Idilia Johnston

The Real Rosie The Riveter Project

Interview 4

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

April 14, 2010

Lutherville, Maryland

For The

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Interview: Idilia Johnston

Interviewers: Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

Date: April 14, 2010

Place: Lutherville, Maryland

De Mare: Alright, so just to start, can you introduce yourself, and tell me your name, and tell me when you were born?

Johnston: My name is Idilia Johnston and I was born in 1924.

De Mare: And where were you born?

Johnston: Cleveland, Ohio.

De Mare: And can you talk to me a little bit about your childhood? What your, what your life was like?

Johnston: Well, my family was very controlling. My mother and father were very controlling. They were from Scotland, and, um, they really dominated us. And we did what we were told. And then when I wanted to go to work, my dad said,

"You're going to stay home and help Mama." And I said, "I don't want to stay home and help Mama." And I went down to Cleveland and I got a job in a bank. And… in the bookkeeping department. And I came home and told them. And I was seventeen at the time, so just before my eighteenth birthday, my father went down and- to the personnel department- and told them that I was needed at home, and I could no longer work for the bank. And because I was not eighteen, I had to go home. And I had to do the laundry, all that stuff. I did not like it.

A few months later, I think it was August of that year, I went downtown and got a job with Allied Loyal. And I learned IBM, the beginning of IBM, which was wonderful. With the great big machines and all that stuff. And I thought that was terrific. But my father was still trying to get me to go home. And he went to personnel and they called me in and I was eighteen and I said, "I don't want to go home." But my father said, "You are going home." And home I went.

So I thought, how can I do this? So one day I was downtown, all dressed up in my best clothes, and I went into a storefront that was hiring for defense plant work. And I said I wanted a job in a factory. And they said, "Well, you don't fit in a factory." And I said, "Why not?

That's where the best money is. I wanna work in a factory." And they said, "Well, we'll get you to a defense pl..." And I told them why, and they said, "We'll get you to a defense plant but you won't work in a factory, in the factory."

So I worked in the office and the assistant comptroller had just been drafted. So I worked for the comptroller; I became the assistant contract… uh, comptroller. And it was a wonderful job. I had one machine that was numbers and percentiles and figures like that, and then I had- Brad Freedent Calculator came out at the same time- and I had a brand new Freedent Calculator to work- get my percentiles. And I made bar graphs, circle graphs, graphs, line graphs- all kinds of graphs for the weekly meetings, the bi-weekly meetings and the monthly meetings for the board of Ohio Crankshaft. And that's what my job was.

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Johnston: I had a drafting table outside the office- cubicle is what the comptroller had- and I had a drafting table outside the office where I did all my work. And I had another desk to do my mathematics and, uh, to get the,

um, graphs printed for the board to use I had to go to the blueprint department because it was before Xerox or anything like that. The blueprint department had to do it. And they did it on great, big, huge pieces of paper. And then they would cut them in sections that I needed, and then I had to collate everything by hand and get them to the board meetings on time. And that was my job.

But I think, um, one of the things that it did for me was, I was kind of working independently and the comptroller did not hover over me, make sure I was doing everything right. And being independent and knowing that I could think for myself, I didn't need my mom and dad to tell me what to do, I became very self sufficient, and I came out of my shell. Before that I had been meek, mild, if somebody said "Boo", I jumped, you know. So I became a person unto my myself, and I loved it.

And at that time, my mom and dad were sc… they weren't scared of me, but they were afraid of what type of person I was becoming. Because I never did talk back, but they could see I was be… becoming more and more independent. And my father… the first day I was going to the job, we had to carpool. They… uh, Ohio Crankshaft… Crankshaft Corporation set you up with a carpool. So the first morning they came to the house my father went out, and

there's men almost my father's age in the car, four of 'em, and I'm gonna sit in the backseat between these guys. And my father had a long talk with them before I came out, and I never had a bit of trouble from those gentlemen. (laughs) Not a bit. And every morning they were there, picking me up at, oh, I think it was seven o'clock in the morning to go to work.

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De Mare: Well, I think it's really interesting that you describe yourself as being so meek when you were very determined to take, to get a job.

Johnston: Mm-hm.

De Mare: You were, it sounds like you were extremely determined to get out from that house.

Johnston: Um---

De Mare: And the housework.

Johnston: Uh, at that time I had to be in bed at 8:30 at night. Lights out. Now, I'm seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and if I had a date and I did not clear it with my mom and dad, and they did not know of the man or young boy, when I was all dressed coming down the stairs to meet him at the door, my father would look at him if he didn't like him, uh, "Get out of here, never date my daughter again." Even though they had given me permission, I'd have to go back upstairs to my room, pretend nothing happened, and the next morning when I came downstairs to breakfast, I would act like nothing happened. And I don't know if that riled my father or not but I just would, well, that's the way Daddy is and that's it. So it was tough to have a date if Daddy didn't know- my- my mother and father would want to know the parents of the person that I was dating; that's how bad it was.

