

Mary Anne Kniska Diamond

The Real Rosie The Riveter Project

Interview 11

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

June 27, 2010

ARRA Convention, Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
New York University

Interview: Mary Anne Kniska Diamond
Interviewers: Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly
Date: June 27, 2010
Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Diamond: My name is Mary Anne Kniska Diamond, and I was born in Clarksburg, West Virginia in May of, uh, nineteen and twenty-two.

De Mare: And, uh, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood: How many children were in the family, what your parents did?

Diamond: Our family was probably, uh, little more than average. There were ten of us in... in the family. I had, uh, two sisters and seven brothers and, uh, my father was a coal miner and, uh, my mother and dad both were, uh, immigrants from Czechoslovakia. They made their way over here- my mom was fifteen, my dad was nineteen- and they met in, uh, Menonga, West Virginia, when my mother came over to visit her sister. They were married and were married all those years, uh, and, uh, we had a big family.

Uh, we did a lot of, uh, self-perpetuating things. Like if you... if your job was to, uh, hang the clothes or to

help wash the clothes, we did that. You had to have that kind of cooperation in those days. That was before, uh, your automatic, uh, washers, and I remember when we got our first automatic washer, for everybody was happy. And we had... we had a great childhood. We went to, uh, Catholic school. We walked to school, which was probably, uh, approximately a mile and a quarter, back and forth. But at the time the streetcars were running and, uh, one of our conductors- he was an Irishman- uh, would stop and pick us up if he saw us walking home. So, we always appreciated that. And, uh, I went on to, um, high school and, uh, started to work as a record librarian at St. Mary's Hospital in Clarksburg, West Virginia, until the war started.

And then a friend of mine suggested we do something for the defense since all of the guys were gone. So we came to Akron, uh, Ohio, and immediately got a job at Goodyear Aircraft. And, uh, during that time they were forming the, uh, Goodyear Aircraft Women's Squadron, which was all of... They had one for the men, where they worked every place, and they started it for the women. And we were trained to go any place in any of the plants and be able to take right up if there were absenteeism or illness and so forth.

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Diamond: (Con't) So we went to school for a year. We also worked eight hours and had three hours of schooling each week. So if you were on seven to three shift you went to school after three. So, they were long days. But we had graduation and, uh, uh, then I was placed in a supervisory capacity where we had what we call 'The Squad House', uh, and that's where all the calls would come in if there was absenteeism on the line and so forth. So I was on supervision with a hundred and twenty-six women, which we, uh, dispensed all over the plants if they were needed. And if they weren't needed, they studied.

So, uh, I was there for, uh, until right after the war. Uh, the reason I came home was because my mother and father were both ill and, uh, uh, started to, uh, work at, uh, for a doctor and, uh, he was a medical internist and I worked for him for thirty years. So, what else do you want to know?

De Mare: Well- that was a lot of information very fast. So... so you... you were trained to do all the different work on the aircraft.

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: So tell me some of the things you were trained to do.

Diamond: Well, the very first thing we had to do was the nomenclature. We had to know what was... what was the wing, and what was in the cell, and what was the wheel in the brake and so forth. So, uh, that was in our schooling and you... you had to take a test to get on the squad. They just... the... the lady I went up there with, uh, she didn't make it. She... but I don't think she was that interested in going on.

But, uh, uh, we learned the different, uh, jobs like riveting- you know Rosie the Riveter- we learned how to use a riveter or use a... the gun without ruining the rivet, because if it wasn't just right they were thrown out. And we learned a hang form, uh, different parts of the plane 'cause when they would come out of the factory they weren't flush a lot a times. So they had... you had to pound it in a certain place to make it conform. Plus, we did, uh, we could go to any of the offices and work. So you learned just a little bit about everything.

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De Mare: Wow. And what kind of aircraft did the Goodyear Craft Company make?

Diamond: We made the famous F6F Corsair, the one whose wings folded up. It was used in, uh, the, uh, Pacific Train... that's when the Japs... That plane was, uh, one of the reasons that we won the war in the Pacific, because they were so versatile. I mean they could do just about anything with them. And, uh, we made, uh, all of the parts of the plane with the exception of... of the motor. The motor was made in Philadelphia, but, uh, uh, we did everything.

De Mare: And you said you were the... you supervised a hundred and twenty-six women.

