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Elson Nash

Rosie the Riveter  
World War II Home Front Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by  
Sarah Selvidge  
in 2010

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Elson Nash

**Table of Contents—Elson Nash**

Interview 1: August 10, 2010

Audiofile 1

1

Upbringing and childhood in Louisiana—born in Palmetto, moved in second grade to live on grandfather's plantation—attended one-room schoolhouse until fifth grade—moved to bigger school with three teachers that was originally a whites-only school, but blacks attended seventh grade—drafted in 1944, but let out with hernia and broken nose after two months—worked in defense plant in New Orleans—studied arc welding at Xavier-- moved to California aged 20 on train with seven friends—impressions of New Orleans and how luxurious it was after rural life—started as common laborer, and needed special release to go to welding school—friends already in California showed him how to get around—lived in dormitory in Richmond—comparison of segregation in California and Louisiana by unions and jobs—worked as welder at Kaiser shipyards alongside women January to August 1945—glad to have good work and opportunities in Richmond, but thought he would return to the family—hired as post office clerk after the war—finished school at University High for veterans—drafted again in 1948, but put in reserves—took exam and became supervisor at post office—noticed big change in civil rights and integration of the Postal Service—met his wife because his sister married her brother—bought a house on Ninth Street in Berkeley and raised three children—studied real estate and invested—distrust of local public school system failing black students—his children all got master's degrees—describes importance of education throughout his life—notes that the Palmetto school is finally integrated

Interview 1: August 10, 2010  
Begin Audiofile 1 08-10-2010.mp3

Selvidge: This is Sarah Selvidge, interviewing Elson Nash. And we're here in Berkeley I'd like to start the interview talking about your early lifetime. Your family, where you grew up. If you can tell me, just to begin, when you were born and where.

01-00:00:51

Nash: Well, I was born in Louisiana, a small town by the name of Palmetto, Louisiana, and grew up in the area, which is more or less a small town and rural area. And that's where I grew up, went to school. Oh, then later on, as I grew up, I left Palmetto, started to look for other places to work and live.

Selvidge: Okay. So tell me about your parents. Did your parents have jobs or did they work on a farm? You said it's a rural area.

01-00:01:54

Nash: They did a little of both. My dad actually grew up on a farm, but he later worked on jobs. And he was an entrepreneur. He had a grocery store, would rent houses, and he worked a job and raised ten kids.

Selvidge: Ten kids, wow. So where are you in the siblings? Somewhere in the middle?

01-00:02:34

Nash: In the middle. I'm number five.

Selvidge: Number five. Okay. And it was boys and girls, I guess.

01-00:02:42

Nash: Five of each.

Selvidge: Five of each. Oh, half and half.

01-00:02:44

Nash: Five boys and five girls, yes.

Selvidge: Okay. So can you just tell me then about where you and your siblings grew up, in the house that you lived in and the school that you went to in Palmetto?

01-00:03:03

Nash: Yes. It was many houses, not just one. And we lived on a farm, and then we moved from one place to the other. And finally, let's see, in about the second grade, we moved to a little place that's called Walker, Louisiana. And then from there, we moved to my grandfather's plantation. And I was in the third grade at that time, and I stayed there until we finished the fifth grade. And that's the maximum that kids in that particular area could go to school, because it was a one-room schoolhouse. Teacher taught from primer—we didn't have kindergarten—primer through the fifth grade. And then as my

father was an entrepreneur, he had bought three acres of land closer to the town, Palmetto. And that was a big deal. We had three schoolteachers. Now, you want me to tell you about me, but do you want me to tell you about growing up, the situation and what the situation was where I grew up?

Selvidge: Yeah.

01-00:04:48

Nash: You sure you want to know all that?

Selvidge: I do.

01-00:04:50

Nash: Yeah?

Selvidge: I do. Well, one of the things that we're interested in is people's personal histories and how those are shaped by the situations they grew up in; by the historical changes, by things like the schools, teachers, other things, politics, things happening in the towns they lived in. Yeah, both of those things are very interesting.

01-00:05:20

Nash: Well, you're aware of what Louisiana was in 1940, 1941, '42?

Selvidge: Well, not as aware as you are, so you should tell me more about it.

01-00:05:32

Nash: Well, strictly segregated. Naturally, the school I mentioned was a segregated school.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:05:42

Nash: And then as we moved to the big time, there were three teachers. And they taught to the seventh grade. And it was a schoolhouse that wouldn't be tolerated now. It was leaning like so. It was originally the white school. And the whites could go to that school and finish high school. And the blacks could go to the seventh grade. The school was leaning. [laughs] It wouldn't be tolerated now for anywhere. Anyway, I finished the seventh grade. And then I went to work— Well, no. Yeah, I went to work during the summer. Then my dad boarded me out to the parish seat, which is Opelousas, Louisiana, for the eighth grade. So I skipped a couple years. And then I think between eighteen and finishing the eighth grade— And then when I finished the eighth grade, because I was skipped a few years, I was drafted into the military, 1944. And I stayed in the military for, I think, two months. And I had a broken nose and a hernia; they let me out. That's why I got out of the military. And then at eighteen I went to New Orleans and went to work in a defense plant. The war was going on at that particular time. And first I worked as a laborer, and then I was suggested by one of my supervisors to take welding. So I went to Xavier

University and I studied arc welding. And that I carried with me to California. At that time I was twenty years old, when I came to California.

