

Eva Chenevert

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 33

Interview Conducted by

Anne De Mare and Kirsten Kelly

July 13, 2010

Detroit, MI

For The

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

Interview: Eva Chenevert

Interviewers: Anne De Mare and Kirsten Kelly

Date: July 13, 2010

Place: Detroit, MI

Chenevert: My name Eva Mase Chenevert and I was born in Detroit, Michigan, March the 5th, 1925.

De Mare: And can you tell me a little bit about your childhood.

Chenevert: Well, I was one of nine children, three girls and five boys and I was number five in the family. And uh we really enjoyed ourselves coming up as far as that goes 'cause you never really had to look for company you always had company. So we seemed to enjoy one another and we got a long quite well. I mean we had our squabbles as most children do but as a whole I mean we were a pretty fine family, I think. We had a wonderful mother and father. And uh they seemed to have taken very good care of us and we did live during the time of the Depression, 1920-early '30s. We seemed to survive that very well. I don't think we ever went to bed hungry. I know we didn't and uh-

De Mare: What did your father do for a living?

Chenevert: My father was a DSR dr-what-motorman for the Detroit Railways. That's when they had the streetcars and my father so my father, in fact he had that job before he and my mother were married.

De Mare: Did your mother work when you were growing up?

Chenevert: No, she did very little work.

De Mare: Well she had a lot of kids-

Chenevert: She was there to take care of us and her mother and father lived in the same building and they were a lot help too helping rear the children.

De Mare: Where did you live when you grew up?

Chenevert: We lived on the east side of Detroit.

De Mare: What was the east side of Detroit like at that time, can you describe it?

Chenevert: Well on the east side of Detroit at that time we had a number of nationalities in that particular neighborhood because we were what they call now the Elmwood Park, the projects. Not just the projects but the new homes, the new sections they built over there. And uh we uh so I know there were quite a few Italians living around us. And we all seemed to get along quite well.

De Mare: Can you talk a bit about how you found the work you did during the war and what you did during the war?

Chenevert: Well we knew there was a going on we all knew that at that time. And I was in high school at the time and uh fourth grade and approaching it. We found out through talking and also through advertising that they were hiring women for war work. Well I finished high school in 1942 at age 17 and then the next year was when I went out to start really looking for work in that field because they wouldn't hire you unless you until you were 18. So I had gone to quite a few places but uh one day—well that wasn't the first day I had gone to *inaudible* but that particular day when they hired me and my girlfriend who was with me.

De Mare: What were you hired to do?

04:17:22-----

Chenevert: I was hired as a riveter. That's what I started off with. The first part of the job they would give us—we had to drill the well we really made the skins of the airplanes. And we called them the skins because they were just sheets of metal and then they were perforated with holes all around where you would insert the rivets but before you could insert the rivets, we had to drill the holes. And that that's the start with well with me and all the beginners drilling holes and they had those skins sitting on things that remind me of easels you that the artists uses. There were stands like that the skins were on. And uh the drill at first—when I first lift it up, I say that how will I do this it was so heavy so heavy at the time but after a weeks eventually it wasn't anything to just pick it up and work with it. So once all holes were drilled we'd go up on a higher table and then it would take two of us. One of us was in the front and one of us was in the rear. And when you insert the rivet, and uh one with the gun, the rivet gun would shoot the rivet and the one in the rear would hold it with like a metal block and if the rivet would be—would be put in correctly, they would make just one knock and that would mean that the rivet was put

in fine. And if it were too flat, they would make, you had to hit, you had knock twice, which would mean to drill it out. You had to take the drill and drill it out. But then if it didn't uh if it were ruined you'd knock three times and they had to discard some of the skins because you could ruin them that way.

De Mare: So that's how you'd communicate with the bucker behind the—was by knocking?

Chenevert: The way—by knocking. That was the way of communication.

De Mare: Wow, so you couldn't actually see the person you were working with?

Chenevert: You couldn't see them...not unless you went around and looked that's true.

De Mare: And did you work with the same person all the time?

Chenevert: No, you didn't. You—I worked with the same group all of the time. But once and a while there were different people you'd work with.

De Mare: Now, did Chrysler train you to do all the work or were you already trained to do the work at that point?

Chenevert: They trained us, after they hired us, of course. They trained us and they gave us a short test and asked with these questions asking about what I was just explaining to you about the knocking and about the county and if you passed that and other things they considered you so I was hired.

07:58:08-----

De Mare: Do you remember—you working on airplane skins, but do you remember what plane you were building?

Chenevert: No, I'm not sure.

De Mare: Okay.

