

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

**Kerby Parnell**

**Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project**

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,  
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by  
Nadine Wilmot  
in 2006

Copyright © 2007 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Kerby Parnell , dated November 28, 2006. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project: An Oral History with Kerby Parnell conducted by Nadine Wilmot, 2006, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2007.

## **Discursive Table of Contents—Kerby Parnell**

### Audiofile 1

Born in Arkansas—works as greeter at Mechanic's Bank in Richmond—father was a farmer in Arkansas—family moved to Dinuba, Ca and then Richmond—picked apricots as a summer job—natural redhead—father worked for Works Progress Association (WPA) —how Richmond has changed—diversity in the neighborhoods—worked in the shipyards during WWII—importance of movies to the culture—war bonds

### Audiofile 2

Rosie the Riveter vs. Wendy the Welder—worked cleaning the engine rooms and decks of the ship—Pearl Harbor and D-Day—Japanese internment—lived in Richmond public housing while working at the shipyards—feminine role changes during the war—Rosie the Riveter memorial in Richmond

Interview #1: 11-09-2006

Begin Audio File 1 Parnell, Kerby 1.mp3

01-00:00:00

Wilmot: Okay, good afternoon.

01-00:00:03

Parnell: Good afternoon.

01-00:00:05

Wilmot: This is Nadine Wilmot with the Regional Oral History Office. And we're interviewing Kerby Parnell today. Today's date is November 9th, 2006. And this is for the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front Memorial Oral History Project in partnership with the National Park Service. So do you want to tell me when and where you were born just to start off?

01-00:00:34

Parnell: I was born in Arkansas in Franklin County. My mother was 16. My father was 28. We came to California in a covered—we came to Texas in a covered wagon and stayed there. And a little brother was born there and died there and is buried there in Texas. And we had relatives in California who came to Texas and brought us the rest of the way in a vehicle. But we really did come in a covered wagon. [laughs] We settled in Dinuba, California, which is about 30 miles from Fresno. And I went to school there up until high school. And then my parents moved up here to work in the shipyards. I went to school up here and at the same time I worked graveyard in the shipyards. I worked in the Fox Theater in Richmond part-time too, so I was really burning the candle at both ends.

My mother stayed up here. My father went back to Dinuba. So they divorced. And I stayed here. My sister stayed in Dinuba. She's still there. And I worked in the shipyards and then I worked for Rheem Manufacturing Company in Richmond and for Hercules Powder Company in Richmond. And this is while the boys were in the service. And when they started coming home, then I didn't have my job at Hercules Powder or Rheem Manufacturing, but I got a job at Mechanics Bank. And I was 19 years old. So I've been with Mechanics Bank now for about 60 years. And I had a 50-year reunion, I mean a 50-year recognition. And recently I had a five-year recognition dinner. And I think I'm the oldest one in the bank now. And been here the longest now.

01-00:02:57

Wilmot: What is your position here? What are you called?

01-00:03:01

Parnell: I'm just the greeter. And—

01-00:03:06

Wilmot: What's that mean?

01-00:03:06

Parnell:

The only greeter—33 branches, and the only greeter. They—well we had some robberies here. And people were—customers were a little bit nervous. Tellers were a little bit nervous. And they thought maybe if somebody older was at the door and not afraid [chuckles] it might keep people from being quite so nervous about—and we haven't had any—well maybe a couple, but not serious ones, and they always got caught. And got our money back. But people liked it. And it was just an experiment. And so they just kept me doing greeter work.

01-00:03:54

Wilmot:

When did you start greeting?

01-00:03:55

Parnell:

It was about six years ago.

01-00:03:58

Wilmot:

Six years ago.

01-00:03:59

Parnell:

And I just simply love it. And I only have to work four hours a day. And I don't have any written duties. I'm just here to greet the customers and talk to them and make them feel at home and comfortable, and they like it very much.

01-00:04:20

Wilmot:

So you would say, "Hello! Welcome to Mechanics Bank."

01-00:04:23

Parnell:

Yes I do. I do that. I open it and I actually—we actually—they give me hugs and kisses.[laughs] And, oh yeah, great friends with all of them. It's just the best thing. People always want my job and I say, "Okay I'm putting you on the list." And I'm enjoying it so much that they asked me if I'm volunteering to do it. I said no. I get paid. But I'd do it anyway.

01-00:04:53

Wilmot:

You're very fortunate to have found a job that you love.

01-00:04:56

Parnell:

Absolutely the best thing that could have happened to me. And I can take trips. I just got back from a cruise.

01-00:05:03

Wilmot:

Tell me about that.

01-00:05:05

Parnell:

I went to Hawaii and Fiji and Samoa and Tonga and New Zealand, 27 days on a ship out of San Francisco. Holland America Statendam. And it was just a *divine* trip. I just got back last week so I've got my land legs back but my heart is out there. Men are handsome, the women were nice. [laughs] Anyway, the food was nice. But I can do that now that I don't really have any duties except

just—and I'm in the budget for next year. [laughs] So I don't see any reason to give it up.

01-00:06:03

Wilmot:

Good, sounds good. What did you do before you were a greeter?

01-00:06:05

Parnell:

Well, I opened new accounts and—the same thing that the secretaries do here in the office. Do lots of little things for people, buy and sell their stock, and now the secretaries are making loans but I didn't have to do that. This is only recent. And I did retire for three years and the bank asked any retirees if they wanted to come back to come down to the head office and talk to them and so I thought, yeah, I'd like to go back so I went to talk to them and this is where they assigned me. And it's been the best thing.

01-00:06:58

Wilmot:

Well I'm going to go back now and ask you some questions about your family background. Because you gave me a quick summary and I thought, 'Okay we're done, we're done with the interview!' But in reality, I actually wanted to ask you a few more questions. If you can just tell me about your family as far back as you know? For example, your grandparents.

01-00:07:25

Parnell:

My dad was a farmer in Arkansas. And my mother—well she was just a schoolgirl because she was 16 when she married him. And I'm told she was a runner, I mean, she raced in her school, champion—just she ran in races. And she was strong and healthy. And when she worked in the shipyards—and I know that I've told you that I worked in the shipyards and she worked in the shipyards and my grandmother, all three of us at the same time—and my mother was a leader woman and she had a crew. And I can't remember what my grandmother did. But yeah, I think I have a picture. I looked to see if I had a picture of my mother in her hardhat and everything but I couldn't find it. And she is dead and my grandmother.

And my childhood, I went to school in Dinuba at Dinuba High School.

01-00:08:52

Wilmot:

I'll ask you about that in just a minute. May I ask you a little bit more? Can you tell me your parents' names and your grandparents' names?

01-00:09:01

Parnell:

My dad's name was James Sanford S-A-N-F-O-R-D Trammell T-R-A-M-M-E-L-L. And my mother's name was Bessie Trammell and my grandmother's name was Carrie Johnson.

01-00:09:15

Wilmot:

That was on your mom's side?

01-00:09:17  
Parnell: That was on my mom's side. I don't know my dad's. She was already dead and I didn't know her name.

01-00:09:25  
Wilmot: Okay, and your grandmother Johnson?

01-00:09:31  
Parnell: Johnson.

01-00:09:31  
Wilmot: Johnson, was she also from Arkansas?

01-00:09:34  
Parnell: She also was from Arkansas.

01-00:09:36  
Wilmot: And do you know what ethnicity was your family, where were they from originally?

01-00:09:42  
Parnell: Well, nothing is written down but I was always told, and so I just went along with that, that we were French and Irish and Choctaw Indian. And so it makes sense to me because my dad looked a little bit—high cheekbones and I'm not sure, but the Choctaw Indians I think were from Arkansas and Oklahoma. I haven't researched it or anything. And so I just always got a kick out of it, that I was French and Irish and Choctaw Indian.

01-00:10:18  
Wilmot: How did that story come to you?

01-00:10:22  
Parnell: It was—I can't remember any particular person, just a family tradition. And so my mother looked Irish. And my dad looked kind of Indian. And so I just took it at face value and just—and one census I was going to—I think the last census I was going to put that down, I thought no, because I can't prove it, that I was part Choctaw Indian. There's nothing written down, it's just a family tradition. And ever since I was small that's what I thought I was. So, I go along with it. [chuckling] To me I look Irish. I had red hair.

