

Mildred Crow Sargent

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 12

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare and Kirsten Kelly

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Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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Interview: Mildred Crow Sargent

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Date: June 27, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Sargent: I'm Milly Sargent but I was Milly Martin when I grew up. And then I married a man called Crow, Dale Crow and he died. Then I met my husband who is a Navy man. He and I danced well together so that was a good, good match so here we are. And then, while I was growing up I went to HUME Fogg High School and I don't know if you visited that or not. It's one of the older high schools in Nashville and it's downtown, Broadway. And I think it's the greatest high school in the world but you know I'm prejudice. But when the war started the men had to go and all we had left was young men and old men that couldn't do much but they helped. They did work like we did. I worked next to men who were older on the-on the gigs and they did good work. So they did their part.

01:01:02-----

De Mare: Where did you work?

Sargent: I worked at Woodall Industry in Detroit. And I made the Curtiss Wright Helldiver, which was a divebomber that travelled on shipped and then bombed from the ships. Now, I have a book written by a man about the Helldivers and he said they were an awkward plane and the pilots didn't really like to fly them but when they went out they knew that they were coming back because they were serviceable. And they said that they would get shot up every which way and they would almost always get back to the ship. But when they got back to the ship and here's my tearjerker, they would push them off in the ocean. Because I couldn't stand it when they said they pushed my Helldiver off into the ocean. But if they weren't, if they weren't fit to fly again they they had to do something with them. And that's...and they pushed them off. And they didn't have anything to fit them with. And I understand that. But it really did hurt to think that my Helldiver was going in the ocean.

De Mare: I bet it did.

Sargent: But they did say that they were were really good work with, to get back to the ship. They were serviceable.

De Mare: Now when you grew up, you grew up around
Nashville, Tennessee.

Sargent: Yes I did.

De Mare: And what did your parents do? What did your
father do?

02:27:19-----

Sargent: They were just- my mother was a textile worker. Ya
know, poor folks but good folks. I had a marvelous mother.
And my- my father was a good man.

De Mare: Now, when you began, when you began to work in
Detroit, can you talk a little bit about, hum, the
transition coming from Nashville going to Detroit. What
that was like as a young woman?

Sargent: Well it was really hard because we had to wear
pants to work in and I understand that was necessary but in
Nashville at that time, nice girls didn't wear pants. And I
had never worn pants in my life. So the first thing they

said when I got there was 'put pants on.' And that was hard to do. And the uniforms...we had to wear twill uniforms and they were heavy with long sleeves because the aluminum shavings would infect our arms if we didn't. But we had to wear them but they were hot and there was no air conditioning at that time. But it was good place to work. It was a small industry on McNichols Road in Detroit. And they were good to the workers. And they had union there. Do you want me to tell about the union? My experience?

De Mare: Absolutely.

Sargent: I liked the union. I think it did a lot for the people. At that time and before they have done a lot of people. But during war the rules- the same rules do not apply for me. They might for other people but not for me. But they came around- I was the fastest riveter and I have papers to show that I was the fastest riveter on both shifts. And I had really great pride in doing that. I was just 19, ya know. So I thought I was really doing a good job. And so this union man came around and said 'you are going to have to slow production. You're setting a production heavy day.' And I said 'those soldiers are not- they don't have a union. And they can't slow production.

If someone comes at them with a gun they've got to shoot.'
'And I have a gun so I'm going to shoot.' And they didn't bother me anymore but they did try-well they didn't get really bad with me but they said, you're setting production... Well it kind of made you feel a bit odd but everyone else felt the same way, they just didn't say it, you know. Didn't have opportunity to say it.

05:09:02-----

De Mare: Now how did you...do you remember how you found about the work in Detroit.

Sargent: By, on the radio. We didn't have television at that time. But I was ironing when- when they announced that they needed workers badly in Detroit, and- women and men. And I had a young son who was about 19 months old. And uh, my husband had a job very near there. I mean we didn't really need to go for work but we decided that if they needed people and we could understand that there, uh, especially women you know and I was an able body woman that that we should go. So we packed up and left and went. And uh uh had no trouble getting work. The first job I applied for. And we had to take two week training session for

riveting and uh, I had a wonderful person working with me who was called the Bucker. And she did good work, didn't chip the rivet tails on the underneath. So we got a lot of work and a lot of good work because she was a good worker. Ethel Clapin was her name. And uh, so it-it was a wonderful experience and when I left there after the war ended, I worked there until the war ended. When I left there, I went to back to Nashville and it was not long until the Korean War came along. And I-I go over to Vultee, which was at the airport at that time, Vultee Aircraft. And and, uh started riveting again on the B52. And this little plane that I did, it was a very big plane but the B52, I worked on the wing section of that, and boy that thing went across the plant. So I had really come up in the world as far as where I riveted but uh, yea that was good experience too.

