

Edith Lyons

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 22

Interview Conducted by

Kirsten Kelly

June 26, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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

Interview: Edith Lyons

Interviewers: Kirsten Kelly

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Lyons: I am Edith J. Lyons and I was born, do you want this. Nallen Fayette County, West Virginia. I lived in Nallen, which was a small lumber town until I was about 12 years old I believe. Went to grade school there then we moved to Lookout, which was, which was close to Nuttall High School and finished grade school at Divine Elementary. I went one year to Nuttall High School after that we moved to Ansted, West Virginia. And I went there three years, graduated from Ansted High School. Then unfortunately I got married between my junior and senior year of high school so my husband was very young too. He was a miner. Worked in the coalmines. But when the war came along he decided to go t Newport, Virginia and work in the shipyards so he asked me to go along and I did. We were there about two weeks and his number came up and he was drafted into the Army. But during that time, at two weeks, I had registered at the unemployment service and they sent me to Camp Patrick Henry. And a construction company, Doyle, Wrestler and Wise was building an Army camp so at Fort Patrick Henry, which

is no longer in existence. Um, I went into a typing pool and my education so far had been in business subjects. I went Charleston School of Business in Charleston, West Virginia. So I was in this typing pool, did that for quiet some time. Then the supervisor of the job needed a secretary so he asked and I was who held up my hand and he asked me then to be his secretary and I worked there until that job was almost complete and his company sent him to Portsmouth, Virginia doing the same thing. Putting in another Army Camp. Then toward the end of that time, my husband was at Stewart Air- I think it was Stewart Airbase in Nashville, Tennessee and ask me to come here and I did and went to the unemployment service again and they sent me to Gillespie Airways. Gillespie Airways, to the best of my knowledge was a commercial airway but had just recently gotten a contract to train Army aircraft students and J.D. Gillespie hired me to do the reporting on this job. Reporting the process of the pilots, the trainee. We had and I keep thinking it was 16 pilots who may have been commercial pilots before they came to that job.

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And we trained 120 students. 60 came one day and 60 the next and kept rotating. And as they completed a flight, they put their log books out in the hangers and the biggest job I had there would go, take them back to my office, read them and make a report on them. Of course, I had to decide what was important to report. I also reported, I think on the pilots, the airplanes, the mechanics and so forth and of course, I was walking from my office, past a government office that was there and uh, into the commercial airline place. We came past that into the hangers and uh, I guess I started with the first flight and as I could catch up with them, I did 60 of those everyday to report on. Then 60 more the next day, same students. I worked there, I think for over a year and then my husband was in Biloxi, Mississippi and asked me to come there, so I did that and uh, I looked for a job there and I must of- I keep thinking that I worked somewhere in Biloxi, Mississippi but probably I didn't. Then I went to Gulf Port, Mississippi and worked there for a short time with it was a government facility. Then I got tired of all that running around so I decided it was time to go back Charleston, West Virginia and went to the unemployment office again and they sent me to General Machinery. General Machinery was the parent company of the Government Ordinance Plant and they were manufacturing big

guns for the war effort. My job there was as secretary to the Chief Accountant and Vice President so what I did, mostly, took letters, dictations, was to type on a type writer, with a cartridge this long, eleven copies at a time of reports on the guns that were manufactures there and sent on someplace for the war effort. I typed eleven copies at a time on special onionskin paper with special carbon paper. And uh, I'm not sure exactly how long I worked there. It was a nice job but then I decided not to work there anymore. I went home for a bit which was in Fayette County. Then I came back to Charleston and found another job with the Hudson Automobile Agency and I think the, I just heard this recently that there was the Hudson Plant was converted into doing something with the War Effort. I didn't know that until I talked to another Rosie here. Um, my job there was a secretary but I was checking the the books and the financial statements and typing those. Also, ordered cars, talked with customers. At that time, I think I could have called anyone of 65 people who were on our list waiting for automobiles that didn't come in very fast. And with that agency we ordered retail, wholesale, new cars, and we also had used cars there. And there was a mechanic shop where they repaired things like that. But when I would call Detroit I would have to tell them what I