So when I got out of the house I became a different person and as I said, a person unto my own self. I… I think I became the person I am today. (Laughs) And, uh, but I was determined that, uh, I just was not gonna have that heavy thumb on me, and having to stay home. And I was not allowed to take a lunch with me from the house. The food we had in the house had to stay in the house. I got, I started at thirty-seven fifty a week, had to give my

parents twenty dollars, and the rest I got to keep for myself. That was lunch money, and whatever else was going on. I had to do that.

De Mare: Did you buy your own clothes on your own?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: Can you talk about that?

Johnston: Well, one thing my mom and dad had a fit about was I always loved shoes, and I had… I bought spectator pumps, I bought saddle shoes, I bought this, I bought that; I had every kind of new, kind of shoe that was coming out. And of course the three-inch heel was out then, not the stilettos, but the three-inch heel. And I had suede shoes, and I had an emerald green suit that I bought for myself. It was a two-piece swoon suit and I got emerald green three-inch heel suede shoes. And my mom and dad just looked at me. (Laughs) So I, I really did buy clothes, because I didn't have to have what Mom and Dad picked out for me.

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De Mare: So it really was your independence.

Johnston: Yes, it was.

De Mare: Even though you were still living at home, it really was.

Johnston: Yes. Yep.

Kelly: Can you wait… just for one sec-

De Mare: Yep.

Kelly: I just wanna ask, was it, was it a religious household? Was that part of the…?

Johnston: Uh, we children had to go to Sunday School, Presbyterian Sunday School, but Mom and Dad never did. Mom would play the piano for Sunday School once in a while, but, uh, there was not a religious household. In fact they used to call me the Holy Roller because I was so active in church. For, ever since I was a little girl I was doing-

outside the household, so you… that tells you what the household was like.

De Mare: Why did you choose… why did… why did that sign out… for looking for defense work… why… why did you gravitate towards that? Did you feel like your father couldn't say no to that?

Johnston: Well, see…

De Mare: Or, or was that…

Johnston: Once you were hired by a defense plant, you could not go any place. You stayed at the defense plant. And you could not be fired either. You were at the defense plant and you were there to work. And I… that's what I knew, and that's why I wanted to go to a defense plant. To get Daddy off my back. But he still kept at me anyway. And as I said, I had to uh, uh, be in bed at eight-thirty, lights out, and all this and, heck, you know, twenty years of age you don't want to do that.

De Mare: No.

Johnston: No.

De Mare: No. When… when you… when you got the job, you said you got the job because the assistant comptroller had been drafted. But you also said that they told you they weren't going to put you in the factory.

Johnston: They…

De Mare: Can you… can you tell… talk to me a little bit about what the… what was going on with the women in the factory work at that time and what was the…

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Johnston: It was as, um, Violet said, it was the attitude towards the women working in the factory; you were a lower class. And I had been out with… to lunch with my friends and… in downtown Cleveland… and I stopped in there, and I was in my high heels and my new good clothes, and uh, they said "You're not for the factory." And I said, "Why? I wanna go where the money is." And they made more money than I did. So, I started at thirty-seven fifty. I left

there, I was making fifty-two dollars a week. But I, what else do you want to ask me about the factory?

De Mare: Well, I am… I'm curious as to… the name… the name of the company was Ohio Crankshaft?

Johnston: Mm-hm.

De Mare: What did they make for the war?

Johnston: Crankshafts for the automobiles, the ships, airplanes. Everything that has a motor has to have a crankshaft. So they made crankshafts. All kinds. And walking through the factory, from my office to go through the factory to blueprinting to get these things printed all time, I was always walking through the factory. I was not allowed to stop and talk to any of my friends that I might know. Um, once I did and the foreman came up and I really got bawled out. And he said, "You do that again," because I was taking them off the line… production… I was slowing down production. So he said, "The next time you do it, you're out. You won't be allowed in."

Also, I had to make sure that I didn't wear anything frilly or anything like that, walking through the factory.

You… I wore… I was very conservative anyway in my dressing, at that time. So, uh, you could not wear anything that was frilly or fluffy or anything like that walking through the factory.

De Mare: Because?

Johnston: I guess danger. Anything could fly out and get caught on your clothes, caught on something. And especially if you stopped to talk to somebody. But I didn't do that. I only did that once and… (laughs)… slowing down production.

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De Mare: Um, what was the… what was your… what was the kind of… what was the ratio of men/women to work, women working at that time in the factory? Both where you were in the office and down on the line? Can you talk about how that population shifted?

Johnston: It was definitely men that were, um, what should I say? I'm trying to think of the correct word. They were in charge of us in the office. They were the leaders.

Like the comptroller was a man, somebody else was a man, and then the women were hired under that. Uh, in the factory, most of the men were my father's age, maybe a little bit younger, but always with children and, uh, things of that sort. And I don't know, I'm sure there was men on the line, but all the men that I saw walking through the factory, they were foremen and supervisors and things of that sort.