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: And these hundred and twenty-six women were trained as you were...

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: ...to do all different...

Diamond: Absolutely.

De Mare: ...kinds of jobs and send out.

Diamond: Absolutely.

De Mare: And you were known as the... the Women's Squadron?

Diamond: The Goodyear Women's Squadron.

De Mare: Now, was it unusual that a woman would be supervising all those people?

Diamond: Might... might not have been so unusual but it was unusual in the... in the fact that you had to know where to send these women when the calls came in, because if there was absenteeism on the line or someplace where they needed help, you had to know, uh, just about what these gals could do. (Coughs) Excuse me.

De Mare: Sure.

Diamond: But they were... they were trained also so it was no problem to send these people out on the job because you knew that it could be done.

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De Mare: Now can you talk a little bit... 'cause you were born in 1922 you said.

Diamond: Mm-hm.

De Mare: So you grew up in the heart of the Depression...

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: ...in West Virginia.

Diamond: Absolutely.

De Mare: And your father was a coal miner...

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: ...and there were a lot of you.

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: Um, can you talk a little bit about what your financial situation was, and then how being a Rosie and earning money at... at Goodyear, how that changed your, um, financial life.

Diamond: Well, I don't know that it had a great, uh, effect on the income, uh, because the coal miners at that time did not make the money that they make today. But, uh, the, uh, the fact that you could go out and earn some money, uh, was great because you could spend some of it on yourself and the rest of it you handed over to mom. And that helped keep everybody else going, and not only me, but everybody in the family.

My brothers, uh, worked different jobs and, uh, uh, my one brother- next to the oldest- went on to become captain on the tanker, and, uh, self-taught, and was in the war, uh, at, uh, on the Pacific and in the, uh, Atlantic. And the tankers would go to Saudi Arabia and get, uh, loaded, and then they would join the fleet. But they had to, uh, uh, stay in what they called 'the coffin's corner', so in

case they were strafed and caught on fire that it wouldn't harm the fleet.

And, uh, my, uh, three other brothers were all in service and, uh, uh, they served in Europe and, uh, no- had four brothers instead of three, because my one brother was, uh, in the marines and, uh, he was in for the total time and he was all over the Pacific. The other two were in, uh, European Theatre.

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De Mare: Okay. Um, can you talk a little bit about what it was like for you working, making the machinery that was going to help, you know, the soldiers. Can you talk about your connection to the war effort and how that made you feel?

Diamond: Well, at the time we started we really didn't know how much effect that it actually would have until after we were out. But we took the men's jobs and without that, uh, without the women being there, it... we wouldn't have been able to produce as much as we... as the United States could. So this way there was not really a lot of let-up in the production because women learned they- a lot

of people thought, well, maybe we couldn't do it, but we did.

De Mare: Did you think you couldn't do it?

Diamond: No! (Laughs) No. No, because when we went to squad school that was the first thing they did, they instilled the confidence. They said, "Now, you know, don't think that just because you're a woman you can't do this, because you can."

De Mare: So that was in the school you... you... you learned that push.

Diamond: In the squad school. Yeah.

De Mare: Okay.

Diamond: And your own, you know, your own personal feelings, "If he can do it, I can do it, too."

De Mare: How did you, how did you find out about... Can you tell me the story about how you found out about the work again?

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Diamond: It was in our, uh, evening newspaper. Uh, the unemployment office was looking for people to work in the defense plants. So, (I thought) why not, why not take a chance? So... which we did.

De Mare: Now, um, coming from West Virginia, going to Ohio, can you talk about that as a young woman? How that... that shift was for you?

Diamond: Well, the first thing, uh, first thing we were called were 'hillbillies'. "Well, here come those hillbillies." That... that was another phase that... it was... it was really funny because a lot of people, uh, had no idea what... what they were saying when they said 'hillbillies'. But, uh, uh, we... we... I think and I... I'm not positive, but an awful lot of the... the women that worked were from West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan. And that... that- in our part of the country- I'm sure there were others, too. But, uh, it made a big difference and, 'course, we made better money, too, you know. So, uh, it was... it was a two-prong thing. It was adventure and money.

De Mare: I want you to go... I want you to expand on that because when you said they... they were... they didn't know what they were saying when they were saying 'hillbilly'.

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: So, from someone from West Virginia, what is a 'hillbilly'?