07:09:13-----

De Mare: Let me ask you...you said you had a 19 month old son, when you first went-

Sargent: 19 months, yes.

Detroit: Now, um who took care of him when you were working?

Sargent: Now this is another story. We lived in a house with my in-laws. My mother-in-law and my daddy-in-law both worked at at um- Dodge at um...I think she made parachutes and I don't- he made something in the war but I- anyway uh, he had three sons and they all lived there with 'em. We we rented a big apartment. It was a hard to find a place to stay with youngsters. People- you know there were a lot of people coming in and it wasn't hard to rent a place so they didn't want youngsters. So we we rented a big apartment and all of us lived in the same house just had separate bedrooms and ate together so that's how we managed that. And...

De Mare: And who would take care of your son while you were at work?

Sargent: That that was an extra advantage to that because there was always someone there to look after the kid folks. So my mother-in-law mostly but when I wasn't there she.

De Mare: Hold on one second...

08:17:04-----

Sargent: Am I not beautiful in there?

Kelly: No you're beautiful.

De Mare: You're gorgeous. You're gorgeous.

Kelly: No you look great.

Sargent: She says I'm not beautiful but I look great.

LAUGHS

Kelly: You are beautiful.

De Mare: So um, so let's let's go backwards just a little bit. So you moved from Nashville to Detroit with your young son?

Sargent: Yes.

De Mare: And you were working-

Sargent: Mid- Afternoon shifts.

De Mare: Afternoon shifts and you were making the Hellcats?

Sargent: Yes, the Helldiver.

De Mare: The Helldiver. Sorry, Helldiver.

Sargent: There was a Hellcat so don't get mixed up.

LAUGHS

De Mare: Now, how old were you when you started doing this?

Sargent: 19 when I started...

De Mare: 19. So you had finished high school?

Sargent: Yes.

De Mare: But you hadn't gone to college.

Sargent: No.

De Mare: Not yet...So when the war was over, what did you do?

Sargent: Well when that war was over, of course, I raised another child. And I had two that died. And..I I, then they started the Korean War and I went up to Vultee Aircraft in Nashville and worked at the aircraft plant in Nashville and I worked on the B52. Now that was a step up because that wing went all across that plant. It was a huge thing, I don't remember how many feet. You know how big that thing was. And I was so proud when we put those things out. And they would leave us. I was a trustworthy person I guess and they would my partner and I at night to work without inspections. And they would depend on us if we got a bad rivet, we wouldn't close it up, ya know, put the skin over it without some inspector seeing it. And that has always been a matter of pride for me, that that they could depend on us to do that.

10:10:00-----

Sargent: After we lived- after I left that, my children were growing up. I had two sons and they were growing up and uh I had been putting back a little to send them to college but they had other notions, you know, at that time.

So I said, 'well if they're not going to use it, I am.'

Because I always wanted to go to college and I never felt that I could because I was from poor people. And I thought education was just ahead of me because they didn't give scholarships to women at that time. I don't care what you did, you didn't get a scholarship. Not many men did but not women for sure. So I said, 'well I'll just take that and go to school myself.' Well, well I thought I'd try it one time. UT (University of Tennessee) had a night school downtown and I thought I'd try it as see what I could do but when I came in with As. This is for me. I love school. I was in the top 15 in my graduating class and I went on to get a masters. And I went on to work on my doctorate and got all the hours I needed and then I got- I did the two term period of a- internship they called it. And I did all of that and then my husband died. He got sick and I had to go Florida. I couldn't take my orals and get my degree. You know...they had just started to do my dissertation. And so that has been a big disappointment in my life but I have I have published three scholarly books and I think sometimes that somebody up there will think about me and say that she deserves and honorary degree. Don't you think?