De Mare: And who was on the line? Was it women on the line?

Johnston: Women and men.

De Mare: Women and men?

Johnston: Yeah.

De Mare: And what was the… when I asked Violet earlier about the pay scale, did you make as much money as the men, did you…

Johnston: No.

De Mare: I heard your voice over there. Can you talk about that? Can you talk about what that was like?

Johnston: Well, uh, at that time we were very, very pleased to be getting what we got. I mean, if it was ten dollars, it was a lot more than we had before we walked in the door. Um, but it was… we did not think that, "Oh well, we're not getting the same as the men," or anything of that nature. I think that attitude came out a lot later. And you mentioned unions before? There was never any talk about union around where I was. No, I never heard anything about unions.

De Mare: Nothing. You didn't…

Johnston: No.

De Mare: Any, anywhere in the factory? There wasn't even…

Johnston: No, no.

De Mare: Ok.

00:15:33:25----------

Johnston: Uh, everything was for the war effort. And, um, as far as food at home and things of that sort, everything was according to, uh, the stamps that we got. And if we did not have stamps for sugar, you didn't use sugar. Um, and, um, during the war when we could only buy a certain number of shoes a year, that was all you got. And, um, Mom and Dad had five children so we got a lot more than a lot of the others.

But going to be hungry? There was many times I can remember going to bed hungry. And we got food stamps, and, uh, the food we got was… sometimes we would get a great, big bag of food, of potatoes. A big, you know, burlap bag of potatoes. And that would be what we ate all week and Mom learned to cook it in a lot of different ways. But, uh, it wasn't until later in the war that you could go to the store, the supermarket and things like that and get what you wanted.

De Mare: What did your father do? What was his job?

Johnston: He was a carpenter. And so, he did not have a big paying job. If he didn't work he didn't get paid. So when he took off of work to come and try to get me to go

home, that day he was not getting paid. So that's how determined he was that I was gonna go home.

De Mare: You said there were five of you in the family. Were… brothers, sisters? How did…

Johnston: I had one brother and three sisters. There was four girls and a boy. My brother was the oldest.

De Mare: And was he in the service?

Johnston: Yes, he was. He was in what they call the Army Air Corp. Wasn't the Air Force, it was the Army Air Corp. And he was stationed in Italy.

De Mare: What was it like for you as a young woman with your brother away?

Johnston: Not very different. 'Cause he was a curmudgeon. And nothing was ever right, and, uh, he and I didn't get along too well together. Although I can remember a couple of times when he didn't have a date, we would go roller skating or dancing or something of that sort. But I think he was desperate. (Laughs)

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De Mare: We haven't heard from a lot of women whose family situations were what you're describing, in terms of the repression.

Johnston: Mmm.

De Mare: You know, so it's very interesting to hear from your perspective on what the work meant to you, what it meant to leave the house…

Johnston: Mm-hm.

De Mare: And have your own life. And I can hear in your voice how important it was to you. Um, and I want you to talk as much about that as you want to, 'cause I think that's really interesting for people to understand.

Johnston: Yeah.

De Mare: You know, especially now. Um, so, can you talk a little bit… you were… you were… you were working, you were earning good money- thirty-six dollars a week, thirty-seven

dollars a week- you gave your parents the money, so you were still living at home. Can you talk about what it was like… who you… who you worked with in the… in the… in the factory and what it was like to kind of make you way out in to this greater world, and as much as you want to about that time in your life.

Johnston: Um, I think, um, meeting different people, and from all sections, and, uh, I had two very good friends that… their husbands were in the service and they were rooming together. And they had a room in an old Victorian in Cleveland and uh, then other friends came along, and, uh, to see their independence and to see my other friends, uh, they were far… further along in being independent than I was. I was still shy at that time.

And, uh, it really taught me a lot. And it taught me a lot to be, uh, self-assured that I could… I could do things. You know, Mom and Dad were always saying, "Well. you're this, you're that, you can't do that, you can't do that." Well, I found out I could do it. And I wanted to do it. And it made me more eager for more. And, um, I think that's why I did leave Ohio Crankshaft. But how did I get out? Well, this, um… I had to go to personnel and his name was Mr. Fish, and he kept saying, "No, you have to

understand this is the way it is when you go in to the factory, da da da da da. After the war you can do what you want, but you have to stay here." And I said, "I want to go in to the Waves." He kept telling me why I could not do such a thing and why he could not let me go. And I wasn't buying it. And he got a phone call. And while he was talking on the phone I was looking at the pictures on his desk, and there was one of a sailor that I knew.

