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The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Richard Billups:  
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2007

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01-00:00:09

Meeker: Today is the 8th of August, 2007. This is Martin Meeker, interviewing Rich Billups for the Oakland Army Base oral history project. I just want to maybe get started, and if you could maybe give a little bit of your background: where you were born, when you were born.

01-00:00:32

Billups: I was born in Santa Cruz on 12-8-43.

01-00:00:36

Meeker: Okay. So right in the middle of World War II.

01-00:00:39

Billups: Somewhere close. [laughter]

01-00:00:42

Meeker: What was your family like? What did your parents do?

01-00:00:45

Billups: My father was a farmer, originally. He worked for Captain McQuaid, in Santa Cruz.

01-00:00:52

Meeker: Who?

01-00:00:52

Billups: Captain McQuaid, in Santa Cruz.

01-00:00:55

Meeker: Who's that?

01-00:00:55

Billups: He's a fireman. There was a small base that was down there. There was a whole bunch of them around at one time or another.

01-00:01:04

Meeker: And your mom, was she a homemaker?

01-00:01:06

Billups: She was a homemaker. She was just {Mary Gross Close?}, and come out of Idaho, Lewistown area.

01-00:01:14

Meeker: Okay. Do you know if your parents were born in — they weren't born in California?

01-00:01:18

Billups: No. One was born in Idaho, and the other one was born in Missouri.

01-00:01:21  
Meeker: Missouri. So do you know when they came out to California?

01-00:01:33  
Billups: Late thirties, sometime.

01-00:01:36  
Meeker: Late thirties?

01-00:01:37  
Billups: Yeah. One of them was — they were both in Santa Cruz. They got married in Santa Cruz, then moved to Oregon. Most of my life was in Oregon, around Tillamook County.

01-00:01:48  
Meeker: So when did you move up to Oregon?

01-00:01:50  
Billups: In '47.

01-00:01:53  
Meeker: Okay. And Multnomah County, that's where Portland is, right?

01-00:01:58  
Billups: Well, Tillamook County's on the coast. It's about eighty miles from Portland.

01-00:02:04  
Meeker: Okay. So what town did you live in when you were up there?

01-00:02:08  
Billups: Rockaway, Tillamook, and {Salem?}.

01-00:02:11  
Meeker: So that's right on the coast, huh?

01-00:02:12  
Billups: Right.

01-00:02:13  
Meeker: Was your dad involved in fishing or anything like that?

01-00:02:16  
Billups: No, he was retired. He had a heart attack — eating too heavy.

01-00:02:22  
Meeker: So he was up there just —

01-00:02:25  
Billups: Well, trying to exist.

01-00:02:27  
Meeker: Yeah. Were you going to school up there?

01-00:02:30

Billups:

I went ten years at {Niaconi?}, and then at E.M. Hill Carlton, and E.M. Hill area two years, and finished high school up there.

01-00:02:47

Meeker:

And then when did you learn your trade? Were you trained as an electrician, or did that come later?

01-00:02:52

Billups:

Well, I went in the service, and had a fourteen-month course for the Navy for electrician, and I was — I want to say two years as a Reserve. That's how I got into it. Then I went to work. I was shy just a few months of having enough time to be a journeyman. I went to work in 1966, June 1, Monday of June in 1966, I started as an electrician helper at the engineers at the Oakland Army Base. And then about a year down the line, I went and took a test — Civil Service test — and got journeyman out of it.

01-00:03:43

Meeker:

And got what?

01-00:03:44

Billups:

A journeyman electrician.

01-00:03:46

Meeker:

Oh, a journeyman. All right.

01-00:03:49

Billups:

I was only short a few months, so I was a helper for a short period of time.

01-00:03:58

Meeker:

So, the period in which you were in the Naval Reserves, where were you stationed?

01-00:04:02

Billups:

San Diego for the two years. Went to Vietnam for a six-month tour.

01-00:04:10

Meeker:

Yeah? And what were your experiences there like?

01-00:04:13

Billups:

Well, that was kind of a unique deal. We were off of Da Nang in July, and went to Hong Kong and Japan while we were there.

01-00:04:32

Meeker:

So you saw a bit of the East?

01-00:04:34

Billups:

Yeah, I got to see some of it. Flyers come down, and have the top of their head knocked off ejecting out of the airplane. Different things I got to see.

01-00:04:45

Meeker:

Okay. So your participation in it was not in infantry or anything like that—

01-00:04:50  
Billups: No, no. It was aboard ship.

01-00:04:52  
Meeker: Okay. All right. What ship were you on?

01-00:04:55  
Billups: U.S.S. Canberra. It was the first ship that shot from sea to shore. So we did bombardment, shot 179 rounds, and completely destroyed a town over there. It was an eight-inch weaponry.

01-00:05:12  
Meeker: So that was a battle ship?

01-00:05:14  
Billups: No, heavy cruiser.

01-00:05:16  
Meeker: Heavy cruiser. Okay. And what years were you there?

01-00:05:21  
Billups: '64, and '65, part of '66. Two years.

01-00:05:34  
Meeker: Your work here on the Army Base was as a civilian, though, right?

01-00:05:39  
Billups: Right.

01-00:05:39  
Meeker: Did you, during that period of time, ever think about becoming a career Naval officer?

01-00:05:45  
Billups: Never. [laughter] I couldn't take their kind of nonsense.

01-00:05:50  
Meeker: What was the nonsense?

01-00:05:51  
Billups: Well, it's just their way of doing things just wasn't my way of looking at things.

01-00:05:56  
Meeker: Yeah. Too many rules?

01-00:05:58  
Billups: Not the rules. I didn't mind the rules. It's just if you did something wrong, they would punish you for anything and everything, and I didn't like that kind of nonsense. If you did something, it shouldn't happen again, because you've had that experience.

01-00:06:18  
Meeker: That wasn't the Navy way of thinking, though?

01-00:06:19  
Billups: But that isn't their way. They punish you for anything and everything.

01-00:06:24  
Meeker: So what kind of work did you do aboard the ship?

01-00:06:26  
Billups: Electrician.

01-00:06:28  
Meeker: Electrician?

01-00:06:28  
Billups: Yeah. After steering, boiler controls. You know, different stuff like that.

01-00:06:35  
Meeker: Was there a lot of work for you to do, or once the ship was launched — it would have been maintenance oriented, right?

01-00:06:42  
Billups: You had to do all the maintenance around there: motor controls and stuff like that.

01-00:06:47  
Meeker: So were you busy? Were things breaking constantly, or were you pretty much were—

01-00:06:51  
Billups: You have a ship that's forty years old, something's got to happen to it.

01-00:06:55  
Meeker: Yeah. So you were busy, then, doing that work?

01-00:06:59  
Billups: We stayed busy.

01-00:07:00  
Meeker: Okay. I don't know much about electrical work. [laughter] I'll admit it. Is there like a particular kind of work that you were specializing in?

01-00:07:12  
Billups: Well, you've got motor controls, you've got lights, plugs, whatever is electrical. Whatever your communications, you've got to feed power to it: all the circuitry and everything, that's what you basically were doing.

01-00:07:28  
Meeker: So, anything that was kind of hooked up via wires is something that you would have been working on?



01-00:07:33  
Billups: Right.

01-00:07:33  
Meeker: Okay. So then, when you finished your term, it was in the Reserves, yeah?

01-00:07:41  
Billups: Reserves. I had four more after I got out.

01-00:07:43  
Meeker: Okay. Four more years in the Reserves.

01-00:07:45  
Billups: Yeah, and it was with the CBs over at San Rafael.

01-00:07:51  
Meeker: CBs?

01-00:07:52  
Billups: Yeah, CBs.

01-00:07:53  
Meeker: What's that?

01-00:07:54  
Billups: It's a unit that the Navy had for like if you did all kinds of work, you build buildings, and do electrical, do whatever. That's part of the CBs.

01-00:08:08  
Meeker: So you did electrical work?

01-00:08:11  
Billups: I was doing electrical. I was doing anything and everything.

01-00:08:13  
Meeker: So, this would have been, like when you were done with your term, you had — you had said two or four more years in the Reserves?

01-00:08:23  
Billups: I had four more years left.

01-00:08:24  
Meeker: During those four years, what are some of the projects that you worked on?

01-00:08:27  
Billups: Well, we'd build a Quonset hut and different things like that. We went to Camp Pendleton one year for two weeks, rumbling around down there, for hiking and playing games at night, and different things like that.

01-00:08:48  
Meeker: Okay. So was it mostly within California that you did the work?

01-00:08:52  
Billups: Yeah, most of it was in the Bay Area here, and then I went to Washington — Lake Washington up there — one year, the CBs up there, and I put in a communications system for them while I was up there for two weeks.

01-00:09:09  
Meeker: So, you were basically doing support work for the CBs. What kind of work did the CBs do?

