

Evelyn Davidson

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 13

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare

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Nashville, Tennessee

For The

For the Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
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New York University

Interview: Evelyn Davidson

Interviewers: Anne de Mare

Date: June 27, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

De Mare: The way I'd like to just start is if you could just introduce yourself to me. Tell me your name and tell where you were born.

Davidson: Alright.

De Mare: Whenever

Davidson: You tell me when to start.

De Mare: You can start right now.

Davidson: OK. My name is Evelyn Davidson and I was born in Northville, Michigan and came here because of aircraft.

De Mare: You came to this area?

Davidson: Came to this area, to Nashville to work in aircraft.

De Mare: And how did you make your way here from Michigan?

Davidson: My daddy was a Superintendant of the aircraft company. And there was an opening for a typist and I was underage but I got in. And read- I learned to read blueprints and that's what really got me started on it.

De Mare: And how did you learn to read the blueprints?
Just from-

Davidson: My daddy just- I was a daddy's girl.

De Mare: So um, just to take it back for a minute and we'll come back to the aircraft. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Davidson: My childhood was farm work. We lived on a farm and daddy worked at the aircraft factory.

De Mare: What did you farm? What did you grow?

Davidson: Crops. Just food crops. In those days that's what it was.

De Mare: And when you- did you ever work- was the job as the typist the first job that you had office work?

Davidson: First job I ever had. I bought an old Remington for \$40.00 and learned to type.

1:33:00-----

De Mare: Do you remember how much money you earned as a typist?

Davidson: No. I don't remember it.

De Mare: Ok.

Davidson: Money really wasn't a factor.

De Mare: Yea...

Davidson: I had a job.

De Mare: So where were you when the war broke out?

Davidson: I was in Nashville. And I signed up the boys at the place I worked. I signed up the boys for the draft first.

De Mare: Oh really?

Davidson: Yea. Volunteers.

De Mare: What was that like?

Davidson: Uh the boys, there not boys, they're young men. I hate to call them boys. And uh they were from 19 to 24 age. And uh, they were, we knew that we were going to have a war. Period...you help me.

De Mare: No I was just curious like it was that's a very...interesting position to be in to sign them up to go away. And I was just wondering-

Davidson: I got an honorary certificate from the Governor for being a volunteer. I was proud of that. I've still got it.

De Mare: Yea...

Davidson: But then I married and my husband was drafted. He was in the Air Force, Military Police. And he was sent to Yuma, Arizona. So I saved up my \$50.00 a month allotment and flew out there. Stayed out there and uh, started working at the airbase.

De Mare: Can you tell me a little bit about the work you did there?

Davidson: I was aircraft mechanic. They said I was really fit for it. They gave us test after test. And they were planning to replace eight men to send them overseas. They wanted eight girls to see if they could do the job the men did. So uh, we didn't know what we were applying for. We thought it was for to be a typist. All of us. They didn't tell us what it was. We thought- we thought we were going to apply to be a typist or a filing clerk. So everyone in town went out there and you had to be a wife of a military man in order to qualify first.

04:00:20-----

De Mare: Really? So you, but you were working for the military? You were actually employed by the military?

Davidson: I was a civilian employee of the Air Force.

De Mare: Wow.

Davidson: Yea. And they found that I was qualified to be a mechanic because, mainly because I had followed my daddy around so much and learned tools and how particular you have to be.

De Mare: Yea...And would you work on, what were the plans that you worked on?

Davidson: Anything that came in pursuits, bombers, carriers... whatever came in I was rained extensively. But before they put me on that they did IQ test, physical, any kind of a mental. They did many tests.

De Mare: Well I'm sure, you were sending- you were responsible for those machines.

Davidson: I was responsible for the machines, lives, winning the war.

De Mare: And how old were you when you were doing that work?

Davidson: I was probably 20.

De Mare: Wow, that's incredible actually.

Davidson: It is if you stop to think back about it.

De Mare: Did you enjoy doing that kind of work?

Davidson: I loved it. Yea, I knew I was good at it. And I took care with it. I knew what was involved.

De Mare: Now was your husband overseas at that point.

Davidson: No. He was still at Yuma.

De Mare: Ok.

Davidson: And when he transferred to different states, they transferred me. I went on the troop trains with the other guys.

05:38:07-----

De Mare: And then would you be an aircraft engineer at-

Davidson: I was an aircraft mechanic at every- at seven different places. And they had the job waiting for me when I got there.

De Mare: So where else did work? Do you remember?

Davidson: I worked from Arizona I went to Shreveport, Louisiana, Mount Clemens, Michigan, Wilmington, North Carolina. The others I don't know. And then I- yea I think I retired from the Air Force. I got a little pay. And I retired from it and went to Marietta, Georgia where I was- bucked rivet for a while. And I broke my hand and of course that stopped my bucking rivets because that took strength.

06:27:16-----

De Mare: Now explain to me what you were doing in Marietta, Georgia. You were bucking rivets for who? For what company?

Davidson: Lockheed.

De Mare: ok. And this was during or after the war?

Davidson: During the war.

De Mare: During the war ok.