Selvidge: Wow. Yeah, let me put it on the camera. Let's see if that focuses. There we go. That's neat. It says "qualified American Bureau of Shipping welder."

01-00:08:26

Nash: Yes, right, right. And so that was January, 1945, when I came to California.

Selvidge: When you came to California. So let me just make sure I understand. When you were drafted to the military, did you go abroad, or did you remain in the United States?

01-00:08:47

Nash: I remained in the United States at that time. Yes, I remained in the United States.

Selvidge: And because of the injuries, you never went abroad. You served—

01-00:08:57

Nash: Not on that particular induction into the military.

Selvidge: Okay.

01-00:09:04

Nash: And then I came to California, and I went to work in the shipyard.

Selvidge: So you came to California from New Orleans, then?

01-00:09:14

Nash: No. No, no, no, no.

Selvidge: No. Okay, explain to me again.

01-00:09:16

Nash: See, my family lived in Palmetto. I went to New Orleans, and I worked. But I'd go home often. It's only about 140 miles. But when I came to California, I left from Palmetto on the railroad train. People didn't fly as much. I mean, no one flew as much at that particular time, 1945. It was about seven of us left Louisiana and come into California on the train.

Selvidge: Seven people from your family?

01-00:09:51

Nash: No. No, friends.

Selvidge: Oh, friends and—

01-00:09:53

Nash: Friends and people in the neighborhood. See, you asked for community or your—

Selvidge: Yeah.

01-00:09:58

Nash: Yeah. Well, that was a community. But here, it was just a city that—

Selvidge: Sure.

01-00:10:04

Nash: Yeah, right. That was a community. And we had people from— We had little areas we would call Baldwin. That's where my grandfather's plantation was. And then there was another area they called Waxie. And there was another one-room school, but it was older than the one in Baldwin.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:10:33

Nash: The parish came to my uncles and my mother and dad and said, well, you had a good corn crop this year. If you sell enough corn to build half of a school, we'll give you the rest, and we'll build you a one-room school. That's the way we got the school to the fifth grade. And this is a repeat. Then after the fifth grade, I went and moved to Palmetto, which they called a town. Let's see. Okay, then we go back to when I left for California.

Selvidge: Before we get to California, can I ask what your impressions were of New Orleans, compared to the rural areas you had known as a younger boy?

01-00:11:32

Nash: [laughs] Well, it was like leaving the country and a small town. See, I'd lived both of them in my grandfather's farm and whatnot, and a small town. And it was leaving the country, small area, going to the city. And hey, that was a big deal.

Selvidge: Yeah, I bet.

01-00:11:56

Nash: We had streetcars and lights and indoor toilets and stuff like that. [laughs]

Selvidge: Luxuries, huh?

01-00:12:05

Nash: Yes. So it was, well, an improvement, as far as the actual living's concerned, yeah. Any other questions on that area?

Selvidge: Well, what other things do you remember about New Orleans? Did you go out much? Did you listen to music? I know there's a lot of music in New Orleans.



01-00:12:39

Nash: No, I was too country. I didn't blend in with the big-city people at the time. [they laugh] No, I went to work, I came home and talked to my cousin, my sisters and whatnot. Every couple weeks, I'd go to Palmetto.

Selvidge: So you maintained a lot of social ties with your family and people you knew already.

01-00:13:02

Nash: Oh, yes, oh yeah. Oh, yes, social ties with my family. And I had sisters living in New Orleans. See, I was number five, and they were older. My second oldest sister, she was there, and she sort of prepared for us to come out of the country and come to the city. And jobs were plentiful at that time because World War II was going on at that time.

Selvidge: Right. Right. So it was easy for you to find a job when you got there.

01-00:13:33

Nash: Oh, yes, there was no problem getting a job because if you were warm, they would hire you.

Selvidge: Yeah. And what jobs did you do in New Orleans then?

01-00:13:43

Nash: First I did laborer work, just a common laborer. And then, as I mentioned before, I had a little supervisor; he says to me, "Why don't you go to Xavier and take welding? You could make more money." And this is the story, I'll tell you the story.

Selvidge: Please do.

01-00:14:03

Nash: I guess you'd maybe want to hear the story.

Selvidge: Yeah.