01-00:09:15  
Billups: Anything that anybody asked them to do. Over there, they tore down a camp, Boy Scout camp, underneath Mount Diablo over there. They tore that down one time. Just anything that they could find for us to do, give us experience.

01-00:09:38  
Meeker: And where were you living during that period of time?

01-00:09:40  
Billups: I lived in Richmond.

01-00:09:43  
Meeker: You lived in Richmond?

01-00:09:43  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:09:45  
Meeker: Were you renting, or did you own a home?

01-00:09:48  
Billups: Oh, I bought a home.

01-00:09:49  
Meeker: You bought a home?

01-00:09:50  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:09:50  
Meeker: All right. What part of Richmond?

01-00:09:51  
Billups: By the Brookside Hospital.

01-00:09:54  
Meeker: Okay. Is that the old Kaiser hospital, do you know?

01-00:10:00  
Billups: No. It used to be Brookside. I think it's — what the heck they call it now? Doctor's Hospital, or something, now. I think they call it Doctor's Hospital. It's a county hospital. It's off of Dam Road in San Pablo. I bordered San Pablo and Richmond.

01-00:10:20  
Meeker: How would you characterize Richmond in the mid to late 1960s, when you were living there?

01-00:10:24  
Billups: It was a good area at the time, and then as time went on, it gradually went downhill. There were more break-ins, and stuff like that.

01-00:10:37  
Meeker: What do you mean by a good area?

01-00:10:39  
Billups: It was an area where you didn't have a lot of crime, and now, you can't park your car out there, somebody's not ripping it off now.

01-00:10:49  
Meeker: Yeah. Did you get married?

01-00:10:52  
Billups: I got married once, and got divorced, and we have a daughter, and then I got married the second time, living with now. That's Lindy. I've got a son —

01-00:11:04  
Meeker: So what two kids, one from each marriage?

01-00:11:05  
Billups: Right.

01-00:11:06  
Meeker: Okay. When was your first marriage?

01-00:11:10  
Billups: '68.

01-00:11:12  
Meeker: Okay. Until '68?

01-00:11:14  
Billups: Oh, a couple of years.

01-00:11:16  
Meeker: Okay. [laughter] Yeah, we all make mistakes when we're young, right?

01-00:11:22  
Billups: You're always making mistakes. Getting married was a mistake at times. Ah, it's been pretty good. I've been married for twenty-eight years now.

01-00:11:30  
Meeker: Twenty-eight years?

01-00:11:31  
Billups: Now.

01-00:11:32  
Meeker: Okay. What's your wife's name?

01-00:11:33  
Billups: Lindy Anne.

01-00:11:34  
Meeker: Lindy Anne. And you had a son with her?

01-00:11:38  
Billups: Yeah, Joshua. He's twenty — about twenty-two now, I guess.

01-00:11:43  
Meeker: Yeah. Is he following your footsteps? Does he want to do similar work?

01-00:11:46  
Billups: No, he's getting little palsy problems, so he's going through college. He's having a little trouble with his English right now. I think everybody does. But he went through that — what the heck's the name of that college down there? I'll think of the name of it. Heald College. He went through an electronic course in Heald College, and he did real good on anything he was doing, he got top grades. Come to English, forget it. I'm basically the same way, though, with English.

01-00:12:37  
Meeker: But you've got your own specialty as an electrician, in one way or another.

01-00:12:39  
Billups: Well, you just figure out a way to deal around it.

01-00:12:44  
Meeker: Yeah. Yeah. So, let's talk about the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:12:48  
Billups: Okay.

01-00:12:50  
Meeker: You said that you started working here not as a journey —

01-00:12:55  
Billups: As a helper. Electrician helper.

01-00:12:58  
Meeker: Electrician helper in 1966. So that was a civilian position, yeah?

01-00:13:04  
Billups: Right.

01-00:13:06  
Meeker: And was it a full time salaried sort of deal?

01-00:13:08  
Billups: Yeah, about \$2.87 an hour, something like that.

01-00:13:13  
Meeker: Do you remember if they provided healthcare or anything like that for you?

01-00:13:16  
Billups: I had healthcare. Kaiser.

01-00:13:20  
Meeker: Have you been with Kaiser the whole time?

01-00:13:21  
Billups: Ever since.

01-00:13:22  
Meeker: Really?

01-00:13:22  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:13:24  
Meeker: How do you feel about that?

01-00:13:26  
Billups: I haven't had any real complaints, except they can't solve away your problem you've got. I don't know how you get around that. That's hard to say.

01-00:13:35  
Meeker: Yeah. And have you had a consistent series of doctors, or —

01-00:13:42  
Billups: No, they're always changing doctors on you. They use them for something else. I had one that I really liked, and he retired and went to his own business.

01-00:13:50  
Meeker: Oh, really? Now he's collecting pension and new pay, huh?

01-00:13:56  
Billups: Right.

01-00:13:58  
Meeker: So what Kaiser office did you go to?

01-00:14:02  
Billups: What's that?

01-00:14:02  
Meeker: What Kaiser office did you go to? What hospital?

01-00:14:04  
Billups: I went in Union City.

01-00:14:07  
Meeker: Union City?

01-00:14:08  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:14:08  
Meeker: Okay. Did you ever have to have any major medical problems, or deal with?

01-00:14:14  
Billups: No, I fooled around down here with a fifteen-foot step ladder on the floor, and it slid on me and gave me a hernia one time. I had that taken care of.

01-00:14:24  
Meeker: Yeah. But they took of that for you?

01-00:14:25  
Billups: Yeah, they took care of that.

01-00:14:27  
Meeker: All right. Did you ever wish that you had a different doctor, or didn't have to stand in line at Kaiser, anything like that?

01-00:14:32  
Billups: You don't have to stand in line. You just call them up and tell them. They'll give you an appointment, and go to it. It's not too bad.

01-00:14:40  
Meeker: I mean, I ask these questions because we have another big project we're doing on Kaiser history.

01-00:14:45  
Billups: On Kaiser's history?

01-00:14:46  
Meeker: But we're mostly interviewing doctors and administrators, and I've been wanting to talk to some people who have been long term members of it, and so it's just fortunate that you're a long term member, so I just kind of wanted to know what the experience was like over the years.

01-00:15:01  
Billups: Well, I've never had any real — usually, when you get a problem, they usually take care of it, but right now I've got a chronic sinus infection, but they say that I don't have a sinus infection. It's my sinuses are going haywire, so they constantly drain. They never quit. And I think it has something to do with this locality, because all the diesel and everything is around here, and I'm breathing it? Because when I get away from here and go hunting, it clears up.

01-00:15:39  
Meeker: So, it might be asthma or something?

01-00:15:40  
Billups: So, it could be just the locale.

01-00:15:45

Meeker:

Do you ever remember going there to do like checkups? Health checkups and that kind of stuff?

01-00:15:50

Billups:

Oh, yeah. I go. Every so often, I'll go down. I'll call them up, and they'll say, "Next time."

01-00:15:55

Meeker:

Yeah. They used to do this thing called the multiphasic exam, where you would go in, and you'd do something at this station, and they'd walk you down a path, and you would something at this station —

01-00:16:06

Billups:

Oh, that was what they used to do over here. The Army would do that, too.

01-00:16:11

Meeker:

The Army would do that, too?

01-00:16:13

Billups:

Oh, yeah. They'd give us a little physical. When you're working for the public works — they'd give you shots, too. I remember one time, we took shots, and I never got a cold for a couple years.

01-00:16:27

Meeker:

So they were like flu shots, or something, huh?

01-00:16:29

Billups:

I don't know what kind of shots they were. I think they were flu shots.

01-00:16:32

Meeker:

Yeah. Do you go up to Kaiser each year to get your flu shot?

01-00:16:36

Billups:

No, I never have.

01-00:16:38

Meeker:

Really? Well, that's good. [laughter] If you don't need it.

01-00:16:44

Billups:

Been pretty healthy, overall.

01-00:16:46

Meeker:

So your Kaiser membership, that's been covered by your job? They paid for that? That's been part of the benefits?

01-00:16:54

Billups:

That's part of my benefit. I retired in — what was it? — '97. I was fifteen months premature, because they closed all these bases up. That took 10 percent off of me.

01-00:17:10  
Meeker: They took 10 percent off your pay?

01-00:17:12  
Billups: Yeah. Retirement pay, because of being premature.

01-00:17:15  
Meeker: And so how, then, is your Kaiser membership covered now?

01-00:17:21  
Billups: It's covered by the retirement. I'm paying for. And it's gone up quite a bit, now. It used to be — oh, yeah, it's doubled or tripled.

01-00:17:33  
Meeker: And you have to pay a copay to see the doctor now and everything, too.

01-00:17:36  
Billups: Yeah. They used to be a dollar when I started, and now it's — what? — \$25 or something like that. Ridiculous.

01-00:17:43  
Meeker: Yeah. I was listening to news this morning about that, and they were talking about Blue Cross in California was \$80 copay visit. Makes you not want to go, huh?

