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Tom Powers

Rosie the Riveter
World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman
in 2011

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01-00:00:07
Redman: My name is Sam Redman, and I'm here today in Martinez, California with Tom Powers. I'd like to focus our interview today on talking about, Tom, your early childhood and the wartime. If you could begin by sharing with me your full name.

01-00:00:30
Powers: Thomas Michael Powers.

01-00:00:33
Redman: Powers is simply spelled P-O-W-E-R-S?

01-00:00:37
Powers: That's correct.

01-00:00:39
Redman: When were you born?

01-00:00:40
Powers: I was born June 23, 1940.

01-00:00:44
Redman: Okay, 1940. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, who they were?

01-00:00:52
Powers: Well, yes. My father, Ambrose Leroy Powers, and my mother, Ruth Cash Mabrey Powers, were married in 1927 and came to Richmond during that time. My father went to work for the Santa Fe Railway, and my mother, at the time, she wasn't working, but later became employed during the Second World War with the Richmond Unified School District Childcare Centers.

01-00:01:31
Redman: Tell me what your father did for the Santa Fe Railway.

01-00:01:36
Powers: He was a painter. He was an apprentice painter in Barstow when he met my mother, who was going to Loma Linda Nursing School, fairly near Barstow. They met and got to know each other there, and then my father was transferred up here in 1927, after he finished his apprenticeship.

01-00:02:01
Redman: Were they both born in California?

01-00:02:03
Powers: My father was born in Ohio in 1904, and my mother was born in Texas in 1907. She moved to Imperial Valley—in fact, the whole community from Texas—to Imperial Valley, about 1910. My father came to California to his

brother's house in about 1919, which was in Richmond. His brother, Thomas Powers, had come to Richmond in the early part of the 1900s.

01-00:02:46
Redman: So that's how they ended up in Richmond?

01-00:02:48
Powers: That's correct.

01-00:02:49
Redman: I'll get back in a moment to the Great Depression, but first I'd like to ask another question about your parents. What were they like, personality-wise? What do you remember about their personalities?

01-00:03:00
Powers: My father, he was a very serious, hard-working, dedicated family man. My mother was a very outgoing person. I remember in particular, because I'm a farmer now, that we always had a double lot at our house, where I was raised in Richmond, and we always had vegetables, fruit trees. We had chickens, ducks, pigeons, and any other kind of animal that we could come on.

01-00:03:38
Redman: One of the questions I was going to ask a little bit later was, during the Depression there's a sort of idea of "making do" that a lot of families had during that time. The idea that they will get by even though economic times were tough. They were able to cobble things together here and there. I'm curious about the animals that you would have raised. Would they have contributed in some way to the food that you guys were—?

01-00:04:00
Powers: Well, of course. Chickens' eggs and ducks' eggs were a big contribution. That was during the war, when also commodities were very scarce. I only know about the Depression from my mom, father, and my sister, who was born in 1932.

01-00:04:18
Redman: Let's talk about that. What did your parents and your sister say about the Great Depression as far as their memories that they passed down to you about what that experience was like?

01-00:04:31
Powers: Well, I remember in particular them talking about being able to get hamburger for five cents a pound every once in a while during the week, and that was their meat. Also, I remember there was an absolutely amazing thing. My mother apparently won a 1935 Dodge at a movie theater in downtown Richmond. That was a big, big boon, because winning an automobile, especially a Dodge, which was a big car then, was a big deal. I know, among other things, that during the early part of the Depression, my family was apparently involved in alcohol business. My Uncle Tom, before Prohibition, had owned a bar in Point Richmond. Then during Prohibition he had a pool

hall in downtown Richmond, on Fourth Street. Apparently, they made bathtub gin. One of my mother's jobs was to clean the bottles and fill the bottles and put corks in it, and then somebody would deliver these bottles to various locations. They were trying to make ends meet.

01-00:06:06
Redman: A lot of either the alcohol companies or bars or things like that had to convert to something during Prohibition years. Was this your uncle that—?

01-00:06:17
Powers: My uncle had a pool hall, and apparently out of the back of the pool hall he would sell these bottles of homemade whiskey and gin.

01-00:06:28
Redman: Did your mother sort of have an inkling of what—?

01-00:06:30
Powers: Oh, she knew exactly what was going on. In the community, at the street level, everybody was aware that alcohol was illegal, but almost everybody drank alcohol or was in some part responsible for alcohol getting to people who wanted it. It wasn't a really big business, but it helped carry ends to meet, and it supplied people with the things they wanted.

01-00:07:09
Redman: In a lot of my interviews, I hear a lot about how Richmond and the Bay Area were changing rapidly during World War II, and then in the postwar years. I'd like to ask a little bit about how your parents described Richmond before the war. Obviously, having chickens, and I've heard stories about goats and things like that, in people's backyards. That was something that, after the war, was less common, from the sounds of it.

01-00:07:40
Powers: Yeah. When I was born, I was born in an apartment house at Second and Bissell, which is really right in the old—well, it wasn't a real old town. It was like the second town of Richmond. Originally, Richmond was Point Richmond, and then around the turn of the century, a man named MacDonald, who the avenue is named after, and a man named Cutting, who another big boulevard was named after, came in and bought a bunch of land and subdivided it, and so Richmond moved further east. My family, particularly my Uncle Tom, were the first one of the businessmen to move from Point Richmond to downtown Richmond, because it was the boomtown. By the time my parents bought a house, which was 1942, I was two years old and we moved to this house. It was on the south side of town, in an area that was very sparsely occupied.

As a child, I remember the lots around us during the winter, which were all vacant, would fill up with water. The kids would build rafts, even massive rafts with sails on them, to sail across these large bodies of water. They were the same areas that were farmed, so to speak. There was a farm in my

neighborhood. I recall up to—oh, boy, some time into the fifties—I've forgotten his name. He was a Greek man. He had goats, and he had a big farm. We always had a big double lot and grew our own vegetables and fruit and had chickens and ducks for eggs. That actually did go on for some time after the war, although it was very prevalent during the war because eggs were rationed, milk was rationed. What you could produce was in addition to what you could buy at the store. In fact, I still have my ration book from the Second World War.

01-00:10:10
Redman: Do you have the impression that some of those lessons from the Great Depression, as far as austerity and only having so much to eat, sort of carried over into the war with rationing?