01-00:14:06

Nash: He was the supervisor. He was white. And we would work overtime, and then he would take us home. So he was going to give me a boost, so he took me into the personnel office and led me to the personnel manager and said, "This young man wants to go to Xavier and take welding." And he came back and his face was red. And he says, "Oh, well." He says, "The manager said if we take you from laborer, we won't have anybody to labor, and send him to welding school." So when he told me that, I said, "Okay." And then I had been in the Army for two months, so they couldn't draft me again. So I started thinking. I said, "Hey, I'm going to quit." I left. And so when I came back from Palmetto to New Orleans, I got a letter from the absentee department, from a person with human relation skills, et cetera. And he asked me to call the number that he sent to me for being absent from work. So I called the

number and he says, "Where you been?" I says, "Well, I been to Palmetto." I said, "I help my dad out on the farm and stuff like that." But I wasn't particularly helping my dad, I was schooling. [they laugh] Anyway, he said, "Well, we need a lot of help here, too." He said, "Would you come to work when you come out to see me?" I said, "No. I don't want to labor anymore. I want to go to welding school." And he says, "Okay." So he wrote me a letter and he says, "Take this letter to the personnel office." And the letter he wrote, he says, "This young man really wants to go to welding school." You needed a release from your job before you could go to school. You see, labor was tight.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:16:27

Nash: Went to the same guy who would not let me go before, and he kept me there from nine o'clock to after lunch, just sitting, waiting. And finally he came and dictate a letter to the secretary, to release me to go to school, welding school. So I went to welding school, and then I went back to Higgins, welding. And I think I made a little more money, but not much.

Selvidge: And is Higgins the same place you were working before?

01-00:16:59

Nash: Yes, Higgins was the shipbuilding company.

Selvidge: The ship— Okay.

01-00:17:01

Nash: Shipbuilder in New Orleans.

Selvidge: Shipbuilder in New Orleans.

01-00:17:02

Nash: Right. Oh, yeah, went to the same place, yeah. And I think I was supposed to work there for, oh, maybe a year or maybe a few months. And then I went to Palmetto. And I had a cousin who had been to California. And he was in the Navy, and when he got out, he says, "Let's go to California." So when I left Palmetto, that's when I came to California. So that is the background, before I came to California.

Selvidge: Yeah. Okay. So you came to California with experience already, welding.

01-00:17:45

Nash: As a welder.

Selvidge: As a welder.

01-00:17:47

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: In the shipyards.

01-00:17:48

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: And you came on the train with some cousins and other acquaintances?

01-00:17:54

Nash: Cousin, friends, yeah. And again, the war was going on, 1945, real hot. Because I think Germany surrendered around about that same six-month period. And when we get off the train, we had friends who were here, and they kind of show you around, take you to the employment office and take you to the dormitories where we lived. And then there were some friends who had apartments. Most of them, they'd come from Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas. Is your family from where? Where's your family from?

Selvidge: My family's from— Well, some from California.

01-00:18:56

Nash: You're all California.

Selvidge: No, not all California. My mom's family came to California in the 1920s.

01-00:19:04

Nash: Oh, okay. Okay. [laughs]

Selvidge: And my dad's family moved around a lot. Detroit area, New Jersey.

01-00:19:11

Nash: Okay, okay. Because we met a lot of people from Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, in the shipyards in Richmond.

Selvidge: Yeah. So tell me about when you arrived in Richmond. You said you lived in the dormitory?

01-00:19:29

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: And were those the ones that were recently built, around 1944? Is that right, do you think?

01-00:19:39

Nash: Well, they may have been built before that.

Selvidge: Oh, okay.

01-00:19:43

Nash: Yeah, right, because there were some people here that had been here since like 1942. And then as families would come in, and they could find those who

were here the longest, and they could sort of show them around. Yes. Then there were people who had extra room; they would rent you a room.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:20:12

Nash: And that was sort of moving up from the dormitories a little bit. We would live with friends or relatives. They'd rent you the room.

Selvidge: And when you lived in the dormitories, was it just a bunch of beds? No kitchens or any kind of—

01-00:20:31

Nash: Oh, no, no. These were facilities prepared for military workers.

Selvidge: Oh, okay.

01-00:20:37

Nash: You had a cafeteria. You'd get up in the morning, you could go to the cafeteria. You could get three meals a day.

Selvidge: Oh, okay. And one of the things I'm curious about, especially since you mentioned very strict segregation of Louisiana in the 1940s, is for you to describe if there was much of a difference, in terms of the way that Richmond was segregated or not.

01-00:21:14

Nash: Definitely was.

Selvidge: Yeah?

01-00:21:15

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: Okay. Tell me more about your experience of that. Was it surprising to you?

01-00:21:22

Nash: Well, it was not as bad as Louisiana, but you had a segregated area of housing. And when I left New Orleans and came to California, I says, "Hey, welders are going to be a dime a dozen after the war." I said, "I think I want to become a machinist." And so when I went to the employment office, I said, "I'd like to become a machinist." And the people at the employment office says, "We can not get the union to accept negroes into the machinist trade." So I had to stick with welding.

Selvidge: Because of the segregation of the unions.