01-00:11:12  
Wilmot: And you said your father was a farmer.

01-00:11:19  
Parnell: I'm not exactly sure what, but I think it might have been—I'm really not sure but it might have been cotton.

01-00:11:30  
Wilmot: In Arkansas.

01-00:11:30

Parnell: In Arkansas.

01-00:11:31

Wilmot: And was he a lot older than your mom?

01-00:11:34

Parnell: Yes. She was 16 when I was born and he was 28.

01-00:11:40

Wilmot: Okay, so there was a little bit of an age difference.

01-00:11:41

Parnell: Yes, there was.

01-00:11:45

Wilmot: And do you know why they decided to come, travel first to Texas and then to California? What was their reason?

01-00:11:50

Parnell: Why they came to California, no I don't. I don't really. I know why they came from Dinuba up to Richmond, because of the shipyards. But coming from Arkansas to Texas where they lost their child, my brother, and then on to California, I think it might have been to work in agriculture. And my brother died in a flu, there was a big flu epidemic at that time, and that's how he contracted the influenza and died. But I think it was to work and because they already had some family out here, they didn't just come out and have nobody. And then they never went back to live in Arkansas or Texas either. But we did live down in Dinuba until I finished—well I think I finished the 11th grade and then in Richmond I finished the 12th grade.

01-00:13:13

Wilmot: Okay, there's two questions I have for you now. Which is first did your family own the land in Arkansas? Were they landowners?

01-00:13:22

Parnell: I don't think so. I don't think they did. But it's funny you should ask, because I never thought about that. I just don't know.

01-00:13:34

Wilmot: I had thought of it because you were telling me about their mobility, that they came here for work. And I thought, well, did they own that land or not?

01-00:13:41

Parnell: I don't think so. And I don't even know if other family members did or not. I don't know. Maybe they just worked for somebody else. But I'm really not sure. Well my mother I guess didn't, because she was just a schoolgirl herself. But my dad I don't know. So but I do know that when we got to Dinuba, he worked in—he didn't have any land there. He worked in fruit and cotton. There's oranges in the San Joaquin Valley and he worked in those.



01-00:14:20

Wilmot:

And then the other question I think you answered this already, but I missed it, which is what year did they migrate from Arkansas, what year did they bring you with them?

01-00:14:32

Parnell:

Well, I was born in 1925. So it must have been 1927.

01-00:14:36

Wilmot:

Two years later, yes. So they got out here well before World War II.

01-00:14:40

Parnell:

They did.

01-00:14:42

Wilmot:

Yeah, and you were actually here well before World War II. Tell me about Dinuba. Tell me what that—oh sorry, back up. Do you know what kind of community they came from in Arkansas, what kind of—was it a rural community or town or—?

01-00:14:58

Parnell:

No, I don't know, and my birth certificate does not give a town either. So, just Franklin County. So I know they're from Franklin County. And in the Ozark Mountains I know that much. But I don't know any—I think they just lived—I don't think they lived in a town. I think they just lived in the Ozark Mountains on a hill. And I do know—or at least the story is that when I was born, they didn't have any money to pay the doctor so they paid him with their best pig. [chuckling] And that might be just a story but I like it, so—and it's probably true.

01-00:15:43

Wilmot:

Yeah, it's not the kind of story that people make up.

01-00:15:46

Parnell:

Yeah. So.

01-00:15:49

Wilmot:

How would you describe their personalities? What was your mom's personality like?

01-00:15:53

Parnell:

My mom's?

01-00:15:53

Wilmot:

Yeah, and your father, when—

01-00:15:56

Parnell:

My mother, she didn't go to high school because they just didn't do that in Arkansas. She went through grade school. And so she didn't have—well, she didn't read. I don't think she owned a book. But my mother was wise and very kind and helpful. Ooh, she would help anybody. And people loved her. And

she's witty and she was smart. Not in formal learning but just wise. And just a good person. She lived to be 80 and so I thought, 'Ooh! I have good DNA and I'll live to be 80.' But I'm going to beat her. [chuckling]

01-00:16:51

Wilmot:

And your dad's personality?

01-00:16:52

Parnell:

And my dad, well his name was James Sanford Trammell and he was called Jack. And so I remember him as people liked him too. And he was a hard worker. Took good care of us. And when I got up into my teens and started wanting to go for a drive with a boy or something he watched me like a hawk. And I was never to get in a car with two boys. [chuckling] So he was careful of his family, loved us. Yeah. And actually I don't know why he and my mother broke up. It could have been because of the age difference. But I don't know.

01-00:17:54

Wilmot:

Okay, so in Dinuba, what was your life—you basically grew up in Dinuba. Were there through 11th grade. So that was your—did you live in a house there?

01-00:18:06

Parnell:

Yes. For a long time we rented when we first came out there from Arkansas. But finally they bought a little house on the corner and—

01-00:18:26

Wilmot:

Was it one-bedroom, two-bedroom, three-bedroom house?

01-00:18:33

Parnell:

Two bedrooms and a screened porch. So that's what we had. And every summer we would go to Hollister—you know where Hollister is?—and work in the apricots. And I remember we would never have to lock our door in Dinuba. We just—

01-00:18:57

Wilmot:

You'd just leave.

01-00:18:57

Parnell:

We'd just go back and everything would be intact and every summer we would go up to Hollister and live in a tent in the apricot orchard for the same people every year and so we got to know—and you saw the same people every year too coming to Hollister. It was like a little community right there in the apricot orchard. [laughs] And even now when I—you know how aromas bring back memories? When I smell apricots, I think about that. Because I met kids of the families, and when I was old enough, 12 or 14, I started working in the apricots, cutting them and putting them on trays and drying them and teachers would come there to work in their summer vacations. And you just meet all kinds of people right there. And so Hollister became a little second little home. And we lived in a tent of course. And then, at our holiday, when

we came there during the summer we'd be going to the beach. Can't remember where we went now but spend the day on the beach and Santa Cruz. In Santa Cruz, yeah, we'd go to Santa Cruz.

01-00:20:34

Wilmot: Hold on one second.

01-00:20:35

Parnell: Buy some fish out on the pier and my mother would cook it over the little gas stove. And we would eat it on an apricot tray that you dried the apricots on. It sounds awful but it wasn't. It was fun.

01-00:20:48

Wilmot: Sounds beautiful. Would you hang on one second?

01-00:20:51

Parnell: It was nice. I've had adventures! [laughing]

01-00:20:53

Wilmot: Hold on one second. I just need to move this down a little bit there. [adjusts recording equipment] Okay, I'm pleased. Did you go to Dinuba High School?

01-00:21:06

Parnell: I did. I went to Dinuba High School, yes.

01-00:21:07

Wilmot: And who were your neighbors?

01-00:21:11

Parnell: There was a girl across the street. It was the Smiths and her name was Wanda Smith and she and I hung out together and when we were old enough we started going to dances at the Rocky Mountain Ballroom in Visalia and listen to all the—and dance and everything. And that's about all I can remember as far as kids. I think I have—I don't even think I have a high school yearbook anymore from there.

01-00:21:47

Wilmot: As far as ethnic background, were people from various ethnic backgrounds? Were there people who were Italian? Were there people who were black? Were there people who were Chinese? Mexican? Do you remember in that community?

01-00:22:01

Parnell: I'm sure there were.

01-00:22:03

Wilmot: Do you remember in your high school classes?

01-00:22:07

Parnell: I think there were, yeah. Probably not as many as now, but I think there were. I just can't remember. [pause] Oh, I know there were, yeah. And I think there

were some that came there to work in the agriculture, men, and like didn't bring their wives. But I'm not sure which country they would be from. I just can't remember that.

All I remember is there was only two people in Dinuba that had red hair, and I was one of them, and the other one was a girl and her name was Rosalie, and we weren't friends because you know how things like that make you different? And you don't like it, because the difference? So we stayed away from each other because we had red hair. [laughing]

01-00:23:10

Wilmot: That's so funny.

01-00:23:12

Parnell: Yeah I know it's funny. It's just awful.

01-00:23:13

Wilmot: It is. It's hard. And everyone thought you should be friends because you had red hair?