De Mare: Absolutely

Sargent: I was always on the Honor Roll and I don't know why and I couldn't do it now because I waited too long. My memory is not what it used to be. You understand that and I'm 88 years old. And but it was a dream of my mother's. She really pushed me in school. And I- she was a wonderful mother. And I would like to do it for her if nothing else. Just to say 'here mom, I got it.' But I have- my mother was an angel, ya know. You have mothers that you think about as angels but she was a super angel. Golden wings.

12:54:02-----

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about, because you talked about, you grew up poor in Tennessee and if you are 88 years old, you grew up in the Depression. Um, and your mother was a textile worker. What was it like for you to go start earning the kind, do you remember how much money you earned?

Sargent: Well it wasn't really a lot. I think maybe 35 cents an hour, wasn't it? When we first went there? It wasn't a whole lot. But I had- we had bought, my husband

and I had bought a little house. It was actually a little store that they moved onto a lot. It-it was a house ya know. And so I was able to pay for that house from what earns were there because both he and I were working and we combined our food and our stamps and all. So everyone got by cheaper in living and then we were combing our rent too and so I was able to but that house cost a \$1,000.00. It had two bedrooms but it had cost a \$1,000.00. And so in about a year I had paid that house and my uncle was so surprised because he had already sold an oat. I bought it from my uncle and he said, 'you haven't saved that much money.' I said yes but we didn't-there wasn't many places to spend money. We could go to the movies but that was about it, ya know? There wasn't many places that you could spend money. So it was- we could save. And then of course we were saving where we living. And I didn't have to pay for childcare. That was a plus. And I didn't have to worry about my child not being looked after. And um, we had carpools because not everyone had a car and there was not transportation to the factories. They had streetcars on the main roads but getting out to the factories was a different story. But uh, we had carpools and um, people would pick us up from work and take us home. And there we

were. We had to pay a little bit, I had forgotten. It wasn't a lot though.

De Mare: Can you can you explain because I don't think a lot people understand what it was like in terms of so many people moved to the areas that had the jobs at that point, temporarily. Can you talk a little bit about the kinds of people you met and what it was like for you to be from Tennessee and meet people from all over and what that experience was like?

15:19:20-----

Sargent: Well it was different from what I was expecting because we had always thought that the Civil War thing that Yankee's were just not nice people. And so I go to work with this young girl and it is a very close relationship because she down in the-the speed ring that I was working on and I'm outside. And I have to depend on her, how she hits that rivet as to how hard I'm going to shoot it. And I have to have confidence in her but she was a very nice person and I really did like her and the the North/South thing soon disappeared with her. Besides there were a lot of people from the South there too, ya know. We don't,

didn't have much industry in the South so the southern people who could work went to Detroit. So there were a lot of Southern people there. And um, the one thing that was a little different than I had expected, there was a black man working on the next jig. Well that was a little bit hard for me to take right at first but I began to like him and you know they had the Race Riots there while I was there and uh that poor man, I felt so sorry for him. He had eight children and he couldn't leave, he was afraid to leave his wife and family at home and yet he needed to work because he couldn't feed them without it. And I really did feel sorry for him and so it really made me feel differently about black folks than I had before. But otherwise I couldn't I couldn't complain about the way I was treated, no.

16:55:19-----

De Mare: Can you- for someone who- because you were there during the time of the Riots, can you talk to us about that and explain what happened?

Sargent: Well, you know, it's all rumor what you read in the paper and sometimes uh- the papers- uh try to do a good

job I think but you know they listen to this and that and try to make the best out of it. And I know I've taken reporting. Um, there's not much I haven't taken 'cause I like to study and I like to read and I like to learn. So I've taken some uh uh some editorial work. And so but the- my understanding is that there was some young people on Belle Isle which was the major um entertainment isle then. They have other places now but I think that was the main one then. And and um, one of the black students, not student, boys...uh...in one of the groups said something to a white girl and what he said, who knows you know. He said something to her and when he did the white guys felt it was there place to take up for her honor. And so it started and it just spread and it was just a terrible thing because like I say this poor black man that was working next to me...he didn't know what was going to happen to his family at home because they were going inside a house. And my husband at the time said that he went down on the major archway and I have forgotten what that is but there was a little girl, she said that she was about four years old and some- a little black girl and he said that someone had cut her with knives. A little child standing there bleeding. Now that was terrible. You know, I think that I developed more compassion for black people as a result of that than I

had before. I had not, I didn't really feel prejudice towards them because we didn't live far from uh- black town, you called it then and they went through the alley by my house and sometimes I'd wave and the little girls and stuff so I wasn't uh, prejudice and my mother didn't teach me that. She taught me to be kind to people. So but there was a difference there because I knew nobody associated with them ya know. And so it it- that brought out the best in me I think.