01-00:22:15

Nash: Well, no, they both worked together.

Selvidge: They worked together, right. [they laugh] Not *only* that.

01-00:22:20

Nash: Yeah. Yeah, they worked together. I'll tell you how they worked together.

Selvidge: Please do.

01-00:22:28

Nash: After the shipyards closed—and I can probably come back to this—I decided I wanted to become an automobile mechanic. So we went to Tech High. They taught automobile mechanics to veterans, et cetera, after 1945. And when we got an apprenticeship, we would go to get a job as an automobile mechanic. And the employer—say Ford, Chevrolet—would say, well, look, you go to the union, we'll take you in. We go to the union, you said, you get a job, and we'll put you in the union. In other words, that was another obstacle. It was another segregation type of situation. Now, you're not going to believe this, but I'm going to tell you. You see the Key System buses running up and down?

Selvidge: Uh-huh.

01-00:22:23

Nash: Before the end of World War II, they would not hire a black person as a bus driver. Did you know that?

Selvidge: I didn't realize that.

01-00:23:34

Nash: You didn't realize that.

Selvidge: No.

01-00:23:35

Nash: Did not. No. Not until later on, after the war was over, when we got— Even during World War II, San Francisco— No. San Francisco had a few; they did, they had a few people operating the Muni over there. But not the Key System here.

Selvidge: Not here.

01-00:23:54

Nash: Anyway, that's the way the unions segregated. I'm getting back to in the shipyards, so if you've got questions along there, I'll be ready to answer the questions.

Selvidge: Yeah. So you started to tell me about when you were looking for a job in the shipyards. You wanted to be a machinist.

01-00:24:24

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: And that didn't work out, so you were a welder at the Kaiser Shipyards, as well.

01-00:24:29

Nash: Right, right, right, yeah. I was a welder at the Kaiser Shipyard, and they had medical care and all that. They were really a great system to work for.

Selvidge: Yeah, that's one of the things I want to ask about. Since you did work at two different shipyards, you can compare, in some ways, the culture of the different shipyards, the Higgins and Kaiser.

01-00:24:52

Nash: Well, the only big difference was the segregation in New Orleans was still like the South. Here in the shipyards, well, same thing. You went to work as a welder, and it's really no big change. You work eight hours a day, six days a week.

Selvidge: Yeah. Did you work with women in both places, with female welders?

01-00:25:24

Nash: Oh, yes, there were. Oh, yes. Well, not New Orleans, but here, you had both female and male welding, working, chipping, and what not.

Selvidge: Did that seem different to you in any way?

01-00:25:42

Nash: Well, yes. Oh, yes, you could recognize the improvement. You can imagine growing up in a segregated Louisiana, and then here, where they're segregated but it's not as pronounced as it was in Louisiana. But there was still quite a bit of segregation, sure. Yeah. Okay?

Selvidge: I have a specific question, too. Do you remember the Port Chicago explosion?

01-00:26:15

Nash: I read about it. I was in New Orleans at the time.

Selvidge: Oh, so you came here after.

01-00:26:19

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: Right. Can you tell me what you remember about even just reading about it? Did it have an impact on you, coming to the shipyards out here, where it had happened?

01-00:26:32

Nash: No, it didn't. Well, no, I didn't think too much about that. Remember, I'm nineteen years old. So such things go in and out, yeah. Okay. Then I worked in the shipyard until August. Wasn't that August 6, 1945, [laughs] a couple days ago? We've got a friend, a Japanese friend two doors down in our

present neighborhood. He used to go crazy every time the day came around, August 6, when they dropped the bomb over in Japan.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:27:10

Nash: But anyway, I worked in the shipyard until that particular time, and then had to go out looking for other jobs. Okay, you want to get back to World War II? What's your question?

Selvidge: Yeah. Let's get back to World War II. One thing I wonder— I know you said you were pretty young during the time you worked in the shipyards.

01-00:27:33

Nash: Yes.

Selvidge: So I wonder, did you have a lot of feeling that you were contributing to the war effort and that you were helping the country? Or was it more a job you were doing for a pay check?

01-00:27:50

Nash: Well, it was a little bit of both. It was some of both. Some of both, yeah. Yeah, right, right, right. It was a real good job, and you kind of thought about going back to Louisiana later on. But it just grew on me, where I says, "Hey." People who were a little bit older here, they said, "Oh, you're crazy if you go back to Louisiana." [laughs]

Selvidge: So the whole time, you thought maybe you would go back to Louisiana eventually?

01-00:28:21

Nash: Part of the time, yes, I thought I would go back, yes.

Selvidge: And was that mostly to be with your family, or for other reasons, as well?

01-00:28:32

Nash: Well, I guess to be with your family, because at that particular time, I had a mother and a father and two grandmothers there, and cousins and whatnot. But to make a living, hey, it wasn't in Louisiana. I knew I had to get out of Louisiana to make a decent living. Okay.