And when he came back I said, "Are you Ned Fish's father?" He says, "Yes." He says, "How do you know Ned?" I said, "I… I was dating him." And he said, "No, you weren't. That… you're just saying that." And I said, "When he was home the last time, your daughter just had a brand new baby,. It was less than a week old. Ned and I went to visit her and her husband, and, uh, the baby's name is such-and-such," and I said, "We spent a couple of hours and then we went roller skating." And he said, "You do know Ned." And I said, "Yes." He says, "You can go in the Waves." And that's how I got out of the factory.

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De Mare: Can you tell for the camera, 'cause a lot of people won't know what the Waves are, what they are?

Johnston: Well, it's a women's organization of… I sh… association of the Navy. And they were called Waves because of waves in the Navy. And, uh, the army had the Wa… Wax. Uh, Wasps were the Coast Guard, and what did they call the Marines? Marines. I think so. And the Waves were the Navy. And I joined the Navy because I liked their uniform. (Laughs) That's why I joined. And I had my boot training, my Navy training at Hunter College in The Bronx, which is now Lehman College. He was the governor of the state at one time, and that's where I had my boot camp training. For six weeks.

And then they wanted to send me back to Cleveland to work in the Bu-Per's office. That's the, uh, the Bureau of Personnel, where you made out checks and the bookkeeping department. And I could live at home. And I said, "No. I don't want to go home." So they sent me to a psychiatrist at the Navy there, they had a psychiatrist. And she interviewed me for a couple of hours, and they sent me to California. To Oakland, California. (Laughs)

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De Mare: And what did you do in Oakland, California?

Johnston: I was working for Overseas Follow-up. And that meant that if, uh, a ship or anybody in the Navy ordered anything from, say, the Islands, and the shipment was sent out and they didn't receive it when we received a notice that they didn't receive it. Well, I would follow-up and see where that was. I would follow… trace it. And I would find it, and if it had not been broken, I would reship it. But if it was broken they kept it, and I had to reorder it and make sure it got where it was supposed to go. That was my job.

De Mare: How did your father feel about you joining the Waves?

Johnston: I went down in, uh, it was March, to join the Waves, and they told me that I had to gain twenty-two pounds- I only weighed a hundred pounds- and they said you have to gain twenty-two pounds and we'll take you. So all this time I'm trying to gain weight between March and November. I gained sixteen and they said they would take me. So I came back- I wasn't twenty-one yet- my mom and dad had to sign papers, which Mom and Dad would not do. So finally it came to the last day that they maybe would take

me and I said, “Daddy,”- he came home from work- I said, “Daddy, I’m cooking dinner tonight, you and Mama are going down to have these papers notarized, I’m going into the Waves.” And he looked at me and says, “You are?” And I said, “Yes, this is the last day that you can sign.” So Mother said, “Oh, we’ll sign it because you’ll never pass the physical, you’ll be back home, you’re so skinny.” And I never came back home. (Laughs) I went into the Navy, and they were surprised I passed the physical.

De Mare: Awesome. Yeah.

Kelly: What did… what did you do in the Navy? What were you doing day to day?

Johnston: Well, the… the Overseas Follow-up, we had a lot of shipments to track and, uh, one thing about that: we had this big, brown box and in that was sheets of paper- like towels rolling- and that was called ‘Twix’, and we could write with a certain pencil, like a Stylus, on that paper, and that would even go to Washington. That was at the beginning of the computers. And it was this great, big, brown box and it was called ‘Twix’ and you… we could write our messages on there and it would go.

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De Mare: You talked about it being the beginning of the computers.

Johnston: Yes.

De Mare: Yeah- can you talk a little bit more about what that was all about? I mean, and describe a little bit of what you were doing?

Johnston: Well, I… before I went to the factory, I worked for Allied Oil, and that's where I learned IBM. And we had the key-puncher with the cards- you know what the cards are- well, we… we'd get a stack of cards- they were blank, you know, no holes in them- and we would have to use the, uh, keys. And they only had a few set of keys, not a whole keyboard. You only had a few set of keys. And you would punch these holes- key-puncher. Then you had another machine that verified it. You had to go through and verify what you did. Now if you came to a part that you hadn't punched correctly, well, the verifier would not go through. So you knew you made a mistake. Well, you didn't make too

many of those because you got what-for. And from there you went to the sorter, which was bigger than that unit right there, that big brown unit. (Phone rings)

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Kelly: Rolling.

De Mare: Rolling. Um, now what's interesting to me about what you're saying about the… the… that part of that kind of technology at that time was… how did you look at the future? Did it seem really modernistic? Like what did… what did you… what did you think about all of it as this young girl from this Scottish home?

Johnston: Um, I didn't think much about it that it was different. I was very interested in it- that- I was amazed that I got that job. And I was so glad because it wasn't like being in the bank and just using the bookkeeping machine or the adding machine, which was passé, you know?

De Mare: How did you learn to do that and how did you learn then to do the job you did at the factory, which was

a lot of blueprinting and…? I mean, did you have training for this or did you just kind of jump into it?