Chenevert: I probably knew at the time. I can't remember now.

De Mare: Do you remember how much money you were paid to do this work?

Chenevert: Let me see...I can't remember the—but it ended up being \$30 to \$40 a pay and that was pretty high at that time. But that's all I really remember about the wages, you know. But I know I did start buying b-war bonds, you know at the time.

De Mare: And do you remember what else you did with that money as a young girl?

Chenevert: Well uh I did uh well like I said I saved that and I started—I was hired there in July of 1943. By then I was married that same year in December 1943 and then the following year in February...I meant to say too that my husband was in service when I married him. He went to service, he went to service that summer and at the time when I was were he was he was in Boise, Idaho. So I took, I bought luggage for the trip to go where he was and other things, which took care of a fare and I had money to spend.

De Mare: Did you visit him or did you move out to live with them when he was in Idaho?

Chenevert: I live—they would allow the soldiers at that time where he was to come, if they had their spouse out there, they could come wherever they were so he came home every night.

De Mare: And how long did you live in Idaho?

Chenevert: I stayed out there six month. I got a leave of absence from my job for two weeks and I told him I was coming to visit for two weeks so when I went and when I was ready to come home, he said, "Why would you leave me? I'm out here alone." You know and carried on so I remained with him. Of course I'm glad we did. I'm glad I stayed there. We really enjoyed it. It was more like a vacation really because it seems to me that out there they had the men waiting to enter a school because later he had to radio operation school. They sent them out there and I guess they had to wait for the op-openings came.

11:17:14-----

De Mare: So you stayed out there with him for six months, and then what happened?

Chenevert: Well, I returned home. He—that was about the time he went of furlough and his furlough...well anyway after the furlough he had to return—he didn't return to Boise. They had ordered him to go to New York. I guess it was New York and from there they had radio school was Bellville, Illinois. So that's where he went to school in Bellville, Illinois.

De Mare: And where were you at that point? Were you with him? Or did you come back—

Chenevert: I I was at ho—when he received his furlough, we came home together. He accompanied me home and he stayed there doing his twenty days I guess it was and after that eh went along to...

De Mare: Did you go back to work at that point?

Chenevert: No I didn't return to work. I had planned to return to school. I had enrolled and was going to Wayne

State at the time. I decided, because I was working...yes by fall but I had done. When I started working, I was working days from six am to therein the afternoon but uh when I enrolled in school, I got on the afternoon shift.

De Mare: And where were you working when you went to school?

Chenevert: I was working at, I was working at Desoto.

De Mare: Chrysler, ok.

Chenevert: Yea because I went to school in the mornings and started the afternoon-shift at three and was off at twelve.

De Mare: Ok. Now if you think back to being in the factory when you were doing the riveting work can you think of anything in particular that happened?

Chenevert: I really can't think of anything that was sticking in my mind because because I can say most of my experiences were favorable and I enjoyed work and um there weren't any complaints. I was working with uh a very great group of girls-women. We had all women in our group. Now if

you needed men to help with some of this lifting of anything, and I was going to say I learned the names of quite a few of the tools. And it was interesting to me so uh...

De Mare: So you'd call the men in if you needed someone to help do the heavy lifting.

Chenevert: That's right, that's right.

De Mare: Ok. And were all your supervisors' men or women?

Chenevert: Well the uh men they were both but our—the senior supervisor was a man but there was a woman directly over us and I know she and I got along very well.

Kelly: What was it like between the men and the women in the factory? Was there—what was it like going to work and did the men think of it? All the Rosies?

Chenevert: Well I can only remember most of the men were quite accommodating if we ever needed anything because there were other ways that they were using rivets. They were working machines and some by feet but that type of

machine I didn't work. But uh they used those and a lot of the men did that and but as far as I can remember most the men and women, they were getting a long and most them were respectful. I can't remember—that's why I can't remember any incident that stands out in my mind that wasn't a favorable one.

16:10:12-----

De Mare: You say that you enjoyed doing the work, you said?

Chenvert: I did say I enjoyed doing the work, yes I did.

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about—the war was going on and you were obviously working to help the war effort—

Chenevert: That's right.

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like to be a young woman and have the war on and have your husband be in the service, what that was like for you?

Chenevert: Well of course at the time they were away you know you were lonesome. But one thing when you continued to

stay busy, you were occupied and that kept you busy. So it was only at the time you'd be alone that you'd be lonely and think about it. But I would go home every evening and I would write to my husband everyday. So on the whole that was fine for me.

