

Thelma Edgar

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 30

Interview Conducted by

Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

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Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
New York University

Interview: Thelma Edgar

Interviewers: Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Edgar: My name is Thelma Norton Edgar.

Hemmerdinger: And where were you born?

Edgar: I was born in Tokaloka, Alabama.

Hemmerdinger: And when did you learn to spell that?

Edgar: Before I started school. My mother was a good teacher. Sh-

Hemmerdinger- That's terrific- I'm sorry, go on.

Edgar: She taught us all at home.

Hemmerdinger: She taught you at home?

Edgar: Until most of us got into second or third grade because we had to walk four miles to school. There were no school buses.

Hemmerdinger: Oh my god.

Edgar: So she was excellent because I skipped a grade when I started real school.

Hemmerdinger: Well how did it feel to be the youngest in the the real school?

Edgar: Well I guess the teachers were just smart because and made everybody feel comfortable.

Hemmerdinger: Then did you stay- I can't pronounce it, did you stay in that place for your whole life?

Edgar: No no, I moved from there with our family to another small town. My dad was a saw miller. He moved his saw mill to another town. So we moved there and I started school at a little school called Union Grove. And it was Methodist school but you didn't know what it was because they didn't emphasize it.

Hemmerdinger: Then after high school did you go to work?

Edgar: after high school I got a scholarship grant to go to school at Jackson State University and I went to work over there and I earned a whole amount of \$21 a month.

Hemmerdinger: A month? What were you doing?

Edgar: I helped in the office and I did janitorial work. I cleaned the bathrooms and all the things that needed to be done like a janitor do.

Hemmerdinger: And then came the war?

Edgar: Not right then because I got my degree at Jackson State in 1940 and went to teaching school at Alexander City, Alabama. That fall, was teaching there and that's when the war came. Took me away from there and I had just meet the love of my life there. He was the coach for the boys. He came there but he was the one who had to leave you know.

Hemmerdinger: He had to leave to go to war?

Edgar: Mm uh And I went back. My dad called said things have opened up here and I want you closer to home. It's wartime and I want you closer to home. So I went back to Glen Cove and that's when I took over the man's job and did everything they had to do except go in the restroom with the kids. I had to have someone else help do that you know. And we had a college student who was working on what they called NYC that was a program, National Youth Council, I think that's what they- NYC anyway. They could work their way through school that way and that's what he was doing.

Hemmerdinger: So you were the coach and he was the assistant?

Edgar: Yes. And later on it was so funny because I had to have someone to go because I was a lady there I had to have someone go in that way. Later on when I retired, I took on the girls- I coached the girls basketball team at my school because they had to have a lady ride with them but they had a really good coach who did the coaching. And I just rode with them in the advice.

Hemmerdinger: So now, during World War II-

Edgar: During World War II

Hemmerdinger: You were coaching in this school, how many kids were you influencing?

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Edgar: I had 126 kids all day long. It was all the boys P.E. and all the girls were combined. We had them in the same classes. It was 126, I believe.

Hemmerdinger: 126 in the whole school?

Edgar: No in the P.E. classes.

Naides: They combined boys and girls? That was pretty unusual-

Edgar: No other way to do it when you didn't have a coach.

Hemmerdinger: You coached what sports?

Edgar: I coached football. Don't ask me now, I can tell you what plays are on when you get on the field. I coach basketball which was my physical education degree and co-basketball was my choice. And then when spring time came we had baseball?

Hemmerdinger: And how did you teams do?

Edgar: Well we won two titles, one state title.

Hemmerdinger: In which sport?

Edgar: In basketball.

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Hemmerdinger: So the love of your life was then off in the war?

Edgar: Yes.

Hemmerdinger: And how was that?