01-00:10:23
Powers: Absolutely. No question about it. Even though things were expanding, there was a limited amount of commodities. Gasoline, rubber for tires, and so forth. In fact, we lived on the corner of Cutting Boulevard and Thirty-Fifth Street. Cutting was a major east-west thoroughfare that went to the shipyards. I remember many times as a child hearing cars come down the road. I say hearing them because they had no tires. In fact, they had rags wrapped around the rims to quiet the ringing, because you couldn't get tires. Next to us was a large lot that had a billboard, and often people would camp out there during the war. In fact, sometimes they would come to our back door and knock on the door and say, "Do you have anything?" My mother would fix them sandwiches and give them some fruit and vegetables to eat. I remember that often.

01-00:11:39
Redman: As a child, I'm curious what that must have been like as far as having an occasional stranger come in the door, and having your mother, in some sense, either welcome them in or give them something to go away with. It seems like that was sort of in the culture of that era. There were so many people going through hard times that people were willing to help out.

01-00:12:02
Powers: People helped people. It was an amazing kind of thing. I remember it extending even beyond and after the war. People coming to the back door was not unusual. In fact, it was probably customary. They did it in a very respectful manner. You could tell when people were hostile or when they weren't. We never had any fear of other people at that time, and felt that sharing was something that was just a part of life.

01-00:12:47
Redman: Did that extend beyond the home? Is that something your parents talked to you about as far as the entire city of Richmond?

01-00:12:56
Powers: Oh, yeah. People were, I think, so used to working close to each other by the end of the war that there wasn't a lot of room. There were these places where—it was called a warm bed, where people would stay there for eight hours during the time that they were not working, and then somebody else would come into the same bed in another eight-hour shift. I remember at the childcare center—it's kind of hard to remember, because I started at the childcare centers in 1943 and stayed there, in one way or another, for probably another eight or nine years. Some people who brought their children to the childcare centers paid, and others didn't, based upon income. It wasn't an unusual circumstance. You just helped people who were on bad times or just coming into town and didn't have any money, didn't have a job. Helped them get on their feet, so to speak.

01-00:14:19
Redman: How about your parents as far as religion? I'm curious if they had a particular religious background and if that carried over at all.

01-00:14:30
Powers: My father was a Catholic, raised a Catholic. My mother was raised an Adventist. Because of the differences, particularly among the Catholic relatives, there was not a lot of religion that went around in my house. But the principles that were involved in religion, such as "help your neighbor," were carried on. Just the institutionalization of religion was not a big thing in my life. Even though, across the street from me, where I was raised, there was a Christian Missionary Alliance Church. I went to it once, and I was frightened out of my mind. All these people were passing out. It was a little over my head, and I never went back again.

01-00:15:30
Redman: Let's talk for a moment about your parents as far as who some of their friends were. Did they have particular friends that—?

01-00:15:41
Powers: I would say this. I would say that my family primarily was involved with our family. When I say our family, I mean there were several relatives in town. Extended family would come by often. We would go to their house very often. And also with neighbors. We were very close to the neighbors. The next-door neighbor, when my mother started working—and she worked while I came home from grammar school—would take care of me for a couple hours and watch after me, and vice versa with their kids. It was primarily family: uncles, aunts, nephews, niece, cousins, grandparents. And then immediate neighbors.

01-00:16:39
Redman: How about those neighbors as far as—were they pretty similar in terms of background, or was there a diversity at that time in terms of race, ethnicity, and religion?

01-00:16:51
Powers: In our neighborhood it was very diverse. I'm talking about the wartime and after that. My neighborhood was Swedish, African American, German, Mexican. A lot of Italians, because this had been an Italian area. The south side of Richmond, before the war, was very Italian. There were a lot of Italian farms there in terms of vegetables and animals. A lot of the Italians who came to Richmond in the early days settled on the south side, and that's where I was raised. So there were mainly Italians, but then during the war, with the influx of people from the Midwest and from other areas, we began to develop a wide diversity.

01-00:18:00
Redman: My guess is that the events of Pearl Harbor were something that was maybe discussed in terms of family legend or lore that you could comprehend a little bit later as far as what your family's reaction was to hearing the news about Pearl Harbor. I'm just curious if any of those stories have been passed down.

01-00:18:18
Powers: Yes. I don't remember a lot of it, but what I do distinctly remember about the early days was that my father was an area warden. Right across the street from us was a fire station, which is still there today. It's a Richmond city fire training center. It was a small firehouse. I remember, as a child, hearing the air-raid siren. My father would get his metal hat, which was kind of a doughboy hat. It was white. He'd put a gas mask, which was in a packet that he carried on his side. He had a whistle, and he also had a flashlight. He was probably the first one to go to the fire station, and they were given orders then, and they would go out. I remember what we did; we turned all the lights off in the house, pulled the shades down, and we got under the dining room table. That was because of the fear of Japanese air attack.

01-00:19:35
Redman: My understanding is that, at the start of the war, there were a number of instances where there were very real fears of the Japanese attacking, and so there were a number of these aerial warnings that went out. Was your father called out to the fire station fairly regularly, or is that something—?

01-00:19:56
Powers: I don't remember, but I remember it happening more than a couple of times. I don't know what age that was. I think that happened probably throughout most of the war. At various times, we went through the drill, so we got used to it.

01-00:20:17
Redman: Tell me what an air-raid drill would have been like from a child's perspective, from a very young child's perspective. Do you remember how that felt?

01-00:20:25
Powers: I kind of thought it was fun. Clearly, if it had really been hostilities, I'm sure I wouldn't have, but it was kind of fun to turn all the lights out and get under

the table and be there with my mother and my sister, and to be close together and talk and not have anything else to do. I thought it was fun. That's a child's perspective, and that's it.

01-00:20:52
Redman: Yeah, certainly. Let me ask a few questions now about your home life. Just one big question, I would say, about the home life during World War II, your family's home life. I'm curious about everyday life, just in terms of the house and chores and things like that. How would a typical day have gone for your family during the war?