Kelly: What did you feel about the war at that time? What was the feeling, the feelings that about why were fighting and-

Chenevert: Well of course I don't think any of us liked the idea of us being in war and knowing why were there...I can remember the Sunday when it was announced that the Japanese had invaded Pearl Harbor and uh so I mean it was just. You know you were going to feel it because we were at that time we were racing for food and other commodities so we felt that very cleanly. But we learned to accept things.

Kelly: And what was Detroit like at that time?

Chenevet: Well it certainly was a different Detroit than what it is now.

De Mare: Can you talk about that?

Chenevert: Well you know we've always had strife in the world wherever we are but most—there were so many—well later on it seemed to me that happened I had been away...well away but I guess people were on edge. And then there were times when you know because I think I was in high school when they had the first race riot and that wasn't—no nobody appreciate that.

De Mare: What was that like for you as a young woman?

Chenevert: Oh it was horrifying.

De Mare: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Chenevert: No I could just see so many people running around to so many different ones lurking but then when the police were patrolling the streets, and what do you call it? The guards...and that was no fun at all to experience those things. You know, we were anxious for the war to end and I was hoping things could return as they were before.

Kelly: Did you feel when you went to work or tried to go to work, did you feel that there was a segregation with any of the companies or any of the people you worked with?

Chenevert: Well you know, you knew there—I mean, that's an individual thing with people and so naturally I met people who were...maybe would want to be segregated and then maybe I met others who—but like I said the majority of people really I got along with people. I was tried to get along with people. And see I succeeded. So...

De Mare: When you were at Chrysler was the uh was the workforce around you integrated or segregated? Did you work all together or were there black crews and white crews?

Chenevert: Most of the time...it was integrated to a point and then there were groups that were—there was one near our group that was all black and then I was with an integrated group. But I was the one about two blacks in my group and the others and it consisted of about ten of us. And uh but then there were groups that were segregated. But sometimes I think they segregated themselves because you could interchange with jobs.

De Mare: What was the social life like at the time for you as a young person? What did you do in your social life? Did you go dancing? Did you go-

Chenevert: No I didn't go doing a lot of dancing and just once and a while I would go to the movies but that wasn't too often either. You know and so-I, we were a very religious family and we certainly believe in prayer and attending church. I never missed attending church if I could, you know *inaudible* but on the whole we got along pretty good.

Kelly: And what was it like for your husband in the service? What was his experience like?

Chenevert: Well my husband I guess he and I are something alike as far as dealing with people and he seemed to get along with most everybody. And he he didn't have, he never had too many complaints but of course he experiences prejudice because of his race. But on the whole he did pretty good and uh so he joined, when he went to radio you know radio operations school-

De Mare: What branch of the service was he in?

Chenevert: He was in the Air Force. So when he, I I uh after I was in *inaudible* for a while, he was in Bellville, Illinois, which is right across the river from St. Louis, Missouri. I went to St. Louis for six months so I could be near him there.

De Mare: So you traveled quite a bit as a young woman?

Chenevert: Yes. I'm very glad I went where he was. We seemed to—well by us getting together early without family or anything, we seemed to have adjusted very well. So when he died we were married for 57 years.

De Mare: That's a long time.

Chenevert: It doesn't seem like it now but it was a long time...

De Mare: Were were any other of your brothers and sister involved in the war effort? Did they work on—in the war industries or were they in the service? Any of your brothers and sisters?

Chenevert: I had—my two older brothers—no my three older boys. Well I had four brothers who had been in service and during World War II I had two brothers in the service. One was in Italy and one was in England. And uh later during the other wars...where was inaudible?

Family Member: Well that was a different wars even.

Chenevert: I know it was a different war but do you know where he was?

Family Member: They were in the Korean War. *Inaudible* and *Inaudible* was.

Chenevert: Yeah, I know Eugene was in Italy and Alvin was in England.

Family Member: Italy too. That's where he got injured.

Chenevert: Well anyway, they went to service. The four boys, they went to service but I don't—not any of my sisters.

De Mare: You were the only riveter in the family?

Chenevert: I was the only riveter in the family.

Kelly: Y-you said your brother got injured in Italy during World-

Chenevert: Not Italy. He was over in England when he got *inaudible*.

De Mare: What happened to him?

Chenevert: I'm trying to think just-What happened to Alvin in-

Family Member: They both got hit by-

Chenevert: My older brother Eugene lost his an eye but

Family Member: *Inaudible*.

Chenevert: But the other one, his back bothered him a lot. And he was-the had sent him to the States to Wyoming to a hospital there. I used to correspond with now and then but I don't remember too much about the injury but he survived

it and did well. And so did the other one. They both gone now.