01-00:23:20

Parnell: No, because we had red hair, see, because she was different and I was different. And, well, for a while, I didn't even want to go out of the house until I was about I don't know, 16, 17, and realized it's not so bad after all.

01-00:23:35

Wilmot: Did you have like very—what color hair was your hair?

01-00:23:37

Parnell: It was an auburn.

01-00:23:38

Wilmot: Did your mom have red hair too?

01-00:23:39

Parnell: No, she didn't.

01-00:23:41

Wilmot: Where'd it come from?

01-00:23:42

Parnell: I don't know. I just don't know. I think I'm the only redhead in the family but it gave me some problems because people would call me “Red” and “Head of Red” and so it was only till I was a little bit older that I realized that this is pretty nice because it was nice, and the boys started looking at me, [chuckling] and so anyway then it turned out that I was really happy that I had that red hair because other people would tell me God, they wished they could have that, and there was no dye or anything that could give it to them.

01-00:24:22

Wilmot:

I have an aunt who has red hair and she's always theorizing why it's so good to have red hair and why she's special as a redhead.

01-00:24:28

Parnell:

Yeah, I read just recently that only about 4% of the people of the world have red hair. So when you get older if there's something unusual that you have it's more valuable than when you're young and you're different.

You're not going to put this in anything! Because I'm just rattling I think.  
[chuckling]

01-00:24:57

Wilmot:

It's okay, that's all right, we're getting back to the work right now. So would you say most of that community was white then?

01-00:25:09

Parnell:

I seem to think that it was, yes.

01-00:25:11

Wilmot:

And that was 1930s. You were in high school during the Depression. Did the Depression impact your family?

01-00:25:19

Parnell:

I think it did, but my family, my dad worked for the WPA, Works Progress Administration. And they built roads and there was various things that they did to help out people. But I don't recall suffering from not having. I know we were poor and I know we didn't have anything. But my parents provided enough somehow that I never felt that. I never felt different. I never felt poor. I never went hungry. I always had clothes like everybody else. So my parents just did a good job. I didn't feel any loss. But I know we were very poor.

01-00:26:23

Wilmot:

Did you feel that in your community you were relatively poor compared to everyone else? Or was everyone kind of at that level?

01-00:26:29

Parnell:

Everybody was like that, yeah.

01-00:26:31

Wilmot:

It's interesting.

01-00:26:32

Parnell:

There were a few that owned stores and so forth that I know had more. But I never did feel that.

01-00:26:45

Wilmot:

When you graduated high school, what did you think you were going to do? Did you feel like you were going to work? Or did you feel like you were going to go to college? What was your expectation? Was your expectation that you would get married? Do you remember? What did your horizon look like?

01-00:27:03  
Parnell: Yeah, well I did work, as I said, for Hercules Powder Company and Rheem Manufacturing Company. And then came to work for the bank where I—

01-00:27:14  
Wilmot: How'd you get all the way up there to Hercules when you were in Dinuba?

01-00:27:17  
Parnell: No. Oh, you mean in Dinuba.

01-00:27:22  
Wilmot: Oh, Hercules Powder Company was in Dinuba?

01-00:27:23  
Parnell: No, it was up here. Oh, you mean what were my expectations in Dinuba. No, I never thought about it really. I think I was probably too young. I didn't think that far ahead. And traditionally in my family nobody went to high school or nobody went to college. And so I think I was probably the first one. I went to Contra Costa College and got my AA degree when I got up here. And that's as far as I went, because I was working and got married, then had kids. But my family usually stopped school after the sixth grade. And I know my mother did. I think sixth grade. I'm not sure about my dad but maybe even less. I don't think my mother ever did, as I said, read a book. But so I didn't really think about that.

01-00:28:31  
Wilmot: And I'm sorry, did you say your AA degree was in—what did you say it was in?

01-00:28:34  
Parnell: Contra Costa College.

01-00:28:35  
Wilmot: What was your major there?

01-00:28:37  
Parnell: In social studies.

01-00:28:39  
Wilmot: Social studies, that's interesting. So you could have taught with that. There was different things you could do with an AA.

01-00:28:44  
Parnell: And I graduated with honors.

01-00:28:46  
Wilmot: Right on, go ahead. Wow. So you—

01-00:28:52  
Parnell: And I did it at night.

01-00:28:53

Wilmot:

While you were working at the powder company? What was that like? What was that work like at the powder company?

01-00:28:58

Parnell:

Well, I didn't have to work at Hercules—at the powder company. I toured it, but what I did was in Richmond across from the hiring hall there was a vacant lot and on it was two trailers. And the trailers, one had me in it, one had another man, a man in it, and we were doing the hiring for Hercules Powder Company and Rheem Manufacturing Company because the boys were in the service, so those companies didn't have enough workers and so we would be in the trailers so that people would come and we would sign them up to go out there and work. And those jobs lasted until the boys came back, and then those companies had *plenty* of workers. The man that was in the trailer next to me worked for Ford Motor Company and I became friends with him and he was doing the hiring for Ford Motor Company, which is in Richmond, or was. And then when the boys started coming back, the man in the trailer next to me introduced me to the vice president of the bank and got me the job. And they thought and I thought probably I wouldn't be there very long. Well 60 years later I'm still there. [chuckling] But that's what I did. I had a boss that worked for Hercules Powder Company and Rheem Manufacturing Company. And he kind of liked me. [chuckles] And anyway so he would just leave me alone there in the trailer and I would take their applications and send them out to work and that's what I did.

01-00:30:59

Wilmot:

Was that comfortable for you to have a boss who liked you? Or was it uncomfortable? Was it a situation you had to--?

01-00:31:05

Parnell:

He was older. He didn't ever say anything or do anything but he just never—he just liked me. [laughing]

01-00:31:21

Wilmot:

So, he just supported you and let you do what you wanted to do.

01-00:31:23

Parnell:

Yeah, yeah.

01-00:31:24

Wilmot:

I understand. I was confused. So the jobs that you were hiring for, what kind of jobs were they?

01-00:31:34

Parnell:

I just toured once. I toured the Hercules Powder Company and once the Rheem. Rheem Manufacturing Company made hot water heaters. And I actually don't know what they did.

01-00:31:51  
Wilmot: They were probably manufacturing jobs. And the powder company, was that making like gunpowder?

01-00:31:56  
Parnell: Well, that and blasting powder.

01-00:32:00  
Wilmot: Blasting powder so they were munitions, that one was a munitions company maybe.

01-00:32:05  
Parnell: Would be?

01-00:32:05  
Wilmot: Munitions or weaponry?

01-00:32:08  
Parnell: I don't think so. No I don't think so.

01-00:32:11  
Wilmot: Okay, I'm confused. Okay. How did you do outreach? How did you do outreach for people to get workers into your trailer?

01-00:32:24  
Parnell: To get—well we were across the street from the hiring hall. And—

01-00:32:29  
Wilmot: Union hiring hall?

01-00:32:29  
Parnell: —they would refer people over to us.

01-00:32:32  
Wilmot: Was it a union hiring hall? Were these union jobs do you know?

01-00:32:37  
Parnell: Yes. It was on Barrett Avenue I think in Richmond.

01-00:32:46  
Wilmot: That's where you were, on Barrett Avenue? Were the people who were referred to you, were they women or men or—

01-00:32:58  
Parnell: Mostly men.

01-00:32:58  
Wilmot: Mostly men.

01-00:32:59  
Parnell: And just men who were not in the service.



01-00:33:02

Wilmot: 4F or married or?

01-00:33:02

Parnell: I don't know, I don't know. Or maybe they were just—maybe they had come home early. I just didn't know that. But the companies were in great need of workers. So and almost everyone I sent out was hired. So, because I really didn't have to—I just took the information and sent them there. I didn't have to make the decision about hiring them.

01-00:33:35

Wilmot: Did you have a radio in your trailer?

01-00:33:39

Parnell: No. And I remember it must have been kind of winterish when I worked there because I had a heater in there, because I'd get cold in there.

01-00:33:50

Wilmot: That's why I'm wondering if you had a radio, you're alone in a trailer, what are you doing for company, coffee, all—

01-00:33:58

Parnell: But some people would stop by and say hello to me and my boss would come by every now and then and so no I never felt any—I felt okay. Strange little job, wasn't it?

