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Mattie Jackson
LABOR LEADER, BUSINESSWOMAN, PUBLIC SERVANT AND ACTIVIST

Interviews conducted by
Nancy Quam-Wickham
in 1996

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Mattie Jackson, 2006

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Interview 1: February 20, 1996

[Begin tape 1, side A]

Quam-Wickham: I'm here in San Francisco to interview Mattie Jackson. Mrs. Jackson is going to begin by telling us about her early life and her family background.

Jackson: I was born October 3, 1921, in Livingston, Texas. Actually, I was born in the countryside near Livingston, Texas, where my father had a hundred-acre farm. I started to school when I was about five years old. I went through elementary school in that little small country school. In fact, that school was in was a church-house.

Then when I was 12, I believe, I went to Crockett, Texas, into a boarding home to go into high school. My sister, Estelle Dennis, was in Mary Allen Junior College in the same town. She was also in the boarding place. That was outside, in a home, where I was living with another family. I stayed there a year, then I went back to Livingston for the summer. Then my father took the last three of us—myself, Arlie (who just died), and my youngest sister (she died in 1972)—and we went into Phyllis Wheatley High School in Houston, Texas. That's where I graduated from high school.

Quam-Wickham: Before you go much farther, I'm interested if you could tell us how your father had a hundred-acre farm. That's kind of unusual for a black family to own that much land in Texas at that time.

Jackson: I can remember asking him something about the farm. His father had 272 acres of land in Blanchard, Texas, which is about seven or eight miles from where I was born. I don't know how he got it. My father lived in Blanchard, Texas, and he said that he saved money. He saved the money because he wanted to surprise my mother with the hundred-acre farm. He said it cost about \$400 or \$500, I think. I guess he just decided to buy his own farm.

Quam-Wickham: What did he do for a living? That was a lot of money back then.

Jackson: I think that it was by picking cotton. Frankly, though, I'm not sure. That's a good question.

Quam-Wickham: It really is a good story.

Jackson: It really is a good question, too. In fact, I don't even know how my grandfather acquire the land. I still have the papers; we're still dealing with some of the land now, not of the hundred acres, but of the other land of my grandfather's. But frankly, I don't know what they did to acquire that land.

Quam-Wickham: It's very interesting. It's an unusual story.

Jackson: We're a big family. The Sykes family and the Quarles family. The Quarles family was my mother's; the Sykes family was my father's. I understand that they came from the Carolinas, initially. But I don't know anything else about their background, other than that they came to Texas. I didn't know my grandfather; he died before I was born.

Quam-Wickham: Were there very many African-American families who owned land in that part of Texas?

Jackson: Oh, yes. Yes, especially in Blanchard, Texas. As I grew up, most of the landowners were black in Blanchard, also in a little place called Kickapoo, Unalaska, and all those areas. They were all black, and a lot of black families are still there. There is no farmland anymore. With our hundred-acres, to the right of us were all black [farmers]. To the left of us were all white [farmers].

Quam-Wickham: Oh, that's interesting.

Jackson: The Binenells, the Wistenharts, the Jetbrocks. The Jetbrocks were big landowners. The Binenells had a hundred acres, like my father; the Wistenharts had a hundred-acres also like my father. The other black families all had hundred-acre [farms], through different parts of the countryside. When you have a hundred acres or more, you always have sharecroppers. My father had sharecroppers. The Nelms had sharecroppers, and the Wistenharts did, too. You get little houses on your land, and you get other families to work parts of the land. My sister would probably know better than I, because she was born in Blanchard. My younger sister and I were born in Livingston, but the others were all born in Blanchard. So they basically all came from Blanchard, Texas.

Quam-Wickham: How far is Blanchard from Livingston?

Jackson: About seven miles. My father's family had about 15 children. Some were by the first wife, my grandmother, who later died. Then my grandfather married another lady, and they had about seven or eight children. So they were half-brothers and half-sisters, from both families. My grandfather had a beautiful acre-home; it was still there. It was a house, a big log house, sitting there; alongside was a creek, where he could fish and do other things along there. He must have been a smart man to get the acreage. And my father was a smart man to get the other acreage. He was the only one of the children who went out and bought extra land. Of the 16 children, he was the only one to buy extra land aside from what he got from my grandfather.

Quam-Wickham: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Jackson: There were seven of us: six girls and one boy. They are all deceased now, except my sister and I. We're the only ones left. My father was really a conscientious man. He always talked about education. He was a fifth-grade dropout. But he had as much sense as my brother, who went to college. I'll say it was common sense. But he made sure that his children went to school.

Quam-Wickham: You went to a very famous high school.

Jackson: Yes. My brother and Estelle and Julia went to boarding school in Huntsville, Texas. It was a little place called Galilea, or something like that. They graduated from the high school in Huntsville, Texas, with the exception of Estelle. She left Huntsville and went on to Phyllis Wheatley. She graduated in 1933, at Wheatley. But my other sister and my brother graduated from Huntsville. He then sent my brother to Prairie View College; Julia and Estelle went to Mary Allen Junior College in Crockett, Texas. That's when I was there, for one year, in boarding school in Crockett, Texas. Then they went to Wiley College in Texas. My brother graduated from Prairie View. My sister graduated from Wiley College in Texas. It was the Depression at that time.

Quam-Wickham: It was unusual to be able to go to college at that time, to be able to afford it.

- Jackson: That's right. They didn't go to the little country school as long as I did. They got out of the little country school and went to boarding school. By the time I came along, he couldn't afford to just put us in boarding school, like he had done for Estelle, my brother, and my other sister. But he did take us to Houston, and we boarded with a family. We were there all winter. As soon as school was out, he would come and take us back to the country. Then we would spend the summer in the country. In the winter, for school, we were in Houston, Texas.
- Quam-Wickham: Did you work at all in Houston?
- Jackson: No, I don't remember any of us working.
- Quam-Wickham: Your father must have really valued education.
- Jackson: He did. And as I think about Estelle, she was [trained as] a teacher. But I don't think she ever taught a day in her life. My brother and my sister Julia taught, during the time I was in school. I remember my father taking Estelle to look for a job as a teacher. And I remember him telling her one day, I don't think you really want a job. Actually, she didn't want to be a teacher. She left the country after she graduated; she went back to Houston and got a job as a ticket person at a theater. Then she went to beauty school. She graduated from beauty school and immediately opened a beauty shop. She did that until she sold it when she retired. She was quite successful.
- Quam-Wickham: Was this all in Houston?
- Jackson: No. She first opened a shop in Houston, and after she left Houston, she went to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and opened a beauty shop there. She bought apartment houses, a home, and everything, because she had a very good business. Actually, see, she didn't want to be a teacher.
- Quam-Wickham: She did fine anyway.
- Jackson: Yes. I guess she just did what she wanted to do. But my father accepted the fact that she decided to do something else. In the meantime, I went to Johnson's Business College. I didn't go to any of the other educational schools. I don't know how, but I got to ask him if I could go to Johnson's Business College.

- Quam-Wickham: You didn't want to be a teacher, either?
- Jackson: I wasn't even thinking about it at that time; I don't know what I was thinking about! I really don't know why I decided to ask him if I could go to Johnson's Business College. Maybe it was because I was thinking about business, because when I started my first business, I was 24 years old.
- Quam-Wickham: When was that?
- Jackson: 1945.
- Quam-Wickham: And that was the music store?
- Jackson: Yes. I've always wanted to be in business. I'm in business now, as you know. It's a small business, of course. Then when I came here to finish, I went to Heald Business College. Let me tell you how I got this career at Koret.
- Quam-Wickham: Can you tell me a little bit first about how you got to San Francisco?
- Jackson: Okay. I got married in 1942, I believe, and my husband had graduated from Prairie View State College. Most of his friends decided that during the war they were going to leave Texas to try and find some better jobs. All of his friends left, but he didn't. Then I guess about six or eight months later, he decided to leave, to go to California.
- Quam-Wickham: Did his friends come here first?
- Jackson: Yes. He left me with my brother and his family. In about two months, he sent for me. That was around April, 1943. When I got here on the train, we were living in what we called housing, but now we call it the projects. It was at the Bayview-Hunter's Point Shipyards.
- Quam-Wickham: Did he work there?
- Jackson: Yes. He was working swing shift. He worked the swing shift, and of course, I was pregnant at the time. During those months, I was sick and what-not, and finally, I went to the hospital, but I lost the baby. I then decided that I would go to work. The first job that I had was as a cashier at the South Gate Cafeteria. I can tell you that when I got that job, it

certainly helped me a lot in trying to see the difference between black and white. I remember my girlfriend and I were there, at the counter, sipping a soda. There was a sign posted there, saying, Cashier Wanted. And I said to my girlfriend, I'm going to go and apply for this job.

