

Winona Gillespie

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 29

Interview Conducted by

Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

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For The

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Interview: Winona Gillespie

Interviewers: Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

Date: June 25, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Gillespie: Winona Gillespie

Hemmerdinger: And where were you born?

Gillespie: I was born in Tennessee in a small town of Sparta, Tennessee.

Hemmerdinger: What was it like in Sparta?

Gillespie: Very small. I didn't finish school there but I did get most of my education there but not the whole thing.

Hemmerdinger: So then you went to work?

Gillespie: I went to work.

Hemmerdinger: And you worked where?

Gillespie: There wasn't much to do there so you had to try to make a living.

Hemmerdinger: So where did you go to try and make a living?

Gillespie: Well I worked in the shirt factory and that was my beginning with the army. Uh because we made dress shirt for the officers in the army. And you know it just gave you a feeling that it was good and uh also helped my daddy and his brother. Uh all the boys were gone and me and my sister were the only one who could drive and I drove them around so they could take care of their business. They went out in the country and bought furs and they would ship them to New York.

Hemmerdinger: Oh really, what kind of furs.

Gillespie: Beaver and uh fox. I don't remember the rest.

Hemmerdinger: So then you went to work in the shirt factory-

Gillespie: And mink of course.

Hemmerdinger: And mink...and then from the shirt factory,
what happened?

Gillespie: I went- my sister moved to Michigan and uh she
was making very good money and I thought, that sounds good
to me and so I went up and stayed with my sister and got me
a job.

Hemmerdinger: What kind of job?

Gillespie: I was working in the uh uh where they built the
bombers for World War II and uh um a lot of my friends that
I grew up with were also there and we just worked and
enjoyed it.

02:30:16-----

Hemmerdinger: What kind of work were you doing there?

Gillespie: uh well we took a course about the whole- about
the whole plane that we worked on and uh um we could do any
of the jobs that it called for- rivets and drilling and uh
cleco. I know I was in the plane one day and we were
supposed to wear our haired tied up you know. And I had

the drill you know and it was over a foot long and didn't have my hair up and I had real long hair and it got my hair caught in it and it got all the way to my scalp. And it scared me death. I wore my cover from then on. And uh-

Hemmerdinger: What's cleco?

Gillespie: It uh goes into the hole you drill to make the rivet. Well there was some inside the plane and some outside and we would drill the holes with the drill gun and uh put this in there and somehow outside, I know did them both I can't remember exactly how it went but anyhow it completed that part of the plane. It was aluminum of course and it was around the Bombay door and it was a lot fun. That's when we started wearing pants, climbing into the plane and everything. It was a hard job but I really enjoyed it.

Hemmerdinger: So you were wearing the pants, you'd be climbing into the planes and mostly women building this plane?

Gillespie: Lots of women, yea and a few men.

Hemmerdinger: And what kind of jobs were the men doing while you were building the plane?

Gillespie: Uh you mean at the plant? Same thing. We were doing the same thing.

Hemmerdinger: Were they beside you or were they inspectors?

Gillespie: Beside us, right.

Hemmerdinger: Were there unions?

Gillespie: Yes. UWA, CIO.

Hemmerdinger: You joined the union?

Gillespie: Um uh.

Hemmerdinger: How'd they treat ya?

Gillespie: Great. Really really good.

Hemmerdinger: So what was a challenging day like? What was a day when things didn't go right like?

Gillespie: Well it seemed like everyday went pretty smooth with us. We worked great as a team and things just went ok and we were such a team, we'd get our job done sooner than expected. And our boss would tell us if the inspectors come around, pretend you're working. But we had so much to put out each day.

05:43:19-----

Hemmerdinger: Eight women on a team?

Gillespie: Pardon me?

Hemmerdinger: Eight women on team? Twenty? How many?

Gillespie: Yea, a whole crew. I would say there was about 20. Ten to twenty. There were...Well each day was uh was just exciting to me because it was so different.

Hemmerdinger: Where did you live?

Gillespie: Uh I lived with my sister part-time then me and some of the girls got an apartment together and shared an

apartment. It was hard to find one though. In fact, we lived in some private homes where they'd rent out some rooms.

Hemmerdinger: And what did you do with the checks every week?

Gillespie: The checks?

Hemmerdinger: The money?

Gillespie: Well we went out celebrated every Friday evening. We found a restaurant that served southern food. And we would go there every Friday time and have our food.

Hemmerdinger: Tell me what a meal was like?

Gillespie: Well it was pretty much like at home. We had beans, cornbread, you know the regular old southern food.

Hemmerdinger: Well, was it more fun to be with this group of girls, women than to be at home?

Gillespie: well I was always home sick but I was making good money and that meant a lot and I would send mom and daddy money.

Hemmerdinger: Kept some for yourself?

Gillespie: Pardon me?

Hemmerdinger: Kept some for yourself?

Gillespie: well yea, yea and even after I come home and the war was over and everything. I just kept getting checks, checks, checks. That was a thrill. The war was over and we heard Roosevelt you know says his uh speech about the war. Oh it was one exciting time.

Hemmerdinger: Did you hear the day he declared war? You know after Pearl Harbor, did you listen- what was it like to listen to that speech?

Gillespie: Unreal, just unreal-

08:27:00-----

Gillespie: It was just so thrilling, beautiful thing.