01-00:34:16

Wilmot: No. Interesting though. It gave you a lot of access to other people's lives in a way. Most of the men, were they actually from the Bay Area? Or had they recently arrived because of the wartime work? Do you remember?

01-00:34:28

Parnell: I don't remember actually, no, but and then once they got the job I never saw them again. They just—I was just a little hiring hall in a trailer there. The strangest little thing. These two trailers sitting there.

01-00:34:52

Wilmot: What ethnic background were they? Were they African American? Were they white?

01-00:34:58

Parnell: I don't think they were African Americans. I know there were in the shipyards.

01-00:35:09

Wilmot: We'll talk about that in just a minute. And at that time where did you live exactly?

01-00:35:14

Parnell: I lived in a boardinghouse.

01-00:35:18

Wilmot: Wow, where was it?

01-00:35:18

Parnell: It was nearby where I worked. And a lady owned it and it had several stories and during the time of the shipyards people would—there'd be two shifts of sleepers in the room. One person would get up and go to work like graveyard and another person would come and sleep in that bed. So they shared rooms like that.

01-00:35:56

Wilmot: Did you share a bed with someone?

01-00:35:56

Parnell: I didn't. I had a little room by myself. The landlady saw to it that I had a little room on the second floor by myself. And my mother was there for a while.

01-00:36:10

Wilmot: Did they let you go off by yourself after high school, your family?

01-00:36:13

Parnell: Yeah.

01-00:36:15

Wilmot: They did. They said okay go ahead and work. And then your mom, she came and visited? Or she came—

01-00:36:24

Parnell: My mom lived in a little apartment of her own and she got married again. It was her—she got married three times. And then the house where I live now, I've lived there over 50 years. She lived in an apartment about two blocks away and she still lived there when she died.

01-00:36:55

Wilmot: Where was this house at? What neighborhood?

01-00:36:58

Parnell: In Richmond and I still live there. And—

01-00:37:02

Wilmot: What part of Richmond?

01-00:37:04

Parnell: Well, I live on Esmond Avenue and it's, well—I find condoms in the front of my house and back of my house [laughing] because I told you it's one of the most—number 11 in crime.

01-00:37:21

Wilmot: Crime and a heavily—high sexual activity too.

01-00:37:22  
Parnell: Crime and that too, see. And so I call the police on that because I get tired of that and they said there's nothing they can do.

01-00:37:30  
Wilmot: There isn't.

01-00:37:33  
Parnell: And—

01-00:37:33  
Wilmot: All you can do is be happy people are using condoms.

01-00:37:37  
Parnell: Yeah, So I don't pick them up either because I don't want them in my garbage can. So I found out that they come in decorator colors now because they're coming in turquoise and orange and—oh, it's just so awful. [laughs]

01-00:37:49  
Wilmot: Tuxedo. Halloween. [laughing]

01-00:37:54  
Parnell: I know they do, yeah, so, oh God it's just awful! So I think they're bused in, because I live near 23rd Street.

01-00:38:04  
Wilmot: Stop one second please. [interview interruption] For some reason my battery just—recording again. Thank you. Okay. What your neighborhood was like.

01-00:38:22  
Parnell: My neighborhood, yeah.

01-00:38:24  
Wilmot: Was it always this way? Has it changed over time?

01-00:38:27  
Parnell: I believe it has changed, yes.

01-00:38:28  
Wilmot: When you moved there, what was it like? And did you move there as a young married person? How did that happen?

01-00:38:34  
Parnell: Yes, I did.

01-00:38:35  
Wilmot: Can you tell me about buying that house? Tell me about it. What were the circumstances around it, your life circumstances?

01-00:38:43  
Parnell: Well I married Doug Byrone and he worked in the bank, too.

01-00:38:49

Wilmot: At Mechanics Bank here, too.

01-00:38:50

Parnell: At Mechanics Bank, too.

01-00:38:51

Wilmot: How old were you?

01-00:38:53

Parnell: I was 22 and he was 26 I think. And he was my boss. And we got married. I don't know where we lived at first but we bought this house on Esmond Avenue. It was a nice house. But it's old now.

01-00:39:20

Wilmot: It's okay, old houses are real nice.

01-00:39:24

Parnell: Yeah? But I have a new bathroom and a new kitchen floor, got those recently. And but then he and I were only married 11 years and he moved away and he married somebody else at the bank. He married the president of the bank's secretary. And she and I were friends. [laughs] But she has retired now.

01-00:40:10

Wilmot: How many children did you have?

01-00:40:21

Parnell: We have two. I have a son who is 51 now, and my daughter's 48. And they have the same birthday, March 27<sup>th</sup>, three years apart.

01-00:40:31

Wilmot: How is that possible? Did you guys time it or what?

01-00:40:35

Parnell: No, and we always laughed about it that we did. [laughing] Said he was going to leave me I forget what month it was, I'm going to leave you every month, every year on that month. But no they did, they have the same birthday, but after they were born and I thought it was so strange, too, but I found out it's not at all unusual. It happens a lot. Either the kids have their parent's birthday or yeah, so it's not—it's pretty common. But it just intrigues me.

01-00:41:11

Wilmot: It is very intriguing. What was being pregnant like for you? Did you know what you were getting into once you were pregnant?

01-00:41:19

Parnell: Well, yeah, and I worked at the bank and—

01-00:41:23

Wilmot: Did you get to take a nice leave to be home with your children?

01-00:41:25

Parnell:

At that time we could take three months leave and that's what I did each time. And that was all I needed. And I had somebody to come and take care of the children. And kept working. Because I always just *loved* to work at the bank. I had other little jobs. I worked in a theater and then I worked at the shipyard. But the bank just—and I worked in a travel agency for a year, too, on Saturdays. And but I just got intrigued with the bank and I just loved it. It was just something about being in the core of a city, you know, you *need* your bank.

01-00:42:06

Wilmot:

Yeah, it's a powerful place. Were your pregnancies easy for you? How were your pregnancies? Were you comfortable?

01-00:42:18

Parnell:

Oh yeah, no, they were easy, yeah. They were easy. I didn't get monstrously big or anything. And I had some nice clothes and I was kind of cute, really. [laughs] So, yeah, no, it was great. And it was just—just as an aside, my cravings were gardenia smell. I needed to smell gardenias. And eat tomatoes. And they couldn't be peeled or cut or anything, I just had to eat, bite into them. Those were my cravings.

01-00:43:00

Wilmot:

Both times.

01-00:43:01

Parnell:

Both, yeah, so.

01-00:43:03

Wilmot:

How fun.

01-00:43:04

Parnell:

So I didn't realize that, that smells could be a craving, but—

01-00:43:11

Wilmot:

Did having two kids, did that change your work life professionally, did that impact the way that—?

01-00:43:16

Parnell:

No. Except that I had to have somebody come and take care of them. And then when they got old enough and the lady stopped working for me—I think my son was five—then I put them into a school, that took care of kids. And so they spent a few years in some schools run by the city and the school department. And so I didn't have to worry about them. And then about I think my son was I don't know, maybe—I can't remember now, but very young, when my husband and I broke up. And then I had them by myself and *had* to work. But it worked out okay. And they're fine. They're fine people. And—

01-00:44:21

Wilmot:

Do they live in this Bay area? Do they live here in the Bay area?

01-00:44:25

Parnell: They do. The son lives in Crockett, and the daughter lives in Oakland. So I'm in the middle. Yeah.

01-00:44:32

Wilmot: Good for you. I wanted to go back because I think there's a piece that I'm missing, which is about the ship—oh yes. We had talked about when you moved into that house how it was a different community then than it is now. Please describe the community that you moved into when you were 22, 23 years old. When you moved into that house on Esmond.

01-00:44:59

Parnell: Esmond.

01-00:44:59

Wilmot: Yeah, what was that neighborhood like then?

01-00:45:02

Parnell: There were a lot of little houses on that street and most of them were rented. Now, more people own them. Same houses but they're owned. So the same people are there all the time. But at first there was a lot of people moving in and out. And that lasted for a while but gradually I see the same people all the time and they own. So and for a while we had block party, somebody would organize a block party so we could meet everybody in the block and you'd take some food. But we don't do that anymore. People are too busy I think. But I liked that. But realistically I don't know too many people in the block, just the ones across the street and the ones on each side of me.