She said, You're not going to do that! I don't know why you'd go and try to get this job.

I said, Well, I'm going to ask, anyway. So I went in to the person's office and asked for an application to see if I could get the job. So she said, Yes. You come back around three o'clock this afternoon. I have another person that I'm interviewing, and I'll take both of you at the same time. So I got there, and when customers slid their trays around, you'd have the coffee-pot and you'd have to serve the coffee. But you didn't have anything to add with. You had to look at the tray: everything was 25 cents, 35 cents, something like that. You had to add it, put it into the machine, and then you would have to give the change. For example, if you had something for \$2.20, and they gave you \$3.00, you'd have to take the change out of the cash register and hand it to the person. The other person who was there for an interview was white. And I was black. I thought to myself, I'm going through this, but I know that she's going to get the job, that I probably won't get it. I watched the girl; she didn't know how to count change. She'd hit the register and she'd stand there and think for a minute, and subtract a \$1.00 or \$1.25 from \$3.00, and try to do it in her head. Then get it out of the cash register. In no time, she was gone and I got the job. The important thing to me then was that being in Texas during that time, no way would I have gone and asked for the job. But even if I had asked for the job, I'm positive that I wouldn't have gotten it. Texas has changed now, though. That changed my attitude: To think that you can get some justice. All because I knew how to count! I knew that. I think that I told the person that I interviewed with, that this incident sold me on San Francisco. It really did!

Quam-Wickham: You worked at the cafeteria for how long?

Jackson: Until I opened my music store. My husband then had left the shipyard, and started working for Golden State Insurance Company.

Quam-Wickham: Do you know when he left the shipyard? I was just interested if he left the shipyard before it closed, or after?

- Jackson: Oh, no. The shipyard went on for a long time.
- Quam-Wickham: It just closed down recently didn't it? The Hunter's Point Naval Shipyard?
- Jackson: Yes. It was 1945 or 46 when I opened the store. It might have been 1946. I remember that the war was over in 45; I was a cashier at South Gate then. So it could have been that I opened the record store in the later part of 1945 or the beginning of 1946.
- Quam-Wickham: What was the name of your music store?
- Jackson: Groove. Groove Record Shop, on O'Farrell Street near Fillmore.
- Quam-Wickham: Did you specialize in any particular type of music?
- Jackson: All types of records, and then I had a counter from which I sold cigars, cigarettes, candy, and all. The place was probably no bigger than this room. [motions]
- Quam-Wickham: Fifteen feet by ten feet?
- Jackson: Yes. Then I opened up a little store on Post Street, and my sister work in there. It was in a photography shop. I had a concession. Nothing but a counter and a rack with records, and she would sell records there. Finally, I moved to a bigger store on Fillmore and Fulton, and we did repairs on radios. I didn't do them; another fellow did. I would take them in and I would get a commission. He would also repair juke boxes. This was a white guy. He would get Decca, Columbia, and Capitol [records]. You would have to have a franchise for it. What he'd do was, when he got the records for his jukeboxes, I could get certain records from him. Because I couldn't get a franchise from Capital if there was another store a few doors down the street. They looked different on making records then.
- Quam-Wickham: So if you had a franchise, say from Capitol, you could only sell Capitol Records?
- Jackson: Right. So I just sold the records of the odd-ball labels. I sold toasters and other things like that at the big music store.
- Quam-Wickham: What was the name of the big music store?

Jackson: The same. Groove Record Shop.

[End of tape 1, side A]

[Begin tape 1, side B]

Jackson: The reason I sold the music store at the time was because you couldn't get a lease; it was always month-to-month for the store. Maybe the big guys could, but I couldn't get a lease. And you couldn't do much to your store because in any month, the landlord might raise the rent. This company would increase my rent every three or four months. Finally, I said, "I'm going to have to find a store to fix up, with a lease so that I could make repairs." But I couldn't find one, and so I decided to sell. I sold everything I had to a place out on Third Street. After I sold the record store, this particular day, my husband and I were driving down Mission Street, in the latter part of 1947, and I saw a sign hanging out, saying, "sewing machine operators wanted." So I said to my husband, "Why don't you stop so I can get out and apply for the job? He said, "Mattie, you don't want to work in a factory, do you?" I said, "What's wrong with that?" You know, my mother had six girls and there was always a sewing machine there. So I knew how to sew and make clothes. So he said, "Well, if you want to, go on in there." It was after the war, and they wanted machine operators then. When we walked in, the boss took me over to a section where I watched a lady working at a power machine. [exclamation] But I didn't know anything about a power machine. It had arms, with a little head on it, and she was making coveralls. And she was just moving her hands, zoom, zoom, zoom! [motions] I thought to myself, She's just doing one thing! I didn't know all about the garment industry. So he said, "What kind of machine can you operate?" All I knew was a Singer. I didn't know about Singer needles or anything, all I knew about was a Singer machine. But I didn't say that. I just said, "I can do what she does." And he said, "You're hired." [laughter] The next morning I went to work.

Quam-Wickham: Was that at Joe Koret's?

Jackson: No. That was at Ben Davis.

Quam-Wickham: So you were making coveralls at Ben Davis first?

Jackson: Not coveralls, but pants. Ben Davis pants. It was right there on Mission. So I sat down to that machine, and when I sat down, I touched that machine and that machine flew right out from under me! I swear it like to scared me to death! [laughter] But the man brought me there, sat me down, and walked away. They didn't watch you, they didn't do anything.

This white lady that was sitting to the right—her name was Roberta, I'll never forget her—she said to me, “You don't know how to operate a machine, do you?” I said, “No, but I'm going to tell you something—if I get a chance, I'm going to try this machine.” Now naturally, this lady had to produce. I was not producing. They were putting the work out there. But this lady would take some of her tickets, give them to me to help me along for the day. And I began to learn the machine. I only stayed there for about three months.

Quam-Wickham: Can you tell me about the tickets, how did they work?

Jackson: It's a sheet, like thin paste board, showing different operations. For example, at the beginning, if you were putting darts in, on this sheet would be the word “Darts” and then a number. There was a little section on the sheet where you would put your initials. You took that ticket off and the amount of garments on that ticket, and put it in your box, and when you finished the bundle, you tied the ticket onto the bundle. Then they pass it on to the next person. After darts, it might be “Band-set,” or it might be “Overlock”—whatever part you were doing, it was written on the ticket. You must put your number on it, so that if anything goes wrong, they bring it back to you if you did it wrong. At the end of the day, you put your tickets on, or you can wet the ticket—there was glue on the back—and stick it on the sheet. At the end of the day, you tally the number of garments that you did. You turn that sheet in at the end of each day. At the end the week, the person in the office sees that your tickets are added up so that you can get paid. I always had a book where I always put in my prices, the number of garments that I did, because if you don't, you don't know what you've done. But a lot of people didn't do this. It depends what you what do.

Quam-Wickham: So this book was your own personal record of what you've done?

Jackson: Yes. To keep track of what you were making, and also, one of the things that's important when you're doing piecework is to make sure that you've

got your prices down. You need to know about the prices because if it came down, if something was done in 1996, say, and it left, and it didn't come back until 1998, then you'd still know what the work entailed and you'd still get your same price, plus whatever else that you needed to do to increase your earnings. For example, if you got your price, say it was 15 cents two years ago, and you got a wage increase, something on the side would tell you that prices were still the same, or whether it was some added money on top of it so that you get your right pay. [interruption]

Quam-Wickham: I understand. Did you make pants first?

Jackson: Yes.