Diamond: Just a plain, old West Virginian. And the, uh, uh, the term 'hillbilly' has come down over the years. That's what we still call each other, 'hillbillies', when we want to. But for different people it has different connotations. But, uh, we always referred... you know, even our football team is ref... er... referred to as the 'West Virginian Hillbillies'. So it really doesn't mean a whole thing, it's just, uh, something, uh, uh, that has been used forever.

De Mare: Now, you said that when you got your first money, you said you... you were able to spend a little money on yourself, and then you said, gave the rest back to your... your mother.

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: Do you remember what you did buy for yourself as a young woman?

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Diamond: Anything I wanted. Things were a lot cheaper then. And we'd go down to the best store in Akron and.. and then get a good lookin' outfit, you know. Uh, but, uh, actually we didn't have to have that many- excuse me- that many clothes, because we wore coveralls at the plant. And you know those were easily laundered, and just hang 'em up, and then you put 'em on just like, after they dry, you put 'em on. That's what you wore. They were pretty good lookin' things, too.

De Mare: Yeah. And, uh, was that the first time you'd worn slacks as a... as a young woman or had you... did you wear pants as a woman before you worked there?

Diamond: Not... not really, no. My mom didn't approve of that. But, uh, the coveralls were great, and I mean, to

this day I wear denims, uh, because they're very comfortable. But they... they were one piece, uh, coveralls, we'd call them. So actually, it was easy, you know, you just jumped into those and you didn't have to worry about anything else. Just comb your hair and put some makeup on, you were ready to go.

De Mare: When you moved to Akron, do you remember where you lived? Like did you live in a room, did you rent a room, did you rent a house? How did that work?

Diamond: Well, Goodyear had a, uh, uh, task force that looked out for the people coming in, and they got us an apartment at, uh, on Center Street, not too far from downtown Akron. And, uh, we had... I had that apartment all the time I was there, even after my first roommate left, uh, one of the girls from the squad from West Virginia was looking for a place, so she moved in with me and we've been friends ever since.

And, uh, uh, it was, uh, we didn't have a car, of course, but a lot of the men who worked at the plant had to come down Market Street, so we arranged to have them pick us up regardless of what shift we were on, 'cause there was always somebody coming down Market Street to come into the

center of town, so we didn't have to worry about transportation.

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De Mare: And it was... it... was it organized? It was just casual, you would just...

Diamond: No, it was... it was pretty much organized, but if you didn't like it, you didn't have to do it. But I... all I had to do was walk out of my apartment and go not even a quarter of a block down to the corner and, uh, uh, Sam Kramer would pick me up, uh, regardless of what shift I was on, because they were on the same rotations, so it was no problem.

De Mare: Can you explain what the shift rotations were about? Can you explain that?

Diamond: There were three shifts at Goodyear: seven to three, three to eleven, and eleven to seven. That was the night shift. And when we went to school, we had to... to work those shifts, and then on our off hours or... is when we went to... to school. But it was set up at the plant, and

our instructors were all there at the plant, so we didn't have to do anything extra, it just took more time.

De Mare: What was the hardest thing you had to learn how to do at the plant? Was there something that you just... you didn't think you'd be able to learn how to do?

Diamond: Nothing that I can remember. Because we had good... we had good, uh, uh, they called them lean men and, uh, they would tell you what to do. And, uh, that wasn't hard to do as far as that was concerned.

De Mare: I think it's amazing that you learned to do all of those different jobs...

Diamond: You had to...

De Mare: ...I mean, you had... you had to be able to go be flexible enough to go...

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: ...from one to another to another.

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Diamond: Well, my most enjoyable time at Goodyear was in the flight hanger because I was on inspection with, uh, one of the, uh, uh, Goodyear, uh, inspectors. And they... they would instruct you- at first- what to look for because when the, um, the F6F was completed, the test pilots would test them at, uh, Wingfoot Lake which was right outside of Akron. And... and if there was anything wrong, they would bring them back into the plant and they called that 'crabbing out the airplane'. It was to see if there were any defects and then it was, uh, our job to fix those defects before they were sent to the Pacific.

De Mare: Oh. Now, what was the... what... what was it like to have all... 'cause women came from all over to work...

Diamond: Right.

De Mare: ...in that... what was the social life like there, with all of the young women?