Johnston: They had someone just show me what I was supposed to do; my… what my responsibilities were. And it was my idea how to fix the graphs. Uh, up til then they had a lot of writing and I said to the comptroll… comptroller, I said, "Well, if these men are looking at all this writing," I said, "Wouldn't it be better to give them a picture? They could look at and get the message right away." And that's how the graphs came about.

De Mare: It was you.

Johnston: It was me.

De Mare: So, you obviously enjoyed your work.

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: Can you talk about that a little bit? Like what did you enjoy about it?

Johnston: I think the thing that I was, uh, the thing was that I was doing something, um, that, uh, I never thought I would be able to do. It was… it was interesting, it was exciting. And of course you have to remember the cause; the reason we were there was exciting. But uh, it wasn't as exciting as being in the bank.

De Mare: No?

Johnston: No. No. Uh, I, ooh, I said that wrong. The bank wasn't as exciting as being the, uh, in the jobs. Of learning these things.

De Mare: How much did you… how much did you earn when you… so you… you… you… when you were working at the factory you were earning thirty-seven dollars a week, I think you said. When you went and you joined the Waves, what was your pay at that point? And what was…

Johnston: I think it… think it was sixty-seven dollars a month. But we were fed, we were housed, we were clothed. So that thirty-seven… I mean, that sixty-seven dollars a month was…

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De Mare: And was that the first time you ever lived away from your home?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: And can you talk about what your actual life was like? Where you slept? Who you hung out with?

Johnston: Uh, at boot camp we lived in apartment buildings surrounding the campus of, uh, Hunter College. And, uh, there was, uh, eight girls to an apartment so… and one bathroom. So the living room was bunks and things of that sort. And the first time… the first night we arrived, um, they took us all together, you know, the apartment building where we were, and, uh, they said, "Well, we need a volunteer." And I raised my hand. And everybody said, "You don't raise your hand." And I said, "Well, I wanted to see what they want."

And the officer said, "Well, Spence," –that was my maiden name– "Spence, uh, you just volunteered to be the mailperson." Well, they said 'mailman' then. "Mailman for the building and you will have a mailroom and that's your

responsibility." So, that's what I did. Now, all these girls had to clean every Friday night the whole apartment- everything- for inspection Saturday morning. They had to do bathrooms and everything. I had to make sure that my mailroom was in order and dusted. And it was so much easier. I got the big laugh on them. (Laughs) Yeah. I… I thought that was so (unique?)- idea that I volunteered. And they're all telling me, "Don't be so dumb when you're told (unintelligible)…"

00:32:23:25----------

Johnston: I'll tell you one incident when I was in the Waves, and this was when I first went in and today it's common, but in my day it was… (sigh) There was two girls- now, we used to always be allowed to go up on the roof of the building and, uh, stay outside if we wanted to. So, these two girls in our apartment, uh, their parents came, which we were told, "Your parents can't come." And I said, "Why are their parents here?" "Oh, they were caught up on the roof." I said, "We're all allowed to go up on the roof." "But they were caught on the roof." And I said, "Well, what's different about us being up there and them?" "Don't you understand what they were doing?" I said, "No.

What were… did they do wrong?" Well, they had to draw a picture for me. I did not understand. (Laughs) That's how naive I was. But, I did not understand why they had to go home.

De Mare: And they sent them home?

Johnston: Oh, yeah. Parents had to come get them.

De Mare: Wow.

Kelly: That's amazing.

De Mare: Wow.

Kelly: What was… what was the, uh, sort of dating and romantic life like for all of the girls living in the apartment at this time?

Johnston: Well, we were all in the Navy; for six weeks you didn't date. You did what the Navy said. And, uh, we did have, um, Armistice Day we marched in the parade on Fifth Avenue. Um, we did have one other weekend where Longchamps was the restaurant and the lower section, the basement of

the Empire State Building. And to go into the Longchamps restaurant you had to go down this big, winding staircase to get down into Longchamps. And that to us was the best thing in the world. Walking down… off of Fifth Avenue, walking into rest… down the big, winding staircase. And we were not allowed to have a drink. And everybody… the waiters knew by the uniform we had on that we were, uh, boots, and we were not, uh, allowed to have a drink, so they wouldn't serve you a drink if you wanted it. Even if you were age… of age, you could not have it.

De Mare: And that was while you were in boot camp in New York?

Johnston: In boot camp.

De Mare: Wow. And then once you went out to California, what was life like out there?

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Johnston: Oh, that was free and easy. Uh, I lived in, uh, Oakland, and, uh, it was right in the middle of town, and they built barracks for the Waves. And there was, uh, two

sets of barracks. And uh, the bus picked you up in the morning to go to work and brought you back at four o'clock. You were free to do whatever you wanted, go any place you wanted, from three until two in the morning. You had to be in by two. And there was two girls to a cubicle, and you had your closet and your bed. Then there was a laundry room, and of course the, uh, bathrooms with the showers and everything.

De Mare: And what was that like for you to have that much freedom?

