

Nell Young

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 28

Interview Conducted by

Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

June 25, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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

Interview: Nell Young

Interviewers: Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

Date: June 25, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Young: Nell, N-E-L-L, Young.

Hemmerdinger: Nell Young.

Young: Except I'm not so young anymore.

Hemmerdinger: Where are you from?

Young: Uh, originally from northwest Florida but I've been living in Clarksville, GA for the last 6 years because that's where my only son, my only child is who married her daughter.

Hemmerdinger: It's good to be near your children, right?

And where did you do the Rosie the Riveter work?

Young: um, Wayne Wright Shipyard in Panama City, Florida. Down in what we called the bottoms, the (inaudible.) I never knew then, you may have heard it but anyway the ship

when they build those holds and then there are layers of metal, like this and there is a big hole cut in them and then they put strips of metal from one side to the other all through the several layers and we had to weld from down hand, vertical, horizontal, overhead, you had to pass all those test in order to weld on those ships. Because it was very very necessary that it be done right and uh I got a lot of pleasure out of because I knew I was helping the war effort but I did not know how much but I read recently and I had been told two or three years ago there were 6 million women that hung up their aprons and went out and drove big trucks, ran railroad, they plowed, they did anything that a man could do and the oldest child would take care of all the other little children at home while the mother went out and worked. And you know, we didn't we didn't resent it when the men came back, they wanted their jobs back. Women gladly gave them back to 'em and went back to the house to work. But now, Hitler made the statement that if those "GD Women had stayed out of it, we would have won the war." And some of the Veterans that live in Clarksville who are members, they are Rivets, made the remark that um that was true and said that Hitler just gave all the credit to the women of this country of us winning the war. And the men said, that's true. He said, because when they sink one of

our ships, women over here were ready to send another one to replace it. They said it was the same with the airplanes. One was shot down, we'd send another. It was just constantly. That's how I was told we won the war. And I did not lose sleep over us destroying what we did. You know? But it was hard. We had to economize on everything. And we ate only what we grew. We- you couldn't go to the store and buy you know a lot of food. You could get coffee and sugar and rice but you just did have it unless you grew it. And we grew ours. We had a big garden and we had uh fruit trees that my mother planted there when we first moved to this so log house. And uh it was it was tough because something like cooking oil, we didn't know what that was. Now lard came from pork hog, um we knew that was because you know we helped to feed the hogs and we helped feed the cattle. And when they were butchered, we would cook 'em and get the fat and saved that up and that's what we use.

4:38:05-----

Young: We had to pick up all kinds of scraps, cans, even little pieces of wire and rubber like tires or tubes, whatever. We would pick that up and it would be carried to

a certain place and you know that without elastic around your panties, what are you going to do? And uh so they came up with this to put a button here and buttonhole so that was that piece of rubber went to the Air Forces, all of them. So you pinned- buttoned that up and off you went, you didn't think anything about it. One day walking down the street, right ahead of him was a couple of girls and one of the button popped and her panties just hit the sidewalk and she just caught her foot in it and kicked it up, caught it and put it in her pocket book and just kept going. And I went home and told my mother about it and she said, "We've got to do something about that." And I said, "What can we do? We don't have any rubber, we don't have any elastic or anything to put elastic in." And those buttons are going to come off. And she said, "We'll think of a way. We'll find away." So she took a strip about so long and then she folded it and made like a stiff big string and ran that through and tied the ends of it after she got it through there and you could tie that in a knot and they wouldn't come down. Unless you wanted them to come down.

06:24:19-----

Hemmerdinger: Could you tell us what it was like to weld? I know you went- had to learn how to go this way and that way and up. But what did you wear? What did it feel like?