Selvidge: So there were more opportunities in California at that time.

01-00:28:57

Nash: For me.

Selvidge: Yes. Yes.

01-00:28:58

Nash: Yeah, there were. Yeah, there were more opportunities. But we had to look for other work after we left the shipyards. So I want you to finish with the shipyards, and then I can go on with my life, if you're interested in my life.

Selvidge: Okay. I am. I am, very much. So another question I have about working at the shipyards is— You said that in New Orleans, you didn't really participate in the big city life. Did you do that more in Richmond? Was there entertainment or sort of other things that you—

01-00:29:36

Nash: No. No. No, no. It was how I was brought up in my family that, see, I didn't know how to dance. [they laugh] And I was still kind of— I was with a lot of people who were probably the same as I was, as far as education, et cetera.

Selvidge: So what did you do, then, in your free time, other than— You would work the eight hour shifts.

01-00:30:15

Nash: You had one day off.

Selvidge: Ah. Okay.

01-00:30:18

Nash: And I worked at night. And we'd get together, we'd talk. And we'd go to a show and stuff like that. As I said, with friends and cousins. But social life was sort of— I didn't do much socializing.

Selvidge: Okay. So you worked then at the shipyards about a year in Richmond, right?

01-00:30:49

Nash: No.

Selvidge: Oh, more?

01-00:30:50

Nash: Less than a year.

Selvidge: Oh, less than a year, even.

01-00:30:51

Nash: I came in January, and they dropped the bomb in August.

Selvidge: Oh, okay.

01-00:30:54

Nash: Six months.

Selvidge: Yeah. Not too long. Okay, so then why don't you tell me— I'm very interested in the transition from working during the war to after the war, and



the challenges that you faced, once there wasn't the abundance of wartime opportunity.

01-00:31:14

Nash: Well, yeah, we started looking for job. And we went to the cannery; we didn't get a job. So my friend and I, the one that was in the Navy, we went out together looking for work. And we'd got to— welding. "What kind of welder are you?" I'd say, "A shipyard welder." "No, we're not hiring a shipyard welder." And then I saw a former schoolteacher on the bus. He says, "Go to the post office." He said, "They're hiring in the post office."

Selvidge: A former schoolteacher of yours?

01-00:31:46

Nash: He was a schoolteacher in Louisiana.

Selvidge: Oh, in Louisiana. Wow.

01-00:31:49

Nash: Yeah, Louisiana. But yeah, he left school teaching and came here during the war. So I went to the post office, and I got hired as a indefinite war service clerk, IWS clerk. So that's where I started my last career.

Selvidge: What does that mean, that category, indefinite war service?

01-00:32:15

Nash: That's people hired during World War II. And see, the war had just ended, so they're still— just the tail end of that type of hiring they were doing, indefinite war service clerk. So I worked sorting mail and stuff like that. And then there was an examination given for a career later on, from late '45, '46. And the best thing that ever happened to me, I failed it. [they laugh] Eighth grade education, and I failed it.

Selvidge: Right.

01-00:32:56

Nash: And when the Russians wouldn't allow us to go into Berlin, in Germany— They had this airlift. So we had to fly into Berlin for that time, and then Truman started the draft again. And oh, incidentally, I had had my hernia fixed. And I really didn't get my nose fixed until a long time afterwards. But anyway, I started school. I was registered to go to school. These are the kind of things that you don't see happening all the time. But there was this schoolteacher. She was white, and she was registering me for the draft that Truman started. And I says—I'm about twenty then, maybe twenty-one—I said, "Is there a place where an adult can finish high school?" She says, "Yeah." She put the paper down. She says, "If you go over to University High School, they're establishing a school there for veterans, and you can finish school. You don't have to mix with the kids." [Selvidge laughs] So I said, "Great." So I started school again. And oh, I knew I had to prepare to pass the

examination. And I was pretty good at math and whatnot. Everything they threw at me in Palmetto, I could handle it easily, so I thought I was a little smart; but I wasn't. [they laugh] But anyway, I started school. And what happened? I got drafted again.

Selvidge: Again. Oh, so you started school around Richmond, is that right? Or in Berkeley?

01-00:34:51

Nash: Oh, no, University High School in Oakland. It later became a junior college. That's on Martin Luther King. University High School. And it was a school they had developed for veterans who had had—that their service interrupted their schooling, why, they could finish high school. And that's where I started school. And I must've gone to school about six months, when I got drafted again. At that particular time, I went in the Army. I stayed in 1948— Drafted '48, I went in 1949. I think about thirteen months. And Louis [A.] Johnson was Secretary of the Defense. He said, "Oh, we don't need you draftees. We'll put them in reserve for five years." So I took off. I came back, I continued going to school. But I went to sleep in the Army with a book on how to pass that post office examination. [laughs]

Selvidge: Oh, so you were studying the whole time.