Diamond: We had a blast. We had... one of our bosses had a, uh, dance hall in Ravenna, and every Saturday night he had a

square dance. So he would load us up in the car and we'd go to the square dance on Saturday night. Uh, and all... one of my, uh (coughs), excuse me...

De Mare: Do you want a glass of water? Would you get me a...

Diamond: Yes, please.

De Mare: Okay. I see.

Kelly: (unintelligible)

Diamond: Oh, thank you very much.

Kelly: (unintelligible)

De Mare: (unintelligible)

Diamond: One of the first things I did when we got to Akron was to look up a church because, uh, I'm Byzantine Catholic, which was at the time sort of, uh, uh, odd. But there was a Byzantine Church in Akron, and I went to church on... on the first Sunday, and the man who was the cantor in

the church, he probably noticed this little hillbilly sitting back there, so he... he came back and, uh, asked me, uh, you know, where I was from and so forth, and he took me under his wing, took me home and I had dinner with them and they were life long friends. They... they... they were just wonderful.

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De Mare: What were some of the... were... were... were you exposed to, um, I guess what I'm asking... were you exposed to people you hadn't met before? I, I mean...

Diamond: All the time.

De Mare: And what was that like for you as a young person?

Diamond: Well, it... it really didn't... didn't affect me too much because there was nobody that was shy in our house, you know, uh, you'd, uh, you met all kinds of people. Now, some you liked and some you didn't. But you knew how to avoid that. But most of the people as a general rule are very, very nice if you are.

De Mare: Um, what about, um, dating? Were there any, um... I know a lot of the men, of course, were gone, but what was the, uh...

Diamond: Oh, we... we don't want to go into all of that.

De Mare: Oh, yes we do. It's part of your life.

Kelly: It's our favorite part.

De Mare: It's part of your life. Like, I'm just curious. People don't understand.

Diamond: Well, at that time, you know, you didn't... you didn't actually have to have a date to go to the dances and stuff. Uh, we, uh, we lived close to, uh, Summit Park, and, uh, they had a lot of dances down there and we'd go down there and that that's how you got to meet people. And especially, as you say, 'dating', there... we were young enough that a lot of it didn't, uh, affect us that much. But, uh, uh, I... I... I just had a good time with a... a lot of guys. Period.

And, uh, uh, it was a different time than it is now, you know, this, uh, I was... I was just trying to remember

some of the... some of the dumb things that we did that, well, you wouldn't ee... even think of doing it today. But we'd go down to the park, just to dance. And, uh, you didn't have to go by yourself, I mean, there might be two or three girls, and, uh, uh, you didn't have to have a date to... to... to go a lot of places. Which you... you wouldn't do that today; you wouldn't go out by yourself at all today.

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De Mare: That's interesting. Um, can you talk a little bit about, uh, what happened when the war was over?

Diamond: When the war was over, I remember how jubilant every was... was because it was over. And I could have stayed at Goodyear in the Industrial Engineering Department, but my folks were both sick and that's why I went back to Clarksburg.

De Mare: Was it unusual that you could have stayed in the engineering department?

Diamond: Well, uh, no, not really. Not really. The, uh, the man, uh, Mr. Zimmerman, who was in charge of, uh, of,

uh, the department that I was in, asked me if I wanted to stay because they kept on manufacturing, uh, planes. Not... not on the scale that they had before, but then they went into other, uh, parts that they used the plane for.

De Mare: Do you... can you think about, um, is... are there ways that being a Rosie, um, do you think affected you or changed you, um, that you could talk about?

Diamond: Well, I think, given the opportunity that I had, at, uh, eighteen years of age and to be able to get on the squad, and to go all over the plant and work with people who were a lot more educated than I was, to me, it was a boon, and it has paid off over the years.

De Mare: In what ways? I'm just curious.

Diamond: Well, uh, the, uh, you could... you... you weren't intimidated by anything, you know. If you wanted to go apply for a job, that's what you did. Or if you didn't like it, you didn't... you weren't afraid to quit. So, uh, it... it taught us a lot that there's... That was a time of rationing, and, uh, I'm one... One of the gals today talked about her shoes that left green, uh, things. So we had the

food stamps and so forth. But after the war was over it was... it was totally different. It took a while to get back in the sw... swing of things, but, uh, it all came about normally.

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De Mare: Now, um, you had brothers in the military.

Diamond: Mm-hm.