Quam-Wickham: And Roberta did some of your work for you? I'm not sure I understand this—

Jackson: No, she did her own work. When I was sitting alongside of her, we were doing the same work. For example, she'd cut a ticket. Maybe she was doing very well, and she'd give me a ticket. She'd give me a ticket for 15, or another ticket for five; it depended upon how many garments were in the bin.

Quam-Wickham: As you were learning?

Jackson: That's right, because they wouldn't have kept me after two or three days. She really helped me out. But after a while, one night I was reading the classified ads in the paper, and I saw an ad for Koret of California: machine operators wanted. That morning, I just went straight to Koret, and thought if they don't take me, I'll go back to my other job. But Koret hired me. That was in 1947. I didn't stay with Ben Davis after that.

Quam-Wickham: That was on Fremont Street?

Jackson: Yes.

Quam-Wickham: Can you tell me a little about what Mission and Fremont Streets looked like at that time? They must have looked differently than they do now.

Jackson: Yes. The Maritime Office was across the street, and there were just loads of people coming in and out of there. There were a lot of businesses, full-

fledged businesses, in that area. There were no buses coming up there; you had to walk from Mission Street to Fremont and Harrison Streets. You know, the Apostleship of the Sea isn't there anymore. That's a shame, too. It was a lovely building; I wonder what they're going to do with it.

There was another garment shop over Koret, because Koret was just a small, little shop. At 611 was the big Koret.

Quam-Wickham: So Koret had two factories?

Jackson: Yes. Koret had sample makers. They had a knitting shop, making sweaters. And offices for Koret. There might have been a sewing shop in there in the beginning, I don't know. I do know that Fremont was the first. And inside shop, as they called it; that means Koret owned and operated it, an inside shop. They also had some contracting shops, such as Aldie's, as they called it, that was a contracting shop. They worked on Koret stuff. They must have had some shops down in Chinatown at that time, as well. At one time, of course, they had a lot of shops in Chinatown. Fremont Street was a very busy area.

Quam-Wickham: Mostly a factory district?

Jackson: Yes. I left Koret. That's when I started going to Heald Business College. I think I left Koret, probably, sometime in 1950.

Quam-Wickham: Before we go on to that, could you tell me a little bit about Koret, the kinds of people who worked there, and Joe Koret? You knew Joe Koret at that time, right?

Jackson: Yes. I didn't know him too well. He wasn't working at the plant where I was. Most of the people were black and white. I don't remember if there were any Chinese. I don't remember. On Fremont Street, I know there were a couple of Japanese workers, but I don't remember any Chinese or any Spanish, either. I believe they were Greeks, Jewish, blacks, Italians, and different whites. But basically, it was a nice factory.

Quam-Wickham: And mostly women?

Jackson: Yes, all women. No sewing machine operators were men.

Quam-Wickham: Were there any male cutters, for example?

Jackson: Oh, yes. They had a cutting room, of course. And all the cutters were all men. There were no women cutters. There used to be some girls who bundled the fabric, after it was cut, and they'd take it to the floor. The bosses were okay: Johnny Foster, Bill Ticeman. I can't recall the top boss's name.

Quam-Wickham: What did you actually do during your first round at Koret?

Jackson: At first, I was a band-setter. I didn't like band-setting, but the problem was that there were only two band-setters, a white girl and me. They had only two styles: a trick skirt and a wonder-flare skirt. A trick skirt had little tiny pleats all around it, and you had to put the band on it. The wonder-flare skirt was the hardest of the two. I remember the supervisor always calling me her wonder-flare girl. I remember telling her, "It's time that you switched over and let me get some of the good work."

We always said it then, and they still say it today: the good work and the bad work. And she said, "Well, you're my wonder-flare girl."

I said, "No, I'm not really your wonder-flare girl. I think you should give me a chance to do some of the trick skirts." I wasn't making any money. You have to make at least the minimum. Otherwise, if you continue making under the minimum, they'll let you go, especially during your probationary period. I always tell people, "Work hard during your probationary period, because once you get through it, you'll have the chance to speak out. Don't speak out during that probationary time."

Quam-Wickham: How long did that last?

Jackson: It would be a month. So she told me one day, "You know, you're not going to stay here that long." I thought to myself, "I'm going to stay, because I'm going to do something to be sure that I make that minimum, until I'll be able to say something." So I didn't say anything. The supervisor's name was Fernie, Fern Stovall. After my probationary period was over, I just told her, "I'm going to have to find out why it is that I don't get a share of both the wonder-flare skirt and the trick skirt." There were different prices on the two skirts. You were supposed to have equal

prices for whatever the work is. But that's not the way it works all the time. Sometimes you get a price that does not yield.

Quam-Wickham: Let me understand this: So even though you had a harder skirt to make, you had the same price?

Jackson: No, you had different prices, but it depends upon how the engineer set the price. And it depends upon the workers to say, "This is not the right price." Then the boss says, "Well, we took a time-study." But sometimes the time-study doesn't work. Sometimes the different work makes it a lot more difficult, and you don't get the price that it really should be.

The way you determine what the price should be is this: If your average is set, and all of a sudden, you dip, and continue to dip, either there's something wrong with the operator or there's something wrong with the price. Then you have to determine: Is the operator working at her full potential? If the operator is working at her full potential, then there's something wrong with the price.

Quam-Wickham: Now, if it's determined that there was something wrong with the price, not the operators—. [telephone rings, interruption]

If it was determined that an operator was not at fault, that she was reaching her full potential, but still she wasn't making the minimum number of skirts, for instance, how would the workers then let the boss know? Was this before the union?

Jackson: No, the union was there. But even with the union there you have to know what you're doing. You have to be aware of and study your rates, and not just leave it to the boss to tell you that you're going to get this amount of money all the time and never disagree with him.

You have to know your operator first, whether one is sort of dragging along to try and get a better price, because some of them will do that. The employer or the supervisor can judge pretty well whether a person really works, or if someone is just laying down on the job. The way I always worked with the people— once I was in the shops I always helped to do piecework, and that was a way that you determined your time and be fair. You have to first be fair with yourself, and be fair with the employer, as well.

I used to tell the workers: “If you have one person, you’re in trouble, but if you have four or five doing the same thing, and you get confidence in a person, and the workers understand what you’re going to do to help us get a better price.” For example, you might say, “Now, you put your time down.” And say, you work from 11 to 12 o’clock. “Make sure you get the number of tickets you did within that hour. Write down the time, the number of tickets, and figure your average hourly wage based on the number of ticket.” If your average was \$2.00 an hour, for example, you would know about where to get that price within that price range.

But the engineer always gets the clock. The engineer will always look at his clock, and you must look at your own clock, or your own watch, at the same time. He’ll say, “You made so many pieces within that time period.” Well, he didn’t take into consideration something like having to change a needle. He didn’t take into consideration that some of the garments were not cut right, or they were too tight, or too loose. All those factors have an impact on the price. You have to help determine your own price. I can tell you that the other important thing about setting piece rates is that every person should make sure to document what they did and they should keep their check stubs, because it’s always stamped out on the check stubs. Also, you should check the price, but you won’t know the details of what you did unless you keep your own book of what you’ve done, say, when you did that arm’s eye. One arm’s eye might be bigger or smaller than another, but they’ll tell you that it’s all the same price. Sometimes you have to help determine the price, and you have to argue about it. The union might not be there watching you work. You have to make sure that you can tell the union to have the union representative come out and take their own time-study.

Quam-Wickham: So the union had their own time-study person?

Jackson: Yes, but you had to call them in New York for that. Now when I went to work at the union, I wasn’t a good engineer, and I wasn’t a good person to do a time-study. I had no credentials to do a time-study. But I asked Mr. Wall to give me two watches, like they had at Koret. I might not be able to pin-point it, but when I had those watches, I set one watch every time someone started a garment, and when they stopped, I’d stop the watch. I also had one watch on the board that continued to run during the whole time until someone finished a whole bundle. Then you get the number in there, and you figure out—it might not be precise but you can get close to

it—how much time it took to make those garments. That was when I was a business agent. I used to like doing that; in fact, I wish I had gone into becoming an engineer. Though I probably couldn't have gotten a job as an engineer, not at that time. I'll tell you about that someday.