01-00:21:19
Powers: At that time, my father worked swing shift for the San Rafael ferry. My father got up at different times. He had three different shifts he worked. He worked at night, he worked in the morning, and then he worked the day shift. He would go off. My mother would get me up. My sister would go to grammar school. Then I would go to the childcare center with her in the morning. Sometimes my father dropped us off in the car, but most of the times we walked. It was about four blocks this way, three blocks that way. So it was about seven blocks we walked. I would go to the childcare center with her very early in the morning. In fact, my mother—and I recall this fairly distinctly—my mother was always the first person there. She unlocked the door, she turned the lights on, and I sat there with her until all the lights went on. Then she would begin opening up various rooms. The first room was—we called it the nursing room. When children came in with their parents—and this was before six o'clock, because the childcare center opened at 6:00 AM in the morning, and so children began coming in with their parents at six. My mother opened everything up. She would check them in. Before the childcare center opened, I could play with any toy that I wanted to. There were blocks, there were tricycles, there were little wooden cars. I thought that was the greatest thing going. As a child, I could have anything I wanted.

Then kids would come in. I would be usually stationed in the nurse's office. My mother was at the front counter, checking people in. They would have to pay if they owed something. Otherwise, they would just sign in and sign their child in. If their child looked like there was a sign of illness, the child was taken to this nursing office right next to the check-in place, and the nurse would put this wooden spoon in their mouth and press the tongue down and examine them. "Say, 'Ahh.'" They would either be cleared and go to a room, or they would stay in what we called isolation, in the nursing room, until either a doctor saw them and they were cleared, or until the parent may have to come get them and take them back home.

01-00:24:34
Redman: It's amazing the degree to which health was monitored for these—

01-00:24:38
Powers: Big issue, yes. Including cod liver oil.

01-00:24:43
Redman: Cod liver oil. That's something I haven't heard about.

01-00:24:47
Powers: Cod liver oil was in this big jar. You would get a teaspoon. Everybody got a teaspoon of cod liver oil every day. All the kids would hold their nose and take the cod liver oil, because you got orange slices and apples right after that, and you could—

01-00:25:06
Redman: You could kind of kill the taste?

01-00:25:07
Powers: Kill the taste, right.

01-00:25:10
Redman: I'd like to ask a question that is a bit simplistic, but I'd like to get this down. Let's say I've never heard about the childcare centers in Richmond before. What would be the very basic introduction that you would offer to me? I'm interested in the history of the childcare centers. What can you tell me about them? What were they?

01-00:25:32
Powers: There were several childcare centers. They were all built to a similar standard. There were two, three, four-year-old rooms, five, six, and x-care. X-care were kids up to twelve years of age. They all had a standard teaching plan. After having been there as a child and also as a teacher and a crafts instructor later, I know. They were all very regimented. They had meals prepared. There was breakfast, there was snack, there was lunch, and afternoon snack. It was all government-subsidized food, which was very healthy, all prepared in a kitchen there at the facility. There were cooks, there were teachers, there were yard-keepers, there were administrators. There were very specific teaching plans. They had materials and equipment and facilities that were identical. It was an amazing thing that someone pulled off very well. Because the plan, although the same in every school, or childcare center, was a good plan and it occupied people. There were art elements to it. Painting, wood crafting, leather crafting. In fact, I became a crafts instructor later, during my college years, and off-summers.

01-00:27:3
Redman: I'm curious. I've talked to a number of teachers who, from the sounds of it—I've read interviews with teachers as well—a common sort of story would be that these were college-educated individuals who were coming out, maybe with the intention of working at the shipyards, and then as soon as they'd arrive, they'd be sort of channeled into these schools. They had this terrific experience, but many people didn't necessarily set out to be teachers, and then ended up here. On the other hand, it seems like there were others who—

01-00:28:05
Powers: I don't know. My mother was not set to be a teacher. In fact, I don't even know how she got the job. During the course of her tenure at the childcare center, she got her teaching credential, got her college education, during that time, going to night school. A lot of the people, and they were almost all women, were not teachers. Let me put it this way. They were not college graduates, although many of them sought and obtained college, like my mother. I don't know how they got started, to tell you the truth, but I know they were not graduates from teaching schools or four-year college teaching credential persons. Some may have been, but most of them were not.

01-00:29:21
Redman: The interesting sort of thing to me is that these schools seem not only very progressive; they also seem quite well-organized, well-maintained, and fairly idyllic for an environment for a child to go to school. I'm curious. It seems kind of surprising how that all came to be during the midst of a war, but on the other hand, the war sort of provided the impetus, the need to take care of children so that women could take up jobs in the factories. At least that's sort of the story as I've heard it told. I'm wondering if you can add to that or if—

01-00:30:03
Powers: I think, like a lot of things during the war, they had to be organized. I think these teaching plans that were developed were developed with a lot of care. They were very detailed plans, just like the plans for building ships were. They built these big ships in very short periods of time, on production line-type facilities, and so they had to be very detailed so all the pieces would fit together. I think, likewise, the childcare center, they were all identical in shape and structure. They had the same food. They had the same teaching plans. Everything was done in great detail. It turned out that they were very good. Having children do art at age three and four—and it was very regimented art programs.

01-00:31:21
Redman: Let's jump into art. There are a number of school subjects that I'd like to ask you about today, but art seems to me to be one of the most significant. What was your experience? You pointed this book out to me today, *Children's Art and Children's Words*.

01-00:31:42
Powers: It's a very nice piece, done by a man named Joseph Fischer, who looked at all of these—primarily paintings. There were watercolor paintings that were done in the childcare centers. The childcare centers were really fortunate to have a lady by the name of Monica Haley. She was art-trained and her husband was head of the Art Department at UC Berkeley.

01-00:32:12
Redman: Oh, is that right? Could you spell the last name for me, Haley?

01-00:32:16
Powers: H-A-L-E-Y. The art program, for me, it was a lot of fun. We had a couple of things that we did. We had easels. These easels were sized for the child's size and they had a place to put paper on it. They had a box at the bottom to put the paints. We had paint, and we had also what we called finger painting. As a kid, I loved finger painting.

01-00:32:57
Redman: It's a terrifically fun activity.

01-00:33:00
Powers: The finger painting was done on tabletops. The teachers would mix up this starchy substance that was clear, and you could put that on these pieces of paper, and then we had powdered color that we would mix with this stuff. We all had aprons on. We all were able to get our hands in this goo and smear it around and put as much color as we wanted on it, and any kind of shape. Clearly, the finger paintings were a lot more creative than the watercolor paintings with a brush. Those things usually were oriented around people, houses, and during the Second World War, around war machines, like airplanes and boats and submarines.