Johnston: I loved it. But, uh, we were… I had friends that were of all different ages. Some were married, some were just older and not married and, uh, I think I was about the youngest one. And, uh, we would go to San Francisco, and I… My mom always had a nice tablecloth on the table and we had candles at dinnertime. That was at home. So I said, "I want to go to a restaurant that has tablecloths and candles." Well, nobody had that during the war. They didn't have the linen, they didn't have any of those nice things. Maybe the Fairmont Hotel had it and something of that nature. But, uh, the regular restaurants

just had bare tables. And they didn't even have placemats in those days, so… Yeah, it… it was good.

I… I loved learning about San Francisco and Oakland and… We had every Saturday and Sunday off. It was like being in a girl's club. It was neat. We didn't have to do any KP. Um, once every six weeks you had to have telephone duty and that was because of people calling up for other girls. It wasn't that you had to be there for any emergency or anything of that sort. It was very good.

De Mare: How did it feel… Can you talk a little bit about how it felt both when you were working at Ohio Crankshaft and then later in the Waves? Can you talk about… about the war and about being involved in the… in that… in… just… about how you saw yourself in that situation? I mean, you talked a little bit about how, you know, the work was important, you had to remember the cause, what you were there for.

Johnston: Mm-hm.

De Mare: Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Johnston: Well, I think, uh, what made us so eager to be doing a good job, or just to be doing something that was necessary, was the fact that so many of our boys were being lost. Now my hometown, my graduating class, there was a whole group of boys from my class that went to Guadalcanal that never came back. It was a sad… um, just like something hanging over the town. And it was a small town. Uh, I lived outside of Cleveland- Maple Heights, Ohio. And it was a small town. And that was just like something hanging over us that really kept us remembering. And, uh, if a sailor or, uh, a serviceperson came home and their mother had ran out of stamps or something like that, we just gave our stamps to that person so they could have a party. Yeah. And of course we didn't have packaged cake mixes or anything then. You made your own. So you needed the sugar and all the other things to go with it.

But, uh, no, it was always there and you knew why you were doing things. But you were, um… I have a motto that I have lived by for many, many years, I would say more than fifty, and it's, "Bloom where you're planted." And that's exactly what we all did; we bloomed where we were planted. We did what we had to do but we had a good time doing it. And everyone was in the same boat. There wasn't anybody better off than we were. And when… if there was, uh,

someone got a notice of a death in the service it affected all of us. It was just something that was always there, but we enjoyed ourselves, too; it wasn't all frivolous. Yeah.

00:40:04:03----------

De Mare: Um, was the… was the work force, was it… was it mostly people of, from the same kind of background, was it segregated, were there people of color? Can you talk a little bit about… about…?

Johnston: Well, uh, color. I grew up in, uh, Cleveland, Ohio, where there was always colored people. So I never knew about the segregation that they had down here. So it didn't mean that much to me if a… you were white or black; you were a person. There was never any of this segregation, so it didn't mean anything to me if they were black or white. Um, I know some people in Cleveland were very bigoted, as my mother and father were. But it didn't mean anything to me because I went to school with these people; they were my friends. One of my best friends was Pauline Holdman, and she was black. And, uh…

De Mare: Was the workforce at Ohio Crankshaft, was it segregated?

Johnston: No.

De Mare: No.

Johnston: No.

De Mare: No.

Johnston: No. No. No. It, uh, they were all there, black and white, and, uh, I did not have any black friends there. Uh, being a daytime worker, you know, nine to five or eight to five, um, it, um, I may not have seen too many, maybe… because you made more money working at night.

De Mare: Oh, really?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: Nightshift paid better?

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: By a lot, I gather.

Johnston: Yes. Yes. (Laughs)

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnston: Yeah.

00:41:44:17----------

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit more… you touched on it, and I'd love it if you could talk a little more about… you said that, you know, the… the way people looked at factory workers was as a kind of a lower class citizen.

Johnston: Mm.

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

Johnston: Well, I… I was angry with the men in the storefront hiring, the hiring men, I was angry. I said, "What's wrong with me?" And I had given them my background

and everything like that and they said, "You're just not the type of person," which again I did not understand. It was my father that told me. He says, "You're upper class." I said, "No, I'm not. I'm just a person." He said, "No. Compared to others, you're upper class." And we, uh, Cleveland was a bohemian, Polish, Slovenian town. It still is, I think. And, uh, those people came over here from the old country to work in factories, so they were used to… that was their type of life. And I was annoyed that I was not hired to work in the factory because I wanted money. And at that time I was not thinking of going into the Waves. I was thinking that I wanted to move out. And that's how I got into the defense front store.

De Mare: Um, how was it… what do you think it was like for… 'cause obviously women didn't work in the positions that you were working in the office before the war. You said that you took over for someone who was drafted. Can you talk a little bit about how the men handled having women working there with them?