[End of Tape 1, side B]

[Begin tape 2, side A]

Jackson: We had a garment, it had an arm's eye, as we called it. In my book, it was 39 cents per dozen that you got for the arm's eye. There is blind stitching on an arm's eye, round this way. [motions] That work came back and when we got the garment and the price, it was 36 cents per dozen. So I went in to John Pugarest and told him that he had made an error, because the price was 39 cents. He pulled out a big sheet, where they had written the prices down in handwriting, in pencil—it wasn't in ink. They put the prices down on that, but they probably erased them sometimes. He pulled the drawer out and he said, "No, it's 36." I said, "No, John, it's 39." I said, "The price was 39 cents during this time. But see, the star number was different." The star number then was one number, but today it was another number. But even though the star numbers were different, the work was identical. It was the same work. You have to know what your work was. I told him, "No, we disagree." He said, "Well, that's the way it is." So I went back and started to work, not on that particular work, but I kept thinking, "We could go to the union but maybe it would take some time to get the complaint finished. I'm going to talk to the workers." There were nine of us blind-stitch operators, nine of us.

Quam-Wickham: That makes it a pretty big group, doesn't it?

Jackson: Yes. At this time, it was a big plant because we weren't on Fremont Street, we were on Alabama Street.

Quam-Wickham: This was later, then?

Jackson: Yes. So at lunch time, I got the group together and I told them, "You know, we have plenty of work." Work was just stacked up to the ceiling, just loads of work, loads of work. I said, "They're going to try to make us do those arms out for 36 cents when it was 39 [before]. The contract tells

us that there should be no reduction of wages or of piece rates during the life of this agreement.” They said, “Well, what can we do?”

I said, “First, I’m going to give you a plan that we can try—if all of us agree on it. Every single one of us must agree, because if I go in there and it’s just me, he can fire me because he can take the rest of you eight and do the work. One wouldn’t hurt him. It’s got to be all nine of us. Will you agree to just stop work?” They said, “We can just punch out.”

I said, “No, I don’t mean to punch out. I don’t mean go home or go out of the building. I mean, just stop work.” They asked, “What do you mean, stop work?” I said, “Sit there and when they bring you the work, just say, ‘ain’t going to do it.’ Just sit there, don’t leave your machine.” So they said, “Okay. We will do it.”

I told them, “I’ll tell you exactly what they’ll try to do. Tomorrow morning Irene Hahn is going to bring us the work.” She was the supervisor. She is a union worker. She’s in the union. She’s a union person. “Now, when she brings it to you, don’t jump on Irene Hahn, because Irene is doing what the boss tells her to bring to us. Don’t jump on her. Because usually you jump on the supervisor. And I said, “When she brings you the work, just tell her you’re not going to do it. The next thing she’s going to do is take all the other work out of your basket, take it away, and put the [objectionable] work in your basket so that all you have to do is that work. You’ll have no other choice. But when she does that, just sit there.”

So it happened, just like that. She came around to me and said, “You know, Mattie, those other girls here, they’re not doing the work.” I said, “Why Irene, why are you mentioning it to me?” She said, “Well, will you do it?” I said, “No. I won’t do it.” So she said, “I think you ought to talk to the other girls and you ought to do the work, because I have to give you the work.”

I said, “Irene, you have to do what you must do, so just go ahead.” Then she emptied out all of the baskets, brought that other work in for us, put it down, and we just sat there. Then she came back and said, “Mattie, I’m going to have to take you to the office.”

I said, “Why are you going to have to take me to the office?” I wasn’t a steward then, either. She said, “The girls will listen to you.” I said, “Okay.” She went in to John Pugarest. I’m sitting there, right outside of his glass window where he could watch me, and when she told him, he hit his fist on that desk—you could hear that sound hitting the desk right through that window! He said, “Send Mattie Jackson in here!” I thought to myself, “This is exactly where I want to be, in there.” So he sat there and he raved. I sat there and didn’t say a word.

He said, “You, of all people, you know that contract backwards and forwards! You know that you cannot pull a strike in this plant! That’s against the rule of the union: there should be no strikes or lock-outs.” That meant we weren’t to go to the union, because that means that if I had told the union that we were going to strike, the union could be sued for that. That’s why I told the others, “Let’s not go to the union. Let’s just do what we are going to do.”

He said, “That’s what that contract says.” I said, “Let me tell you something, John Pugarest. That contract also says ‘There shall be no reduction in wage rates or in piecework rates during the life of this agreement.’ And if you can break it, so can I.” So he said, “I’m going to fire you!” I said, “You’re going to fire me? You are discriminating against me.” He said, “What do you mean—I’m discriminating?” I said, “Everyone else isn’t working either, but you’re going to fire me?” He says, “Send them all in here!” So they all came. This was the proudest moment of my life, when all of them walked in and John P. said, “I can fire all of you!” Christine Della Rica hit her fist on that desk and said, “We stand ready to be fired.” That’s just the highlight of my whole life at Koret! So when Christine did that, he knew we meant business. He knew that he wasn’t going to get his work out. He knew that nobody was going to sit in our chairs, because we had our chairs at our machines. He knew that! So then he calmed down and said, “You know, Mattie, if you can get the girls back to work, I’ll sit down with you and see if we can work out the price.” I said, “Well, you have to ask them. Don’t just ask me.” And he says, “Will you agree to that?” I looked at him and said, “Yes.” That evening we got our price back.

Quam-Wickham: How long did you all sit at your machines?

Jackson: About twenty minutes.

Quam-Wickham: Not long.

Jackson: Not long. Irene went directly into the office, immediately after this all happened. Immediately, we got the price all fixed that evening. Because I had my check stub at Koret. At the vault they had a sample of most of your basic rates. I used to tell the union about that when I was working at the plant. First, I should say that that evening, I went down to the union for whatever reason and Mr. Wall and the business agent, Larry, were standing there in the office. I was getting a drink of water there at the fountain. Same as it is there today. And Mr. Wall said to me, "I hear you pulled a strike."

I said, "No, I didn't." Then he said, "Well, you can tell us!"

I said, "No, I didn't." I thought to myself, "Now, I couldn't tell them that we were going to pull a strike, not the union, because I knew what the contract said." So I just told them, "No." As I was walking out toward the steps, I heard Larry Murgone saying to Mr. Wall, "I think she would make a good business agent." In two or three days, they called me in to be a business agent, but I didn't want to be a business agent.

Quam-Wickham: Do you remember what year this was?

Jackson: In 1967. Before I get to that, there's another point that I wanted to make. Anyway, they called me in. I was making pretty good money, and I knew the business agent wasn't making the money I was making. A lot of people don't believe that, but it's true. They were going to start me in at \$110 a week. But I could make more than \$110 a week in the shop because I could work overtime, and I could work Saturdays sometimes, as long as the work was there. I made good money, because I was a good, fast operator. I know it might sound like I'm giving myself accolades, but I know I was good.

Quam-Wickham: If you know you were good.

Jackson: I was one of the fastest ones, but yet my work was always good. I was telling the workers after the sit-down strike—I call it "the sit-down strike"—it was important on Wednesdays, when we got our checks. A lot more Chinese people were coming in then. It was hard for them to get the gist of what they were doing. In Chinatown, they'd do one thing, but then

when they started coming outside of Chinatown into the other shops, they had previously dealt with the Chinese employers. I don't mean to state that there hadn't been any Chinese before, but there weren't as many. And as they and the blacks came in, it was hard for them to figure out the percentages. And all of it's percentages. You could get your rates at 15 cents a dozen, and yet you have a dozen and a half. You have to know what a dozen and a half are at 15 cents a dozen. And you have to know what percentages are to get to a certain amount of money. I used to tell them, "Keep your book, so they won't cheat you." Because even if a ticket fell off of your paper, you would know how many garments you made each day. It's a lot of work to do, it's record-keeping. So when they [the union] asked me to come to work there, I told them, "No." That group at Koret, it was a big plant, when we moved to 375 Alabama, that was a big group.

Quam-Wickham: Do you remember how many workers?

