

Idamae Mason

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 17

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare

June 28, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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

Interview: Idamae Mason

Interviewers: Anne de Mare

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Mason: I'm Idamae Mason and I live in Birmingham, Alabama and during World War II, I worked and Consolidated Vultee Aircraft uh on Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans, Louisiana.

De Mare: What did you do there?

Mason: I inspected the castings and forgings that was being machined into the landing gear. We had the first had to check to see if there was enough metal in it to be machines and then I had use the Rockwell Machine to test the hardness of it. And then if it past that, I would send it to Magnaflux to see if there were any cracks inside and if there were, if it was okay it would be machined.

De Mare: Now, had you ever done any work like this before? When you were younger?

Mason: No.

De Mare: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, like where you came from and how you ended up there?

Mason: (laughs) Well I'm a little country girl. I walked three miles to school. It was a two-teacher school. And uh back then, you had to first- the first year was the primer. If you're little red hen found a seed, it was a wheat seed. Had to go through all that. But I had a brother and sister older than me. I knew my alphabet so and I could spell words in the newspaper so I learned to read before I even got to school.

De Mare: That's wonderful.

Mason: So I was only in there a month and then I went into the first grade.

De Mare: And what did your parents do? What kind of work did they do?

Mason: My father, at that time worked on the railroad. He was carpenter on the railroad. Of course, mother stayed

home and took care of the children and would over see the farm work.

De Mare: And what kind of farm work would you do?

Mason: Well, a little bit of everything. Uh we had sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes and the winter Irish potatoes. Peanuts, corn, had to pick cotton. And raised hay so we had to raise everything that uh was necessary on the farm.

De Mare: So now as a young woman when you went to work down in New Orleans, what was that like- you were earning money. What was that like for you, to earn that kind of money that you earned-?

Mason: Well it was big money. Well, I thought this is like having an executive job compared to what- you only got a dollar a day.

De Mare: Working on the farm.

Mason: No I didn't get paid for my work.

De Mare: So where did you earn a dollar a day, when you were down in New Orleans?

Mason: No, ironing and tailoring in Birmingham, Alabama.

De Mare: Ok.

Mason: I first started out altering fur coats, which I didn't know how to do but I learned right quick. My boss never did find out about it. I picked up a pair of scissors to cut the fur and the one of the ladies knew I didn't know anything about it so she (didn't say anything)- so she showed me how. And uh I kept that until- you know that's just seasonal. So at Christmas time they told me I would sell toys and I said, "I'm no salesman. I don't want to sell." And so well you have to. So I went up and third customer came in. I had pulled out everything. And of course, this was during the Great Depression and no one had much money so when she asked to waited on, I said, "do you want to just look or are you going to buy?"

05:03:21-----

Mason: So I decided I wasn't a salesman.

De Mare: Now can you tell me the story of how you got the job working in the defense plant. Do you remember how that happened?

Mason: Well the plant opened up and I decided that would pay better than what I was getting. So you had to go to classes, three weeks, to learn the proper names for the parts of the plane. And then you uh had to buy your uniform that you wore and go into the plant. Well they tried me at the to be a riveter. But my wrist wasn't strong enough to hold the- I cou- to hold the pneumatic gun. But you had to have electric to actually do the work. It was too heavy so they said you'd be buckler then. I was a buckler one day. I came in, I couldn't hold it in both hands. I would hold it up and I was all black and blue. So then they put me on bunch work. You had to uh. My job was to drill hoes in the forms where they blanked out the parts. Well I got metal poisoning and they wanted me to take sick leave. And I said, "I'm not sick. You can transfer me to another department." And they didn't want to so I said, "I'm going to sit on that stool eight hours and draw my pay." And that's what I did for six weeks. And I went to night school at Tulane University. I wanted a blueprint reading

but the class was filled. So I signed up for aircraft drafting. I did not know what I was getting into. So about the second week, the professor looked at the class and said, not a third of you will to finish. And he was looking straight at me. And I thought well buddy I'll show you I'll finish. Because if he hadn't said that I'd probably quit. And I got my certificate and I thought I was going into blueprint reading and that's when they put me in inspection. And that's where I stayed until the war ended.

08:25:03-----

De Mare: You had quite the adventure there. Now can you tell me the story of when the war ended? What happened after the war?

Mason: Well we had to give up the- they sold the plant to Kelvinator and uh while I was working you had to work three- there were three shifts, the render shift, the swing shift and the graveyard shift. Well I had just come off the graveyard shift and I had just worked three months by the time you got oriented to that one, you were changed to the next one. So I was glad I came off of it otherwise I would have had to clean up for that department. So I drew my-

went back to Collinsville. I mean, Yup, back to Collinsville and drew my penance. I think it was twelve weeks.