Davidson: So I broke my hand and that stopped that right quick. And I went to Pennsylvania with my parents and that's when the war ended. My husband got critically injured so I never went back into the work.

De Mare: What happened to your husband?

Davidson: He was an MP. He was patrolling the- on Iwo Jima patrolling the runway. Shooting snipers. And a plane was crippled coming in couldn't help it. The pilot was not at fault but he landed on my husband who was on a motorcycle

and so that hurt him quite bad. And uh, so he eventually got out of the Air Force on disability.

De Mare: Yea... Now when- did you have children when he was in the military?

Davidson: No.

De Mare: No.

Davidson: No I had the children later.

De Mare: Ok...

07:46:20-----

De Mare: And it's interesting that kind of life where you are traveling so much between bases as a wife. Can you talk a little about what that was like for you personally?

Davidson: Actually, I didn't think about it. It was not tops in my mind. The war was tops. I lived in one place-in Yuma where in a screened in front porch. I got water out of the facet in the front yard. And uh, food in a kept in an

ice chest. And our bathroom was little building out back and uh it was in Yuma. The Air Force had a list of places, rooms mainly, not apartment that the wives go and live while their husbands were on base.

De Mare: So you didn't live on the base with your husband?

Davidson: No.

De Mare: No, but you were with him? You travelled with him?

Davidson: He would come home. Yea he would come home at night. And uh, we didn't worry about it. We were on rations, everything was rationed. But it didn't bother us.

De Mare: It's interesting, a lot of the ladies talk about how um, they were in the same boat so you really didn't feel the hardship. Did you feel the same way?

Davidson: We didn't- didn't I felt no hardship. No, nothing. It's surprising you think now. If you think back, oh poor me but I didn't- we didn't think that way. None of us did I'm sure.

09:23:17-----

De Mare: Now when you broke your hand, you broke it bucking rivets? That's how you broke it?

Davidson: No.

De Mare: No?

Davidson: Actually no. I broke it putting things in the trunk of my car and the trunk fell on my hand. But that stopped the riveting.

De Mare: Ok.

Davidson: And stopped that whole thing.

De Mare: What was it like working at the- at Lockheed? What was that like for you?

Davidson: It was hot. It was awful hard. It hurt muscles. It was muscle work and um in those days, I had them.

De Mare: Yea... You're funny.

09:58:04-----

De Mare: Did, Now did-

Davidson: Now days you can wave with those muscles.

LAUGHS

De Mare: Now when you were working at, it was in Marietta,
Georgia?

Davidson: Marietta, Georgia.

De Mare: What was- were you working with was it just women
you were working with or women and men?

Davidson: Women and men.

De Mare: Women and men, ok. And did you have a good
relationship with the men you worked with. Can you talk a
little about that because that was unusual at the time. To
work like that.

Davidson: Yea it was. No it was everybody was equal. We were all working for one thing.

De Mare: Yea...

Davidson: And we knew that planes were coming in trying to overtake the country. And that's what we were fighting for.

10:41:01-----

Mimi: What did you do for fun when you weren't working and your husband was overseas? How did you entertain yourself?

Davidson: We didn't. We got up, came home and washed the uniform. Uh, we had jumpsuits...uh, we wore jumpsuits. And uh, I was small you know, I never got fat. No for fun we didn't really look for fun. In Arizona we would get in a Jeep and take off across the desert and look at jackrabbits. Big fun. We didn't try to hurt them we just accepted those long ears you know they were fascinating and riding in a Jeep over those sand dunes. No I can't think of fun, actually we weren't look fun. We were looking to keep those planes off our borders.

Mimi: What was it like wearing pants?

Davidson: Fun.

Mimi: Yea.

Davidson: We felt like we were equal you know. We were taking the place of a man and yea it felt natural.

De Mare: Well thank you so much for opening- talking to us. I really appreciate it.

Davidson: Ok. It was hard at all

De Mare: See I told. I told you it wasn't going to be hard. Yea.

Mimi: We're not making you take a test.

De Mare: No... I love-

Davidson: No... I bet ya I could pass it though.

12:07:00-----

De Mare: I bet you could too. I love the fact that you went from- that you didn't know what you were going up for when you became an aircraft mechanic. I love that you were twenty years old, had never been a mechanic and all of a sudden you are up there keeping these planes up in the air I'm that's extraordinaire.

Davidson: They tested, they tested coordination, IQ, metal, physical, background.

De Mare: How did your husband feel about the fact that you were doing that work.

Davidson: He was all for it. He knew I could do it. And I knew how, I knew I could do it...yea.

De Mare: What did you work...when you did work on the farm as a kid, what were you responsible for?

Davidson: Actually nothing. Nothing, except...uh well we lived next to the penitentiary and daddy would go over with his big old truck in the morning and they would and some of the men were allowed go out for the day and they loved

coming to the farm. And daddy had a market truck and uh, inmates did the work for us and they were thrilled to be a part of a home.

De Mare: I bet.

Davidson: Yea, and he would take them back at night.

De Mare: I'll bet.