Jackson: You had four floors there, so it was probably 400 or 500 workers there. There were a lot of piece-workers there. Even with the bundles-workers, they started to put them on piece-work.

Quam-Wickham: Were the cutters on piece-work, too?

Jackson: No.

Quam-Wickham: They were on an hourly wage, then?

Jackson: Yes. They always made good wages. And they never did get laid off. They do now, but they didn't then. The cutters were the elite group.

Quam-Wickham: Were they union?

Jackson: Oh yes, they were union. The union was flourishing then, too. Anyway, I told Mr. Wall that I'd rather just stay where I was. Then they called me again. First they asked me to be a steward. So I said, "Okay." And I would go to stewards' meetings, and I used to pound it in them. I'd tell Mr. Wall, It's time that this union set up a piece-rate system at the union hall. You can do it because every time you set a rate, you have files on it. So when I'm gone, if I take my book away, you'll have someone else who'll know what the price is."

Quam-Wickham: Didn't they have that before?

Jackson: No, they didn't have that until I came in. They had it to some degree, but they didn't have the files. I set up a book for each shop, that listed every operation, and I got the piece-rates for basically every operation. Most of them are down at the union hall, but I still have a few of them here.

Quam-Wickham: So this was shop-by-shop, and not industry-wide?

Jackson: Yes, because every shop is not the same. All piece-rates are not the same for every shop, but they get close to it. And you'd have a piece-rate list that you can take to Chinatown. I took care of all of Chinatown; we had 52 shops in Chinatown. I took care of every single shop in this Bay Area as a business agent, for piece-rates. I think Mr. Wall did this because I gave him such a bad time at the union. I'm telling you, I did!

Quam-Wickham: It makes a lot of sense to keep those kind of records!

Jackson: But the point is, I think he deliberately did that because I used to tell him to do it at the union meetings and at the shop stewards' meetings! I'll tell you, one day Mr. Wall was making his speech to the membership. We used to have good meetings once a month. Mr. Wall was talking about how the workers were doing. I thought to myself, "Why do you keep talking? You're not telling it right!" A lot of these workers were in make-up, and I knew that they were in make-up. But he just kept on talking. I stood up and raised my hand. I wasn't doing anything deliberately; I wasn't thinking. I just stood up and I said to him, "Mr. Wall, a lot of these workers go home in make-up. Now the managers have to know what's happening in the industry. The only way that you can know is by the business agent being the pipeline to your office. And your business agent tells you how well they're doing in this shop, or how many problems you got in that shop. What kind of problems you got at that shop." So when I said that, Mr. Wall turned around and called Myrtle Banks to the podium. So she says, "Sister Jackson, I think you ought to know what you're saying before you make the kind of statement that you've made." I said, "But Sister Banks, I do. You take that line across this back row, and I want all of you to stand up. Tell me, show him, how many of you that are standing here are in make-up." All of them were in make-up. But I shouldn't have done it that way, though. It was wrong for me to do it that way.

Quam-Wickham: Why was that?

Jackson: I was thinking that you should just talk about things and you're supposed to do it out in the open. I didn't want to embarrass Mr. Wall; I didn't want to embarrass Sister Banks. I should have waited, gone to them, and said what I did at the meeting, but this way, privately. There's a better way to do some things. I think that when Mr. Wall asked me to be a business agent, [he thought], "Now, we're going to show her." But he did tell me that when I decided to be a business agent, "You're thinking about Koret. You want to look out for all the people at Koret. But what about the people in all these other shops? They need help, too." Well, I thought about that. Then I thought to myself, "Well, it pays \$110 a week. I'm going to take the job." But I thought from the very first day that I'm going to give them at least six weeks or two months, and if they don't raise my pay, I'm leaving. Within that time, Mr. Wall went to the district council—it was a joint board then—and they raised my pay. I didn't ask them to. One of the ladies asked, "Do you know what we did for you last night?" I said, "What?" She said, "We raised your salary from a \$110 to a \$150 [a week]." I said, "No kidding!" She said, "Mr. Wall said that you were doing the same work as the other business agents, so you have a right to have \$150." That was good because I could keep my job.

Quam-Wickham: What does a joint board mean?

Jackson: The joint board is composed of locals. Locals 8, 213, and 101. San Francisco Joint Board. After I became manager, we had another Local 214 and another Local 215. So we had five locals. Now it's called District Council. Joint Board and District Council are basically the same thing.

Quam-Wickham: So it's the same thing with a different name. What about the locals? Did different locals represent different groups of workers?

Jackson: Yes. Local 8 was the first old local, the very first one, and that was Coat and Suit makers. The members made coats and suits. Local 213 was all cutters. Local 101 was Sportswear. Local 214 was shipping and office workers. That's the one I did. And Local 215 is a sportswear local in Napa, California.

Quam-Wickham: Are there different types of workers who do different work? The cutters would be all men.

Jackson: Yes, but there are a few women now.

Quam-Wickham: In the Coats and Suits Local, were the operators mostly women?

Jackson: There were men in Coats and Suits. Coats and Suits were the better garments. There was a lot of coat and suit [making]. Beautiful suits: Herbert Herbert's, Nathaniel Gray, oh, it was just a lot of nice shops. There were a lot of sportswear shops, too. All of them had cutting. Emma-Down used to offer half-off, they had beautiful dressy outfits. They just did dresses. Some of them did just sportswear. But that's why it's called a Joint Board.

Quam-Wickham: Let me ask you this: You were telling me about how when you went into Koret, they had good work and bad work. That's still a term they use. Could you explain what that means today?

Jackson: It means that good work is good prices and bad work is bad prices. That's why there are so many complaints and arguments between workers. You have to kind of spread the good work around. There's no question that it's hard to determine why the engineers can't give you the proper figure to do certain work. For example, take these pants that I have on. You blind-stitch the bottom of these pants; it's a penny and a half. Then you take the skirt, it's a penny and a half. Then you've got shorts with wide legs, it's a penny and a half! That doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense. Even though they have the clock, you still get a penny and a half for each. And it will be a penny and a half forever. When you get more money for it, you can put a percentage on top of the penny and a half. It used to be that we put 51% on top of that, then it went to 60%, and then on and on to sometimes 300% on top of that penny and a half. But that doesn't change the work itself; the work itself is the same. But what I did at Koret, when I was steward, there were so many fights between workers who were doing the long leg of these pants, and the wide leg of those shorts, because both were a cent-and-a-half. So I said to the workers, I'll go to the boss, and ask him to change the price to 19 cents a dozen for the shorts, and then get 17 cents a dozen for these pants. You see, a penny and a half is 18 cents per dozen. They agreed. The boss agreed. So I got that straightened out through them.

The other thing is that when you do blind-stitching, there are many gimmicks that you can use. I can do 180 pair of pants in an hour, 150 or

180 skirts per hour. But what I'd do is slide up that string that holds the bundle together, lay several garments on my machine, instead of picking them up one-by-one, and I could just do them much faster. [motions]

Quam-Wickham: By getting them all set up before you started to sew?

Jackson: That's right. And when I did that, the whole line would do that. When you take your garments together, after you blind-stitch them, you slide them across the machine. Not every worker does that. You have to use your head to see how you can beat the system a little. But the problem is that once they give you that rate, once they set the circumstances of work, then you make the decision that want to slide them across and speed up and make more money, then they come back and want to cut the prices. And I'd always say, "No."

Quam-Wickham: So what you're saying is that by eliminating just one movement, you can speed up your whole work process.

Jackson: Right. And make more money. Then they want to cut the prices because they're thinking you're making too much money. You're making too much money, they want to re-do that rate, but I said, "That can't be done. That's the rate it was, and it cannot change." But you have to be tough. You have to fight like cats and dogs.

Quam-Wickham: How is it that they can try to lower the price if there's a contract that states that prices can't be lowered?

Jackson: When you get a new style, and the workers are familiar with the style, they can't just cut the rate like that. It's very hard to do.