Hemmerdinger: What did you think of Eleanor Roosevelt?

Gillespie: Oh I liked Eleanor. She was a fine lady.

Hemmerdinger: she was a good example to other young women?

Gillespie: Very good, very good lady- Well I had three brothers that went to war, and a first cousin who got killed in Germany. And of course my two sister's husbands were there. So I had a lot of relatives in the war and uh they had maneuvers come through that area at that time...during the war or after the war? Oh I don't know. But anyway my mother was so worried about my brother, he was in Germany and she was would just get sick, she was so worried. And uh in fact she did get sick but uh these- well while he was gone, she let some of these soldiers that were maneuvers stay at my brothers home. It was next door an uh she said that I was about 17/18-

Hemmerdinger: -And what was it like when you went shopping for stuff? Now you had your own money, what did you spend it on?

Gillespie: Oh we went shopping. I always loved clothes and we'd go shopping some of the best shops. And buy us a new outfit just real often and everything.

Hemmerdinger: Did rationing get in your way at all

In a way...what saved us was my dad mostly he worked in a store and he was able to get some things that normally we wouldn't have had. Yea, we- he would also mail us some things because he didn't really need it all. I don't mean he got so much but he would share it. But uh living with her and everything she was kind of like my mother figure. She was ten years older than me and she was a big help to me.

11:30:00-----

Hemmerdinger: and so all the two brothers-in-law and your brother, they came home?

Gillespie: They came home.

Hemmerdinger: So tell us what the day was like when they came home? The days?

Gillespie: just unreal, just unreal.

Hemmerdinger: Happy.

Gillespie: Oh so happy.

Hemmerdinger: Did they have stories to tell you that you can tell us? Or should we-

Gillespie: I've got letters now that my brother wrote to my sister after mother died. He was in the Philippines in the Korean War. One brother was in the Navy in Japan. My older brother was in Germany. He drove a Jeep for a patent. He got- his feet were frostbitten and my brother in the Navy, he he had trouble with his feet and legs from then on. You know, it wasn't an easy time. I try not to think about the hard times but we had hard times too, very hard times.

13:04:22-----

Gillespie: But he was a wonderful man.

Hemmerdinger: But we are grateful to him as a country for what he did to save us.

Gillespie: Absolutely, absolutely, and it thrills me to know that I helped.

13:17:00-----

Hemmerdinger: So back to Friday night! What happened after the dinner?

Gillespie: Oh we went to the ballroom. And there would be the big band and all the all the bandleaders would be there and a lot of times we would have to dance with the women because the men were so scared. And uh well when the boys- back to the boys when they were on maneuvers, they had a big band in the downtown area and everybody in town was there and dancing up a storm. It was on big party.

Hemmerdinger: What was the music like then?

Gillespie: Oh it was good.

Hemmerdinger: Give us a song.

Gillespie: Glen Miller all the big bands of that era and uh of course I love it now, watched Lawrence Wilber every Saturday night. 7 o'clock.

Hemmerdinger: How about the jitterbug? Were you doing the jitterbug?

Gillespie: Oh yea, the jitterbug big time.

Hemmerdinger: How did you wear your hair? What did your hair look like?

Gillespie: Well I had these little tight curls up here and just long and casual and then I would wear it in a French bun, a French twist. And always had good hair and it would do anything I wanted.

Hemmerdinger: So were you dating there, were you meeting the fellows? Were they all too shy or were there one or two that stepped up.

Gillespie: Oh we had plenty of good guys. And we would meet a lot of the solders. In fact, I dated one from New York and he was a little bit shorter than me but we could sure jitterbug. I feel mean talking about that.

Hemmerdinger: Why?

Gillespie: Well some people look down at dancing. Best exercise I ever did. But it we also had fun. It wasn't all gloom and doom.

16:02:10-----

Hemmerdinger: Why was it so gloomy and doomy?

Gillespie: Well we wanted that war to over.

Hemmerdinger: Tell us about the cost of living? What did it cost to go to a movie?

Gillespie: Oh well my first movie was a five cents, a nickel.

Hemmerdinger: And did you get to go often to that movie?
You know to the movies?

Gillespie: Yea each time it would, a new movie would come.
I would be there and it was about the only place to go in
them days. You could go over and over again and see the
cowboy shows and the hehe...

Hemmerdinger: Then the war came because that was before the
war, right?

Gillespie: That was before the war.

Hemmerdinger: What did Monday morning feel like at work?

Gillespie: Monday morning we just knew we had a job to do
and everybody was just happy to be there and we we like I
said we worked well together.

Hemmerdinger: Did you miss it when the war was over?

Gillespie: I did. I did. I missed it a lot.

Hemmerdinger: Did you continue working?

Gillespie: Um uh

Hemmerdinger: What did you do?

Gillespie: Well I came back home and then I moved to Nashville and I've been here since the '50s and uh my husband was a contractor. He built bridges. And I worked for him all those years and so did Caroline, she was his secretary for many years. And uh we sort of made a family thing out of that.

Hemmerdinger: So you worked for him?

Gillespie: I did.

Hemmerdinger: You didn't work with him?

Gillespie: I worked with him but not out on the job. I sort of- I did all the driving and there was a lot driving and a lot of his work was out of town of course, and we would go home on weekends and go back out to the job Sunday afternoon. It just went on for all them years.

The End.