01-00:34:05
Redman: Let me ask about that, because your painting that's featured in there features an airplane and a submarine. Frankly, it looks like something I would love to draw when I was in kindergarten, too, but, on the other hand, it seems like there are a lot of war images in terms of a flag or an airplane or a ship, as you'd said. These images sort of surrounded you at all times, I would suspect, during the war.

01-00:34:30
Powers: Yeah. In fact, one of the things I liked to do, I would ask my dad, "Can we go down and see the cranes?" He would drive me down by the Kaiser Shipyard, and there were these big, whirley cranes that were going around and they were lifting things. It was amazing to me because they were so large. These things were boats that were being built in Richmond for the war effort. The images that children of Richmond had of boats, and the issue of war and the Japanese and the Nazis and Hitler and the swastika, they had to be present, because I know a lot of the kids in the childcare centers at the time were hearing this, and so they were putting it down on paper. I remember one paper with a swastika that somebody painted, and "Down with Hitler" or something negative about Hitler. So these things that are discussed at home and in places that children went are the things that kids replicate in their own minds and on paper.

01-00:36:00
Redman: That transferred into the art.

01-00:36:02
Powers: It transferred into the art. I remember the airplane, submarine being talked about. War was a part of everyday life. Getting under the table because there may be an airplane bombing the area. We didn't, fortunately, have a bombing. It was things that were said between adults that kids picked up on.

01-00:36:34
Redman: Certainly. One of the things I'm wondering is, prior to television, how these images sort of got disseminated. How would a child see an image of a submarine? Was it movie reels or was it newspapers?

01-00:36:49
Powers: I think probably it was posters. I think it was posters. These were war bond posters. Posters were everywhere. They were on billboards. They were on building sides. Everywhere you looked, there were posters about the war. "Buy war bonds." It talked about an airplane or Hitler, or it talked about Pearl Harbor. I don't remember the movies myself. I don't really think I went to the movies during the Second World War. But I do remember posters.

01-00:37:43
Redman: It's a very interesting thing. I wonder to what extent, as a parent and a child—I'm thinking of maybe walking down the street and seeing a poster and having to ask, "What's a war bond?" as you're learning to read, or, "What is that image?" and then the parents sort of have—

01-00:38:02
Powers: That's like a painting on the wall. So here I am, painting, and I paint things that I see that are paintings. There you have it. I think it's kind of simple. Kids see posters. They hear parents talking about these things. If they're older, they go to the movies, maybe. If they're older, maybe they read the newspapers. Posters were exposed to me. I saw the posters. I remember them pretty distinctly.

01-00:38:37
Redman: That's really fascinating. Let's talk about another subject. I'd like to ask about math. Do you remember your early lessons as far as mathematics and how math was taught at all, in particular?

01-00:38:53
Powers: I really don't. That's not something I remember, and I have never been really good at math.

01-00:39:00
Redman: I share your pain on that. We can just take that off.

01-00:39:06
Powers: Painting and words were big things, but math is—I don't remember anything about it.

01-00:39:14
Redman: That's totally fair. How about science, while we're on it? Were there any science classes to—?

01-00:39:20
Powers: In high school, but I don't remember early on. I don't remember anything in science. The thing I remember most is the art.

01-00:39:31
Redman: How about reading?

01-00:39:32
Powers: Oh, reading was a big issue.

01-00:39:35
Redman: Do you remember how reading was taught? First, let me just ask, what was the exact relationship between the Kaiser Shipyards and the school districts in Richmond, or the maritime schools in particular? Was there an official relationship there?

01-00:39:55
Powers: I don't think so. I don't think there was. The only relationship was the medical system, the Kaiser Permanente medical clinics. I was an early recipient of Kaiser plan. I don't remember exactly when. I think I was first a member in '49. But I'm sure I was involved before that, in one way or another, through the childcare center. I don't remember any connection between the Kaiser Shipyard and the schools. None that I can recall. I don't think there was much of a connection.

01-00:40:46
Redman: Did you have an impression of what the other students, what their parents may have done for work? Were most of them then heading off to the shipyards?

01-00:40:58
Powers: Most of the people in my neighborhood that were not old-time Italians were, in one way or another, mechanics, welders, carpenters, trades people in general. Teamsters. That was the main craft. In terms of reading, what I remember in school, I remember alphabet, and then reading in round, several students. The teacher would read a little bit, and then they would ask a student to read out of the book. That probably, in my mind, was after the war, because I did not get into grade school until the year after the war, but I do remember, in the childcare centers, there was always a period of time where the teacher would read to the children a story. In fact, in that childcare art, my mother is reading a story to several children, which I remember. That started very early.

01-00:42:27
Redman: My own mother, recently retired, was a kindergarten teacher. That was one of the favorite parts of her day. Did your mom sort of tell you what her favorite parts of teaching were? Things like reading to children or art?

01-00:42:43
Powers: My mother was so excited about everything she did there, I couldn't tell the difference. She liked her job end to end. She liked dealing with the parents. She liked dealing with the children, checking them in. She was a teacher in the room. She was a teacher in the young ages, all the way up to higher ages. She did everything. In the childcare center, you become a head teacher. It's like a principle in a grammar school. She became a head teacher because she had so much experience with everything in the center.

01-00:43:25
Redman: But she was also so enthusiastic about it.

01-00:43:27
Powers: Oh, she loved it, to the very day she retired, which was 1974. She would go back to all the retirements; she would go back to the school to visit. Of course, they named one of the childcare centers after her because of her involvement, almost from 1943 to probably almost the year 2000.

01-00:43:56
Redman: Did she come home tired at the end of the day?

01-00:43:58
Powers: She was always tired, but she was never tired enough that she would have to—she would fix dinner, she would put the kids to bed and everything. She lived to almost 100 years of age. She was a very healthy woman. She was healthy because she was engaged, and she was mentally engaged and physically engaged, and was an all-around person.

01-00:44:35
Redman: I have a quick question. Do you remember fire evacuation drills by any chance?

01-00:44:41
Powers: Absolutely.

01-00:44:42
Redman: Tell me about that. From a child's eyes, why is that so memorable?