19:31:20-----

De Mare: And what was it like to work with the men so closely? You know because men and women didn't work together at the time either.

Sargent: They did at that time. Like I said there was a black man on the jig next to me.

De Mare: Right...Right...

Sargent: Now he was doing repair work. He wasn't, his his- we were doing new work and when it had to be repaired it

went over to him and he laid it on the floor and did it. So he was right next to us, a black man. And so there was... and they had, they had rest periods for women, um, I'd say twice a day and maybe ten minutes at a time, which was different. Now we did have one instance of black relationships that caused a little problem but it didn't last long because most of the people were like me. They were broadminded about that. And and um, when, um Roosevelt, his wife mostly said if you don't hire women in the war work, we need them, if you don't hire black women, we're going to take your contract. So it didn't take long for them to hire black women. And so when they came in the white women, some of them went down to the office and protested and they wanted me to go and I said, 'no, I won't go with that.' But they said that they went down there and complained that they didn't want the black women in the restroom with them. They said that they'd be dirty in the restroom. Now this is what I heard, I don't know. It's a silly thing isn't it? Why would they be anymore (dirty) than we were. But that was one incident that we had but it didn't amount to anything 'cause they didn't listen to them in the office. We had- well they had to- in order to keep their contact they had to keep them.

De Mare: So- so what union did you belong to?

Sargent: AF of A I'm sure...yes.

De Mare: And do you remember what you did? Did you pay dues? Do you remember?

Sargent: Yes. I don't remember ever going to a meeting but my sister who worked in Nashville at Vultee. She was a secretary in the office. She did belong to the union and was a secretary for the union here. But I never talked to her much about it and she's dead now so I can't. I did have connections with the union here. But I believed in the union...you know I was a history teacher. After I went to college, I taught at Two Rivers High School and uh and uh I- you know I taught about the unions how they developed and how much good they had done. No one knows what, unless they worked in a plant that didn't have a union, how people mistreated my husband worked in a plant...and he said if the boss didn't like your looks he'd say, 'fire that man. I don't like him.' Only they'd use tougher words than that. And the man hadn't done anything and it's just that- the union made a difference. You had to have some reason for hi-firing a man. And they really did help. So...what

happened to me had nothing to do with me feeling the union was a good thing. It was just what they were doing to me was not what I would accept.

De Mare: Right...

Sargent: And so they accepted what I said and left me alone.

De Mare: Can you tell that story about you being the fastest riveter? Can you tell that story for me?

Sargent: Well I had this paper there but it's- they timed. They were always timing people. How much it took for this and how much time it took for that. And they timed the night- the day shift workers first and then they timed the night shift. And I- everyone agreed that I driving anymore rivets than anyone else. So I beat the day shift. Two or three rivets a minute. So...and I've got the thing that tells exactly how many rivets but that's not important really. But I had a great deal of pride in in because I had grown up without any advantages myself and having a place in the making of history and the winning of the war and all this was very, gave me a lot of pride. I had great pride in my

work. And sill, I got a model of the Helldiver in my bedroom. I look at the thing at night. LAUGHS. But it's it's...I've based a lot of my life on pride. Even though I came from a poor section, I was determined to have an education and I almost have a doctorate. And that's...and that's a good accomplishment. And I then, I know that I did a good job on my work, my war work.

24:44:08-----

De Mare: And do you feel...So I'm going to ask you this and I think that you've answered it but I would love it if you could talk about it. Doing that work and the work was so important that you were doing. You know working on the Helldiver and working you know on the B52s, which I can't believe just the scope of that.

Sargent: Oh yes.

De Mare: Can you talk about how that helped you in your life personally?

Sargent: Well of course it made me self-supporting even though I had a husband who worked. I could feel that I

could contribute to the welfare of my family. And of course, if I had not worked I would never have been in the position ever to go to college or send my kids to college because you know one person could not make enough to do more than just take care of us. So it did make a difference in my life.