Family Member: *Inaudible* wasn't in the Korean War, he was in Germany. And Douglas was in the Philippines.

Chenevert: Number three yea.

De Mare: Do you—can you talk about when you found out the war was over?

26:51:09-----

Chenevert: Well, I was very glad when I heard the war had ended because by that time I had a baby. I became pregnant when I was in St. Louis and uh when I came home when—about the spring of that year and my baby was born in October. And then the following year was when the year was over. And I was just thrilled, yes. And uh was—

De Mare: Were you working at the factory when you were pregnant?

Chenevert: No—

De Mare: Did did, were you working at the factory while you were pregnant?

Chenevert: (Shaking head)

De Mare: No...

Chenevert: See when I took that leave of absence, I never returned.

Kelly: Do you remember where you were at or what you were doing when you found out that war was over?

Chenevert: You know, I don't remember what I was doing but I was happy but I was home most of the time anyway so I imagine that's where I was.

Kelly: And did your husband come home right after?

Chenevert: He came home soon after. He came home when the baby was five months old.

De Mare: And now how many children did you have?

Chenevert: I had two children but they're both gone now. I had a baby in fact, my daughter who was born uh in my son was born in '45. My daughter was born in '47 and she was still born on July, in fact her birthday is soon, July 25th.

De Mare: Did you ever go back to work after you left the factory?

Chenevert: Yes I did go back to work. I went back to school for a while then I worked for Michigan State uh for uh for the Compensation and then I also worked for the Board of Education.

De Mare: And what did you do for them?

Chenevert: I was Matron for the bathroom attended for the locker room girls in the school. And so I worked there for a while.

De Mare: If you if you could look back at the time when you were a Rosie the Riveter, do you think doing that kind of work that was so important and that you were very well paid

for, did that change you in anyway? Do you think it changed your life? Can you talk to that?

Chenevert: I don't think it changed me. I just know that I never liked violence, I never liked war and I was just glad to do something to help. Because there was a lot of help needed at that time.

De Mare: Do you think that do you that that all the women going to work while the men were away at that time, changed the way we look at women in this country?

Chenevert: With some people it may have because there was a time when women didn't always wear pants. And actually we really started wearing a lot of pants then because I had a jumpsuit for work. And I wore jumpsuits, and you know all the overalls, coveralls, everything...

Kelly: Is there any memory or story that from that time in your life that you um or maybe you've heard stories or anything that you recall that you'd like to just tell us?

Chenevert: I can't think of anything that would be so extraordinary about it because it was a different time, I

mea I talked about traveling on streetcars everyday because I didn't drive at the time. And uh so I used to have to get out very early in the morning at five o'clock in order to be at work at six when I was working in the dayshift. That's really something I'm telling you.

Kelly: Were they crowded or d-did-were they crowded?

Chenevert: Were they crowded? The streetcars?

Kelly: Yes...

Chenevert: They weren't crowded in that time of morning but there were quite a few people but they weren't crowded. You could always get a seat at that time of morning. And uh but when you made a transfer where others were coming from other directions, and the streetcars that ran to Wyoming, *inaudible*, you'd see so many women getting off the streetcar. We had a field we walked from the line to the factory and it was always so full and that's the part where I'd see so many women.

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about—I know you are from Detroit and you lived at home but I know so many women traveled from everywhere to work at that time.

Chenevert: Yes, that's true.

De Mare: And did you meet—can you talk about what that was like for you? Did you meet a lot of people you would have never met before? Or...

Chenvert: I did meet some people that I would never have met before.

De Mare: 'Cause it was the first time a lot of women were thrown together like that to work.

Chenevert: Yes, that's true.

De Mare: Yea...

Chenevert: I know I never would have...one young lady, I don't think I'll ever forget her but haven't contacted...I used to talk to—see her or hear from her now and then. She

was from Ironwood, Michigan and we got along. We worked together side-by-side and did very well together.

De Mare: Oh! Were you a member of the union? We-were-there was a labor union wasn't there.

Chenevert: There was a union...I'm trying to think—I don't think I was at that time.

Family Member: You waited, I think.

Chenevert: Because I don't remember paying dues...

33:29:08-----

Family Member: *Inaudible*.

Chenevert: Yea, I wasn't at that time.

Family Member: You weren't a member?

Chenvert: No, not at that time.

De Mare: You don't remember paying any union dues to work at the factory?

Chenevert: I don't remember becoming a member when I worked yea know Desoto...Shirley give me that badge so I can show them that...no, right there, it's on the table, right where the middle vase is...