01-00:18:05  
Billups: Well, it stops a lot of this nonsense of people going for little or nothing.

01-00:18:11  
Meeker: Yeah. Yeah.

01-00:18:14  
Billups: That's one thing it does do.

01-00:18:15  
Meeker: So you said you were a helper electrician for a short time?

01-00:18:19  
Billups: Yes. Electrician helper. Electrician helper.

01-00:18:21  
Meeker: And then you became a journeyman?

01-00:18:23  
Billups: Right.

01-00:18:24  
Meeker: What is the process by which you become a journeyman?

01-00:18:27  
Billups: Well, you had to go down the civil service and take a test. That's how I became a — there was about four of us that went down and did it, because there were three or four of us were in there at the time, that took the test.



01-00:18:47  
Meeker: And then was that also in 1966 you became a —

01-00:18:50  
Billups: No, that was '67, I believe, I did that.

01-00:18:54  
Meeker: Okay. And so when you first started working at the base in '66, it was obviously during the kind of —

01-00:19:05  
Billups: Vietnam period.

01-00:19:06  
Meeker: Yeah, that lead up to it —

01-00:19:08  
Billups: It was really getting heated up about that time.

01-00:19:09  
Meeker: Getting heated up then. So can you describe, from your vantage point, you know, of coming here, commuting from Richmond — I assume you drove?

01-00:19:20  
Billups: Yeah. I was living in Nevada for about six months, and then one of the guys, Mr. Watts, I moved in with him for eighty bucks a month, and I rode in with him every day. He was a boss here, in the p.m. He had the p.m. crews. Then I would do troubleshooting. You may get twelve or fourteen chits a day for light bulbs, plugs, fuses blow, or whatever. And then as I was doing that, I got into the fire alarm part of it, and did fire alarm. Then they had a night crew that used to go until 12:00 at night.

01-00:20:23  
Meeker: Did you ever work on that?

01-00:20:25  
Billups: Oh, yeah. I'd stay in and do a double shift when there wasn't anybody available for it. But we used to have a girl that — Harriet Grahams used to — she wrote all the jobs up, and then we'd get them out in the shop. 640 used to be the headquarters for the Army.

01-00:20:54  
Meeker: 640 being?

01-00:20:55  
Billups: That's the building they're tearing down right now. It's seven and a half acres of building. Used to be a girl named Mrs. Freedman, and she would take you by the hand, and take you wherever that job was, and show it to you.

01-00:21:10  
Meeker: [laughter] Just to make sure you got it done, huh?

01-00:21:11  
Billups: Little short little gal. Yeah. But just different things like that, and they had the gym in that building, too.

01-00:21:20  
Meeker: There was a gym there?

01-00:21:21  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:21:22  
Meeker: Did you have access to that?

01-00:21:22  
Billups: Oh, I could have. I just never used it.

01-00:21:26  
Meeker: Yeah. So being a civilian working on an Army base, I guess can you describe the different ways — I mean, were civilians and enlisted men like totally interacting, or was there kind of a division? Could you, for instance, shop at the stores here?

01-00:21:41  
Billups: No, you couldn't shop. You had to be a serviceperson to shop in the PXs and stuff like that.

01-00:21:50  
Meeker: Yeah. So then, I guess, what were the points of division between the servicemen and the civilians here?

01-00:21:59  
Billups: In what sense are you talking about?

01-00:22:01  
Meeker: Well, you know, I mean, so for instance the PX, you couldn't shop at the PX  
—

01-00:22:05  
Billups: You didn't have the right for the PX, but you could have gone to the gym, if you wanted to go to the gym. But everything else was — I never really got involved in that part of it.

01-00:22:18  
Meeker: So, you never went to the movie theater here or anything like that?

01-00:22:22  
Billups: No. I always talked to them and everything, but you never got involved with the people who were around here. I never did, anyhow. Some of the people did.

01-00:22:33  
Meeker: "Got involved" meaning friendships and stuff?

01-00:22:34

Billups:

Yeah. Friendships. I never — because they moved in and out too rapidly to really get real friendly.

01-00:22:41

Meeker:

So, I mean, the regular enlisted or draftees would move in and out quickly, I guess, but there was —

01-00:22:48

Billups:

Yeah, they were here about two years, sometimes less.

01-00:22:53

Meeker:

And then they would ship out?

01-00:22:54

Billups:

No.

01-00:22:56

Meeker:

Oh, you mean the leaders?

01-00:22:56

Billups:

Now Dale Butler was the head of the gym down there. Now he was a Sergeant, I believe, and he was the head of the gym, and that's Linda Butler that you want to on the other — Dale, he worked out at pier seven on a forklift for a long time after he retired.

01-00:23:25

Meeker:

What do you mean by "he was head of the gym"? Like what —

01-00:23:27

Billups:

He was a Sergeant, head of the athletic division for all the troops going in and out of that gym at 640. It's a lot of guys. I can't remember their names anymore. He's just one that I can.

01-00:23:50

Meeker:

Yeah. So, let's say it's 1966, and you first started working here, and this Mrs. Freedman's kind of touring you around the base, showing you what works need to be done, and everything —

01-00:24:04

Billups:

No, she was just in this one building, 640. There were seven and a half acres of building there, and she would take you down there and show you where things are at. If she had things to do, we would just do it. They'd write up an MRI or something to be able to do the job.

01-00:24:22

Meeker:

So, let's say in the same way that if you were driving around the street today and just describing the scene that you would see — you know, you'd see a lot of trucks with containers on the back, and —

01-00:24:36

Billups:

Well, okay. Something really sticks in my mind: all the pop and beer that went overseas that went down to pier seven. There were just truckloads, after truckload, after truckload of it. A lot of heavy equipment. All that stuff. But I mean, that's the one thing that really stuck in your mind, is you'd go down in the kind of a lake area there. They'd have it all stacked up down there. I got into places that you wouldn't normally get into.

01-00:25:01

Meeker:

So you got to see everything that went over —

01-00:25:04

Billups:

I was around the base. I was everywhere, because I was doing troubleshooting.

01-00:25:08

Meeker:

So what other things did you see?

01-00:25:11

Billups:

Oh, the morgue, building 804.

01-00:25:16

Meeker:

And those are going to be bodies coming back from Asia?

01-00:25:18

Billups:

Bodies coming back from over there. They had to extend it one time, when they had a big kill of over there. And building ninety was where the paperwork was done for the morgue.

01-00:25:31

Meeker:

What do you mean, they had to extend it?

01-00:25:34

Billups:

Well, they had a small morgue there. The bodies come in in the caskets, and so forth. The one time a bunch of them got burnt up, and they brought them back, and then put them into refrigeration, to identify them, I guess. I've been in the morgue when they were doing it, and there was one guy that was standing by a generator that got hit by a bolt of lightning, and just burned him up. There's things that you've seen.

01-00:26:06

Meeker:

How did it feel to see these guys, you know, had been over —

01-00:26:12

Billups:

At first, it was hard. And after that, you kind of mellowed. A lot of people wouldn't go in there to do any work.

01-00:26:19

Meeker:

Yeah? Really?

01-00:26:21  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:26:23  
Meeker: And so you were one of the few electricians that would go in there and do the work that needed to be done?

01-00:26:28  
Billups: Yeah. It's hard at first, and after you do it a few times, you get immune to it. I guess it's like everything else.

01-00:26:37  
Meeker: How did you feel about the war, being that you were working on the base and saw the people who were —

01-00:26:41  
Billups: Well, I was over there. It was kind of a war that they wouldn't let you do anything.

01-00:26:50  
Meeker: Meaning?

01-00:26:51  
Billups: Over there — well, you could beat the war if you could have went ahead and did what they were supposed to do, but everything was "Hold back." It's like Haiphong Harbor, when the ships are in there and they've got flags on them that are British flags — fuel flag ships. I mean, we're fighting against everything. It was kind of a dumb war, in a way.

01-00:27:22  
Meeker: So, meaning that it seemed like they didn't really want to win the war? Is that how you feel about?

01-00:27:27  
Billups: Yeah, it's political. It's just like this war that's over there right now. It's political.

01-00:27:34  
Meeker: So, it's like if the military was able to fight the war, they might actually win it?

01-00:27:40  
Billups: Oh, they would have overrun them. They'd have gone up there and took him out. But you can't do that, because you've got China sitting over coming over, too, so you'd be fighting China, too. That's the reason they used the — what, the Forty-Ninth Parallel, or something like that?

01-00:27:57  
Meeker: Yeah.

01-00:27:57  
Billups: Something like that.

01-00:28:02  
Meeker: When you were working on the Army base, was it ever the object of protest or anything like that?

01-00:28:09  
Billups: Only one time that we've ever had protests.

01-00:28:13  
Meeker: When was that?

01-00:28:19  
Billups: Early seventies, I think. I think that's just before the war — before they closed it down. Yeah, it was in the early seventies sometime. I don't remember the exact date on it.

01-00:28:35  
Meeker: Okay. Were you working here then?