01-00:36:08

Nash: I was studying the whole time. So I got out, and I passed the exam. And then I was still working as a substitute, because when I got drafted, I was still this IWS clerk. So when I got back, I went back. So then I took the test, I passed it. And six months later, I was appointed career. And I continued going to school.

Selvidge: Oh, you did?

01-00:36:38

Nash: They started giving examinations for supervisor. I said, "Hey, I'd like to be a supervisor." So I studied personnel management, passed the test, and was promoted to supervisor. I was promoted up the line and to the position of manager of personnel management. That position was equal to the position of the manager in New Orleans who refused to give me a release to go to welder school. There was great opportunity in the Postal Service for minority people at the time.

Selvidge: So you feel like you had experienced a change. You noticed a change in the—

01-00:37:39

Nash: Oh, there was a *big* change.

Selvidge: Big change.

01-00:37:41

Nash: Oh, yes.

Selvidge: Now, tell me more about that. What were some of the things that changed that you observed after the Civil Rights legislation?

01-00:37:50

Nash: At the time Postmasters were appointed by the congressman. He appointed the first minority postmaster in San Francisco, who was Chinese. There were big changes in the Postal Service after Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights law that Kennedy started. Therefore after forty years of service I retired as Manager of Employee Services, which was two levels below the position of Postmaster of San Francisco.

Selvidge: Wow.

01-00:39:07

Nash: In San Francisco.

Selvidge: That's great.

01-00:39:15

Nash: Is that the end of the story? [laughs]

Selvidge: Oh, no, we have— So you've told me about your career, but you haven't told me much about the more personal and family things I'm also interested in.

01-00:39:30

Nash: *My personal and family?*

Selvidge: Yeah. When did you meet your wife? Did she work? And things like that I'd be interested in.

01-00:39:39

Nash: All right. Okay. My brother-in-law was from Palmetto, and he married my wife's sister. My wife came to visit, and I met her. And they were from Yuma, Arizona.

Selvidge: Oh, yeah?

01-00:39:51

Nash: Yeah. And she was in college. And I says, "Oh—" Well, wait a minute. Let's see, how to get there. Yeah, I was in the Post Office, I'd been in the Army and I'd gotten out. Yeah, right. Right, right, right. So I had a job there. So we got married. Oh, at that time, you could buy a house. If you were a Post Office employee, you could get a house with, oh, a little money down. So I bought a house on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, for—

Selvidge: In Berkeley?

01-00:40:31

Nash: In Berkeley. For \$9,500.

Selvidge: Oh, wow. [they laugh]

01-00:40:38

Nash: I just had a bathroom put in here in this house, and I paid \$16,000 for it.

Selvidge: [laughs] Yeah.

01-00:40:42

Nash: Anyway, I bought a house. And that was one of the things I had in my mind; before I got married, I was going to buy a house. I wanted the house paid for before I got married. Yeah. And [laughs] the young lady I courted from grade school. And I said, “Well, you didn’t want to wait for me. You didn’t want to wait till I bought a house.” She got married. [laughter] Anyway, when I got married I had a house. We had three kids. And after I got married, as I was going to school over here, I went to Merritt— In other words, Merritt became a junior college. I went there so long they thought I was a teacher. [they laugh] Anyway, I studied real estate. I didn’t do well at selling real estate, but I invested in real estate and did okay.

We had three kids. And well, this is a little reflection on the University of California, but it was there. It was there. Oh, people in my group, you didn’t find many of the black people graduating from the University of California. So I was determined that my kids would qualify to go to Berkeley, to UC Berkeley. I didn’t trust Berkeley public schools because they were not teaching black people the way they should have. I’ll give you an example. I had a cousin, my cousin that had got out of the Navy. And his wife— we lived across the street. The house I bought was across the street from him. His wife’s sister came, and she had to go to high school. And she came from Louisiana, from a parochial school. And he worked in the daytime, I worked at night. So he said, “Would you take her to Berkeley High to have her enrolled in Berkeley High?” So I took her. But fortunately for me, I had been going to junior college, and I knew something about the school system, the teachers and what not. So I took her to the counselor to take her into high school. He said, “What do you want to do?” She says, “I’d like to become a nurse.” He says, “Well, you came from the inferior schools down in Louisiana. I doubt you can keep up. We train the kids here for the University of California. I doubt if you can keep up.” So he says, “Well, you can take typing, you can take swimming and so on.” I said, “What do you mean? No math? No history or anything like that?” So he gave her a little better program.” The girl ended up becoming, I think, a typist. She got married. My oldest son—I don’t have his picture—he was six months old. I says, “Ah-ha. My kids will not go to Berkeley public schools.”

Selvidge: Because they didn’t expect for the African American students go do well.