De Mare: Unemployment?

Mason: And then I went to New Orleans, I mean to Birmingham. I came in to Birmingham and got a job in tailor.

De Mare: And is that what you did for a while after that?

Mason: Yea, then I decided that I couldn't use my hands very good because I got metal poisoning I just couldn't work my hands real good. So I got a job as a payroll clerk with a gas company.

De Mare: Can you tell me about the metal poisoning in your hands? Can you explain that to me?

Mason: Well you had to drill uh they used the Kirkside which was an aluminum alloy to make the form and that the shavings and drilling it entered the pores of my skin. Uh it formed uh a hard surface. These three fingers were

pulled in like this. So you couldn't do anything with your hand like that.

De Mare: Do you have-I wish we had longer to talk to you. Do you have a favorite story that happened? Like an anecdote you remember. An event that happened while you were working that stands out among the other things?

Mason: Well, yes. Uh Errol Flynn. You know movie stars had to come and promote bonds. Well Errol Flynn came and he was so drunk he couldn't find the gate so he started climbing the fence. So he came back to the hotel. He was about halfway up the fence by the time-

De Mare: That's amazing.

Mason: And uh we only had thirty minutes you know for lunch and we had three different lunch periods and you only had thirty minutes. And they tickets- the colors were changed and if you didn't finish in thirty minutes they'd have to call your boss before you could pay for it. They'd dock you for a half an hour. So everyone wanted to finish up. They started running and then they put up a sign, walking ten miles an hour. So Victor Mature came and we were headed

right at lunchtime. So we couldn't stay and talk to him we had to run and get through that line. He got close we didn't pay him any attention.

13:06:02-----

De Mare: When you worked in the plant, was it is mostly women or was it women and men? What was it- how was it?

Mason: It was well the ones that- I guess there were about as many men as there were women. Because it took the men to find- I mean to uh get everything ready to be- the plane to be put together.

De Mare: Ok, so the men did a lot of the heavy work- heavier work than the women did at that point?

Mason: Yes and they sabotaged all of two planes. Uh they uh, you know they had to test it over Lake Pontchartrain. Uh see they had the pontoons where they could land on water as well as the landing gears for the land. And uh, he started to take off and the propeller fell in Lake Pontchartrain. And they- They had brought the FBI in. I could spot every one of them because they wore uniforms

just like everyone else but they didn't do much work. They would be pretending they were working then they'd raise up and look around at everybody. That's the way they caught them. Was you know, whenever they tried to do sabotage work.

De Mare: So who were the people doing the sabotage work?

Mason: Um, well I wasn't it that part of it to know exactly where and they second one was- it was like he had just taken a knife and chopped it off behind the pilot and co-pilot and they landed in Lake Pontchartrain and the shrimp just uh left the skeleton but they were fastened to their seats, the seatbelts was still in tack. The clothing they had on underneath on between them and the seat, that was the only way they could identify which one was which.

15:47:23-----

De Mare: That's a terrible story.

Mason: I mean, it was a clean cut and how that- I never could figure that out.

De Mare: Now do you remember how much money you were paid to work there? Do you remember how much you made? But you remember it was a lot of money at the time for you?

Mason: Yes it was.

De Mare: Do you remember what you did with the money.

Mason: Well I sent it to my youngest brothers in school in New York to do electrical and gas work.

De Mare: You paid for his education?

Mason: Yes.

De Mare: And what did you- after the war, how do you think, did doing that work change you? Do you think it affected you to be involved in this bigger effort for the war?

Mason: Yes.

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

Mason: Well, it changed the lifestyle of everybody. And of course back then uh, we had to be dressed proper. You couldn't let your ankles show and you couldn't wear blouses with low necks. So uh of course if they saw it today, they'd have a heart attack.

De Mare: Do you think- you think that working women- can you talk about that? How did it change- how, how did being a workingwoman change that attitude do you think?

Mason: what we started wearing pants suits then. We were not allowed to wear pants suits to go shopping. You had to be dressed like you were going to church. Make sure you had your gloves and your hat or they would not wait on you. Uh we didn't have time to go home and change clothes if we wanted to buy something after we got off from the plant. So I showed as long as I could stand it because they kept waiting on everybody else that came in that was dressed proper. And I said, "are you going to wait on me or do you think my money is too dirty?" So they got busy and waited on me. I knew that I was making a lot more than they were.

De Mare: Do you think it effected, because obviously you have a daughter. Do you think, do you think that going out

and working in that way and earning that much money and being that independent, do you think that changed how you raised your daughter?

Mason: Yes it definitely.

De Mare: It's interesting because I wonder how from your perspective if you thought that the way you raised your daughter was different than the way you were raised. Can you talk about that?