01-00:28:36  
Billups: Oh, yeah. We made barricades and stuff, and they blocked the tunnel off for coming off of 7th Street. All kinds of weird things.

01-00:28:45  
Meeker: Was it just a one-day thing, or did it last for a while?

01-00:28:49  
Billups: Just one day. They set a fire in the tunnel over there, where nobody could go in or out.

01-00:28:54  
Meeker: But it didn't really disrupt the base much?

01-00:28:57  
Billups: Didn't have any effect on us.

01-00:28:59  
Meeker: Okay. What was the shipping like here? They weren't doing container shipping then, were they?

01-00:29:12  
Billups: No. The container was going out of Sealand. That belonged to the {LBJ?}, I believe, if I remember right. [laughter] But they had Foster and {Klaiser?}. They made signs. We used to call them the sign people — the deaf people. They would make signs back and forth to each other. A lot of the shipping would come through building one. That was the headquarter building. They'd park out there, and then they'd go back around, go down Burma Road, and go to the piers. But they had the other pier open at that time: six, six and a half, and five, all of that was open. They had a couple more warehouses they were

using at that time. Pier seven was the major shipping. In '89, that earthquake separated that, and they tore that building down and put a small tin building that was half the size of what it used to be.

01-00:30:18

Meeker:

So all the shipping that was done in the military ships, that was all break-bulk?

01-00:30:25

Billups:

Oh, most of it.

01-00:30:28

Meeker:

Like equipment and stuff there, right?

01-00:30:30

Billups:

A lot of equipment and so forth went through there, but lots of beer, lots of pop. [laughter] I remember that beer going there.

01-00:30:40

Meeker:

But do you remember having that beer when you were over in the east?

01-00:30:43

Billups:

When I was over there, you could buy a can of beer for a dime, so there lots of beer over there.

01-00:30:50

Meeker:

All right.

01-00:30:51

Billups:

I was over there in '64 — no, '65, I was over there.

01-00:31:00

Meeker:

So over the period of time that you were working here, between '66 when you started out as a helper and then, I guess, retired in '97. Is that right?

01-00:31:11

Billups:

'97.

01-00:31:12

Meeker:

So that's a good thirty-year period of time.

01-00:31:14

Billups:

Thirty-some odd years.

01-00:31:15

Meeker:

Thirty-some odd years, yeah. Did your job change much during that period of time?

01-00:31:20

Billups:

Well, over that period of time — because from 1974, we went into public works with the Navy.

01-00:31:28

Meeker: Okay. What does that mean?

01-00:31:31

Billups: Well, instead of having engineering on this base, we had an engineering for all the bases. You know, like T[reassure] I[sland], Y[erba] B[uena] I[sland], the Air Station, all of us, it was one group.

01-00:31:51

Meeker: TI, YIB meaning Treasure Island and Yerba Buena?

01-00:31:53

Billups: Right. And then —

01-00:31:56

Meeker: So you partnered with the Naval base, then, huh?

01-00:31:58

Billups: Right. We did all the maintenance for the — you know, I started in '73. I was here ten years, but I'm still back here. [laughter] It's really amazing: a big, vicious circle.

01-00:32:16

Meeker: Is that unique, for the different branches of the services to partner on these things?

01-00:32:22

Billups: Well, they did that, in '73 they made a public works for all the bases.

01-00:32:27

Meeker: So, it's like a civilian public works side that was going to service all the bases.

01-00:32:32

Billups: Right.

01-00:32:33

Meeker: And who was your boss?

01-00:32:35

Billups: Ah, jeez.

01-00:32:38

Meeker: I guess you probably had several, huh?

01-00:32:39

Billups: I had a lot of them. The one over here was Bob Campbell and Hopper, and then I worked {with Durham?}, and Larry Wash — oh, a bunch of different people.

01-00:32:54

Meeker: Do you remember who the person was in charge of this public service group?



01-00:33:01  
Billups: Can't even think of their name right now. It'll come to me. [laughter]

01-00:33:07  
Meeker: So, aside from electricians, who else would have been involved in the public service?

01-00:33:11  
Billups: You had carpenters, heating and plumbing, then you had your material handling people. You had a whole bunch of different people who were involved with it. There were probably 150 people when we first started.

01-00:33:36  
Meeker: And then did that grow through the years, or did it shrink?

01-00:33:38  
Billups: Well, when we went to public works, it grew. And then I'd come back over here, and did different things.

01-00:33:46  
Meeker: So, did this public works thing, did that end at a certain point?

01-00:33:52  
Billups: It was on this base. I've got a book around here somewhere. I ought to give it to you. It's in some of my stuff over there. But the headquarters was in the 796, and they abandoned it in '97.

01-00:34:14  
Meeker: Okay. So the public works group lasted through the end of the base?

01-00:34:19  
Billups: Until the bases closed, and then it closed.

01-00:34:23  
Meeker: Now, you know, one thing I always wonder — one of the questions I have about the base — is that the Army is a big institution, and they have engineers, they have electricians who could do this work. Why is it that they contracted civilians to do this work?

01-00:34:44  
Billups: I think it was just it's an easier way to do it, and the time that they were doing it.

01-00:34:49  
Meeker: More consistent, regular employees?

01-00:34:51  
Billups: Well, it's consistent. You have an Army personnel, he'll only be there two years, and I was there for ten years. When you want to learn something — that's the reason I think I'm here now is because what I know. I know all the little crannies, you know? I know where the pipes are at, and stuff like that. I

just like — this base was used to move troops overseas. There were 1,000 troops a week went out of here.

01-00:35:29

Meeker: During the height of the war?

01-00:35:31

Billups: Yeah, during the war period. It was running 1,000 troops a week out here.

01-00:35:36

Meeker: When the war ended, how did the pace change?

01-00:35:41

Billups: It went down to nothing. They still used some of the — for equipment going out of here. I don't exactly — because this is the only base that had transportation.

01-00:35:55

Meeker: Transportation —

01-00:35:56

Billups: Western Military. What the heck was it, Western Military Transportation System, or something like that?

01-00:36:01

Meeker: What's that?

01-00:36:05

Billups: That's what this base was. I think it's on that sign out there, when you come in.

01-00:36:11

Meeker: What do you mean when you say this was the only base that had transportation?

01-00:36:14

Billups: This is the only base that you could — on the West Coast — that took material for war. The only place that a ship could come in, and no union or anybody could affect it.

01-00:36:31

Meeker: Okay. So there weren't any bases in Southern California or up in Washington that could do that?

01-00:36:36

Billups: No, this was the only one.

01-00:36:37

Meeker: If I'm to understand, there were no munitions coming through here, though?

01-00:36:42

Billups: No, that was out at Concord.

01-00:36:44  
Meeker: That was out at Concord Weapons Station?

01-00:36:45  
Billups: Yeah. Everything else came through — now, these buildings on this far side, here, when I first came here was GSA.

01-00:36:59  
Meeker: General Services? Is that right?

01-00:37:01  
Billups: Well, yeah. For the Army. So everything — all their buildings were loaded with goods to be shipped overseas. And then you had the morgue and 804, front section of it. Now 806, they had ammunition there, and weapons. One section of that was loaded with ammunition and small arms. There was kind of a unique deal on that, too, because there was a load of ammunition that was supposed to be in there, and where did they find it? Tijuana, Mexico. {inaudible} was where it was.

01-00:37:43  
Meeker: Really?

01-00:37:44  
Billups: Yeah. It was kind of a unique deal.

01-00:37:46  
Meeker: I guess so. How'd that happen, do you know?

01-00:37:50  
Billups: They have no idea, but it was signed in, but it never was signed out. [laughter]

01-00:37:55  
Meeker: So, it just disappeared at one point?

01-00:37:56  
Billups: You know, just — yeah. In one of those buildings, before they put that in, a guy was supposed to retire, and he got killed — a huge truck backed over the top of him and killed him one day, and he was supposed to retire that Friday. Weird things that happen. But most of these, no. At 640 and 590 — 640 was the administration for all the troops. These barracks right over here — 796, 794, 792, and 790, and 780 — were where the troops stayed. 590, during the real heavy period of Vietnam, they had barracks that they built in there, and they put a little recreation services in there for the troops.

01-00:38:58  
Meeker: How many troops were stationed here at once?

01-00:39:02  
Billups: Oh, I don't know. There was probably a couple thousand in here, I would imagine.

01-00:39:09

Meeker:

And in the period between their arrival and then being shipped out — those were going to be serving in infantry units, for instance?

01-00:39:19

Billups:

Yeah, within a week. They would bring them in within a week, and they were out of here in a week.

01-00:39:23

Meeker:

So it was really quick — it was a really quick turnaround?

01-00:39:24

Billups:

Yeah, there was a quick movement. They would bus them here up to Travis, and then fly them over to Vietnam.

01-00:39:31

Meeker:

Do you know, then, so let's say there are three or four or five thousand who are doing that regular cycling through — how many core service members would have been stationed at the base?