wanted on these cars and we'd try to add as many accessories as possible. And then there, by that time, I was divorced, after 10 years of having been married and not seeing my husband very much during that time. And uh, so this young man called from Carmine and asked how soon he could get a Hudson and we told him we hoped about 90 days and uh so he said he'd come in. One day I was in the office all by myself. You had to walk across the show room floor and up some steps to get to my office and uh, saw this young man come in the door and watched him walk across the showroom floor and up the steps. He came up and said, "I want to sign up." So I signed up. I gave him an order form- well I found an order blank and started writing everything down. And I sold him a convertible with white sidewall tires and a Kleenex dispenser, which was unheard of I think. But everything I could think of to go on as an accessory, I sold him. He didn't get that car. He had to wind up buying a used Buick, I think but he said later that he signed up for a car and I signed him up for life. And we were married 54 years. He died 2002. He became- he was in the Engineering Department at Carbine and they had layoffs soon after we were married. We had discussed the fact that he might go back to school so we decided that now was the time if you are ever going back to school, do it now.

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Lyons: He went to Marshall that's in Huntington, West Virginia. They signed him up but on the way out- I can't remember exactly how that happened but the Register, or the person who had interviewed him to be a student said, "I'm sorry Mr. Lyons, we- your grades were so low at the University of Tennessee that we can't accept you with that." So he was broken hearted then. But then, this man who interviewed him said, "If you go to Charleston and get a couple of semesters or get a couple of hours and make some good grades, then you can come back." I'd like to tell you this. While I was at Gillespie Airway, FDR decided- or the government decided that we had too many pilots in training and that they needed to wash out some that were training and not take in anymore for a bit. And maybe that was supposed to be the end of it. Anyway, my husband was in- my wonderful husband was in training to be an Air Crew- Air Force Pilot. He had finished all his training. His uniforms orders and he had one flight to do and the same orders went to Pensacola that came to Gillespie Airways, so I knew how these boys were washed out of the service- washed out of the Air Corps and uh, then they all had find

other places to go. I think my husband was offered Annapolis for more training or whatever. Anyway, he decided to go back to basic training. Went back to Great Lakes and uh from there he became a...let's see, he was on an LSM supply ship that went to China and back so we didn't meet until about '40...'46.

Kelly: Right after the war.

Lyons: Right after the war. So uh then-

Kelly: Did he know you were a Rosie?

Lyons: No, of course, I didn't know I was a Rosie.

Kelly: So after the war did you work through the rest of your life?

Lyons: Yes, m'am I did. I retired from the Talbot County Library in Easton, Maryland after I had I had become 62 years old, signed up for my social security and uh I decided, well, I might need another jobs or I might need some money to carry me over so I signed up for unemployment compensation. I think I drew one check and social security

got started and then I got another job. So I tried to stop the social security payments so that I could-

Kelly: What did you learn from being a Rosie?

Lyons: From being a Rosie, uh, I learned a lot I really did because there are about 10 years of my life that I just sort of blanked out. I didn't like being a divorcee and uh I didn't care about people know I was. I was ashamed of it but this was not my fault. So anyway, the name went under at Gillespie was my first husband's name. I think I should tell you that because if it's the Gillespie Airway people who I worked with or their descendants hear about this, they would probably remember me as Basie but that's not my name. It was Bays. B-A-Y-S. One of the trainee's, one day said, "Why do they call you baby?" And I said, "Oh they don't call me baby, they call me Basie after my last name. I've always had a nickname, one way or another. I started with Johnny from Johnson, my middle- my maiden name. Let's see what else did I get called?

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Kelly: Do you have one favorite story or one favorite memory from the time when you were a Rosie, during the war?

Lyons: Yea.

Kelly: Just one, just one...

Lyons: Well the teamwork at Gillespie Airways were just great and I knew all these people there and we went to parties together and we just- each of us knew that we were away from home and uh it was just a nice feeling to be there and to know that these people cared about you. And you were away from home so uh that was nice.

Kelly: Sounds like a very supportive-

Lyons: And now I'm glad to be remember this because I sort of wiped it out for so long.

The End.