Johnston: Well, Mr. Symot- was the name of my comptroller- he was, uh, very happy, he was very nice, and he was never disagreeable. Um, the other men that were, uh, say

supervisors or foremen or whatever you wanted to call them in their positions; um, I think they were just glad to have women to do the work. They didn't care if it was a man or a woman. Just someone to get the work done. And I think that's it.

De Mare: Yeah. So you didn't feel a lot of… you didn't feel, um, you always felt like you were welcome to do the work. You always…

Johnston: Oh, yes.

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnston: Yes, yeah.

De Mare: That is… that's what I was going for. Yeah.

Johnston: I don't know about in the factory, though. What it was like in the factory, you know. But, uh, in my position and where I worked, and I know walking through the factory I didn't have any problems.

00:44:30:17----------

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit… this is kind of a broader question… but can you talk a little bit about, you know, growing up the in… in the conservative kind of family that you did. It was… it seems like your father kind of ruled the roost.

Johnston: Oh, yeah.

De Mare: Um, can you talk about how things have changed in your perspective now, at this point in your life, looking at the world and seeing how things have changed for women. Can you talk a little bit about what you think that time had to do with that?

Johnston: I don't know if the way we were treated and the, uh, the work we did during the war had anything to do with it, but I do know that my friends and myself, we became more independent. We were not told; you asked us to do things.

Uh, I remember once my husband told me to do something, and I said, "Uh, what?" He said, "I want you to do such and such. Get it done." And I said, "Wait a minute. If you ask me to do it, I'll do it. But if you're

telling me, I won't do it." And he had to stop and think because we became independent. That's… and we knew… we had some self worth. We were proud of ourselves. We were proud of what we'd done. And we… we knew that self worth and we weren't going to give it up. I wasn't anyway. (Laughs)

And I was married and, uh, we had a baby and everything and he finally… he just demanded that I do something and I said, "Wait a minute." And it was just his tone of voice and the way he said it. And that was the last time he ever spoke like that to me. We didn't have a fight about it either, it was just, "Hey." So that's what… that's the way it was.

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnston: Yeah

Kelly: You said earlier that you… you had a really happy marriage.

Johnston: Oh, yes.

Kelly: And, um, can you talk about… a little bit about that from… you were… you started talking about independence and, you know, this… this defining moment in… early on in your marriage. And… and how do you think the Ro… the Rosie experience continued to… to just inform your marriage and your… your life?

Johnston: Well, that was… as I said, we became independent. We felt the self-worth that we were worth and we were… we liked it. You know, when you're always told what to do and how to do it and when to do it, and all of a sudden you're doing it on your own and you can do it, you feel so much better. So, I always carried that with me and, um, even when, um, my husband said that to me, it wasn't… I didn't flare and I didn't argue, it was just, "Hey, wait a minute." And it was just conversation.

00:47:53:05----------

So… and then, um, my husband was always one that, um, he wanted me to do something better for myself. Always. He was the one that told me, uh, I was always home with the baby or the children, and, well, it was George… was the baby, and he said, "You know, you have to get out and join

some organization or something. What do you want to do with your time? You need to get out." And I said, "Well, uh, the women's group at church has an evening circle. I'd like to go to that." So, when we had evening circle meetings, he would make sure he was there and, uh, took care of the baby or the children as it went on. And, um, he made sure that I got out.

When I was going to have my second baby, I said, "Oh, I'd love to have a sewing machine so that I could make a layette, instead of going to Lowbells, the baby store, and buying everything." I wanted to make it and he said, "Well, they have night school classes. Why don't you go and make the baby's layette there?" Well, he made time for me to go to that, and I made the baby's layette. Unfortunately, I… it was going to be a girl, you know that, and I put pink ribbons on everything and I had a baby with the reddest hair you ever saw, and it was a boy. (Laughs) But he wore the pink- when he was a baby, he didn't know the difference. (Laughs) So…

Kelly: That's great.

Johnston: Yeah, I bought the flannel and made the… all those things.

00:49:39:18----------

Kelly: Was there a ttt… was there a big reaction when… when the war ended and the… the men came back- was there, uh, a big reaction or what was the feeling of the women who were not allow… not supposed to work anymore and kind of go back into the home…

Johnston: There were with some women because, uh, like everybody there's good and bad and some women really resented being told, uh, "Well, so and so is coming back to work. You won't be working here anymore." And they didn't want to quit. But they soon would get a job some place else. But if they really liked their job, they really resented it. We did not have… I did not know any women in an authority position. They were all men in authority. So I think we just reverted back to being told what to do, you know, and we did it. I don't know anybody… well, I wasn't there then either because I was in the Waves and I got out of the Waves because I got married. That's why I got out. And my husband was being discharged so I got discharged. So…

De Mare: And did you work after that?