01-00:39:46

Billups:

That's what I say. There were probably, I don't know, 1,500 probably.

01-00:39:54

Meeker:

Okay. Did you get to know any of those people?

01-00:39:56

Billups:

Oh, a few of them. You get to know them, but you don't — you know of them, you never really get to know them because of the — I did work for a couple of the cooks, because they had five mess halls in this place. In 790, 796, 794, 792, and 790, had a mess hall, and the one in 796 was a steak mess hall. When the guys came back, and they brought all their stuff back, and they dumped it off, they would give them a steak — real good steak.

01-00:40:36

Meeker:

And that was only for the people who just came back, huh?

01-00:40:38

Billups:

Just the guys that came back. Steak house, and fish house, and then they had one over in 782, so troops were over there.

01-00:40:48

Meeker:

Now, as an employee here, could you eat at any of the mess halls?

01-00:40:51

Billups:

Oh, I have eaten in it. I don't know if you were really supposed to or not. Probably not.

01-00:40:55

Meeker:

Oh, yeah? [laughter]

01-00:40:58  
Billups: But you got to know the cook, so naturally you're going to get a little extra.

01-00:41:07  
Meeker: Did you ever go to the steak house?

01-00:41:09  
Billups: Oh, yeah. Every once in a while. Never made a habit out of it.

01-00:41:13  
Meeker: No. Okay. So how long did you live in Richmond?

01-00:41:22  
Billups: About eighteen years, I believe, I lived there.

01-00:41:29  
Meeker: Okay. So you were living in Richmond through the 1970s?

01-00:41:33  
Billups: Yeah. I bought a house in San Lorenzo. I've lived there for twenty-eight years now.

01-00:41:40  
Meeker: Okay. So you moved down there in about 1980, or —

01-00:41:42  
Billups: Yeah, somewhere in that area.

01-00:41:44  
Meeker: Okay. Now, there were a lot of changes that went on in West Oakland during that period of time, too. Was it just like a neighborhood you drove through to come to work, or did you ever have any interaction with people who lived in West Oakland?

01-00:42:01  
Billups: Not much.

01-00:42:02  
Meeker: Not much? Do you remember anybody working here, say civilians, who lived in that area?

01-00:42:08  
Billups: Yeah, there was the — what the heck was his name? Boy, it's so long ago. I forget all the names.

01-00:42:15  
Meeker: Yeah. What'd he do?

01-00:42:18  
Billups: He was a gardener. He was in the gardening part of it. I did an electrical job for him, that's now I remember where he lived.

01-00:42:28  
Meeker: Oh, okay. So you went to his house and helped him out?

01-00:42:29  
Billups: [laughter] I went to his house and put a service in for him, because —

01-00:42:33  
Meeker: Was he black?

01-00:42:34  
Billups: He was a black guy.

01-00:42:34  
Meeker: Yeah. Among the civilians who worked here, was the workforce pretty diverse?

01-00:42:41  
Billups: It was well mixed.

01-00:42:44  
Meeker: So were there a lot of electricians who were, you know, of Mexican background, or black, or —

01-00:42:52  
Billups: We never had any Mexican. We had a Hawaiian — couple of Hawaiians, I guess, at one time or another. Some white guys. We had a couple of black. Most of the rest of us were American, or Heinz 57 variety, whatever you want to call —

01-00:43:15  
Meeker: [laughter] A blend, huh?

01-00:43:17  
Billups: A blend.

01-00:43:18  
Meeker: You know, so after the war ends in the mid-1970s and the base changes, were there layoffs, I guess, in the civilian force?

01-00:43:27  
Billups: Well, it started going back, because we used to go back and try to pick up things that we haven't done, things like that. It really went down after '73. It really dropped off.

01-00:43:43  
Meeker: It really dropped down then, huh? And did you ever, being part of the — what did you call it, the work group? You know, the conglomeration of different, with — partnership with the Navy Base, and Treasure Island, and so forth.

01-00:44:03  
Billups: Well, I was a troubleshooter with them for a long time.

01-00:44:08  
Meeker: Okay. So you did work, then, at these other places?

01-00:44:10  
Billups: I came back here and worked, and I got burglar alarm and fire alarm training and I did a lot of that. I came back over here, did a lot of that. I maintained the fire alarm over here for years.

01-00:44:23  
Meeker: The whole base?

01-00:44:25  
Billups: Yeah.

01-00:44:27  
Meeker: I imagine that was a pretty important job, right?

01-00:44:31  
Billups: Well, it's important because they want the fire protection on the buildings. You've got all wooden buildings, you've got 240 feet of warehouse long, so —

01-00:44:43  
Meeker: Did you guys ever have any problems with fire?

01-00:44:45  
Billups: The only fire that I've ever seen on this base, they had in the commissary, and they put it out themselves. It's the only fire that I've ever seen. I don't know what really caused that. That's the only fire that I'm — now, in the earlier years, they had a firehouse where the cops were, and they locked the guy up, and the firehouse caught fire, and burnt the guy up. That happened way back when. I don't remember the year, but I've heard the other guys that were here before talk about it.

01-00:45:22  
Meeker: So then when the war ends, do you notice that industry starts to move in, some of the regular shipping industry? Do they start taking over some of the old buildings, or anything like that?

01-00:45:34  
Billups: They didn't do that until the city came into effect.

01-00:45:36  
Meeker: Okay. When was that?

01-00:45:39  
Billups: That was in the nineties.

01-00:45:42  
Meeker: Okay. So throughout the whole 1980s, the base basically was the same as it had been in the sixties?

01-00:45:48

Billups:

They had different people in here, and I'm not sure how they really did that, because they did different things that I never really — because building six was the Army communication building. That's for the West Coast. It was a relay deal. That's the first place I've ever seen a Burroughs computer. IBM, Burroughs, and what the heck was the other one they had in there? They were big. It filled up the whole room, and when I went to the Navy public work and I came back, and I'd come back in, and there was a little computer like this, and the disk drives doing everything that that Burroughs and IBM machine was doing before that took up the whole room.

01-00:46:47

Meeker:

What years were those? What was the time period, if you remember?

01-00:46:48

Billups:

Oh, '66 was, I think, Burroughs and IBM, up to '70-some time.

01-00:47:02

Meeker:

Do you remember doing a lot of electrical work —

01-00:47:04

Billups:

I did a lot of the electrical work in there. That's how I know what machines were in there.

01-00:47:07

Meeker:

So you did a lot of electrical work preparing for the computers to come in?

01-00:47:12

Billups:

Yeah.

01-00:47:13

Meeker:

When did that start happening?

01-00:47:15

Billups:

They did a lot of it '66, when I first got here. A lot of that was done. '66 up to '72, right in that period there. They did the changes back and forth on the old machine, but it amazed me the one time I — because I used to run the generators for the buildings. Ran them once a week, you know, make sure they'd run when the building went down and different things like that, and then '70 — God, I can't remember all of it.

They had all the housing at this far end down there. They're all skeletons now, but they're getting ready to tear them down. But they had all the troops in there that worked on the base. Most of them were Sergeants, some Master Sergeants. You had your library, and they built a new bowling alley, and they built a new theater. They tore all that stuff down my first couple of years that I was here. They built a 650. They had a guest house for the troops to come in and stay overnight.



01-00:48:34

Meeker: What do you mean, they tore that stuff down?

01-00:48:37

Billups: Well, they tore down old buildings to put new buildings up there. Before I got here, in '65, they put up the guest house, and then about a couple years later, they built a theater, they tore down the old bowling alley, and put another bowling alley up. Different things like that that happened in that period in the sixties there.

01-00:49:02

Meeker: Did you ever go to these places?

01-00:49:04

Billups: Oh, yeah. I used to bowl all the time.

01-00:49:05

Meeker: Oh, okay.

01-00:49:06

Billups: All of us —

01-00:49:07

Meeker: Were you part of a league?

01-00:49:10

Billups: Yeah. When I was over, after '73, when public works would come back, and we'd bowl in there.

01-00:49:19

Meeker: And who was a member of your league? Like where did they work?

01-00:49:25

Billups: In public works, most of us. It was a big group of us that worked public works. There were all different groups of people, were involved in it.

01-00:49:36

Meeker: So, you know, this thing about public works — I guess I'm just trying to figure it out. I mean, who would you get your paycheck from. Would it come from public works?

01-00:49:44

Billups: Come from public works.

01-00:49:45

Meeker: Okay.

01-00:49:46

Billups: It's part of the government.

01-00:49:48

Meeker:

And then was there a period that then you moved from public works to the Army base, or was it the same thing?

01-00:49:55

Billups:

No, it stayed the same. From '66 to '73 — what was it? July of '73 — we made it public works. They called it Navy Public Works of the Bay Area. That took in all the bases. It took in part of the Presidio, Treasure Island, YBI, this base, Hunters Point, the Air Station, and even, we did work for the Coast Guard. But that's just part of what's going on. Plus, we'd come back here and work on this all the time.