01-00:46:11

Wilmot: Yeah, your neighbors. And then, was the neighborhood primarily white? African American? Hispanic?

01-00:46:18

Parnell: Primarily white, but now I have black people on both sides of me, black lady and white husband on one side of me, and black people on the other, and some black people across the street and all great neighbors.

01-00:46:48

Wilmot: So it sounds like it turned into a primarily African American neighborhood.

01-00:46:51

Parnell: Yeah. I've asked them for—like if I couldn't get my car started or something, asked them for—oh, yeah they're all—all quiet and all, they're all nice, yeah. So but I notice I haven't seen them but I get a little flyer from a real estate agent and he gives the names of the people who've moved and who are coming in. And it's a lot of Hispanic names that are showing up on his list so I think it's becoming more Hispanic too.

01-00:47:20  
Wilmot: At this time. Well, now there was a little piece. And your sister at this time, she's still in Dinuba?

01-00:47:31  
Parnell: She's still in Dinuba.

01-00:47:33  
Wilmot: And your dad was there too?

01-00:47:37  
Parnell: And my dad was there. He died quite a long time ago.

01-00:47:41  
Wilmot: But he stayed there too. When you—why did you decide to leave the hiring hall and enter the shipyards? What was that decision about?

01-00:47:54  
Parnell: Why did I decide to leave—

01-00:47:57  
Wilmot: The hiring hall.

01-00:47:59  
Parnell: The little trailers?

01-00:48:00  
Wilmot: The Hercules Powder—

01-00:48:01  
Parnell: Because there were so many boys coming home that the powder company and the manufacturing company didn't need anybody, the boys coming home could go directly to the companies. There were so many boys wanting jobs that they didn't need me to send them any anymore. So it just ended on its own.

01-00:48:33  
Wilmot: Okay, so that was right at the end of the war.

01-00:48:37  
Parnell: Yes, it was.

01-00:48:36  
Wilmot: That was right in 1945.

01-00:48:38  
Parnell: The boys were coming home.

01-00:48:40  
Wilmot: So you were in the shipyards before that?

01-00:48:42  
Parnell: I was in the shipyards before that, yes.

01-00:48:44

Wilmot: Tell me, tell me about that experience. You were 18 years old. Working maybe for the first time.

01-00:48:50

Parnell: Well, I was working graveyard.

01-00:48:53

Wilmot: Was that your first job out of high school? No, you were 18.

01-00:48:59

Parnell: Well, I worked in the theater at the same time. Yeah, I know I burned the candle at both ends because—

01-00:49:07

Wilmot: You did. You were serious about making money. What was your motivation?

01-00:49:12

Parnell: I've always done that. It's just, I don't know, tradition or—I've always worked ever since I can remember.

01-00:49:18

Wilmot: At that time were you supporting your mom and your family at that time?

01-00:49:20

Parnell: No. No, just me. My mother worked in a restaurant and she supported herself. And so I worked the graveyard at the shipyard and went to high school and worked evenings at the theater. So I did, and I wanted to date at the same time, so man, I just never got any sleep.

01-00:49:49

Wilmot: What was going on? Tell me about the dating life. Tell me about your social life if you want to.

01-00:49:54

Parnell: Oh yeah, oh yeah, because—

01-00:49:57

Wilmot: What was it like?

01-00:49:59

Parnell: What was it like? Well, some service, there were still some servicemen around and they would want to go out with me sometimes. And to tell you the truth I didn't have that much time, but I did meet people in the theater. I was a candy girl and sold tickets and took them to their seats and stuff. Usherette. [laughing] And you think you're just great because you got that little uniform on. And yeah, and some other girls were working in there too. And some actually that I went to high school with there were some in there. And it was great, and so I saw movies, I saw all the movies. But I saw them in bits and pieces.



01-00:50:45

Wilmot: Tell me about what was playing there.

01-00:50:48

Parnell: Oh, man! I just—well I can't remember but I saw almost every movie. There's a man that comes in the bank here and he's interested in silent movies all the time and so he'll bring me brochure—he goes to them all the time—he brings me brochures and I said, “Yeah, I know that person. I saw that movie. But I didn't see it from beginning to end, I saw it in bits and pieces. But—

01-00:51:10

Wilmot: Did you see newsreels about the war? Were those also shown at the theater? Will you tell me the name of the theater again, was it Richmond Theater?

01-00:51:15

Parnell: It was the Fox Theater and I worked there on Macdonald Avenue and across the street in the Uptown Theater. I worked at both of those. And—

01-00:51:32

Wilmot: At the same time? At the same time or—

01-00:51:35

Parnell: No, different times. And at the Fox Theater once in a while a star would come and sell war bonds. The theater would put a table out there and some chairs and people would come and buy bonds. They were having a bond drive. And stars did that. I can't remember some of the stars but some famous stars. Not too many but a few came to Richmond to sell bonds and they would do it in front of the shows. And I'd forgotten that but they did.

01-00:52:23

Wilmot: Did you buy any? Did you buy any?

01-00:52:25

Parnell: I didn't buy any from them but I signed up to buy them at the shipyard. And to come out of my check. So I had a lot of bonds. And I kept them for years and years and had bonds taken out of my bank account, or out of my check here too. And then finally I sold them.

01-00:52:55

Wilmot: Okay, so I wanted to ask you. I already asked you were there newsreels about the war, about what was going on in Germany, in Japan.

01-00:53:03

Parnell: Well there was. But I can't really remember too much about it. No.

01-00:53:10

Wilmot: And that thing that people say that people were actually sleeping in the theaters because there was so much—there were no vacancies for people to—did you notice that? Were there—did you come across sleeping people?

01-00:53:25

Parnell: No, I didn't. I didn't see. No I didn't, no, I didn't. I know there were shortages and we had Meatless Tuesdays. You've heard of that. Yeah we had Meatless Tuesdays. And we wouldn't eat meat on—because we were saving for the war effort. And we could only have three pairs of shoes per year, we could only buy three pairs of shoes per year. And we turned in our metal. And for munitions. And a lot of that stuff that we did, there were no silk—there were no stockings.

01-00:54:13

Wilmot: Leg paint.

01-00:54:15

Parnell: Yeah, it's really—and not too many clothes. And I don't know, maybe that was just to bring us all together, maybe that wasn't even necessary. But when you're working, when you're all working together and you make an effort, well it brings you together to win, I guess. Because I don't know if that was all necessary or not. But that's what we did. And so we were all in on the war effort.

Now, we're not. There's some people think we should be at war and some think we shouldn't be.

01-00:54:59

Wilmot: What do you think?

01-00:55:03

Parnell: I don't think about it. [laughs] I guess we have to be.

01-00:55:14

Wilmot: Let's stop for a minute. I need to change all of our recording media for our next tapes, okay?

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

Begin Audio File 2 Parnell, Kirby 2.mp3

02-00:00:10

Parnell: Can I tell you about Rosie the Riveter?

02-00:00:13

Wilmot: You can. Just please start from the beginning. Tell me how you found that job or why you decided to go into the shipyards. Did someone you know work there? Like, how did you get your job?

02-00:00:21

Parnell: My mother was already working there.

02-00:00:23

Wilmot: She was already there! What was she doing there?

02-00:00:24  
Parnell: Well she was a leader woman. She had a crew. And it was a cleanup crew.

02-00:00:34  
Wilmot: She was probably about—

02-00:00:34  
Parnell: She was just in her 30s, probably mid 30s. Yeah yeah. Of course she seemed older to me, but that's because I was a kid, but realistically she was just a young woman herself, yeah.

02-00:00:50  
Wilmot: Why did they name you Kerby? How did they decide?

02-00:00:52  
Parnell: The story is that it was my father's old girlfriend's name. And so my mother couldn't remember my name for three weeks after I was born. I guess she didn't want to probably but that was—he named me and it was after a girlfriend. It's Kerby Lee.

02-00:01:20  
Wilmot: Kerby Lee Parnell.

02-00:01:23  
Parnell: K-E-R-B-Y, not K-I.

02-00:01:25  
Wilmot: I've been spelling it wrong.

02-00:01:26  
Parnell: Because K-I is for male or last name and I get lots of mail for men.