Young: I wore dropdown um coveralls. You girls don't know what that is, do you? - Those coveralls were cut down to here but they were well seemed and they had a belt from here and from here and when you to go to the bathroom you just untied them right quick and like down you went. Now on top of that, I wore raw leather overalls that came up to here with straps up to here and I had a leather jacket that was raw leather. Now you all know what raw leather is? It's not this tan to it or anything. And uh I had on top of that jacket I had all leather gloves that came up my elbow, ok? And then I had thick socks. I had steel toed shoes and then you had a bandanna, we called it. You put your hair up and you tied it up because if a spark- if a spark hit it you caught your hair on fire and uh on top of that, we had what you called a hard hat. You know if had some build- built in there, wouldn't touch right on your head but those sparks didn't hit your head. Then on top of that we had our welding helmet. Okay now we're ready to go to work. We took the hel- that welding going thing, you'll have to excuse me, it's been about 50 years ago so. And we got down

here and crawl through those holes, pull on our big cable to where we're going to weld. And they had some fans that were throwing some of the smoke out but didn't get it all. And the temperature ran from 110° to 120°. And but, we didn't notice it. We just kept working and one uh at one instance, they asked us to run a race with a shipyard in Brunswick so we had everything ready and we started the same time they did. And we worked 24/7. We worked hard, twelve hours was nothing then, but we worked day and night and uh of course we won.

09:33:07-----

Young: So we really rubbed it in on 'em. But they were good. They turned out a lot good ships. And uh a lot of the men, I've heard make remarks about the war about the women that won the war and they said it wasn't the men but they contributed. Lots of them gave their lives, but we were the backup so to speak and we and we did everything. We worked all day and sat their and quilted half the night so there would be enough cover for the kids back home. And uh our log house was not very well insulated.

Hemmerdinger: A log house?

Young: I mean, real logs. And my mother, she really believed in everything being clean so every Saturday was washday. You took everything out of the house. And you had boil the clothes in this pot and you'd take 'em out and put them on this block and take a wood- and you'd beat 'em, breaking buttons and all, it didn't matter, she was getting them clean, getting all the dirty out. And then that hot water, we took that in small pans inside and we'd pitch it on the walls of that log house. It was clogged with clay mud. The reason for that, there were bedbugs and I never saw one but my mom said they were there and if they weren't there, she didn't want them to be. So we had to throw all that boiling water on them every Saturday. So we stayed busy. We didn't have anytime to play or grow up.

11:24:11-----

Hemmerdinger: How many in your family?

Young: There were eight. I was the fifth.

Hemmerdinger: Eight children?

Young: Mmuh, yup.

Hemmerdinger: And how big was the log cabin? Did you all sleep in one room, two rooms, three rooms?

Young: We had four rooms in it, big front porch that run across it and the hall was at least this wide and there were no doors at either end, you know. On one side of the hall was a kitchen and a dining room and on the other side it had two double beds in each room. And if the Preacher came or if anybody came we'd drag out a chair and welcome them and invite them to wait and eat lunch, just like we were uptown.

Hemmerdinger: Two double beds, in two rooms makes not a lot of room for all eight children. Where did all those children sleep?

Young: The little ones, and I remember myself sleeping on pads as they called it. It was quilts and you know when you're small like that a lot of kids enjoyed it and when our relatives would come and they would have three or four kids maybe our age, we just played games. Sneaker around and get under the quilts and just where our mothers stand.

Hemmerdinger: So you went from that log cabin to work in a defense plant?

Young: Mm uh, and we worked- we paid off what we owed on it and Mother got a smaller house, which was built out of wood- I mean, planks and stuff like that. And the first thing I did, the first paycheck I sent home for her to get the house wired up because there was no electricity in it and she had never lived in a house that had electricity. And then uh she didn't really have a kitchen it was just part the dining room. So I- every month, every time I got paid every week, not month, I would write her a letter, put twenty dollars in there, write her a letter. Put a twenty in there between each sheet. I told her, "Now start thinking about building on the end of those rooms, building a kitchen." And she did and it must have been 6X6. Big enough for the stove and barely get around. But yea, we had some hard times but God saw us through all of it. No matter what, whether it was raining or what, when Sunday came we knew we were going to church. We knew we better not complain with a bellyache or anything. We just didn't do it. Well, one thing we wanted to go to church. We didn't

see anybody else or any other kids during the summer except
at church because everybody worked.

The End.