01-00:50:41

Meeker:

So you were doing work at all those places?

01-00:50:43

Billups:

Yeah, I was everywhere.

01-00:50:44

Meeker:

But this was kind of your home site, here?

01-00:50:46

Billups:

This was where I started, and I'm right back here where I started. [laughter]  
I'm a bad penny that came back.

01-00:50:53

Meeker:

So how is it, then, that you're working here after retirement?

01-00:50:58

Billups:

Well, I went to work for J.A. Jones —

01-00:51:01

Meeker:

Which is?

01-00:51:01

Billups:

— when they closed down, and we were working for the city doing maintenance around here while the city was renting all these buildings out. Because you had the cotton people over here, and you had different buildings that had people in them, and we were doing roofing, electrical, whatever came up. And I got into high voltage, too, in the process.

01-00:51:28

Meeker:

So that's something new that you've done? High voltage work?

01-00:51:32

Billups:

Oh, well I did a little bit of it here and there, but then I got more into it.

01-00:51:36

Meeker:

How does high voltage work differ from the regular electrical work — domestic electrical work?

01-00:51:42

Billups:

It's altogether different. You've got to make sure it's dead. You just don't walk up to it and say, "Howdy doody." It'll kill you. The other will kill you, too, but it's not as likely.

01-00:51:57

Meeker:

Did you ever encounter any mishaps, or did any of your coworkers have problems?

01-00:52:02

Billups:

Well, one of the coworkers was cleaning some — in 780 in the transformer. What the heck was his name? Can't even think of his name right offhand, but he got hit with 12,000, still living to tell about it. He went back east.

01-00:52:24

Meeker:

Wow. How was that, that one would live to tell about it, after that?

01-00:52:30

Billups:

Well, I'm sure it did internal damage to him, but I mean — he was doing pretty good. He says when the second occurrence, when the line fell over the top of his mask, he says, "That's it." [laughter]

01-00:52:45

Meeker:

He just retires that night?

01-00:52:48

Billups:

[laughter] He went back east. But you had different — they had an EM club, and an officers' club that used to be on the other side. They took the EM club and moved it right over here next to this building here. You'll see it when you go outside here. They cut it in two and moved it over here, and I required that.

01-00:53:27

Meeker:

What's the EM club?

01-00:53:28

Billups:

Well, there's enlisted —

01-00:53:29

Meeker:

Enlisted men. Okay. So they separated it from the officers?

01-00:53:33

Billups:

From the officers, and then they took the officers' club and made an officers' club out of the PX that used to be down at the far end down here. There used to be a PX there. At '60, there used to be a PX, and it went up until about — I don't know, late eighties, I guess. Then they closed it down. Whenever the Army & Air Force Exchange closed down their PXs. I don't remember exactly. It had to be around the nineties somewhere.

01-00:54:14

Meeker:

So it kind of sounds like — I mean, the look and feel of the base didn't change a whole lot from the late sixties at the height of the Vietnam War into the eighties when there wasn't —

01-00:54:25

Billups:

It had a lot of movement in the sixties to the mid-seventies, and then it started on a downward trend, because the engineering department was in building one, and then they moved out of there and went to building 780. Then you had a dispensary across the street over there that all the civilians and the servicemen went into during that period. I'm trying to think when they closed down the bowling alley. It would be the late eighties, when they closed that down, too. Might have gone a little further into that.

01-00:55:14

Meeker:

Were you ever tempted to take work outside of the base?

01-00:55:18

Billups:

Oh, I did a lot of side work. Yeah.

01-00:55:21

Meeker:

But, I mean, you were happy with this as your primary job?

01-00:55:24

Billups:

Oh, this was a good job.

01-00:55:27

Meeker:

And you said that you were not a member of a union at that point in time?

01-00:55:31

Billups:

Well, I never liked the union, honestly.

01-00:55:34

Meeker:

Were any of your coworkers union members?

01-00:55:39

Billups:

Some of the —

01-00:55:39

Meeker:

Was there an electricians' union that they were a member of?

01-00:55:42

Billups:

I never got into it. I couldn't see any sense in paying union dues and have no benefit from it, so I never really got into it.

01-00:55:52

Meeker:

No benefit because you were working with the federal government, and —

01-00:55:55

Billups:

Yes. It wasn't nearly — I couldn't see any real gain by doing it, so I never got involved with it.

01-00:56:01  
Meeker: Okay.

01-00:56:02  
Billups: It's like the one I'm in now, it can't benefit me any way, except they've got a union, so I have to belong to a union to be able to work here.

01-00:56:12  
Meeker: Okay. What union is it?

01-00:56:15  
Billups: Local 3.

01-00:56:17  
Meeker: We've got about five minutes left on this tape, so I wonder if there's anything that you think is important for me to know about the base, or about the work that you did on it. Sort of anything in summation?

01-00:56:38  
Billups: Not really sure.

01-00:56:40  
Meeker: Is there anything that you think that, like, if you were doing interviews, who would you like to talk to, or questions you'd like to ask?

01-00:56:50  
Billups: Nothing I can really think of. I'll probably think of a lot of things when you leave.

01-00:56:57  
Meeker: Yeah. Well, you can always call me and tell me, right? I mean, is there anything that you think is really interesting, that you think would deserve greater attention?

01-00:57:07  
Billups: Well, what was really interesting is when the troops come in and out of here. When they bring them in, they would manage to get from the airport on their own into the base, and then when they left here, they were bussed to a point at Travis to fly out. Just little things like that you get to see. The conditions — they weren't allowed to take any equipment. You know, cans of shaving cream, or anything like that. So they guys threw it in the garbage can. We had a guy that was a junkie, and he would come in early in the morning, go through that, and he said he found a lot of money in that garbage can.  
[laughter]

01-00:57:58  
Meeker: They couldn't even take money with them?

01-00:58:00  
Billups: No, the guys, when they gathered all their stuff up, they would throw money away, too. It was just amazing what he said he found in the garbage.

01-00:58:11  
Meeker: They couldn't bring it when they were shipping back, or when they returned?

01-00:58:15  
Billups: Well, no. When they were going overseas: when they were going on a flight over to Vietnam, they weren't allowed to take any shaving cream or anything like that with them.

01-00:58:27  
Meeker: So people even came through here even if they weren't going on a boat? So they would come through here, and then be sent up to Travis to be flown out?

01-00:58:37  
Billups: They would come in from Air, and they went into 640, went through all their paperwork, and they would give them clothes and everything down there, and then they would ship it all up to Travis, and then fly them over to Vietnam.

01-00:58:54  
Meeker: Okay. I always thought that people would have been shipped over there on ships. I didn't really think about planes.

01-00:59:00  
Billups: No. They used planes.

01-00:59:03  
Meeker: So this is also almost like an airbase as well as a seabase here?

01-00:59:10  
Billups: No, this is just the point of entry *to* the air. Because you've got to go through all the paperwork. See, that building 640 did all the paperwork. That was the first place they had the keypunch with the little cards, that you punched out the —

01-00:59:32  
Meeker: Who were the people who would have been doing that key work?

01-00:59:37  
Billups: Well, the service people that were here. They had a bunch of gals — a bunch of WACs there, because I remember times that I went in the bathroom, and they said, "Just stay where you're at. I've got to go." [laughter] You know, when you're doing work? And just, "Stay where you're at. I've got to go."

01-00:59:58  
Meeker: So they were mostly women who were doing the administrative functions?

01-01:00:00  
Billups: Lot of women, lot of men who were doing all the paperwork.

01-01:00:04  
Meeker: Do you know what title they would have had?

01-01:00:10

Billups: Don't really remember. Most of them were low rank, and there wasn't any — there was a lot of Sergeants around here.

01-01:00:21

Meeker: They were just sort of paper pushers?

01-01:00:26

Billups: Yeah, they just processed everybody that came through here. They had a bank on the base. They had where you could get an airplane ticket to leave, and they'd bring everybody back. They'd come back here and they'd dump everything off. They'd just dump everything.

01-01:00:46

Meeker: And they would head to Vietnam?

01-01:00:48

Billups: They would go home. No, they'd go home. They'd bring them back here to discharge them, too. Did all kinds of little things. It was quite an interesting place, in its heyday.

01-01:01:06

Meeker: Sounds like a real crossroads.

01-01:01:08

Billups: Yeah, it was a crossroads. It was entry from the airports, to the planes to go over to Vietnam. We were just kind of reverse — going the other way.

01-01:01:22

Meeker: Well, I think we've hit our time limit here.

End Audio File billups\_rich1 8-01-07.mp3

Begin Audio File billups\_rich2 8-01-07.mp3

02-00:00:00

Meeker: So you were saying about some specific places, and about the interesting work that was done here.