02-00:01:34  
Wilmot: So your mom was working at the shipyards. Which one did she work in?

02-00:01:39  
Parnell: She worked at Yard 2 and so did I and my grandmother. Yard 2.

02-00:01:43  
Wilmot: And your grandmother was there too working. What did she do there?

02-00:01:47  
Parnell: We were all laborers.

02-00:01:52  
Wilmot: When did your grandmother come from Arkansas? I missed that part.

02-00:01:56  
Parnell: Actually I don't know, to tell you the truth.

02-00:02:01  
Wilmot: Was there like a time in your life when she was not there and then suddenly she was there?

02-00:02:05  
Parnell: Suddenly she was there, yeah. I just don't know.

02-00:02:12  
Wilmot: Okay, so what was your first day on the job like?

02-00:02:18  
Parnell: My first day on the job at—

02-00:02:18  
Wilmot: As a welder, you were 18, right?

02-00:02:20  
Parnell: Yeah, I was 18.

02-00:02:20  
Wilmot: Was this just out of high school?

02-00:02:23  
Parnell: No, I had not graduated yet.

02-00:02:26  
Wilmot: You were still in high school and you were in high school now in Richmond. So somewhere along the—and so, oh, 12th grade was in Richmond. Were you at Richmond High?

02-00:02:34  
Parnell: Richmond High.

02-00:02:37  
Wilmot: Okay, so you were in high school, you were working at the theater, and you started working the nightshift. What did you do with the money you made? It was your first money you were making?

02-00:02:48  
Parnell: Clothes and some bonds. Clothes, and basically I was just on my own taking care of myself.

So, but anyway Wendy the Welder. I spent a day on—my son and I spent a day on the Jeremiah O'Brien. And they explained to us that on the east coast they made Liberty ships with rivets so it would be Rosie the Riveter, but on the west coast, here, they discovered that if they welded them then—if you rivet them, the plates have to—for the rivet to go through both they have to overlap. And so that made the Liberty ships heavier and not as fast. So on the West coast, they discovered that welding the plates could be just together and welded in a seam. That made them lighter and faster. So really we're Wendy the Welders here and in New York—or on the east coast they were Rosie the Riveters.

02-00:04:22  
Wilmot: So you're Wendy the Welders here and Rosie the Riveters. Interesting.

02-00:04:24

Parnell:

Yeah, yeah. And I didn't know that until—I didn't realize that until that man explained it to me, to us, on the Jeremiah O'Brien.

02-00:04:34

Wilmot:

Would you tell that story again?

02-00:04:39

Parnell:

Really? Hadn't you heard that before?

02-00:04:41

Wilmot:

I've never heard that before.

02-00:04:44

Parnell:

And I hadn't either until I heard him say that but it made sense to me.

02-00:04:47

Wilmot:

The reason why I ask you to tell it again is because you said we're really Rosie the Welders here, and that's why I'm asking you to tell it again, because I want to just have one piece of film where you just say it just the way you mean it. So that if someone ever decides to use it they've got it.

02-00:05:03

Parnell:

Okay. When I went on the Jeremiah O'Brien, a man told us, all of us, that actually we were Wendy the Welders on the west coast. The east coast riveted their ships and the plates had to overlap so that the rivets could go through both plates and hold them. And that made the ships in the east heavier and not as fast. The west coast, here at Kaiser Shipyards, found out that welding them, the plates could just meet and be welded—a seam could weld them together, making them less heavy and faster. And so it was the west coast liberty ships that helped win the war, and so we were really Wendy the Welders and not Rosie the Riveters. But Rosie the Riveter was in the advertisements and the—not the advertisements, but the war effort word for it anyway.

02-00:06:23

Wilmot:

Propaganda, slogans?

02-00:06:24

Parnell:

Yeah, that, yeah.

02-00:06:25

Wilmot:

So were you proud of your work? Were you proud?

02-00:06:28

Parnell:

Yes, and realistically I really never did have to weld. You had to go to school for welding, and you wore a big welding thing. They just had kids like me cleaning up. I worked in the engine room, cleaning up, and when we had to move the ship to the outfitting dock, and of course I worked at night.

To move the ship you had to turn out the lights and move it to the outfitting dock where they did more work on it. You had to get under something

because if anybody was walking on the catwalks in the dark, if they dropped a hammer or something it could kill you, so you had to get under something until the outfitting dock and the electricity was hooked up again. And so we would get under, we would take a bucket and up end it to sit on in the double bottoms of the ship. And it would be wet down in there and so you would go down there, and till you moved, you'd sit down there. Couldn't walk around, it was pitch dark. So anyway.

02-00:07:51

Wilmot:

So what kind of conversations would you have down there while you were sitting down there?

02-00:07:56

Parnell:

I think we just tried to sleep.

02-00:07:58

Wilmot:

You would sleep because you were working so hard.

02-00:08:02

Parnell:

Yeah, because it was a graveyard shift and so we would all be sleepy all the time practically.

02-00:08:08

Wilmot:

Who were you working with?

02-00:08:11

Parnell:

Well, there were some—it was—I mean women mainly.

02-00:08:15

Wilmot:

All women. And were they union?

02-00:08:18

Parnell:

We would clean up the engine room floor, and they would give us rags and things, and then come to find out those rags, some of them had asbestos in them. And so some people suffered with asbestos poisoning after working in the shipyards. My mother did. My mother got a little settlement. Her lungs were affected by the asbestos. And I was tested too, but I didn't, I wasn't affected.

02-00:09:02

Wilmot:

What was the ethnic makeup of the workers that you worked with?

02-00:09:09

Parnell:

Well, I really—I just don't remember that.

02-00:09:16

Wilmot:

Do you remember if it was mostly white? If it was some African American women? Hispanic women?

02-00:09:23

Parnell:

There were, yeah, I see pictures now, I see pictures now of them, and I think I have a picture of my mother and her crew, and I think she had some black women in her crew. I think it was just a mixture just like it is now.

02-00:09:39

Wilmot:

And do you remember if most of the people were from the Bay Area or if they came—?

02-00:09:44

Parnell:

A lot of them were coming in from back east and Arkansas and other places. And once they came here they pretty much just stayed. After the shipyards were over, people were settled in, and just stayed. So it was—

02-00:10:03

Wilmot:

I've talked to some people who were from Arkansas who experienced like taunting or discrimination because they were from Arkansas, they were called Arkies and Okies and—

02-00:10:15

Parnell:

Yeah, we were.

02-00:10:15

Wilmot:

Did you experience any of that?

02-00:10:20

Parnell:

I think maybe somebody teased me about it, but I didn't ever feel discriminated against, but I knew that people made jokes about us. The Arkies and Okies. Because people did come here from there to work and usually work in agriculture. And till the shipyards started. But I never felt—I never felt discriminated against.

02-00:10:52

Wilmot:

It may be that I chose the wrong word. Were you very—how much were you making an hour?

02-00:11:03

Parnell:

I can't remember. In the shipyards? I can't remember hourly, but it was \$52.50 a week.

02-00:11:09

Wilmot:

Wow, that's huge.

02-00:11:10

Parnell:

That was good.

02-00:11:11

Wilmot:

It was good. And at that time were you living still with your family or was this the boardinghouse?

02-00:11:16

Parnell: I was, I was.

02-00:11:17

Wilmot: Okay, you're living with your mom. Were you proud? Were you very proud of your work? Proud to be part of that effort or proud to be going to work in the shipyards?

02-00:11:31

Parnell: I remember being proud of it, but I just knew that I would have to work. I always had to work and I always liked to work and never—I never wanted not to work. So even down in the San Joaquin Valley when I was still in grade school I would pick grapes and pick cotton and I worked in a place called a bleacher's where they bleached raisins and did you know that the white raisins start out dark and they have bleach put on them?

02-00:12:08

Wilmot: No.

02-00:12:11

Parnell: Ever see the golden raisins? Those are—they're not—they don't come that way.

02-00:12:16

Wilmot: I didn't know that.

02-00:12:16

Parnell: They're processed, yes. And I worked in that. And did all kinds of things. And pick turkeys at Thanksgiving, go out to a shed and dunk the turkeys in a barrel of hot water and then you would pull the feathers off of them and—

02-00:12:43

Wilmot: I have another question about the shipyards, which is did you see discrimination, racial discrimination, in the shipyards?