De Mare: Um, and did you feel really connected to them when you were working?

Diamond: Oh, sure. Sure.

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

Diamond: Well, my... my oldest brother was in the Battle of the Bulge, and that was the... the hardest one, I think. My next-to-the-oldest brother was, I told you, was captain on the submarine at... on a tanker, uh, which was a precarious job at the time. Then, uh, my-next-to-oldest brother was, uh, in the army, and I had a... a brother that was a, uh,

retired... he was in the marines until he retired, and, uh, had two other brothers that served in Europe. And, uh, as I say, we were a close-knit family, we had a big family, and it was a joyous thing when they would come home because they always brought stuff home for the kids. Say, we... we had, uh, even today, uh, we have some of the souvenirs that they brought home for us. They didn't forget us about... forget about us even though they were over there.

De Mare: Wow, that's beautiful. Um, do you... do you think, I mean, I think a lot of, uh, you know, the young woman today standing up and saying that she's going to vet school and she wouldn't have been able to have these opportunities if the Rosies hadn't kind of paved the way.

Diamond: Mm-hm.

De Mare: And obviously you have, um, how do you feel like it... it has affected the younger generation?

Diamond: Well, they, uh, uh, some people still today don't believe that the women did what they did. I... I know when, uh, we went back home, my sister worked for the National Carbon, and the man who was, uh, the plant manager, was

asking about the war effort and everything, and she told him that, uh, I... I had been in industrial engineering, he said, "Ah, there are no women industrial engineers." So, I mean, that was one of the things you put up with and say, well, check it out and see, because it was. But that's when women did get a start in... into, uh, different positions. They weren't just housewives and, uh, mothers and so forth. They learned how to do an awful lot of things.

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De Mare: Questions from the... from the... from the group?

Kelly: Well, we kind of missed half the interview, so we... it's hard 'cause we don't know...

De Mare: No, I...

Kelly: You're great.

De Mare: No, it's wonderful to hear you talk. Is there wh... was... was there any kind of, um, do you have any

anecdotes, any... any stories, um, about little things that happened when you were at Goodyear, or, um...

Diamond: I have scars to show it.

De Mare: Tell... tell me the story. How'd you get the scars?

Diamond: Well, we were crabbing out, which was inspecting the wing on one of the F6F's, there was a little strip of material that went along, uh, one edge, so that the wind, when the wings came down, that they were airtight. And I was checking out the phenolic strip on it, and there was a fella in the cockpit, didn't realize that we were working on it, and some way he let... let something go with one of the, uh, uh, instruments that controlled the wing.

Fortunately, there was another man that I was working with that was right by me, and when it came down, it got these two fingers here, but he was able to stand under that so it didn't lock in, because if it had, it would've taken them right off. So that... that was my... I can tell that because I got the scars to show that.

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Diamond: (con't) But, uh, oh, there were... there were a lot of things that happened. Uh, you know, funny, and... and sad and, uh, but I felt the women did a tremendous job coming up with not... having to learn everything. That was the thing. Because I worked along with the men who were all graduate engineers, and... but they were wonderful to work with. They would show you how to do it and then if you made a mistake, or they thought maybe your time study wasn't just right, they would say, "Well, now look here, Mary Ann, you know, maybe you were too harsh on this, uh, study. Maybe you were too lenient on another study." Si that way you were able to equalize what needed to be done.

De Mare: Yeah. Is there anything looking back at that young woman who was, you know, so, uh, I don't know, so, so brave to kind of go out and... and get those jobs and... and learn all that... is there anything you'd like to say to her, like looking back?

Diamond: No, I thought it was a great myself and I never regretted a minute of it because we... we had a... we worked hard but we had a good time because our squad class had,

uh, uh, they had a, um, uh, organization that all the women- I think they must have had about five or six squad classes. We had a softball team, we could go out to dinner and so forth, and we didn't have to be afraid because we had people to go with. So, uh, I have no regrets about anything that I did.

De Mare: Fantastic. And is there anything you'd just like to say to the younger generation?

Diamond: Hopefully, they will take a look at Rosie the Riveter and learn something from that because I'm afraid today there's been so much eliminated that the younger generation doesn't really know a lot about what the women did in World War II.

De Mare: Terrific. Terrific. Anything else?

Kelly: Yay.

De Mare: Thank you, Mrs. Diamond. You were wonderful.