Johnston: Not at first. Um, at first I stayed home and then, um, my husband was not getting his raises, or a raise. He worked for Burrows Adding Machine Company, and, um, it was either we charge the food and pay for the coal for the furnace or charge the coal and pay for the food. So I said to him that I had to go to work and, uh, he said, "No, you're not going to work. Not my wife." And finally I brought it out to him with facts and figures and he cried because he was not doing enough to keep his family together. And I said, "Don't take it that way. Just be glad that I can."

So one day I went down to the hospital, which was practically in walking distance, and I said, uh, "I would like a job," and I became the night bookkeeper. He would come home at five, I would go to work at three. The neighbor girl would mind the baby for two hours and I would have the dinner ready. All he had to do is reheat it in the oven- no microwave. (Laughs) And, uh, I became the night bookkeeper for the hospital and that was pay for the coal or the food- whichever we decided needed it. And that's why I went to work.

But then, uh, after the… let's see… Glen was seven.

That's Glen that you met. He was seven and, uh, Gordon was twelve, and George was seventeen. And when they were that age my husband opened a business and I had to go and work for him. And I suggested that I go out and get a job to bring home salary til we saw how the business made out. No, I had to work for him. And so I went to work for him and, uh, that became a full-time job. And it was architectural hardware for architects and building homes or institutions or buildings; whatever. But to pay the rent in the store, you did locksmithing. So we had men that did locksmithing and, uh, my husband would do the bench work.

00:53:43:15----------

And one day going home- this is after several months- he was real worried and I said, "What's… what's bothering you tonight? Something's wrong." And we had a twenty-minute ride home from the store to the house so we could talk over… over things so we never talked about the problems of the store at home. So, I said, "What is the problem?" And he says, "We're just not doing any bench work." I said, "Yes, we are." He said, "Who's doing it?" I said, "Me." And he said, "What?" I said, "Yeah." Well, he got petrified. First of all, I didn't have a license; I

was doing it. Secondly, how could I know what to do? So I said, "Well, stay in the shop a couple of days and see what happens."

So I was doing this. Somebody would come in with a lock and wanted it changed. I'd say, "Alright. You know, we have such a nice little town right here, village," and I said, "Why don't you walk around, this'll take about twenty minutes. So, it'll be ready when you come back." And I'd get them out of the store and I'd take out a new one and look at it, an old one and figure it out, and, uh, then they'd come back and: "Here."

So I gradually… I worked on cars and all sorts of stuff. But, uh, my husband was so petrified. He said, "The store isn't paying for itself." I'd say, "Yes, it is." So I'd show him the books and he'd say, "Well, I see it but I don't believe it." (Laughs)

De Mare: That's really funny.

Johnston: Yeah, it is. He was… and he was real worried; this was bothering him for some time. But he'd come in off the road and there would be no bench work to be done for the next day or anything like that. I was doing it.

00:55:46:13----------

De Mare: You said a couple of times that there were no women in leadership positions and superior… in supervising positions. Um, could you just talk a little bit about that and about how that made you feel?

Johnston: We didn't know any different because it was always a man's world. We did not know any different and we didn't think anything about it. It was just the natural way of everything.

De Mare: When do you think that started to really change?

Johnston: I think maybe after World War II because, uh, I know there were never any women officers in the Navy until World War II and now you see, you got, um, commanders and admirals that are women. And I think it all started with World War II. But I don't say that's the real reason. It was just a way of… everything gravitated to that end. And we found ourselves. We really did. We found ourselves. And we knew that we could do things. And we were of worth. We were important. When that… the glue that won World War II. So, that is it.

De Mare: When you look back… if you can look back at yourself when you were, you know, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old at that time, is there anything that you would do differently or want to say to that young woman now?

Johnston: No, I don't think I would do anything differently because I think everything evolved as it went along. I didn't plan anything. Whatever… I've had a terrific life; I've enjoyed it, eh, through, uh, working in the work world, in church work. I just wrote a letter to my pastor and I outlined seventy-three years of volunteer work within the church and he was shocked. I was everything but the preacher in seventy-three years, and it's always been leadership. I was a leadership with the Presbyterian Women, I was leadership in the P.T.A., I was leadership in the Den Mothers; I did all that stuff. And wherever it's been I've always had a leadership position. And it's not that I looked for it.

Right now down at the senior center I'm an officer, down there, and they're giving me a new job. And, uh, where I'll be in charge, uh, not in charge, but, um, I'll be the liaison for all the people that have to ride the

county ride bus like me, with my walker and things of that sort. People that ride the county ride bus are a certain group and now I'm gonna be the liaison for that, between the directors and me and the group.

00:58:57:10----------

De Mare: Why do you think you are always the leader?

Johnston: I don't know because I never asked for it- it just comes my way. And I love it. (Laughs) When, uh, last year they asked me to go on the board- an officer- and I said, "Oh, no, I can't do that." And they… they talked to me a few times so finally I said alright. And I made up flyers and put them all over the senior center, um, 'Idilia is your Ideal Candidate'. And all kinds of stuff. And I… here I am.

De Mare: That's awesome.

Kelly: Great.