02-00:12:52

Parnell: I didn't.

02-00:12:53

Wilmot: You didn't. How about one thing that people often mention is how when Richmond changed because there were a lot more African Americans suddenly there in the city who had come from the south for that shipyard work, did you witness that? You were probably right in the middle of that change. I don't know, when did you come to Richmond?

02-00:13:18

Parnell: Let's see.

02-00:13:18

Wilmot: What year was that?



02-00:13:23

Parnell: Well, I must have been about 18, 17 or 18.

02-00:13:26

Wilmot: 17, so let me think. So you were—1943.

02-00:13:33

Parnell: Yeah, yeah.

02-00:13:34

Wilmot: So coming from a semirural place, and the Joaquin Valley, San Joaquin Valley, and then arriving in Richmond, was it a bustling city at that time? What was it like?

02-00:13:54

Parnell: Richmond, was it a bustling city?

02-00:13:59

Wilmot: What was that like for you coming from a small town?

02-00:14:07

Parnell: First, when we came up from Dinuba, we lived in Rodeo in a trailer park. And then moved to Richmond. And yeah, I guess it was, because we were near San Francisco and so I knew it was—and when I lived in Dinuba the city to us was Fresno. And here, when I moved up here, the city was San Francisco. You would go to San Francisco when you went to the city. In Dinuba, you would go to Fresno if you went to the city. So yes, it was bigger and busier and to me no question about ever moving back to Dinuba. But to my dad there was and my sister never did move up here. She always stayed in Dinuba. And she was younger than me but she stayed with friends when my folks came up to work in the shipyards. And she just never wanted to—she never wanted to come up here and work or go to school or work, so she's lived all her life in Dinuba.

02-00:15:33

Wilmot: Do you remember hearing about Pearl Harbor in 1941?

02-00:15:38

Parnell: Yes. And D-Day and—

02-00:15:40

Wilmot: Where were you?

02-00:15:40

Parnell: On D-Day I was on the streets of Richmond and we were all celebrating. There was noise. And Pearl Harbor, that was not celebration. Well it was about what I feel now as far as Iraq, just don't like it—[pause]—but we were betrayed I guess you'd call it by the Japanese. But that's over. And now they're friends, we're friends.

02-00:16:44

Wilmot:

Well, that brings me to this other question, which is when you were in Dinuba, was there a Japanese community that was interned? Was there any internment that you witnessed?

02-00:16:51

Parnell:

It had begun.

02-00:16:53

Wilmot:

What was that like?

02-00:16:55

Parnell:

And because the Japanese people in Dinuba had—they were in agriculture, orchards and things. And people were a little bit afraid that, well, they just were afraid that there was going to be bombs I guess there, I don't know, in Dinuba. But so we were aware of it, but I don't know what was done or anything, I don't know if any of the people there were sent away or not, but they might have been. But I guess I was so young I just didn't really think about it too much. But I know I was aware, and I hadn't thought about it till you brought it up, but yes, Dinuba had fears because there were quite a few Japanese people there.

02-00:17:52

Wilmot:

And did you go to school with any? Did you have any Japanese classmates?

02-00:17:54

Parnell:

I don't remember that. I don't think so. I don't remember that at all. I can only remember just adults. Ooh, they just grew such good things—[laughs]—watermelons and—. But kids are just—in a place like that anyway you just don't really know what's going on too much.

02-00:18:21

Wilmot:

Sometimes even when you're in a place like Oakland or—

02-00:18:23

Parnell:

Yeah, you just—you're just not *aware* of everything. But I don't recall feeling any animosity toward *anyone*. If someone went to school with me they were just kids I knew.

02-00:18:47

Wilmot:

Again in 1945, when Nagasaki and Hiroshima were bombed, did you hear about that? Did you hear about those bombs?

02-00:19:07

Parnell:

Well, I think I did, yeah. And I probably felt sad about it. Because I think I saw pictures of a little girl that was burned and it was a famous picture, she was standing in a street, and when yeah. But it's all vague to me.

02-00:19:42

Wilmot:

And what did you know about what was happening in Germany, the Holocaust in Germany? During that time was there actually—did Americans really know about what was going on there?

02-00:19:58

Parnell:

Well, I don't know. But I visited there a couple times on my trips. And went to Poland and saw the piles of shoes and the just—and well it was bad. So I believe that it happened. I guess there's some people that don't believe it happened, but I do. It happened, because I saw the place where it happened.

02-00:20:45

Wilmot:

After the war when the Japanese returned from the internment camps, do you recall seeing people return and repossess their belongings or their homes? Did you see any of that in Richmond when you were there in 1945 and '46 and '47?

02-00:21:02

Parnell:

No, uh-uh, I just don't recall anything like that at all. No.

02-00:21:11

Wilmot:

That's my last question.

02-00:21:11

Parnell:

But I guess they didn't have their possessions anymore, their property, and so forth. But I'm just not aware of that, no. I only know because it happened, but I wasn't aware of it at the time.

02-00:21:26

Wilmot:

It wasn't a day-to-day thing so people could see and experience around them. In your experience. How about in 1946, do you remember the Port Chicago explosion? This was up in the North Bay. There's the Port Chicago—

02-00:21:45

Parnell:

Is that where the black men were—?

02-00:21:49

Wilmot:

They were working and there was a big explosion that was—it was huge. And then after the explosion they refused to go back to work and then it was called a mutiny. But I'm wondering, like, if you were here, you may have felt the ground shake in 1946, from that explosion, because it was that big. But—

02-00:22:11

Parnell:

Well, I was not aware of that at all, but I just read about it later, because it's been in the news fairly recently in the last year or so. But when it happened, I just wasn't aware of it.

02-00:22:31

Wilmot:

Okay, well, let's see. I also wanted to go back to the shipyards. Because you said in the theaters you worked with some of your high school friends. Did

you have any high school friends who came to work in the shipyards with you as well?

02-00:22:47

Parnell: No.

02-00:22:50

Wilmot: Were there young people who you made friends with and went out with in the shipyards?

02-00:22:55

Parnell: No, not in the shipyard.

02-00:22:56

Wilmot: Socialize afterwards or hang out or visit?

02-00:22:59

Parnell: No, no. Most of the people that worked in the shipyards were older than me and I only knew them at the shipyard.

02-00:23:11

Wilmot: And I don't know if you told me why you left your job at the shipyards.

02-00:23:30

Parnell: I think that it was because, well, I was burning the candle at both ends. Shipyard, theater, school, and I wanted to finish school, and I think that's why. Just gave it up. And besides, it was sort of ending anyway, for everybody. And so, well, this is hard to remember.

02-00:23:58

Wilmot: I know. Did you go to church in Richmond? Do you belong to a church here now?

02-00:24:04

Parnell: Church? I belong to the Lutheran church in Richmond and I grew up as a Nazarene because my parents, that's where my parents sent me. It was probably because it was the closest to our house. And so when I—

02-00:24:21

Wilmot: Nazarene? Is that Nazarene Baptist or?

02-00:24:24

Parnell: It's just called the Church of the Nazarene, and on my cruise that I just got back from one of the countries I saw the Church of the Nazarene, God, I don't see those too often anymore. But then when I moved to Esmond Avenue, the Lutheran church was the closest to my house. It was within walking distance. So that's what I joined. The Lutheran church. And I liked it.

02-00:25:00

Wilmot:

Now, your grandmother and your mother and you were all working at the shipyards. What was that like for you? Like did you all see each other and have meals together? Or did you just say I don't know them, or—

02-00:25:14

Parnell:

No, no, but we worked like different crews. So we didn't come in contact with each other. But of course I lived with my mother and there was a little train that went from our apartment. We were in the projects they called them.

02-00:25:35

Wilmot:

Was this which ones?

02-00:25:37

Parnell:

In Richmond, they built—I think they were about six apartments in each building. And the people working in the shipyards lived in them. And there was a little train out to Yard 1, 2 and 3 and we'd worked in Yard 2, and we'd take the train out there and back. And now my grandmother—we were all doing something different. My mother had her crew and I was working on the graveyard shift in the engine room cleaning that up. I can't remember what my grandmother was doing. But it was noted that the three generations were working there. And then we were the only family that had three of us, mother, grandmother and child working together. So but I don't know, my grandmother probably was just a laborer like me too.