The only way they can reduce the rates is if there's some problems, and you sit down with the business agent and the manager and the boss. I'll give you a good example: at the Lily Ann Company, the top pressers at Lily Ann were really making more money than anyone else anywhere. This guy, he was the lone top presser although there had previously been two or three top pressers, maybe ten years ago or longer than that, he was making \$45,000 a year. Adolph Schuman called me and said, "I'm not going to give him his wage increase coming up in October." I was the manager then, and I said to Mr. Schuman, "You can't do that. You have to

give him his wage increase.” He said, “No, he’s making more than my vice-president!”

I said, “I’m telling you, Mr. Schuman, you can’t do that. You can’t single out a particular person and tell him that you aren’t giving him an upcoming wage increase. “

He said, “Well, something’s going to have to give.” That evening I called Pete [the presser] into my office. [telephone rings, interruption]. So I called him in and told Pete about Schuman calling and all. I said,” What happened? Why are you making that kind of money?”

He said, “It used to be that I was working every other week. But then David retired, and now that I’m working constantly, I just work harder and make more money.”

I said, “What do you suggest that we do? Because you must get your wage increase. Is there any way that we can work out something that would be agreeable as far as the company is concerned?” We did. We finally worked it out. But he came back and he started making more money, anyway. So Schuman had to live with it!

Quam-Wickham: What did he do? Figure out some way to press faster?

Jackson: No, that wasn’t what it was. The top pressers have to finish a garment, but they have a group of pressers over here who’ll do touch-up work if the top pressers can’t finish. But he was having more touch up work done, not doing it like it should, and the touch-up people would pick up his work. I told him that that wasn’t a good idea. I said, “You’ve been living with it all this time, and Schuman will have to live with you [doing this].” In fact, Lily Ann just closed, and then they reopened with 35, maybe 40 people. That’s the last coat and suit shop here.

Quam-Wickham: Are they still union?

Jackson: Yes. They’re not in the same building anymore, either.

Quam-Wickham: Where were they before?

Jackson: Sixteenth and Alabama. That's the piece-work system. Every shop is different.

Quam-Wickham: Does it work? Does piece-rate work for the worker?

Jackson: I like piece-work. Some workers don't like piece-work. But I like piece-work because I've seen workers who come to work and talk and just play-work. I like to move my work. I think I ought to get paid for that. I can almost tell the difference between a person who does piece-work and one who has never done piece-work. In my office, the dues clerk had to count the money before he opened the register every day. Piles of dimes, piles of nickels. I'd just do it this way. But they wouldn't: pull this out, pull that out, do this over here. [motions slowly]

You can earn good money with piece-work, but you have to have the right piece-rates first. I've known workers who'd do one garment, and [in the same time] I'd do two garments, or two-and-a-half. My good friend, I used to tell Alice, "Alice, why do you get up in the morning?" She just worked very casually. She's older than I am, and she's still working today, and she's still casual. That's good for her health, I'm sure. There are a lot of people who talk a lot and just fluff off. My daughter tells me, "Mom, I wouldn't work for you for anything!" All I would do for somebody is what I'd ask of others. I'm going to give you a decent day's work, even if it's just washing dishes. I'm going to wash those dishes right. I have to tell you about when I sold my coffee shop, and I was home, and I saw an ad in the paper saying Part-time help wanted, from 10 to 2. I thought to myself, this would be good. I'd have some pin money and not have just a regular job. So I went in for the interview; it was at the Hillwood School down in Pacific Heights. The application asked about education and what-not. When I was sitting there that morning, this man was bounding down the steps, and I said, "Hi," and he said, "Hi." I saw him at the coffee shop. He was always at my coffee shop in the morning. He was driving the Hillwood School's school-bus. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I came to see about this job." He went bounding up the steps and then came bounding down again. He said, "You know what, that's my mother and I told her that you were the only person I knew who would be smiling at 6 o'clock in the morning." Well, I never wanted to smile at 6 o'clock in the morning, but I would be! So I took the job. I took the job. I had to come in at ten. I had two or three workers working under me. We had to take the trays and fill them up and take them to each classroom.

This was in an old Victorian house. Then after you pick up the dishes, you come back and clean the kitchen. Then they'd leave. Then after they left, I had to come back to the classroom, where I'd have to read to a bunch of little ones, this size. [motions] Then I'd have to tell them to put their heads on the desk and take a nap. Then at 2 o'clock, I'd leave. I was there about three weeks, she calls me in her office, and she says to me, "Mattie, I'm going to have to let you go." I said, "Why?"

She said, "I just don't think you're right for this job." I just couldn't believe it, couldn't believe it. When I got home, I told my husband that I got fired today. I said to him, "She said I'm not right for the job," as if I didn't do the work. [interruption]

[End of tape 2, side A]

[Begin tape 2, side B]

Jackson:

That worried me. He said, "Maybe you weren't doing it the way she wanted you to do it." To that I said, "Well, I don't know." Then I kept thinking about it. When I really thought about it, I said to myself, "Maybe I should have done it like they were doing it." Instead of doing it routinely as we had always done it, what I did was that I organized it just like I did with piecework. For example, when I was doing the dishes, I'd do one and then do another just like in a line. I did that because of my experience with other things. She didn't tell me how to do things. She said, "Clean the kitchen." She didn't tell me how to do it. Or not to do it any other way than you'd normally do it. And I believe that's what happened. Now remember, that was quite some years ago. I retired in 1990. Somewhere around 1985 or 1986, this lady came before the Board of Permit Appeals. I was on the Board. And here comes this lady, I saw her coming. They had put on the calendar, Hillwood School. I just figured it wasn't this old lady, because that lady was old back then. Not old, but she was mature. And this boy came with her; he seemed to be a younger boy, not the one who had been bounding up the stairs. A young man, I should say. So I voted for her [request]. They wanted to build a big, tall fence and the neighbors had some problem. They had to appeal it to our Board. I figured they needed that fence because it was right at the corner and then kids might not get hurt in the play area there.

After the case was closed, I ask the president of the Board for a recess for a few minutes because I wanted to talk to somebody. The lady went out and I followed her out into the hallway, then I reached for her and I shook her hand. I said, "My name is Mattie Jackson."

She said, "Well, how are you?" I said, "Fine. Do you remember me?"

"No, why should I?" She was a very staunch woman. "Well, *should* I?" I said, "You fired me in 19something," whatever year it was. She said, "I couldn't have." I said, "But you did. I'll tell you a little bit about it and maybe it will jog your memory a little." I was smiling, you know, I wasn't angry or anything. When I finished telling her, she said, "I was right, wasn't I? [laughter] I was right, wasn't I?" I said, "Right? How?"

She said, "I told you that you weren't supposed to be in this kind of job." Then it dawned on me that I don't know what she thought but maybe she thought that because I was moving things, that I was taking charge or something. So she let me go.

Quam-Wickham: That's a funny story.

Jackson: Yes, it was funny that night.

Quam-Wickham: I'll bet she was shocked.

Jackson: Yes, she was. I met her little grandson and another one who was her great-grandson. He was helping her on this case.

Quam-Wickham: That's funny. Let me get back to the first time you were at Koret. Do you remember when the ILGWU organized Koret? Were you there then, or had it been organized already by the time you came in?

Jackson: It was organized. I don't know when.

Quam-Wickham: Maybe organized much earlier? Do you know how long Koret had been in operation?

Jackson: I really don't know. I don't know who the first group of people were, it didn't have to be Koret. Because local 8 was the first Local. That was in 1930 or 1933, something like that. I think probably 1930. I think Local

101 was organized in 1933. And there was a Local, a Chinese local, I have the papers on that but I can't remember the year. Maybe I'll make some notes next time. I know that Jenny Matyas organized the National Dollar stores with a group of Chinese people at that time.

Quam-Wickham: Also, when I came here before, you told me a little bit about how you shared different kinds of work at Koret your first time around.