02-00:00:28

Billups: Like building ninety-nine, they had all the mechanical work for their forklifts, for lifting material onto the ships. And then the stevedores used to load these ships: pier seven, pier five, and six, I believe it was. A small portion of it was an open pier, and they drove in. But during the Vietnam, when they brought a lot of that stuff back, they polluted down by pier seven. Now they've got to take care of that pollution. They brought back the chemicals that they were defoliagizing with —

02-00:01:16

Meeker: Agent Orange and stuff?

02-00:01:18

Billups:

Yeah, Agent Orange, but I don't know exactly what all it as, but they brought a lot of it back. They had damaged barrels, and they let it sit there, and then it went into the soils. They have to get rid of all of that. But that whole lake area down there by pier seven, in —

02-00:01:36

Meeker:

What do you mean "lake area"?

02-00:01:38

Billups:

Well, it's the loading area where they put everything in kind of a — it's a lower area than the rest of it. They call it kind of a lake area. They bring tanks and everything in. They had a ship one time down here that they loaded in. It opened up at one of it, and you could drive the tanks and everything into that ship. I don't know if you've ever seen one of them or not, but —

02-00:02:06

Meeker:

I have seen those, yeah.

02-00:02:07

Billups:

But they filled that up. They'd have that whole area down there. They did the same thing when they came back. They brought a bunch of that stuff back. But just really interesting things you see and you kind of forgot about it. You just wipe your mind out of it, I guess. I don't know.

02-00:02:30

Meeker:

Well, you know, it's these images of just everyday life here that we're really interested in capturing, because that's the stuff that's gone, right?

02-00:02:38

Billups:

Yeah, that's one thing. I guess during the fifties when they took people overseas, they used to load these ships up here, and they had catwalks when you got inside pier seven, six, and I can't remember the names of the buildings anymore. At pier five, they had a big building like they had down at pier seven. But pier seven, in '89, when the earthquake went through, it took beams that were — I don't know, they were about thirty inches by like that, and it popped it this way. You know, most of the time, you snap a board, but this went, it went poke!, and you had a separation right down the middle of the pier. But it just snapped the beams that way, and they went in there and secured it, where they could still ship out of there.

02-00:03:45

Meeker:

After the earthquake hit in '89, you were still working here, right?

02-00:03:49

Billups:

I was working over at the supply center. That was when I was with the public works.

02-00:03:53

Meeker:

The Naval Supply Center on Harbor?



02-00:03:55  
Billups: Yeah. So all of this was still in operation. They were still moving stuff out of here. I don't know where they were taking it to. I wasn't into that part of it, because I wasn't over here.

02-00:04:06  
Meeker: Was there any emergency electrical work that you had to do after the earthquake?

02-00:04:12  
Billups: Well, I was up north hunting when the earthquake happened. [laughter] So I wasn't here. I got to see the after effects of it.

02-00:04:19  
Meeker: And so you didn't have to deal with it, then, either, huh?

02-00:04:22  
Billups: No. I came back, I did a lot of it, but I mean —

02-00:04:24  
Meeker: Yeah. What kind of stuff needed to be done?

02-00:04:26  
Billups: Well, I was working on boiler controls and stuff by that time, so a lot of the boilers snapped the pipes, and they had to repair them. Controls, and stuff like that. Fire alarm, some burglar alarm.

02-00:04:41  
Meeker: So you've mentioned hunting a couple times. Is that one of your favorite free time —

02-00:04:46  
Billups: Oh, that's right. I like to fish and hunt, the heck with everything else. [laughter]

02-00:04:48  
Meeker: Okay. All right. How much vacation did you get when you worked here?

02-00:04:55  
Billups: The first five years was two weeks. I think when it went to — you got ten years, you got three weeks, and then every five years after that, you got another week. I got as high as five weeks when I was — it's pretty hard now, because I'm not getting anything. I lost anything now.

02-00:05:22  
Meeker: Yeah. So, did you spend a lot of time going hunting and fishing?

02-00:05:25  
Billups: Did a lot of that. I used to —

02-00:05:26  
Meeker: What were your favorite places to go?

02-00:05:28  
Billups: Went to Idaho, in the panhandle area, two weeks at a time, three weeks at a time.

02-00:05:33  
Meeker: You drove up there, I guess?

02-00:05:35  
Billups: You drive up there.

02-00:05:36  
Meeker: Yeah. Were there favorite rivers you used to go to?

02-00:05:39  
Billups: No, we were just hunting in that panhandle area, around Wallace, and that area up in there.

02-00:05:44  
Meeker: Was it deer hunting?

02-00:05:45  
Billups: Elk.

02-00:05:46  
Meeker: Elk hunting.

02-00:05:46  
Billups: Elk and deer. I've killed a few of them.

02-00:05:50  
Meeker: Yeah. And are you a cook of them, as well?

02-00:05:54  
Billups: A little bit.

02-00:05:55  
Meeker: A little bit?

02-00:05:58  
Billups: [laughter] No, we used to — one of the other guys, well, two of the other guys used to go up, and then we had a Navy Captain that we used to hunt with up there, and then people that are in the vicinity of all this, we got a group that was about twelve of us up there. So we had a pretty good time. The wives would cook. When I'd come back from up there, I was fat. [laughter]

02-00:06:31  
Meeker: You rented a cabin or something up there?

02-00:06:32  
Billups: No, we — I'd have a —

02-00:06:33  
Meeker: You camped?

02-00:06:34  
Billups: — camper like that.

02-00:06:35  
Meeker: Oh, okay. All right.

02-00:06:37  
Billups: And they had trailers. They'd rent trailers. I had all kinds of fun.

02-00:06:42  
Meeker: Yeah, that sounds great.

02-00:06:43  
Billups: Three weeks of it is good. Well, it gives you a way to get away from all the nonsense.

02-00:06:49  
Meeker: And when did you usually take your vacations?

02-00:06:52  
Billups: In October.

02-00:06:53  
Meeker: In October?

02-00:06:54  
Billups: Yeah.

02-00:06:54  
Meeker: So, then the earthquake time, right?

02-00:06:57  
Billups: Yeah.

02-00:07:00  
Meeker: [laughter] Any other thoughts about the kind of stuff that you saw going on here that was interesting to you?

02-00:07:04  
Billups: Well, we had a building that — they had the trains that used to come in and out. I used to call the guys. Every time I'd see the guy, I'd say, "How's the training today?" [laughter]

02-00:07:15  
Meeker: How's the what?

02-00:07:15  
Billups: How's the training today? [laughter] You always joke with them a little bit. You can't joke anymore. Ever since the — '70, when the women's rights come into it, you got where you couldn't joke with anybody. You're scared to say anything.

02-00:07:36

Meeker:

Like, how did that change?

02-00:07:38

Billups:

Oh, it just changed everything. It changed the way that you talked to people. Everything changed. The whole situation of working changed. You really noticed it around here, because you had to watch your — otherwise they'd write you up, or they'd do something.

02-00:08:02

Meeker:

They'd write you up for something, or —

02-00:08:04

Billups:

Well, they'd do something that you wouldn't like.

02-00:08:05

Meeker:

Yeah? Like what? What are some of the things?

02-00:08:07

Billups:

Oh, just they were doing all kinds of little things. I know in the latter part of the public works, we ended up down at the Hilton. Everybody had to go to a mandatory "can't talk, you can't say more than one — you say it more than one time, it's harassment." It changed everybody's way of doing things.

02-00:08:40

Meeker:

During your period in public works, were there any women doing electrical work, or carpentry, or anything like that?

02-00:08:46

Billups:

There were some plumbers. And there were a few electrical gals that were in there. I never really got to know any of them, because they were in the construction part of it, and I was in the maintenance. I was into a lot of construction, but I never got into the maintenance. I was in maintenance most of the time.

02-00:09:11

Meeker:

So you wouldn't really have had that much opportunity to interact with the women who were working in the public works?

02-00:09:17

Billups:

No. Well, you got to interact with them a little bit, but not that much, because there wasn't —

02-00:09:21

Meeker:

Mostly those who were in administrative positions, I guess?

02-00:09:25

Billups:

Most of them.

02-00:09:25

Meeker:

Yeah.

02-00:09:27  
Billups: But there were a few of them that were electrical.

02-00:09:31  
Meeker: Do you know anyone who was ever fired for harassment or anything?

02-00:09:37  
Billups: No. They'd just give you a letter or reprimand for it. Most of the time, they would just — they'd give you a ration of talkings to, and, "Don't do that any more." It's a little different now. It's changing.

02-00:10:02  
Meeker: Meaning?

02-00:10:04  
Billups: Well, I don't know if it's still good, or — you can't say anything, so you just don't say it.

02-00:10:09  
Meeker: You've just gotten used to it, then, huh?

02-00:10:11  
Billups: Well, you get used to it. It still puts you in a different type of — I'm glad I'm to the end of it. I don't have to deal with it any more.

02-00:10:21  
Meeker: So, it became like an extra burden or something?

02-00:10:24  
Billups: It is a burden, because you've got to watch what you say. You can't say what you normally say. It changes your whole pattern of life. It's changed.