Edgar: It was sad. We were just friends and he had gone out to California at Camp Callan. They had- they gave him tests because then Pearl Harbor hit. And when that happened we didn't have enough military officers to take over and do the things that needed to be done so they had him. They tested him and he tested real high in the mathematics, in the at field, took it for them- He was sent off to Cadet school and they called him a 90 day wonder, that's how quickly they got through there. And he stayed with it and stayed in uh National Guard after he got home. He made the rank of Major before he came out to that and then later on he was offered Lieutenant, General- he made Colonel then made General. And uh I would have made it but then he said nope I had my- I think he said belly, I'm not sure of that. He said I want to go home and teach boys and girls. So he came back to high school to coach the job was open so he got it. We worked together then 32 years until he died. At the same school.

Hemmerdinger: You continued to coach?

Edgar: Yes, I gave up the coaching because there was so much traveling to do and I enjoyed being in the school after school helping the children who got behind in school.

And then it it's a long story I could talk forever about it.

Hemmerdinger: What skills do you think developed when you had this opportunity you wouldn't have had otherwise?

Edgar: First thing is patience. And I think I have that to the end. And I think that's one of the things that gave me a lead over other people that applied for the job. I uh, training grants high school gathered some counseling courses so I got a grant to go to the University of Alabama then to get my Guidance Counselor all paid for. All my grant. Then I went back to the same school when I got that because by that time they started hiring a counselor for all the little schools. For a long time, one counselor had to go from one school- The first part of my counseling I did go to five different schools in the county.

Hemmerdinger: How was it for the children and other teachers who might have been separated from their loved ones...take us back in time a little bit.

Edgar: Well, I learned quickly how to handle children whose parents had gone off to war. And some of them lost a

parent. And I guess that was the real beginning of my counseling, the grief counseling and I spent many times I remember when one student had lost both grandparents in just natural deaths within a month of each other and they were really upset then next the dad was killed in service so I was able to handle that and I'm sure that was the beginning of my looking out for opportunities to become a counselor and work with children, young people. And I guess I'm still doing it because I have uh, now I have a senior citizen's complex and I counsel my old folks, every once and a while they have problems they can't handle and they don't mind coming to see Thelma, see if she'd give them a little advice. I don't give advice, I just give suggestions you know to what they could. I give them alternatives they can work with.

Hemmerdinger: How many people do you think you influenced in this positive way since you started coaching?

Edgar: oh my goodness, how many? Well one time when I was fixing to retire in 1980 from the school, I had them check the record of the different students I had and up to then I had 3981 that had come through my- I say 81? that's right 81. I had it in my head it might have been 91.

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Edgar: I was teaching at another school and they had six grades in the same school one through six and I was there teaching. And I was supposed to be teaching reading, English writing and I had classroom three times as big as this. And there was a section here and section for the different grade levels. And I was teaching English and was teaching conjugating the verbs you have to do and they got to giggling over at that table and giggling and I said, alright you need to quiet down over there. And they just kept laughing, they couldn't quit and I said, alright what are you laughing about or I'm going to send you to the office if you don't settle down. And a little bit, and one of the boys said, "Miss Edgar, you don't want to know." And I said, "Yes I do." And he said, "Well, Andrew let a fart." That's the funniest one that happened in all my teaching career. And that's what I told my- the County of Education when they interrogated us some little meeting we had. I said, "You'll fire me if you hear this one but it's true." And it was and that boy grew up to make a fine person. I followed him on and he became a coach.

Hemmerdinger: If you could go back in time and talk to that young girl, young women who became a coach? What would you say to that?

Edgar: Well, I'd get up stand up because I learned a long time, if I want people to teach and not keep their seats to stand up and I would get up and stand up and talk to them that they didn't get a afraid to get up in any crowd where they are. And that's what I'd tell them today, to stand up for what you believe, but I mean actually get up on your feet and stand because they'll listen to you and nobody is going to listen to you sitting down.

12:57:13-----

Hemmerdinger: How did you psych up the team before it went out to?

Edgar: I'd just say, "Look around, you don't see anybody in here better than you are." And I said, "You can stand up to any of the out there." I said, "if you make a mistake, don't worry about it, everybody makes mistakes. You can beat that other fellow, go to it." That's about what I said.