Jackson: You mean when I did band-setting? Oh yes, when I did band-setting and I was talking about the wonder-flare skirt. Back then, I didn't like the band-setting, but I kept watching to see if anybody left, because I wanted to get into the special machine department. See, band-setting is single needle work. On single needle you do a whole lot of different things. But the single needle operators don't make as much, I think, as special machine operators, except band-setting is about the same. Then there's a lot of different work that you do on single needle [machines]. You can do cuffs, collar, a whole lot of little different things with single needle. But on the special machine, you can only do one thing. The person who does single needle is a much better operator, a more skilled operator than a special machine operator. You can go in and learn special machines and you won't know anything but that. But if you are a single needle operator, you have to do more than one thing most of the time. So you're a lot more skilled. I didn't have the skills to do as much as some of the single needle operators did. So I did the band-setting. Then one girl left, and I went in and asked the boss for the blind-stitching machine. He said, "Well, Mattie, you don't know how to work a blind stitching machine." I told him, "Just give me a chance. Give me a chance."

He gave it to me. I was one of the best blind-stitch operators that they ever had. One of them; I wasn't the only one. I'll never forget that I was getting the price on the campus jacket— it had a little slit on the side where you do one side like this [motions], you do it, then you do the other side, blind-stitched. That first day, I made those garments and I thought to myself, I'll never make any money doing this. But by the evening, I was doing a little bit better, a little bit better, then I got good at it. I liked the special machine. After that, I didn't do anything else. When I left to go to work for the union, I was still a blind-stitch operator.

Quam-Wickham: Was it easy for a worker to move from one machine to another within the factory? Or did someone have to do what you did and just keep an eye out?

Jackson: I don't know if anybody else tried. I know that I was watching from within for that machine, and I had enough courage to go and ask the boss.

I wanted to tell you something. My first arbitration case with Koret of California was a case where I knew all the engineers: Doug Whitely, John Pugarest, Bill Ticeman. I knew them all because I had worked with them. Then when I took this case, I don't remember if it was piece-rates or whatever, I told Doug that I didn't think we should go to arbitration on this case.

Quam-Wickham: Do you recall what kind of a case it was?

Jackson: It had something to do with rates. And he said, "Well, we're going." Now I remembered that I had a record of something that we had done concerning this particular case. I can't remember exactly what kind of case it was. I said, "Well, okay, but I'd suggest that we work it out." But he said, "No, we're going."

When we got to that hearing, Bill Ticeman was the top boss then at 611, Doug Whitely was on Alabama Street. When I got through with my records and telling them exactly what took place, Bill Ticeman's face was as red as a beet. He was really dumbfounded because actually, the case shouldn't have been there. [telephone rings, interruption] Anyway, we settled on most of the little points. But Sam Kagel said to Bill Ticeman, "I want you and Mattie to try to work this out, but if you can't work it out, I want you to come back to my office." Bill and I set up a date for a couple of days later. I was a new business agent; this was my first arbitration case. So Lad Murgone, the other business agent, went with me. When I walked into this room, Bill Ticeman had fifteen or twenty other managers sitting around. Bill was there. I had my file, with whatever case I had filed in the order of what I had done first, in the beginning, to the end. When I got there, Bill said to me, "Mattie, I noticed that you have some new forms. Where did you get those forms?"

I said, "I made them up." He said, "What do you mean, 'You made them up?'"

Just what I said, “I made them. You take a piece of paper and leave a space for the answers. I did it for the workers so that when I took a complaint I’d state what kind of complaint and the explanation, and et cetera, et cetera.” He said, “You made them by yourself?”

I said, “Well, I listed the questions I wanted to ask, the typist typed out the forms, and Mr. Wall okayed it before I got them. I didn’t just do it automatically.”

He said, “Can I have some of them?” So I gave him some of them. He said, “You know, why don’t you come to work for the company?” I’m sitting there, thinking, “Why would he say that? I’ve been working for this company off and on for 17 years! And he never, never looked at me!” So I said, “You know, Bill, I don’t quite know why you’d ask me to come to work for you. I look around this room at everybody that’s sitting here. I’ve worked with each one of them, with piece-rates. I’ve worked here 17 years, in your sight, right in front of John P., where you could see me through the glass from your office. And you never asked me about a job.” So he said, “Well, why didn’t you ask?”

I said, “Do you think I would have asked? Number one, there are no women in your engineers’ office or in your top office. I don’t see any. And me, as a black woman, if there weren’t other women, do you think that I’d even ask for a job in your office? You know that I’m not someone who went to engineering school. Everybody sitting here—” I’ve worked with them. I would see the ads in the newspapers for engineers. And some of those guys would come in here without knowing a cuff from a collar. They knew the mechanics of things, and they could watch us. But most of them didn’t know anything about sewing. Some of you have even given me prices that were too high, and I would tell them, “This price is too high; it shouldn’t be this.”

One of the reasons that my reputation was so good was that I’d tell the girls, “Look, we want what we’re supposed to have. We don’t want any more or any less. Until we get another wage increase, we shouldn’t get more just because some engineer didn’t know what he was doing. I’ve done that.” He said, “Well, you’d make more money.”

I said, “No, I’ll stay where I am.” And it’s good that I did stay where I was because Koret was sold to Levi Strauss and guess who lost their jobs?

Quam-Wickham: Oh, really?

Jackson: Yes. Koret was sold to Levi Strauss. Then Levi Strauss resold it to a bunch of people who had been in Koret. Old man Joe Koret sold it. He sent us a letter. I still have that letter in my files. Even when he sold it, I was an officer at that time, but it was the nicest letter that he wrote. He didn't have any children. He and his wife, Stephanie— they had a line of clothes called Stephanie K. So when I got back to the office, I told Mr. Wall, "Of all the people, did you know that Bill Ticeman offered me a job today?" He said, "I wouldn't be surprised."

I said, "Well, I was surprised. After all these years, he didn't think that I knew anything but a sewing machine. I left Koret three different times, and each time they've called me back saying, "Mattie, we hear you aren't doing anything now. Why don't you come back to work for us?" I told him that. I said [to Ticeman], "Each time that you said you wanted me to come back to work for them—" Like one day, John P. asked me. I told him, "I don't know if I want to come back to work, John." And he said, "I'll get you a brand new sewing machine. And then you ask me to work in your company!" I guess he just wanted to get me off his back.

Quam-Wickham: Yes. Maybe by working for the union you also showed him even more what you could do.

Jackson: Yes, I guess you're right.

Quam-Wickham: That's a great story.

Now you said that you left Koret the first time in about 1950?

Jackson: Yes. At first I was going to go to school at State. But I couldn't get the classes. Koret agreed that they'd let me off in the evenings, say at about 12 o'clock. But I couldn't get classes set in the evening. So I discarded that idea.

Quam-Wickham: Were you going to take business classes?

Jackson: Yes. So then I decided to go to Heald. But I'd have to go from nine to twelve. So I found a job at Franklin Hospital, as it used to be. Now it's UC Medical. In that job I worked as a surgery aide.

Quam-Wickham: Did you? How did you get into that job?

Jackson: I was at a picnic; my girlfriend was a nurse's aide, and she said that she heard there was a job opening at Franklin Hospital, where her job was. I told her that I had never worked at a hospital before, but she told me to go try anyway. So I went in.

I'll never forget this day and that lady's name; it was a long time ago. Some people's names just stick in your mind because of certain things that have happened to you. Her name was Mrs. Drysdale. She was in the top office room; there were probably six floors up there. When I went in, she asked me if I had any experience. I told her, "No." She said, "Why are you asking about the job?" I said, "Well, I need a job." So what she did, she just started talking about things in general; she just bypassed the job, and just talked. We had a good conversation. In a few minutes, she said, "When can you start to work?" I'm not a person who can interview people very well. Evidently my conversation was such that she figured I could do what I was supposed to do. What I had to do was go to work at 3 or 3:30, pick the instruments for whatever case it was, like a tonsillectomy or an appendectomy or whatever, for the next day. You put them all in a tray, wrap them, write the kind of operation it is, the date and time of it, and the doctor's name. And you put it in the autoclave. I sat in a small room with an autoclave, a telephone, and a desk. Then I took any messages for doctors. If there were any cases that night, if a doctor needed any information after the operation, I'd tack the notes up right on the door. When he came out, he'd get his messages there right on the door. The other thing about this job that helped me a lot was that when we didn't have any cases, I could study. I could study a lot during the night.

Quam-Wickham: So you went to Heald in the morning, then you came to work in the evening?