01-00:44:17

Nash:

That's correct. That's correct. And believe it or not, I sent my kids to St. Joseph parochial school. All three of my kids, they went to Oakland parochial schools or primary, high school over here at St. Mary's Catholic High School. I don't know if you know about it. And then there was a girl's high school. My daughter went to girl's high school. So she says, "I knew I wasn't going to get to go to high school," because she wanted to be with boys and so forth. Said, "I didn't even ask." So she finished UC. She finished high school, then she went to UC. Both of my sons went to St. Mary's. They finished high school, went to UC. I wouldn't do that to them again. That was kind of tough. But I said, "Okay, you're going to be prepared to go to university." And they finished. They all finished and they all got a masters degree after graduating from UC Berkeley.

Selvidge:

Wow.

01-00:45:22

Nash:

My daughter's husband was two grades in front of her, but they weren't courting at the time, in grammar school. He went in the military, and they sent him to medical school. And he is a physician. Well, they got married. I think he was still in medical school. He was a first lieutenant in medical school [laughs] when they got married. And my oldest son, his wife taught school. She's still teaching school over here. Unfortunately, my older son passed away—

Selvidge:

Oh, I'm sorry.

01-00:46:03

Nash:

—but they had two beautiful daughters. And they're in school now. But my daughter-in-law was of the school system. Not the school system in Berkeley. If you were not astute enough to notice the discrimination, well, hey, they ran right through you, right over you.

Selvidge:

Right.

01-00:46:25

Nash:

But my daughter-in-law's parents were educated. They were teachers. I think her father was a PhD. But anyway, they were able to guide our granddaughters through Berkeley High, because they could. They've got a system like in Berkeley; I think they sort of put it to where you live, how much money you make and whatnot, you can take this course or that course. Well, I avoided that with my kids by not sending them to public school. I still don't have any confidence in the public schools! They don't teach like they should. Think of this counselor. Here's a counselor talking to a girl, "Hey, you ought to be—" What is that, a nurse or something? "I doubt if you can keep up." Well, about like that. And not everybody was like that, because think of the lady when I was registered for the Army. She says, "Hey, yeah. There's a

place you can go to school.” Those are the kind of things that you don’t find in the public school system.

Now, at Cal, [laughs] my oldest son, he was sort of pushy. [they laugh] And he’d tell them what class he wanted. He said, “I want this, so-and-so and so-and-so.” And a funny thing happened with him. Well, anyway, I gave the guy a job. I gave a lot of people jobs.

Selvidge: So this gentleman was a professor and he wanted a Christmastime job?

01-00:49:32

Nash: This was a professor. He’s probably a— oh, just a casual professor. I don’t know. He was not a tenured professor, no.

Selvidge: Oh, okay.

01-00:49:43

Nash: No, no. No, no. I think he said he and his wife had the job— I think it was like a temporary job at Cal, and they probably got him to do certain things.

Selvidge: Sure, okay.

01-00:49:55

Nash: But anyway. [laughs] And my son probably deserved a C, because the other two, they were always out front. Yeah, right, right. And oh, I wish I had a picture of my young son. The President visited his job. He has a job in Washington, D.C., where he parcels out money to public schools.

Selvidge: Oh, okay.

01-00:50:19

Nash: Yeah. So he’s one position from the Postmaster— No, his boss reports to the Postmaster. Wait a minute. I’m sorry, to the President. [laughs]

Selvidge: To the President. I thought as much. Or I’m a little confused. Okay.

01-00:50:36

Nash: His boss reports to the President.

Selvidge: Reports to the President. But he works in education, your son?

01-00:50:42

Nash: He is a grant donor. In other words, the money going out to public schools and from the federal government. He works for the department that helps parcel out the money and go and see what they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing with the money.

Selvidge: I see.

01-00:51:03

Nash: That's my youngest son.

Selvidge: Yeah.

01-00:51:04

Nash: Yeah, he was always out front, yeah.

Selvidge: That's great.

01-00:51:07

Nash: He was honor roll at St. Mary's. My daughter, she was sharp, too. She said, "But Cal is hard." She said, "It's real hard." [laughs]

Selvidge: Yeah. Yeah.

01-00:51:14

Nash: Yeah. But anyway, they came from high school and went to Cal and finished.

Selvidge: That's great. So it seems like education has really been important throughout your life and your children's.

01-00:51:29

Nash: Okay, I'll tell you how and what it was in my life. My dad was a minister. And when we were coming up, when we were growing up in school, he would find a person that'd had been to high school, actually would graduate; he taught us pre-kindergarten. He had them to come home and teach us. Come from home and teach us. And there was a cousin here in Berkeley. Her mother was a product of Palmetto. And she went to Berkeley High. And we talked about the school system, and she said, "But the counselor told me at Berkeley High that I'd better take typing and stuff, because otherwise, 'you could probably become a waitress or something. That's about the best you could do.' But you remember that guy who—" He had finished law school, and he kind of directed her from there and on through college and high school. And when her mother was babysitting and they'd keep kids, and they went up a little higher. And they'd finally develop a private school in Berkeley. My young son went to the private school and pre-kindergarten. And that daughter that he said could not be anything but a waitress, at Berkeley High, was a co-owner of a school that went through the fifth grade. She got a masters degree.