De Mare: Will you hold it for us? For the camera? And can you tell us what that is?

Chenevert: This-this is the badge I received the day I was hired at Chrysler-Desoto, 1943. July 1943.

Kelly: Just hold it there for one second; I'm going to get a close-up.

De Mare: So that's you? And you would have been 18 years old in 1943, right? You were born in '25?

Kelly: Chrysler-Desoto...

De Mare: You are the first woman who has her badge that we've talked to.

Chenevert: That's because I didn't come back after two weeks.

Kelly: You abandoned ship for love.

Chenevert: I sure did!

Family Member: That was a good thing.

Kelly: Yea.

De Mare: Absolutely, absolutely.

Kelly: How old were you during the war?

Family Member: Uh three years younger than she was...

Kelly: Okay...

Family Member: 15 when the war was over. It was quite an experience.

De Mare: I bet.

Family Member: We had the black outs, we had to shade our windows with drapes so you couldn't even light a cigarette or match because we were worried about the air raids, you know. Air raids with the sirens going...she was in Boise, Idaho a lot of it but I was here through it. I bet you did the same thing in Boise. Did you have black outs?

Chenevert: No, I don't remember black outs here. I know we had—you know when they had a rule it was for everybody.

Family Member: The black outs with the sirens.

Chenevert: We had rationing I know that.

Family Member: What was that?

Chenevert: Rationing.

De Mare: What was the hardest thing that was rationed. What did you feel was the most precious thing you couldn't get?

Chenevert: Let me see...sugar, I guess. I can't think of anything else. It seemed like I had everything else I needed.

Family Member: Your rationing?

Chenevert: Yea. What did you-

Family Member: Butter.

Chenevert: Oh you rationed butter?

Family Member: They rationed butter here.

Chenevert: They rationed the sugar

Family Member:...flour...

Chenevert: But you just had to have a shortage of so much, but apparently I managed to eat because I'm about 117 on there and when I came home from Boise I was weighing 135. And I wasn't pregnant then...

Kelly: What do they say, when you fall in love you 10 pounds?

Chenevert: I suppose so. I suppose so

37:11:01-----

Family Member: Pardon me. Did you tell them that you *inaudible* in high school?

De Mare: No.

Kelly: Would you tell us that story?

Chenevert: No I didn't tell you that did I?

Kelly: Tell us!

De Mare: Yea, tell us!

Family Member: Yea, that's the most interesting part

Chenevert: That's...

De Mare: No, we want to hear it all.

Chenevert: Well, actually I was 14 years old when I met my husband, because he was uh I was already in high school and he had changed schools and I just saw him out talking to some boys. I knew his brother but I didn't know it was his brother and I just say--then I saw him talking to him and then I asked him who was that young man with whom he was talking? He said, "Why are you interested?" So he then anyway, he talked to his brother and this is the way I met him. There at school and then he started at the same high school.

38:10:16-----

Family Member: How old were you? 14?

Chenevert: That's right. I was 14 when I met him.

Family Member: And that was the beginning of a long courtship.

De Mare: Well if she was 14 I would hope it was a long courtship.

Chenvert: No, the courtship wasn't long. I mean...

Family Member: Or a long life of love...

Chenevert: Yea because we married...oh! I'm glad we have that picture still...

De Mare: Can you hold it? Is it too-yea.

Chenevert: I hope you dusted it.

Family Member: Yes, I did.

De Mare: And can you tell us who that is in the picture?

Chenevert: This is picture is a picture of-actually we were in the vicinity of the train station that's on Michigan Avenue.

De Mare: And that's you and your husband?

Chenvert: Yea, and I was down there with my husband because he was returning to service. He was returning to service.

On this picture I was four months pregnant...four or five or whatever it was.

De Mare: Let me take that from you? Thank you...

Family Member: It was a wonderful love affair, let me tell you.

Chenevert: Well it was a wonderful husband too and I'm so glad of that. I have beautiful thoughts.

De Mare: What has it been like to watch Detroit over the last 50 years. I've never been here before. This is my-

Chenevert: You've never been here before?

De Mare: This is my very first trip.

Chenevert: Oh it's-

Family Member: But when we were growing up it was so beautiful.

Chenevert: Oh yes it was.

Family Member:...we had clouds. We lived near Belle Isle.

Chenevert: That's one thing, Belle Isle is still beautiful.

Family Member: ...oh we could ride our bikes...

Chenevert: We have friends in Belle Isle and then keep it up. But we had so many things to be so thankful for. We still do but it's just too bad the way things have gone down.

The End.