01-00:44:48
Powers: Well, I'll tell you one thing that makes me remember it. We all lined up and then walked out the doors, but also, there was a slide. Every childcare center, including the one that I went to, had a slide. It was in the second floor. We really were never allowed to slide down it, although I did, because I was there by myself. That kind of put it all together for me. I remember marching outside. We'd go out the doors. On a regular basis, we would have a fire drill, but the second floor always had the slide you would go down. My mother explained particularly to me, and so did the other teachers, that that slide was for fire escape, in case there was a fire in the building. So that made it most indelible, because that was the fun thing about it as a child.

01-00:46:03
Redman: For sure. Let me ask you about other kinds of play that you remember. Physical activity, running around with some of the other kids. Was there something like a recess?

01-00:46:17
Powers: Everything was very regimented at the childcare center. There were "play times" inside and outside. Inside, there was a kitchen-living room thing where mostly girls hung out. Then there was an area where there were blocks and little cars and little boats, wooden boats, that mainly boys played with. That was the inside drill. Then outside, we would go outside at a certain time of the day. There were swings, slides. There was a sandbox. Always a sandbox. Then there was a big yard that you could play ball in. That was usually an earthen or lawn area where you could play games. The teachers would help organize these games. Kicking a ball. I don't think we played baseball. We had a sandbox that you could play in. Then there was a cement area where you could ride a tricycle, pull a wagon, and there were some other little wheeled things that you could play with. It was pretty segmented. Everything was supervised. Let me put it that way. The sandbox not supervised as much. You could check out a tricycle or a wagon. You could check out a ball and go out and play in the earthen area—

01-00:48:24
Redman: Those things would, then, have to be returned?

01-00:48:26
Powers: Oh, yeah, everything was returned to the right place. Yeah.

01-00:48:31
Redman: It's interesting that there's a system for checking out a ball, or there's a system for checking out a tricycle. In a sort of similar way, you go to the Bethlehem Shipyards, let's say—

01-00:48:43
Powers: Check out tools.

01-00:48:43
Redman: Check out your tool for the day.

01-00:48:46
Powers: It was very similar, and it was very regimented. I think it taught kids to share. You would move from the two-year-old room to up in age, where a lot of this play was a lot more organized. In the two-year-olds, diaper changing was a big issue, and sitting at little tables with toys was an issue. As you moved up, there was more freedom. The yards were bigger in the ages above toddler. The yards were bigger. The toddler classes had smaller yards. They were more like the size of the children.

01-00:49:44
Redman: A couple of times you've mentioned the food and how good the food was. It was of high quality. Let me ask what your recollections are about the food.

01-00:49:56
Powers: One of the best-tasting things in my whole life, I got in the childcare centers. It was a lemon-flavored milk, a heavy milk that you put lemon juice in, and put graham crackers on either side. To this day, I don't know that I've ever had anything that tasted better than that. The milk is still around. It's a canned milk. It's a concentrated milk. They would mix a lemon, and I think probably some sugar, in it. Then, the other thing I remember is the toast. They would make this nice toast and they would cut it in quarters. At one time during the day, we had a snack, which was nice. I don't remember getting snacks at home during this time, so I would come and I would have breakfast, and it was usually oatmeal or cream of wheat with milk and a little bit of sugar, and orange juice. That was the breakfast in the morning. Then, mid-morning, you had a snack, which was these beautiful pieces of toast that had butter on them, and slices of apple and slices of oranges. I remember putting the orange in my mouth and biting one out, and then have the orange peel in your mouth there to show the kid on the other side of the table that you bit the orange.

01-00:51:50
Redman: Built-in entertainment right there.

01-00:51:52
Powers: I remember that very distinctly. Of course, also the cod liver oil, which we tried to get past really quick.

01-00:52:01
Redman: As quickly as possible. Now, as we conclude this tape I'd like to ask, it seems like you had a really enjoyable experience at the school. It seems like you learned a lot, you enjoyed your time there. I'm wondering if, looking back on it, were there any problems inherent maybe to the wartime, with not having as much? It seems like this is a pretty idyllic environment. Do you have any sort of critiques of the setup?

01-00:52:33
Powers: I cannot remember anything bad during my childhood. I think I had an idyllic situation. We didn't have a lot, but we had enough. I think that the constant attention from the teachers, from my mother, my father, my sister—I really can't remember a bad day, to tell you the truth. A lot of the kids that I went to in childcare center grew up as law-abiding citizens, happy people.

01-00:53:29
Redman: Was it a pretty diverse student body?

01-00:53:34
Powers: It was diverse. I don't think it's as diverse as the United States is today, but it was fairly diverse. I don't remember any problems with the Japanese, because there were no Japanese in my neighborhood, but I know a lot of the

Japanese—because I learned this after the war—were transported out of town to internment camps. In fact, one of the people who was one of my best friends and mentors in the farming business, a guy named Francis Aebi, A-E-B-I, a Swiss man, in North Richmond, when the Japanese flourished out there and rose growers were interned—this was the biggest farming industry in the East Bay, the rose growers. All the Japanese were interned, and he kept their nurseries running and gave them back to them after the war. The only thing I remember about anti-war people, around the corner from us, on the other side of the church, was a German family. They had a bakery, a German bakery. I don't think anybody threw stones at their walls or anything like that, but there was always talk that "Those people are Germans, and you have to watch out for them." That's the only thing about an ethnic group or a foreign country person that I remember. Otherwise, there were African Americans, Mexican Americans. I remember Swedish, and then Italian. It was fairly diverse, although I don't think it's as diverse as the United States is today.

01-00:55:47
Redman: Let's stop the first tape there.

01-00:55:49
Powers: Sure.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 powers_tom_02_06-20-11.mp3

02-00:00:04
Redman: I'm back with Tom Powers. This is Sam Redman. This is our second tape together today here in Martinez. The first sort of general question that I reminded myself that I wanted to ask was about rationing. We got into this a bit in the first tape, but I'd like to hear if you have any other recollections in particular about rationing and how it affected your family.

02-00:00:28
Powers: Everybody in the family had a rationing book. Mine is still somewhere around here. It was kind of brownish-red in color. You would open it up and it had stamps on it, round and square stamps. Some for sugar, some for food, some for milk, and other things. I don't remember all the details, but I remember that we had to give those to the store in order to buy certain commodities.