02-00:10:36  
Meeker: So, do you think of it primarily as it makes work less fun and interesting, or do you think about it like you're not free to do things that you once were?

02-00:10:51  
Billups: Well, that has a lot to do with it. You can't say how you feel about it. You say what you feel about it, you'll end up with a letter. That's just the way it goes. It's just part of life now.

02-00:11:05  
Meeker: Do you feel like this prohibition against talking, speaking your mind, do you feel like that now extends beyond sexual harassment into other realms, too?

02-00:11:19  
Billups: Well, they've shoved into a whole different — they kind of compacted it so you don't know what to say anymore, so you don't say anything. You don't even walk up to people and don't even say hi to them anymore. It cuts down the closeness of the people.

02-00:11:34  
Meeker: Because you fear that people might take it the wrong way, and —

02-00:11:37  
Billups: Oh, I've seen it. So you just don't do it.

02-00:11:42  
Meeker: Okay. Is it around issues other than women?

02-00:11:48  
Billups: Well, when you get into — well, since I'm being taped, I don't want to say it.  
[laughter]

02-00:11:59  
Meeker: You know, I should have mentioned before, but you're free to edit things out of this transcript if you want to.

02-00:12:05  
Billups: Yeah, but it's better not to —

02-00:12:08  
Meeker: All right. Well, if you don't want to talk about this anymore, that's fine.

02-00:12:11  
Billups: Well, no, that's fine. We can — 812 was a mechanical place. That did forklifts, too, and they did all kinds of mechanical work in there. Heavy trucks, and so forth. Then you take 821, they had a — no, 823. They had a — where they bring furniture in, refinish it, saw-sharpening place. When I first came here, all of that stuff was — you were self-contained. You had everything that you needed, basically, on this base to maintain it. If everything else around you fell apart, you could still maintain it if could get the parts. That's the one thing about this base. And the supply center was the same way. It was an interesting process. But I noticed in the last few years — you used to be able to get any parts you wanted. In the last few years, you can't do that anymore. You've got to order it.

02-00:13:25  
Meeker: Meaning?

02-00:13:26  
Billups: So, our whole society is on the downward slope. We can't get what we used to get. It's not available.

02-00:13:34  
Meeker: How does it change? What is the different method for getting things?

02-00:13:38  
Billups: The method now — used to be able to go downtown and get anything you wanted? Can't do that now.

02-00:13:45  
Meeker: Oh, and so they'd have like a purchase order or something like that, and you could just go get it, but now —

02-00:13:50  
Billups: Yeah.

02-00:13:50  
Meeker: — now you have to go through other channels?

02-00:13:52  
Billups: Yeah, you've got to go through other channels. Well, it's not available, either.

02-00:13:56  
Meeker: Okay.

02-00:13:56  
Billups: Our society has gone overseas, and taken all of our technology overseas. It's — I don't know what's going to happen. It's —

02-00:14:06  
Meeker: Well, what sort of things can't you get anymore?

02-00:14:12  
Billups: *A lot* of things you can't get. They're just small items that you can't get. They're not available.

02-00:14:18  
Meeker: Huh. I mean, can you give me examples?

02-00:14:21  
Billups: Well, you can get them — well, you know, like certain faucets and stuff like that. Electrical fittings are not as available as they used to be. Times are changing. It's changing really rapidly. Before, you could get it from downtown. You just can't now. Downtown don't have it. I guess because the bases are gone, or something.

02-00:14:52  
Meeker: Where would go downtown to get stuff? What stores?

02-00:14:55  
Billups: Oh, I'd go to some of the hardwares, you know, like Ace. But I dealt so much that I go to the different places that your electrical — you know, Alameda Electric, places like that. I even go to the liquidators. You can find the old stuff that you can't buy any other place. Just stuff like that.

02-00:15:22  
Meeker: What about like Home Depot and those kinds of places?

02-00:15:24  
Billups: Oh, I go there quite often.

02-00:15:26  
Meeker: Yeah. I guess I'm trying to figure out, it's not a question of selection, it's just —

02-00:15:35  
Billups: Well, certain types of parts, you can't get. They're just not available like they used to be.

02-00:15:43  
Meeker: Okay. Maybe because it's about maintenance of an old base? Is that? Is that what that is?

02-00:15:49  
Billups: Oh, probably. After twenty years, you get a forty-year-old base, you're trying to patch it up, and it's pretty hard.

02-00:15:58  
Meeker: What are some of the big changes in the technology of electrical work that you've seen?

02-00:16:03  
Billups: Technology has changed from the codes. The codes change it. It's all based on safety. That's something that I can remember, too. When I first came here, this place was wide open, and as our time with the different things that have happened. You know, like that one time, we had a little riot. The base closes up, all the gates close. Now you've got a guard out there watching everything that's coming in and out. Time has changed our whole life is changing. Our rights are disappearing, just rapidly.

02-00:16:50  
Meeker: Why do you think this has happened?

02-00:16:54  
Billups: Oh, just different things that have happened around the world, but our rights are disappearing really rapidly, and just like Congress, in their wisdom of not — you know, the wiretapping. That's a no-no. That's another right that's disappearing.

02-00:17:19  
Meeker: So, the right to privacy is gone?

02-00:17:20  
Billups: And that's going to come back and bite us. Yeah, privacy is just disappearing. The last twenty years has been a fantastic amount of rights lost.

02-00:17:33  
Meeker: So you saw a lot of that happening around here, then, too?

02-00:17:37  
Billups: Oh, yeah. You've watched it happen.



02-00:17:43

Meeker:

So are there any other sort of thoughts around the base, and the work you did here? Some interesting things that happened?

02-00:17:54

Billups:

Right offhand, I can't think of anything. [telephone rings] Somebody's calling me. What this is — this is my work that I'm — over here? They call me, I go take care of it. It could be anything. This is electrical. The front part of these buildings — 803 is the only building that hasn't been copper mined. They've started in the back, and come right straight through the building, and pull all the wire out of it. That's the same thing that's — right now, these guys over there want to, I guess, get some power on the building, I guess. All I've got to do is go turn the breakers on for them.

02-00:18:41

Meeker:

Oh, is that was it is? [laughter]

02-00:18:44

Billups:

They haven't figured out how to get the breakers on.

02-00:18:46

Meeker:

Is that kind of like a lot of the work that you do?

02-00:18:51

Billups:

Well, you have blowouts. I've seen in the back of the building, where it comes up through the weather head and comes down into the main power, burn all three conductors off of it. It just — [explosion noise] — and it didn't take out the transformer fuses. I don't know why. It had a high enough resistance, no good ground. Somebody hadn't removed the ground on it. Just small things that you run into. I do a lot of the lift stations, sewers, and everything around here, now. I do everything. I'm the last of the Mohicans.

02-00:19:29

Meeker:

Okay.

02-00:19:31

Billups:

The port keeps me here, because I know where the water valves are at. I've been around here. I know where this stuff's at.

02-00:19:38

Meeker:

Yeah. Yeah. So I think about the cell phone. You know, that's interesting, right? Like how did you communicate around the base before —

02-00:19:51

Billups:

Around before?

02-00:19:51

Meeker:

Yeah.

02-00:19:52

Billups:

We had walkie-talkies.

02-00:19:53

Meeker: You did? Okay.

02-00:19:54

Billups: Oh, yeah.

02-00:19:56

Meeker: When you first started here in '66?

02-00:19:57

Billups: Oh, first started here, we didn't have them, and about a few years down the line, we had them. And I remember when public works, they came up with — you had a telephone and a walkie-talkie. The same as like this? You can have a walkie-talkie, I can talk to whoever I've got in the radio. I can talk to probably twenty people or more, one hundred people if they want to. You can communicate pretty good, now.

02-00:20:29

Meeker: Yeah. So that was how you moved around base without having to go back to the office to figure out what was next?

02-00:20:33

Billups: Yeah. Yeah. But before, when I first started here, we were doing all the little chits.

02-00:20:39

Meeker: What are those?

02-00:20:41

Billups: Well, they'll tell you, like going to 640, Mrs. Freedman, different things like that. I would get a chit, and I'd go down to see that person. You get to know each individual, where to go, sometimes you have to ask —

02-00:20:58

Meeker: So you'd just have a little chit?

02-00:21:00

Billups: Yeah, they'd give you a telephone number. You could call them and find out exactly where they're at, places like that. But you needed a person to be able to contact. If you didn't have a person to contact, you were lost. You wouldn't know where to find it. It was an interesting process.

02-00:21:20

Meeker: So many people over such a wide expanse of space.

02-00:21:22

Billups: Well, you could have — I don't know — fifty, sixty different people that you'd have to go. You get to know them. I read meters around here, water meters, and gas meters. I worked on boilers for a few years.

02-00:21:42

Meeker: Jack of all trades?

02-00:21:44

Billups: A jack of everything. But my main deal is electrician. So it's kind of an interesting process.

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[End of Interview]