Jackson: Yes. I drove home, made my husband's dinner, then I'd go to work and get off at eleven. Some nights it would be busy, and sometimes it'd be weeks with always just doctors. After that was over, I didn't have to do anything but answer the phone and take notes. And she told me to tie my hair up, get the uniform, but I didn't have to wear the white stockings. I don't think the nurse's aides had to tie up their hair, but I did as a surgery aide. I had pretty long hair then. I had gauze all around me. I stayed right there even after I got out of school. I stayed there; Koret found out that I

was out of school. My girlfriend called me and told me that John P. had asked if I'd come back to work. I said, "No, I think I'll just stay with this job for a while." But he called again, and somehow I was just lured back there. I had to call Mrs. Drysdale and tell her a little lie that a window fell on my arm and broke it. She said, "When it gets well, you just come on back to work." But I never did go back. I went back to Koret.

Quam-Wickham: How long were you at the hospital?

Jackson: About a year and a half. Then I went back to Koret. Then I started back to school again. I started going to school at USF.

Quam-Wickham: Taking business courses?

Jackson: No, negotiations. Union stuff. Then I was taking a course in economics at State. I was doing that on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I believe USF was on Mondays and Wednesdays. I studied for my economics class at work. When I went to work for the union, I told Koret that I'd give them a two-week notice. He said, "You don't really have to give us a two-week notice. I figured that you'd be leaving. I hadn't planned to leave."

Quam-Wickham: Was this in 1967?

Jackson: Yes.

Quam-Wickham: So did you work for Koret all the way from the 1950s to 1967?

Jackson: No. Remember, I had the coffee shop.

Quam-Wickham: Oh, that's right—in between there. You worked for Koret a while, then you quit for the coffee shop. You owned your own coffee shop, right?

Jackson: Right. At 25th and Potrero. It was the Potrero Coffee Shop. That was by hook or crook, because I'd never worked at a coffee shop. I'd never done any work in a coffee shop. It's just amazing that I would have even considered it, but my girlfriend said, This lady is selling her coffee shop. Why don't you buy it? I said, "I don't know anything about coffee shops. She said, "But I work there as one of her cooks. You've been in business before, so why don't you try it? If you want me, I'll stay." I thought about

it. I'd saved up a little money, for a car. My husband and I had a car, but I wanted a little car of my own.

The way I saved money: My husband and I would get an allowance each week. He'd get a little more than I would get, because if we went out, he'd pay. Or if he went out with the fellows or whatever, he would have some money. I wouldn't go out as much. He would go, say, maybe to the racetrack. I never did go to the racetrack. I'd take my money and save it.

When I got ready to buy the coffee shop, I told him I was going to buy the coffee shop. He said, I don't know who's going to help you because I don't want anything to do with it.

I said, "Okay." So I bought it. I got this cook, and the waitress. I still worked at Koret. I'd leave every morning from this house at five o'clock, go there, make the coffee, and be ready to open up right at six. Borden's Milk Dairy was right there close. At six in the morning, most of those who came wore white coats, because they wore white coats when they drove those dairy trucks. They went out and got milk, orange juice, and brought it to your house. They don't do that anymore. They were the first customers to be there. I learned from the very beginning. I didn't just work the cash register. I also did dishes, I learned how to work the grill, but I had to learn from the cook. But I learned every ounce of it.

Quam-Wickham: That's not easy.

Jackson: No, it's not. [interruption]

So I got started. About two months later, my sister said to me, "We need some uniforms. By the way, are you going to keep this coffee shop?"

I said, "You get the uniforms. I'll let you know in a few days." So I was sitting there at that sewing machine, where I was pushing hard because I had to take part of my money to pay the people at the coffee shop. And I was thinking, "I did this wrong, because the lady didn't have good business in the first place." And I went in there just like it did. Then I got on the phone, talked to my sister; I said, "I need some help. I want to re-do my shop." I told her what I needed to re-do it: tables, dishes, and other things. Then I called the landlord and asked him if he would paint the outside, I'd paint the inside. He said, "Okay."

I had a parking lot right next to it. I called Borden's Milk Dairy and asked them if I could advertise their ice cream. I would put their sign in my window, and they would give me some new menus and things, because I was using their ice cream. I'm going to tell you: When I re-did that place, I closed it on Friday. I worked all Friday evening, and all day on Saturday and all day on Sunday. There was a great, big plate glass window. Even though I'd been there two or three months, I put a big sign in that window, "Under new management." Like it was a new place! At lunch-time [on Monday after it reopened], the place was packed. It depends on what you've got, if you've got a flourishing business, you have to keep it up. If it's already down, you have to discard the whole thing. I didn't do that. But you know what, that \$450 meant a lot to me. That was all I had.

Quam-Wickham: Is that what you invested in it, in re-doing it?

Jackson: No, that's what I bought it for! I was going to lose the \$450.

Quam-Wickham: And you were working at Koret at the same time?

Jackson: Yes. Then, in 1955 or '56, no, 1956, because in 1957 I left Koret because the business was moving. I went to the coffee shop early, then at quarter to eight I'd go to Koret, and when we got out at 3:30, I'd be at the coffee shop at four and stay there until I closed up at 5:30 or six.

Quam-Wickham: That's a long day.

Jackson: Yes. It was early in the morning that I left here, at 5 o'clock every morning. When I sold it, everybody was in there all teary-eyed. They called my hamburgers Mattie-burgers. [laughter] I had a clientele that was good; they were good.

The one incident— more than one incident—I'm sure they do it to stores even today. If you walked into that coffee shop, and you weren't working in that area, you didn't know who was in there. You just would have to walk in. I had whites that would walk in, see that we were blacks, and just walk out. There wasn't any black food in there, just good sandwiches, a merchant's lunch each day, good ice cream, good milkshakes. And it was a neat, neat place, after I got it fixed.

There was another incident. There was a place called the Pittsburgh Glass Company. It was called a glass company, but they were making gloves. There were maybe two blacks there, and the rest of them were whites. They never came in the shop there, not even the two black girls. I know they went out to lunch, because I'd see them go different places, like down the street.

One day, a man from the union, not the ILG, but another union from that company across the street. They were unionized, and they had a strike. The man from the union came over to my shop, and said, If you will give each one of the pickets coffee and a doughnut twice a day, at 10 o'clock in the morning and at 2 or 3 o'clock in the evening, just keep a list of who you serve and I will pay you once a week as long as the strike is on. He didn't know that they didn't come into my shop, and I didn't tell him. So I said, "Sure." On the first day, nobody came over. I thought to myself, he's not going to know about us, about these two sides, because he's just trying to serve his people. The next day, two or three of them came, the next day, five or six of them came, the next day, all of them came over. But you know what they said to me afterwards? One of them said, "This is a nice little place. I want you to know that we were mean, in not coming into your shop. I will be coming over here from now on." I just said, "Thank you." I didn't say anything else, just "Thank you." God does things in mysterious ways, with wonders to perform. Because this man came to me and I got all those customers.

Quam-Wickham: That's a great story. It helped you and it helped the union, too.

Jackson: Yes, it did.

Quam-Wickham: Did you have a mixed clientele, then?

Jackson: No, there wasn't anyone but whites. The only blacks who came in there were people from Muni. They had a bus stop right there. All the people from Safeway were white! All the people from Borden's Milk Dairy were white! All the people from Pittsburgh Glass Company were white, except those two. There was a screen place, where they were all white. All the people from Soulé Steel Company were white! I've got some pictures of people sitting at the counter: there aren't any black folks! But some whites would walk in, then walk out.

Quam-Wickham: Do you know if there were very many other black women in San Francisco running their own businesses at the time? Do you have a sense that you were unusual in that regard?

Jackson: There might have been. No, I haven't thought about it. Let's see. Myrtle Rector, she had some kind of business, maybe a liquor store, over in the Fillmore. There might have been some more. There were beauty shops. I know there were black beauty shops. I don't know about restaurants. But I don't know, I hadn't thought about it. It's a good question. I'll have to look that up.

Quam-Wickham: I suspect that you were unusual, but I don't know. It's interesting that you haven't thought about it.

Jackson: Yes.

[End of Interview]