Hemmerdinger: And did the children misbehave or not around you?

Edgar: We did not have the much trouble with children in school then because they knew if you got sent to the Principal's office, the next place you'd be going was home and your parents would bring you back not fussing but thanking the teacher and the principal for disciplining their child.

Hemmerdinger: And how do you compare life then, during World War II, with what you see now in the way children are taught in schools in schools and the value's that they carry now?

Edgar: Well I think really now the teaching profession and teachers get a lot of criticism but I think if they sit down at eye level with the children and discuss problems, they'd have a lot less trouble and they when you get ready to send that one back to his classroom or the Principal, get up and put your arm around them and say just let everything go and do what you know is right, that's what I'd tell them.

Hemmerdinger: You mentioned putting your arm around them. I understand now in school, teachers can't go-

Edgar: I know, I'd change that, I'd get fired because I believe that there is nothing that makes you feel better than someone their hand across your shoulder. I don't mean hug them tight but just 'cause a touch is a healing thing.

Hemmerdinger: And how did we get to where we are now how teacher's work in schools and how they are told how they have to behave verses what you did instinctually?

Edgar: Well, part of that came when they abolished segregation. And that was easy for me to do because we had five blacks come to our school at the same time and their mother had been our kindergarten keeper at church and it was such a blessing. And if you ask one of those kids, if it was hard to start school at Glen Cove High School, they'd tell you no because Miss. Edgar made us feel like we belonged and that we were their to learn. And learned to get along with people, each other and that's still what I would tell them, learn to get along, be patient and really it's easy to learn everybody, one experience I was teaching

a seventh grade class and there must have been I think it was 51 in that class they were crowded, maybe in a space not much bigger than this. And they were laughing and talking and I told them to just- little old Jimmy Anchorage as I remember him, he's still a great man now had come up be in trouble and I would make him stand by my desk and uh he said, what makes you be so kind? And I said, I learned a long time ago to love everybody that was good, some good in every person you come into contact with. He said, "What do you see in me?" I said, "well I see you are full of mischief and you don't mean to get in trouble and I see that you love people" and he went on, finished high school- he was in what- back then they called it mentally retarded, he was not that. He was held back because he failed to turn in schoolwork not because he couldn't do it but because his situation at home was such a bad situation he didn't get any homework at home and his parents didn't give a hoot about him. And he stayed in school, had some bad grades, I thin he had about a C- average overall from 9th grade to 12th when he graduate. And he said, I'd like to go to college but I know I can't make it. I said you can do it, if you want to. That's all it takes. He went on, he got through. And now he teaches at the junior college where- it was just a school it was just a school, but it's

a junior college now and he's teaching there. He's in the Social Sciences department and he's fixing to retire because he's 70. You have to retire at 70 but I think he'll be 70 at his next birthday, couple birthdays away I think it is. That's it. That's my story.

Hemmerdinger: You were coaching the girls team? How was it to be a high school student in 1945?

Edgar: Well, I hadn't thought of it just like that, except my girls were taught it was not good to go out and go parking somewhere. And they didn't, they didn't do much of it. Sometimes they did. One time, one girl was fixing to marry the boy she was dating and she had gone out and they had parked, there was this bridge that there was never any parking on, the new bridge so they were parked there and uh the police came around because you didn't park in that canyon. And uh, drove up and flashed his lights in there and said, "What are you doing there?" And he said, "Well, Captain, Captain-" and he stuttered, he just couldn't say it. He said, "I just proposed to my girlfriend and we thought it was time to stop and kiss." And that's it.

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Edgar: One of my favorite stories is about a little girl named Margie and she was not supposed to be dating yet but she had slipped off and a couple- she went out with another couple and a boyfriend and saw as they were crossing the bridge- Catalanta Bridge in Ellic City, Taposus County, they were going on and uh the police came up, asked them what they were doing there and they said, "Well, we're not doing anything, the light changed and he just wanted to kiss me."

The End.