Davidson: But daddy always insisted that they wash, comb their hair and they brush their clothes off. Uh yea, but they had a big long table out under an apple tree where they thought they were at home- felt at home.

De Mare: Did you ever go back to Michigan?

Davidson: Oh yea, we go back all the time. It's where my family is. Yea...

De Mare: Where in Michigan? What part of Michigan?

Davidson: All over it. Yea... I have a sister in Romulus. I was born in Northville- lower Michigan. I have family up north. And around Traverse City.

De Mare: I love Michigan. I spent a lot time in Michigan a few years back.

Davidson: It's got a lot to say for it. And the people are kind of a special breed, I think. Up there it seems like. But I I mainly- I was an outdoor child and uh, developed a lot skin cancer because of it.

De Mare: We didn't know.

Davidson: No. No one knew.

12:34:10-----

De Mare: Wow, no one knew...Well thank you so much. That's it. You're done. You did a great job.

Davidson: Oh yea...

De Mare: Are there any stories that she's not telling us that we need to hear?

Family Member: Well when they were kids they went cherry picking and that was their summer fun.

Davidson: Yea...

Family Member: They went cherry picking in Traverse City and they camped for the whole summer because it was the Depression.

Davidson: It was during the Depression.

Family Member: Yea...

Davidson: And daddy didn't let us go hungry. He said, 'let's go camping.' So we'd go up to Traverse City and camp out in the cherry orchards and pick cherries, make enough money to do- for what we needed.

Family Member: When she was in Yuma she lived on screened in front porch.

Davidson: Yea...

Family Member: And she didn't have any way to keep her food cool so they- she didn't know how to drive but she drove an old rattle track truck.

De Mare: Oh you have to tell us that story. You have to tell us that.

Davidson: I had no idea how a car worked except we pushed a button on the dashboard to start it and I knew where the break was and that's it. And so we would drive to the icehouse and put a quarter in, it was the honor system, you'd put a quarter in. You go it and get a big chunk of ice, 25 pounds, take it home and put it in the cooler. And that was our refrigerator.

De Mare: I think it's hysterical that you didn't know how to drive and you and you were an airplane mechanic.

Davidson: I did not know how to drive. I had no idea how to drive a car.

Family Member: She'd hit the curb.

Davidson: Yea. I hit the curb a few times and jumped over a few lawns and went through some hedges but we got our ice.

16:22:08-----

Davidson: I mean you made due in those days. Yea, if there was something you wanted to do you were going to find a way to do it. And I found a way to get ice. Push on that button and put on the break when I needed.

De Mare: That's wonderful.

Family Member: Bob Hope.

Davidson: Oh yea, Bob Hope had programs in the hangers out there...of course we'd makeshift. Make him a stage make curtains for the crew and everything. That was a big deal.

De Mare: You would do that?

Davidson: No, we helped. We put up the ladders and the sheets for the stage crew.

De Mare: You know, it's funny being from a different generation and a different world, now. I just think it's so extraordinaire how unified people really felt about what was going on.

Davidson: We were one person. It just seemed like everybody was on one job. That's that's the feeling you got.

De Mare: Do you remember when that feeling went away?

Davidson: No I don't think it ever did. I think we still do that. Ya know. I really do.

De Mare: Good good good.

Davidson: Of course there are off shoots. But there are more people now than there was then. But no, I think we still want the same things.

De Mare: Well thank you.

17:53:09-----

Family Member: Tell them about the steering wheels on the planes when they would come in crippled and injured.

Davidson: Yea...the planes would come in some would have flesh on them- skin, hair that we would have to steam clean off. And uh, that's part of the mechanic work and uh, insides of planes would be uh, show damage where people had gotten shot. And uh, we'd clean it- steam clean it. And on the steering wheel of- there isn't a steering wheel on a plane but it's up here. It's got a button in the middle, put it that way. And uh, the mechanics would flip that button off to clean under it. There was a little hollow place where we'd leave a note- the pilot would leave a note. 'Call mom. Tell her I'm ok.' Or uh, 'hope you have a good day.' Just anything. We'd write a note back to him and put it under that cap, under that little cylinder that little round cap. And I guess that's the first thing they did when they got in the plane. Lift that and see what the mechanic had to say. Some were a little bit leery of female mechanics but they learned, yea. Because we knew what was involved.

De Mare: Do you think that doing that kind of work, that kind of work that had been done by men before. Um, do you think that changed how you raised your own children? Do you think that changed how you-

Davidson: No.

De Mare: No?

Davison: No because I would have raised them...they're both- I've got two and I raised them both that way. To- if you want something done, find out a way to do it. Yea, don't wait for it to be handed to you. And uh, I think that's what it takes.

De Mare: That's very good advice.

Davidson: Find out your way.

De Mare: That's very good advice.

Davidson: And both of my kids- well you can see what one of them is like. The other is the same way.

De Mare: Seems like you did pretty well.

Davidson: Yea, I did. If I had known they were going to be that good, I might have had a house full of them.

De Mare: That's wonderful.

Davidson: It's a fact!

De Mare: Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

Davidson: So I can get out of here?

De Mare: You can get out of here!