Mason: Well I wanted her to, as she grew up to experience everything. And pay attention to things that were happening. And I got criticized because they thought I was too lenient with her but I knew that for her future she needed to know all about that.

19:49:14-----

De Mare: I think you did pretty well.

Daughter: She had a- she wanted- she went to college and uh her father said that if she went to college she was going to be a schoolteacher because she could only be a nurse, a

school teacher. You know there are only certain things you could do. That a woman could do. And that's not what she wanted to do-

De Mare: Can I ask you what you did want to do?

Mason: I wanted to fashion sketch. Uh, you see you did not work in an office with men because they might rape you. That was that idea. You could teach school but you couldn't work in an office even if you were in a different room. That just thought that men were terrible.

De Mare: So interesting. So what did- did you end up going to school for fashion illustration?

Mason: no I didn't.

De Mare: What did you end up going to school for?

Mason: Right after the war I worked in the Dash Company. I was- did payrolls. And I gave out uh if anybody didn't know about the place, they'd come and ask me. SO I learned all about how the operations were and I check all the- each department had to make out their own payrolls but I had to

proof them before they'd let them through. Make the checks out.

De Mare: Now um, and I don't know if you can answer this question but it's a question that's been on my mind when you talk to the women about going into working in- you didn't have a family at that point. You were single, you were still a young girl at that point. Do you know what the women did who had children and families? Like how they dealt with have kids and going to work when there was no one to take care of the kids?

Mason: You couldn't.

De Mare: You couldn't. I've just been wondering about that because I know so many women went to work-

Mason: No, they started after World War II.

De Mare: I was just curious-

Mason: You had to do the best you could but you stayed home and took care of your children.

De Mare: So you talked a little bit about the attitude um you know you weren't supposed to work with men in an office, this was after the war. During the war, when you working side-by-side with the men, did you have any trouble with them? Did you have any challenges?

Mason: No. no.

De Mare: No. Nothing.

Mason: They were willing to show anything that I wanted. They all knew me down at the plant. No matter which building I was in. They- the two lift operators were having and argument and uh I had gone to help the girl out who checked out the aluminum sheets because they were behind. And uh, they had European A-frame. They bent her leg up- you know bit the bottom leg. But I hollered for them to stop and they didn't pay me any mind and I screamed just as loud as I could and that got their attention. And several of the bosses from the main plant come running- they thought I was about half dead. They came in and saw that nothing was wrong with me and said, "Idamae, what's the matter?" And I said, "Well, they wouldn't pay any attention to me and they were bending that girls leg. I said I

thought they were going to break it." So they- I screamed to get their attention. I didn't dream that they could hear it all the way to the other building.

24:13:08-----

De Mare: That's a wonderful story.

Mason: Everybody was extremely nice to me.

De Mare: It's interesting because we hear that a lot but also that there was this feeling that you weren't supposed to work with men because it was so dangerous, or it was not lady like and yet you're in the plant and everyone seems to think- you know. Now was there any kind of labor union where you were? Was there any kind of- was there a labor union? Were you a member of the union when you worked or no?

Mason: No.

De Mare: No, ok so there was no union.

Mason: No, inspectors and uh the ones, the different department heads were under a ten thousand dollar bond. So uh when people would come in visitors you know walking around and ask me uh, what I was doing and I would say if you want to know you're going to have to ask my boss. And uh, so well uh, you can't tell me what you're doing? I said, I told you- you have to ask my boss if you want to know anything about it because they were slipping out, blueprints and things. And there was a lot of stealing going on when it first opened up. What they would do, they some of them would you know steal what you call silverware now, they would take rolls of paper- toilet tissue and wrap it around their body to go through. They final had to get women to check the women because the men weren't supposed to touch the women.

De Mare: That's interesting. So they had a lot of theft from the factories.

Mason: And they found out that they were sneaking out blueprints and selling them. There were three German submarines in the gulf and a Coast Guard could only go so far out and they would come almost to the Coast Guard. What they wanted to do was to get in the land. They knew

we were getting the castings and forgings, nuts and bolts from Birmingham so they could come to Birmingham and bomb them. To keep, so we wouldn't have anything to work with. And they dynamited the levee twice. They wanted to just wash us away but they threw bags of seamen in too and then they built it up for two Jeeps. They'd meet in the center and they'd patrol 24 hours a day.

De Mare: Just if there was anything else you want to say about that time in your life. Just from your own perspective, anything that you wish people knew?

Mason: Well, not off hand.

De Mare: That's ok. You did wonderfully. This was lovely. It was really lovely to get to meet you a little bit. And I loved your stories, I really did. I really loved your stories so thank you so much.

THE END.