02-00:01:05
Redman: Now, one thing I've always been confused about with rationing is that, on the stamps, the image will be—you'd sort of think it would be a stick of butter or a tire, but instead it's an airplane or a tank or an American flag. I'm just wondering how would you know that so many tanks equals so much beef that you can get?

02-00:01:28
Powers: It's right in your book. It's written right in the book how many of these you get. Children got less than adults. You knew the quantities with these things. It was all fairly organized in the book.

02-00:01:44
Redman: So it was pretty clear.

02-00:01:45
Powers: Yeah. I wish I knew where it was. I'd show it to you.

02-00:01:49
Redman: Do you remember how that would work? So your mother would go to the store and—

02-00:01:53
Powers: She would go to the store for me, my father, and my sister, and she would bring all the books in there. I forgot the store she went in, because the store I knew as a child was formed by two guys who came back from the war. I think it was the Pullman Market or El Cortez Market. She would go and buy these things and would have to give them stamps. They would have to record these stamps. It's a little vague to me because I was pretty young. I was age five at the end of the war.

02-00:02:35
Redman: As a child, did you sort of understand what was going on with that, or was that something that maybe became clear later?

02-00:02:42
Powers: Because I grew up with it, it was just kind of a part of life. It was a normal thing. I thought everybody had ration books. I see my mother go to the store, and she has to give them something before she gets something back, and then she has to give them some money after that. So it was kind of a ritual that we went through, and I didn't realize it wasn't normal until years after the war, when we didn't have to do that.

02-00:03:16
Redman: A lot changed in Richmond between your birth and the end of the war, and then maybe in the year or two that followed the war, Kaiser Shipyards had a huge boom, brought in tons of work. The Bay Area experienced maybe 150,000 new workers, in addition to all the soldiers that were coming and going from the Bay Area. To what extent did you, as a child, hear about any of those changes or know about any of those changes that were going on?

02-00:03:52
Powers: I think what probably impacted me the most was that there were buildings where people were moving in built right across the street. There were these big buildings, and they were apartment house. They were war housing. There were people driving down the streets, going somewhere, some of them

without tires on their car. You could hear them distinctly. The rims would ring—

02-00:04:28
Redman: Even though they had wrapped towels and whatever?

02-00:04:30
Powers: They wrapped rags around them and a variety of things to try to stop that, but rims are so sharp, they cut right through those rags in no time. It was just a bustle of activity and just more people coming. When I started school, there was two shifts in school. There was a morning shift, which I was in, and then there was an afternoon shift. We would actually warm up the seats for the kids who came in the afternoon. That clearly went down after the war. The other thing that I—

02-00:05:13
Redman: So you think enrollments in schools declined slightly?

02-00:05:17
Powers: It declined, yeah. It declined after the war on a gradual basis, but it clearly declined. Many of these buildings, by the fifties—war housing, we called them—began to be abandoned and then ultimately torn down. I think they started tearing those down in '57 or '58. Richmond was bustling. I remember it at that, although I know that it went from 11,000 people in 1940, when I was born, until it reached 110,000 in 1945.

02-00:06:12
Redman: Just amazing, the growth.

02-00:06:13
Powers: The growth was just amazing. Everything was busy. I remember going downtown Richmond, my mother holding my hand. There were cars going back and forth and people walking up and down the streets. Everything was moving.

02-00:06:34
Redman: I'd like to ask a question—from the perspective of a six-year-old or a five-year-old, might be a bit unusual—but my understanding is that El Cerrito sort of became what is now Las Vegas in that there were bars and nightclubs and gambling for folks in some of the seedier side of the East Bay. But Albany, right next door, continued to be this family-oriented, very strong school system, and Richmond had its own unique problems in terms of managing the size of the growth. How do you think these different towns maybe dealt with it slightly different or were able to deal with the impact of all of these migrants somewhat differently?

02-00:07:22
Powers: I'm not sure about that, but I remember the gambling in El Cerrito.

02-00:07:26
Redman: Is that right?

02-00:07:27
Powers: Well, I remember distinctly, because my father had a bookie in El Cerrito. His name was Kelly. I know exactly where he lived. I know that I went to the dog track, which is at the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center now. I went to the dog track with my dad and watched the dog races. I also went—and the building is still there. It was called the Wagon Wheel. It was a gambling location. I remember my dad leaving me outside in the car while he went in and gambled. I don't know exactly the period of time, but I know that I was small, and I know that El Cerrito was the place that he went to place his bet with Kelly the bookie. What he did inside the Wagon Wheel, I don't know. I know he bet on the dogs at the dog track at El Cerrito Plaza, because I saw the dogs race. I remember distinctly the dogs. Many years later, I learned that the 1948 election in El Cerrito turned the whole town around. There was an anti-gambling political slate that won, and all the gambling went away after that.

02-00:08:55
Redman: I hadn't heard that. That's interesting, because today, you can drive between Albany and El Cerrito and parts of Richmond, and you don't feel like you're really leaving the same—

02-00:09:06
Powers: It's the same thing. El Cerrito was a different place then. As a four or five-year-old, six-year-old, it was very vague to me, but I know Kelly. The house isn't the same house, but the lot is there. I know exactly where the dog-racing track was, and the building that the Wagon Wheel was in is still there to this day. It even has the little circle where the Wagon Wheel is.

02-00:09:45
Redman: There was gambling on the dog racing, but was there also gambling on other sports? You could presumably bet on a baseball game or a football game, but maybe not.

02-00:09:58
Powers: Kelly took bets on race tracks throughout California for my dad. The Wagon Wheel—I assume they had dice and cards and roulette. This was a gambling facility. I don't know exactly what was there, but I know my dad played bets on races that were not there.

02-00:10:27
Redman: So elsewhere in California?

02-00:10:29
Powers: Elsewhere. The guys who played "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" did a movie about an off-track betting underground facility in Chicago. I know that those kind of things existed in El Cerrito at the time.

02-00:11:00
Redman: We had mentioned when we were off tape, I wanted to ask about Port Chicago. That's something you only learned about later, is that correct?

