town, we could put on a pretty [good] parade. I knew all these veterans and we were always told, don't ask the veterans about anything, because they don't want to talk about it; but they all liked to go down to the American Legion and talk about it. Also growing up, it was the period of the growth of Mussolini. Hitler came a little later. But that was at the time when we sent General Smedley Butler and the Marines into occupy Haiti and occupying Santa Domingo and occupying Guatemala. We were constantly the great colossus of the north, constantly meddling. I'm sure you're more aware of this than I am because you're much closer to your books. But I was certainly aware of Mussolini invading Ethiopia. We didn't have TV at that time, but we always went to the Saturday movie.

Redman: So you were aware of these developments as they were happening and it was hard not to think of this as a [regular occurrence].

02-00:35:49

Gray: Yes. Yes, well, the thing is, our war developed between the advent of the first movie cameras and TV, so that if we went to the Saturday matinee movie, there'd be pictures of— These were Italian troops that were leaping out of the third-story windows so they could be paratroopers, bombing the poor Ethiopians. There was a barnstorming black pilot at that time, [a] self-appointed colonel, and he was going to Ethiopia and lead his air force, his private air force, against Mussolini. Well, of course, he was a big— well, a thirty-day sensation. But it turned out he couldn't even fly a plane. But the thing is that this period was not a peaceful period. There was the Balkan wars. The United States had troops in Siberia, as late as 1929, I believe. Most people didn't even know we had troops in— But we were supporting the whites, I guess, which— Anyway, we had troops there. And I think the British did not pull out of Murmansk until about the same time.

Redman: How did you get the nickname *Uncle Bob*?

02-00:37:23

Gray: Well, because I have been Uncle Bob for most of my life. My niece, who is now seventy years old, arranged for me to come in here when I was unable to arrange it for myself. And undoubtedly, she calls me Uncle Bob. But I have been Uncle Bob to four or five generations of my friends' children. I never had any children myself, but I've had four or five different close friends that all the kids call me Uncle Bob, even the third generation. But I have been Uncle Bob ever since I was about twenty years old. I don't know, it just stuck.

Redman: It stuck.

02-00:38:04

Gray: I like it because it differentiates me from the other two Bobs who live here. So if you say Uncle Bob, they know it's not the Bob that lives over here and shows movies, and it's not the Bob down here that growls.

Redman: With that, I'd like to ask, is there anything else that you'd like to share about World War II?

02-00:38:33

Gray: Well, there were 20-million people from the United States that were in it; but there were still 100-million who weren't. That's a big thing. We talk about the war and the war effort, but I think basically, except for the rationing, things went on pretty much as they had all along. Because there was rationing, but before that, we'd been too damn poor to buy anything anyway. So my feeling was that things were just pretty ordinary. Of course, part of that is because this is the time I was maturing. I was between being a high school kid and being a full adult.

Redman: So you see some of that [continuity].

02-00:39:29

Gray: Oh, sure.

Redman: Yes. Well, with that, I'd like to say thank you very much for sitting down.

02-00:39:33

Gray: Well, thank you for listening to me.

Redman: It was great. Thank you.