02-00:26:50

Wilmot:

Did she live with you in those projects? What street were those on, the projects you're referring to? What street were those on?

02-00:27:03

Parnell:

I lived on—

02-00:27:05

Wilmot:

It wasn't Canal?

02-00:27:07

Parnell:

Cutting, I think.

02-00:27:08

Wilmot:

It was on Cutting.

02-00:27:09

Parnell:

Cutting, yeah, close to Cutting.

02-00:27:11

Wilmot:

And she lived somewhere else? Where'd she live?

02-00:27:13

Parnell:

I think she did. Yeah.

02-00:27:16

Wilmot: Did she have an Irish accent at all?

02-00:27:19

Parnell: No, she didn't.

02-00:27:21

Wilmot: But her family was from Ireland.

02-00:27:24

Parnell: Well, I'm not sure. But because they always told us, told me, that we were French, Irish and Choctaw Indian. So and my mother looked Irish. So I don't know if they came from Ireland or not. But I just never have even thought about researching it. I wouldn't even know how to begin.

02-00:27:52

Wilmot: Overall, can you reflect on the ways that the war changed women's lives?

02-00:28:02

Parnell: In the shipyard?

02-00:28:04

Wilmot: Or working during the war.

02-00:28:06

Parnell: Oh, it did. It changed their lives because before that women stayed in the house and did home things, children and family. But it was necessary for them to work. Because there weren't enough men to do the job. And I guess they found out they liked it. And they just kept working. But, yes, their lives changed.

02-00:28:35

Wilmot: And it's funny. When you say that, I just hear your voice saying, "I worked since I was a small child." So you were working all along before. You already knew you would be working.

02-00:28:46

Parnell: Seem like I've always worked. Doing something or other. I know I started working in the apricots in Hollister and in San Jose worked in a cannery, and I think there's some time when I was cutting apricots, to put on the trays to put out in the field to dry, I think I was maybe 12 or 14, and you aren't supposed to work when you're that old, but I did. You're supposed to have a little—well you're supposed to be a schoolchild. But I always worked. Because I was always big, and not childish, so I just...

02-00:29:35

Wilmot: Not childish. Interesting. Okay, well what else do you want to say today?

02-00:29:44

Parnell: Well, the main thing I wanted to tell you was that I was Wendy the Welder. Not Rosie the Riveter. Have you seen the memorial to Rosie the Riveter in Richmond? See, I haven't seen it.

02-00:29:58

Wilmot: You should go. It's beautiful.

02-00:29:59

Parnell: I should go too, yeah.

02-00:30:01

Wilmot: Well, there's different parts of it and then there's an archive, but it's made to look like the ribs of a ship. So it's freestanding, it is very conceptual. It's a little abstract. But it's meant to look like the inside of a ship. Like the skeleton of a ship.

02-00:30:18

Parnell: It's out at the Point?

02-00:30:18

Wilmot: And it makes you think. Like that's what I think is really good about it, is it leaves a lot to the imagination. So you just think about—you flesh it out yourself. It's beautiful.

02-00:30:29

Parnell: I'll have to go out and see that.

02-00:30:29

Wilmot: I would recommend it. I really wanted to bring my grandmother to see it.

02-00:30:37

Parnell: I remember when it was first built, I was going to go to the opening of it, but I didn't get out there. So I'll have to go out there.

02-00:30:52

Wilmot: Well, I'm done asking questions. So when you're done, if you have anything else you want to say that's good, and if you don't we'll close for today.

02-00:31:00

Parnell: Well, I think that I'm just about drained dry. [laughing]

02-00:31:04

Wilmot: Okay, take care. That's it. Okay. [interview interruption]

02-00:31:13

Parnell: Well, you know that I like adventures. And I've been up in a balloon, and helped fly it, and I've made a parachute jump, and I think the bank had to change their insurance after that. [laughs] But and he told my boss don't let her do that again. Because I hurt my leg. And he said, "Well, I can't stop her doing anything." And then I've parasailed and I've climbed the Great Wall.

And I've been to Tibet. I've been to 107 countries. And I'm going to try to go to *all* of them. And I've climbed Ayers Rock in the outback of Australia. And this year I was told that they don't allow people to climb up there anymore. Too many have been killed. And I didn't know that till this year. And—

02-00:32:18

Wilmot: How come you like adventures so much?

02-00:32:19

Parnell: I don't know. I just do.

02-00:32:23

Wilmot: When did you start getting—

02-00:32:25

Parnell: And I only have to do something once and then I've got it out of my system. Yes. It's strange.

02-00:32:30

Wilmot: What's your next adventure?

02-00:32:33

Parnell: Well, I don't know, but it'll be something good. [chuckles] But the parachute jump, you take your life into your hands. And you have to be willing to do that. And if you can do that that's the finest thing you can—you can do it.

02-00:32:56

Wilmot: Was that your favorite? If you were to say your favorite adventure, would that be it?

02-00:33:03

Parnell: The parachute jump, yes, that took more nerve than anything I've ever done.

02-00:33:06

Wilmot: You did it in a plane?

02-00:33:06

Parnell: I went to school first for one day over at Stevens Paraloft at Oakland Airport and went to Buchanan Field and jumped. And—

02-00:33:22

Wilmot: Were you over the ocean or over land?

02-00:33:24

Parnell: Land. There's a target there. You know, they tell you what to do. And first, there were several of us, at first. I said, "Well I don't think I can do it." And the jump master said, "Well there's no—if you can't do it, it's not anything against you, you just can't." because some people just can't. But he said, "You're ready." So I went in the plane again. Went around. And I jumped.

02-00:33:59

Wilmot: He told you you were ready and you were like, okay.



02-00:34:00

Parnell:

I was ready, yeah, and then I didn't have to do it anymore. I knew I could do it. Just stepping out into eternity. And it was the *finest* thing I ever did. I felt like I was outside the world but very much a part of the world. It was the best feeling. And I was on crutches for two weeks but it was worth it. [laughs] Anyway. Oh, that was so great. I don't need to do it again though but once was enough. It was wonderful. You got to do it.

02-00:34:41

Wilmot:

I don't think I do. Have you ever done bungee jumping?

02-00:34:45

Parnell:

No, I haven't done that either.

02-00:34:46

Wilmot:

Snowboarding?

02-00:34:48

Parnell:

No, I haven't done that either. So you've done that?

02-00:34:52

Wilmot:

No.

02-00:34:52

Parnell:

No. But now that you mention it maybe I'll do it. [laughing]

02-00:34:58

Wilmot:

Yeah, figure out your next adventure. Okay, well, thank you for sharing that. I actually turned back on the camera and am recording because Kerby said to me, "I hope you know I like adventure," and I was like, "Kerby, please, please say this on tape." Thank you for sharing that. When did you start doing that though? That's my question. When did you start pursuing the adventures?

02-00:35:18

Parnell:

Well I don't know, probably when I was about—I must have been 40 or something. I don't know when I first knew that I liked to do unusual things. But—

02-00:35:35

Wilmot:

Racecar driving.

02-00:35:39

Parnell:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was in a racecar. I swear, with my helmet and everything. I didn't drive it but I was a rider in it, yes. It was a Lotus Elite, purple, went around the racetrack in it. I did. [laughs]

02-00:35:56

Wilmot:

Well, that warms my heart to know you're doing those things.

02-00:36:01

Parnell:

Well, sometimes you do things like that if you're missing something else in your life. And I didn't have—I lost both my marriages. And so I didn't have—so I think maybe it would have been different had I remained married. But I lost those, so I had to get something else. And just to see if I could do it.

02-00:36:31

Wilmot:

But you know, if you stayed married you wouldn't have done those wonderful things.

02-00:36:35

Parnell:

I think that's probably it, yeah.

02-00:36:38

Wilmot:

I'm just glad to know you did those wonderful things.

02-00:36:39

Parnell:

Yeah, I think that's it, yeah. Yeah so. Anyway.

02-00:36:44

Wilmot:

Thank you.

02-00:36:46

Parnell:

Yes, thank you.

[End of Interview]