02-00:11:09
Powers: I didn't know about Port Chicago at the time. I know the legend of it. One of the persons I serve with on the board of supervisors, Nancy Fadden, was a resident of Martinez at the time, and probably a teenager. The windows in her house and neighbors were blown out as a result of that explosion. It was lore at the time of my becoming knowledgeable about things, but I never knew anything directly about it.

02-00:11:47
Redman: How about the droppings of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Do you recall those events and what, as a five-year-old, you might have thought about that?

02-00:11:59
Powers: No, I don't remember that. The one thing I do remember is the day that Roosevelt died. That was April 12, 1945, because that was my father's birthday. I was out in front, on the lawn. I was there with my father, and I think my father was mowing the lawn at the house. My mother came out and said, "Roosevelt is dead. He died today." I remember that so distinctly. I know exactly where I was on the lawn.

02-00:12:42
Redman: That was such a powerful moment for a lot of people.

02-00:12:44
Powers: That was extremely powerful.

02-00:12:45
Redman: How did your parents react to that?

02-00:12:47
Powers: Oh, they were so sad.

02-00:12:50
Redman: Obviously, someone that was your age, but people that were quite a bit older than you, he had been the only president that they had ever known in their life.

02-00:13:01
Powers: My mother and father idolized Roosevelt. I didn't know that much about him, but I knew that at that moment, that event was very heavy in my mother and father's life. They were impacted very much.

02-00:13:23
Redman: How about V-J Day, the surrender and the end of the war? Do you recall that at all?

02-00:13:29
Powers: I don't recall that. I don't recall it. We were in a suburban neighborhood—I guess you'd call it suburban. There weren't any celebrations around it. I'm sure that—

02-00:13:43
Redman: A lot of people went to downtown San Francisco or Oakland, I understand.

02-00:13:46
Powers: I suspect so. I don't remember it. The Roosevelt thing was a big deal.

02-00:13:57
Redman: That's fascinating that it still stands out in that way. After the end of the war, I was going to ask about the end of your time at the childcare development center. You transitioned, then, later on, into a grammar school, or you stayed there through—

02-00:14:16
Powers: As a child, because my mother worked there from the time I was three until many years later, when I was thirty-four—she retired—I was there as a child until about age eleven or twelve. That would have been in 1951 or '52. I then came back during college, in a summer. I worked there as a crafts instructor. Between the time that I graduated from law school to the time I was sworn into the bar, I worked there as a substitute teacher.

02-00:15:06
Redman: What was it like to come back as an adult and—?

02-00:15:10
Powers: I knew the drill. Believe me, everything was the same. Everything was the same. It wasn't anything I had to study. I knew everything.

02-00:15:25
Redman: It was so familiar.

02-00:15:26
Powers: It was so familiar to me. I knew exactly what to do. Frankly, I enjoyed it. I had a great time being a teacher and a crafts instructor. I knew the tools. I knew what to do. I did the same thing that teachers did for me. It was quite pleasurable. At that time, the community was changing. In fact, there were some, what we called race riots, in the mid-sixties in Richmond. A lot of the things that happened inside the childcare center and with the childcare students were a lot more wholesome than were happening outside the walls.

02-00:16:15
Redman: For some, it seemed like that was sort of a safe space.

02-00:16:18
Powers: It was a savior for a lot of kids. It got them into education, discipline, how to treat your fellow human being, how to treat your neighbor. It taught things to

kids who were on the outside of the fence. And by the way, there were kids who would come to the fence on the outside and wanted to come in.

02-00:16:17
Redman: At a certain point, the childcare centers were maybe at capacity?

02-00:16:50
Powers: They were at capacity. I would say in the sixties, they were at capacity, but there was still room. From the side, I guess, of the parent, they were not tuned to getting involved in that for one reason or another. What it is, I don't know. I know a lot of kids envied the fact that there was structured play inside. These are kids that are looking in from the outside and would like to have played with us. I don't know what I could have done about that—

02-00:17:31
Redman: But it's a memorable—

02-00:17:33
Powers: But it's very memorable. I remember one time walking down the street in the morning, and this was probably in 1961. I walked down the street with the class, walking the class to grammar school—the kids who were in what we called x-care. These were the kids who went to grammar school. We would walk the whole class there. I walked back by myself. I remember, across the street from me, there was a guy with a pistol. He said he wanted my tennis shoes. I didn't look at him and I just kept walking. Finally, he stopped talking. That's the distinction from the early days to the time that I came back.

02-00:18:26
Redman: My understanding is there would be higher unemployment and some race issues that were—

02-00:18:31
Powers: There were racial issues then. There was poverty, ignorance, lawlessness, and a variety of things that were arising.

02-00:18:48
Redman: At that same time, there were a number of wildcat union strikes. There was a big strike in Oakland in 1946 called the Oakland General Strike that lasted three days. In 1946, you would have been six years old, so I assume you may not remember that event, but I'm curious if you remember any other union strikes or union activities.

02-00:19:10
Powers: I do remember union activities. My mother and father were very much involved with the unions. In fact, I remember as a child going with my mother and others to the picket line to provide food to my father and other people on the picket line. These were inland boatmen union guys demonstrating at the San Rafael ferry. Then, on the other side of the equation, my mother was a founder of the union in the childcare centers.

02-00:19:54
Redman: Oh, wow. She founded a union?

02-00:19:56
Powers: She founded the union. First it was AFSE, American Federated State Employees. Then the business agent broke off and formed his own union, called Public Employees Local Number One. His name was Henry Clark. My mother became the first president of that, even though the district administration said she was supposed to be management. My mother was the president of the local. So my mother was a scrappy gal during that time. That was after. This had to be in the fifties, early fifties, because at some point in time the people at the childcare centers did not get raises for about ten years, so they began forming unions. I remember that kind of union activity. I don't remember the Oakland situation, and I don't remember the longshoremen strike, which was a big deal in San Francisco, probably during the war or just before the war.

02-00:21:18
Redman: The next question I'd like to ask is, a lot of folks lost their job at the end of the war. People who were working for the shipyards. Many of them found other work. I'm curious. One of the questions I'm always interested in, to what degree women wanted to keep on working in these factories versus, at the time, there was some pressure for women to leave their jobs and sort of, quote unquote, "return to the home" to raise the children. Now, on the other hand, your mom had a very successful, inspiring career following the war. I wonder, was there any pressure, do you think, on her to leave work, or was teaching sort of a safe profession that someone could work while they had kids as a teacher?