Selvidge: Wow.

01-00:53:28

Nash: I said, "Did you ever go back there and kick his butt?" [Selvidge laughs] She said, "I went back and looked for him, but he was gone." [they laugh]

Selvidge: Hopefully, he lost his job. [laughs]

01-00:53:39

Nash: Well, no, not, because that was the system.

Selvidge: That's right.

01-00:53:42

Nash: This was systemic, this is not just one or two people. Because when my daughter, Karen, started kindergarten. Karen was there—No, first it was Byron, my son, started kindergarten. And the teacher teaching kindergarten, she said, "Oh, well, that's good," she said, "Because he can be good at baseball." She said, "He'll be bigger." Because he was starting six months later. And she said, "Well, that's good. He'll be big." I said, "{Miss Hilty?}," —and I guess she's still kicking, I don't know—I said, "{Miss Hilty?}, that's the last thing I'm sending my kid to do, to become a baseball player." She says, "Well, then you've got Karen." Now, Karen's my daughter. She was always out front. She was smart. She says, "Well, I tell you. I've got a group of kids." It was over there on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, kindergarten. "I've got one here who don't know how to lace their shoes up, and Karen wants to read." They would say, don't teach your kids. But I taught mine. I taught them how to read, taught them their ABCs, taught them everything, because I knew what a hard time I had trying to get an— No place to go to school. And I said, "I'm not going to let this happen to my kids." And I didn't. And guess what? My grandson, Karen's son—she's got three kids. All three in college. Her oldest son is in his first year of medical school.

Selvidge: Wow.

01-00:55:26

Nash: His daughter has finished Howard, and she's taking a year off, and she thinks probably she's going to follow her dad. Her dad's a doctor, see? But my oldest son, he got his first year in medical school.

Selvidge: That's great.

01-00:55:44

Nash: So I had very successful family. Yeah, yeah.

Selvidge: Yeah. I'll say.

01-00:55:48

Nash: I'm not mad at anybody. I just said, "Hey, you've got to weave your way through this type of situation." So I stayed in the Army, in the reserves. Well, yes. Then, too, I'll get back to the Army. The second draft, I got out and got to the reserves, and Berlin acted up again. I think it was, oh, Kennedy called us up. And I got another year. [laughs] And I said, "I'm going to stay in." I stayed in until I retired.

Selvidge: Oh, you stayed in the reserves.



01-00:56:25

Nash: Until I retired.

Selvidge: Oh, for your whole career.

01-00:56:26

Nash: Yeah. So I was able to pay my house note out of that. [laughs] So we just had to find a way. Just some people can find a way, some can't. And sometimes you open a way for them, they can't see it. But well, I'm not mad at anybody. I love everybody. But anyway, you just have to do certain things, you see? It's like I couldn't be a machinist, so I became a personnel director. And I would hire the machinists.

Selvidge: Yeah, right. [they laugh]

01-00:57:08

Nash: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, unless you ask a specific question I can help you with—

Selvidge: Well, we're actually just about one or two minutes from the end of this tape.

01-00:57:19

Nash: Okay. Well, you've got my life story.

Selvidge: Yeah, I got your life story. I think we've sort of come to a natural stopping point, in a way.

01-00:57:38

Nash: All right. All right. I think so. I think so.

Selvidge: Yeah. I think I've learned a lot from your story.

01-00:57:46

Nash: Well, that's true. I believe you. I believe you. Because if someone just casually tells you the things that I've experienced, you'd think, that couldn't be true. Would a counselor talk to a person like that? No. They finally integrated the school in Palmetto.

Selvidge: Oh, yeah?

01-00:58:15

Nash: Yeah, they finally integrated, and they have black teachers and whatnot. And I found one PhD at Howard that came up through the Palmetto system. After integration, they were able to go to school. [laughs]

Selvidge: No kidding. That's great.

01-00:58:31  
Nash: Yeah. Right, right. But anyway, yeah, I believe there's some things that you just don't believe really would happen. But it did happen. But well, how old am I now, do you know?

Selvidge: You should tell me.

01-00:58:54  
Nash: No, no, you know how old I am.

Selvidge: Well, I'd have to do the math.

01-00:58:59  
Nash: No. No, I'm eighty-five.

Selvidge: Eighty-five. Thank you.

01-00:59:02  
Nash: Eighty-five years old. Yeah. So my wife and I live here, just the two of us. I've got a dog. I've got a beautiful Rottweiler.

Selvidge: Oh, no kidding. Oh, a big dog.

01-00:59:17  
Nash: Yeah. But my kids are away. My daughter lives in Illinois, my son lives in Washington, D.C. And we've got two granddaughters here.

Selvidge: Oh, well, that's nice.

01-00:59:32  
Nash: Yeah, yeah.

Selvidge: Great. Okay, well, I'm to go ahead and stop the tape here.

01-00:59:38  
Nash: All right.