De Mare: And um...

Kelly: Sorry. We have about five minutes.

De Mare: Ok, so we only have a little bit more time unfortunately so what we want to get to is just if you could tell us the story of what you did to help with the War Memorial and with getting the Rosies recognized.

25:54:02-----

Sargent: Well Fran has done most of what has been done to get them recognized. I give her credit for really doing a good job. And she has done most of that. But for the World War II memorial that was a thing close to my heart too. And I would get out on street corners and pass out those little pamphlets that they gave to have you send in

money. And do that. I also wrote articles in the newspaper. Every time I could get somebody to accept it I would write another article. Opinion page or what-have-you, I wrote it. And then I would uh, what else did I do, John?
LAUGHS.

Kelly: John, you can say it now because she's not talking.

John: Uh?

Sargent: I wrote to different people who had money like Gates and Oprah and his plant and uh, uh my husband's plant. And say here, 'He was a veteran and he helped win the war and you better send some money to help us build a memorial to him.' And they all gave 'cause we we had a pool inside the office there. A young man who liked us and he would tell us when checks would come in that I helped to get. He would tell us about it so we got a lot of things. They have made another commentary of me. And it was made, what about ten years ago? On CBS.

John: A bit before she...

Sargent: And that was about the time I was working so hard. I had, I went to Washington several times. Maryland, places around to make speeches to raise money. And um, that's what he's talking about. They made a commentary of that and you might want to look back in the archives and find that.

27:48:00-----

De Mare: Now what was done at the memorial to honor the Rosies? Can you tell us?

Sargent: Well they have a a system set up with all the names and you can go there and punch in the name you want and they will tell you can locate it and they are honored just like the men. It's a wonderful thing, a wonderful thing. And it's the first time that women have been honored in any memorial and that- that was really a plus to me but I wanted the men honored too because I lost an uncle in Okinawa. And um, it's... uh, the War Memorial, it's a special thing for me. It feels I feel that I own part of it. I helped...and I say to myself and that's really stretching the point but I say to myself, I helped build that that little article there or that one, you know and just pretend to

myself. But of course I know what little I did didn't touch much but it helped.

De Mare: I think it did..

Sargent: And there were wonderful people working there, wonderful people. Bob Dole was in charge of it at the time and he's a really nice person and uh, uh, I can't name all of the persons but he was the head of it. So that was a good experience of me because they brought me up there three or four times to make speeches and stuff and I felt so honored. Here I am, this little girl out of the sticks, and they are bringing me up here to make speeches to these, you know there were these people with these degrees and what-have-you up there. Rich people. That I was telling the story...

Kelly: Why was it so important to you to get that monument built?

Sargent: Oh yea it was really was. And and I felt so honored that what I did, such a little bit I did such a little bit that did was helping to do that. And you go over there and see it, it's such wonderful place. Have you seen

it? You you just can't imagine what it does to me. You just can't imagine. And I had a cousin who her father got killed in service and she wanted to go when I- when they dedicated the grounds and it was just wonderful to watch her. How- Because her father was being honored more than other people might say because it was her father. The whole thing, the whole experience was just wonderful for me. And the Rosies, I feel a kinship with them because they were there working with me. I didn't see all of them but they all had their little part to do and without the Rosies we couldn't have done it. And when you think about it the world was on its knees. Europe was down you know. England was gone and and France was gone and he we were. Our men were off everywhere. All over the world. Most of our Navy was gone, except the carriers and the plan I built flew from a carrier. Now, now that's a wonderful story. My little plane could help bring us out of that. It was a little plane but it did it- it was noisy. It it blasted them. And the Navy, the fact that most of it got destroyed in Pearl Harbor but we still, our aircraft carriers were outside. And our little planes that I helped build helped to win the war. It didn't win it but it helped. And, and...it makes me feel really important sometimes when I think about it, I think well you shouldn't be so self-satisfied well

not self-satisfied it's just that without us the men weren't there. Without us, they couldn't have done it. England had nobody left. They were being bombed to bits. Who could do it but us? And we were there and we did it. And the Rosies are the being complemented for what they did. We had some great Rosies.

Kelly: Thank you.

De Mare: Thank you so much.