02-00:22:09
Powers: I don't think there was any pressure for my mother, because teaching, I think at the time, is considered more a woman's occupation. I don't remember a lot about, quote, "unemployment" after the war. My parents were both gainfully employed, and a lot of people in the neighborhood were gainfully employed. I remember distinctly one of the things in Richmond that—there were two major things. There was the Ford plant, which produced Fords, until about 1957, and they moved to Milpitas. Then there were the Felice and Perrelli Canneries. The canneries employed a lot of women during the period of time after the war. In fact, I remember, because we were right near a bus stop, a lot of the women in the neighborhood would walk down and almost catch the same bus. They all had their starched uniforms on and little hats that went over their heads that looked like nurses' hats, but they were kind of a green color, light green color. There was not a lot of unemployment in my neighborhood. I didn't know much more out of that neighborhood what was happening.

02-00:23:45
Redman: Let me ask, just as far as looking back at the war in its entirety, years later. Did you ever have a chance to talk to your parents as far as how they looked back at the war? What were their sort of recollections of the war as they got to an older stage in their lives?

02-00:24:03
Powers: Oh, yeah, we talked about that a lot. There were a lot of reminders of it, too, because Cutting Boulevard that we lived on was a major thoroughfare to and from the shipyards. In years after the war, there were a lot of World War II surplus stores that were pretty thriving stores. They sold shovels; they sold clothing. They sold anything you could get. Camping equipment, cots. I remember being reminded of the war many times because of these things, these relics of the war that were still being useful. I remember them talking about the air raids. For instance, supposedly there was a submarine that was in the bay that was a big scare. In fact, apparently there was a submarine that washed up on the shore somewhere on the North Coast, but during those days, what happens, because communications is not instantaneous with CNN News and the like, the rumors spread. The gossip about submarines attacking the West Coast and airplanes attacking the West Coast got a little bit out of hand. A lot of these rumors began a discussion about what really happened. Your dad went over to the fire station. We began turning the lights off. Then, shortly thereafter, the air raid was called off because it was a false alarm.

02-00:26:11
Redman: Sort of a follow-up question along this, I wanted to ask about your recollections of the war as a child. I'm thinking in particular about how, in my growing up, things that may have happened when I was maybe in the ages of one to seven, or one to eight, that then your parents explain to you, well, here's what happened, or let me put this in context for you. I assume that that must have been a big sort of thing in your life with the war, in that you were so young and there are all of these sorts of stimuli that are hard to understand what they really are, and then your parents sort of explaining, oh, that was when this happened, or when that happened.

02-00:26:54
Powers: That's right. A couple of things that I remember as a child—I didn't know what the big cranes were all about. I didn't know that Richmond was building more ships than any place in the world. All I knew was that there were these big cranes that were moving and carrying big things. They were just absolutely astonishing to me. One other thing that I remember—close to the county building that many years later I had my office in, and near there was where I went to high school, there were all these tanks. I remember the tanks as a child. I didn't know why they were there, but apparently it was a railcar storage place where they accumulated tanks that were being constructed at the Ford plant in Richmond. Later, I was told about what these tanks were for, where they were coming from, why there were stored there, and the like. Those two things stand out to me, because I remember these. I learned later

they were flat cars. There were two or three tanks on each flat car, and these flat cars were stored in lines near this county building. There were just a massive amount of them. I didn't know why these tanks were there. I knew what a tank was, but I didn't know why they were there and all the ramifications. I was told later what those were about.

02-00:28:40
Redman: Let me ask, just in terms of your recollections of school during the war, at the childcare center, it seems like that is a prominent place in your life in terms of the long story of your education, in that you remember it quite fondly and you remember a lot about those years. Can you talk about how those years during the war sort of fit into the story of your life?

02-00:29:13
Powers: The childcare center was a big part of my life. Well, schools were a big part of my life. I would go early, early in the morning, 5:30 to 6:00 in the morning, to the childcare center, and then later, when I became grade school-age, I would go from there to the grade school. Then I would come back from the grade school to the childcare center, because my mother worked a split shift. She worked from 6:00 to 10:00, and 2:00 to 6:00. So she not only opened the school, but she closed it.

02-00:29:53
Redman: That's a long day.

02-00:29:54
Powers: So I had a twelve-hour day at school. School was everything to me. I just remember school, school, school. It wasn't a bad memory. I thought that was the way it was supposed to be. I remember one of my grammar school teachers. Her name was—a name you can't forget—Younglove. I remember her very distinctly. One time, our school had a fire, apparently, and my class burned and we had to go to another school. It was a fun school. Woodrow Wilson School as opposed to Pullman School. They had these ramps. Instead of staircases, they had ramps you would walk up and down, and I thought that was fun. The ramp at the childcare center, I couldn't go on, but the ramp at Woodrow Wilson, I could go on, because it was built for kids. It wasn't really steep. It wasn't a fire escape. I guess they felt that children could walk up these ramps and then they could also be used as fire escapes. That was a big memory. School was a big time. I remember one incident. We had a fire truck come to the school. There was a fireman on this ladder. I think he had a megaphone or a microphone or something, because they were talking about how we should not play with matches. He said the word "matchies." There was something in his voice, or his accent. He said, "Do not play with matchies." I asked my mother, "What is a matchies?"

02-00:31:53
Redman: No, son, a match.

02-00:31:55
Powers: It was a match. These things that we use to light the stove.

02-00:32:00
Redman: Then it suddenly makes sense. That's so funny. How about just in terms of recalling the war itself, through posters or through images? It sort of surrounds your life as a child, but on the other hand, you're separate from it and you're just being a kid.

02-00:32:23
Powers: The images of posters, the images of the tanks, the images of the ships being built—and I had two uncles, one who was in the Navy, and one who was in the Army, and would come visit me, so I remember military people a lot. The images of the war were stateside images, but they were images of something happening in some other place that wasn't good that we wanted to end. That's kind of a summary of my—

02-00:33:03
Redman: Yeah, I see. As a young child, that's a fascinating perspective. Well, I want to thank you for sitting down with me today.

02-00:33:09
Powers: Oh, you're welcome. Yes, it's fun.

02-00:33:10
Redman: Thank you.

[End of Interview]