

Kathleen and Ken Powell
The Real Rosie the Riveter Project
Interview 18

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare

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Nashville, Tennessee

For The

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New York University

Interview: Kathleen and Ken Powell

Interviewers: Anne de Mare

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Kathleen: My name is Kathleen. I was Kathleen Owen and I'm now Kathleen Powell. I grew up in a little small town of Williamston, South Carolina and doing and I graduated from high school in 1938. I did not go to college and that fall I was helping in the town clerk and treasurer with some of his records just to be helpful to him because he was a friend. He knocked on my door one evening and said, "You seem so interested in what the work that you were doing helping me with the records. Would you be willing to come and help me and I will pay you from my pocket." I two family farms plus my job with the town and I'm so snowed under with work. So I told him I'd be glad to. So I started to work under him and he assigned me jobs. A little later on there was a uh some of form of government that if you were employed by somebody than the government would supplement that income. And so I was able to work longer hours because of this of this fund. It was WPA but it was for young people so I was being paid a little more money, which I was very grateful for. Now in December Pearl Harbor

came a long and it wasn't very long before he had to register and being a single man it wasn't very long before was drafted and sent away. And I was doing his job and mine both and they the little town had four Councilmen or Alderman and mayor and they kept saying that we got to get help from Mrs. Owen. She can't keep doing both jobs. So they said well why we don't we let her, she's going to have to show the man- new person his duties because the Town Clerk had gone to service so they said why don't we just go ahead and let her be Town Clerk. And they said but it's a woman's- man's work. And they said, "but she's been doing the job so finely" that they voted for me to be Town Clerk and Treasurer and I was paid \$75 to work full-time six days a week- I worked on Saturdays sometimes also. Now as a result of that I was be responsible for a lot of things that older people would have done like run an election or meet with the town attorney but this this was my job. A little bit later on I decided that I really would like to do something more for the War Effort. World War II was where everybody wanted to do as much as they possibly could. And so I got on bus one morning and road 17 miles to the Airbase there where they were training B25 pilots and when they find out that I had worked with money they immediately wanted to hire me to do that something that was

involving money. So anything on the Airbase that had to do with money like dry cleaning, jute boxes anything that had to deal with money. The money came to my offices. The reports, I made the reports; sent the money to the bank collected- collected money for them for their cash. And I also, I worked there I worked there 'til V 'til V 'til V 'til V-J Day. And then I left thinking that I was employed and that I had a full-time job because I was taking care of my mother. So I went to work for a church.

04:48:11-----

De Mare: Wow. So were you the first woman who ever held that Town Office?

Kathleen: Yes. And one of the state papers and I don't know which put an article in the paper that I was the youngest female town clerk.

De Mare: That's amazing. Now do you think- How do you think that has changed how we look at those positions now?

Kathleen: Well now since I've stayed in touch with that town and every town clerk since then as been female.

De Mare: You must have done a very good job to pave the way. Now and when did you meet this gentleman here?

Kathleen: Ok when I the airbase when I left he airbase because I thought the bases would be closing. It didn't occur to me that we had not finished the war. But so I went ahead starting to find a job and I was real active working in my church as a volunteer and uh went to work went to work as the minister's secretary. Now when I graduated from high school I did not have any typing. And I would go on my, the high school started giving typing and so when I was working as a town clerk, on my lunch hour I would go over to the school and take typing. So I began so I began typing so I learned to type and I became secretary to this minister. The- at that time at that time the war it was '45- at that time soldiers were coming home. And he came he came every Sunday to the services in full uniform as a second Lieutenant and um they became interested and several people became interested in him because he came so regular to the services. And I gave him a- asked him if would help me work with a teen group and that's where we met and became acquainted and married. And then he stayed- we stayed there so he could go to college.

07:15:00-----

De Mare: And Ken, would you introduce yourself to us and tell us a little bit about your history?

Ken: I'm Kenneth Powell and uh I was born in Marion, Indiana and then we moved to Texas. Dad was working until the Depression came along and he we had a lot of problems and the Depression made us move to Florida and I uh at uh well because of the Depression I didn't get but two years of high school. I didn't finish high school. Then I had to go to work and then the Depression made us move to Connecticut and there I was working at PetroWorks with the aircraft doing some artwork for the PetroWorks for the aircraft. Then Pearl Harbor came along and uh I jumped up when I heard about it. My mother said, "Sit down, son." She knew what I had in mind. But the next day I joined the Marines and I passed but a brother of mine failed that test. Later on my older brother joined the Marines with me but later on but then they put me through another test and I failed that. While I was trying to get in the Marines- trying to get in the Air Force I was drafted in the Medics. And uh then because I- in order get in the Cadets after I was in the Medics, I had to pass three tests but not having

high school, I had to take three tests before I could pass it. But I got in the Cadets. And then, in the Cadets I went through 9-monthes of training and then I picked up a B-17 in as a Co-pilot on a B-17. We left- picked it up in Savannah, Georgia. Then we went to- flew over seas and a Prestwick, Scotland on D-Day, we were in- I was on my way to my base at Dunthrop when I hear about the D-day going on. At the time I didn't know it but my brother was on Omaha Beach but I didn't know that until 50 years after the war. My other brother was in the Pacific with the Marines and uh... So when I got to my base it was but a few weeks after that I was shot down on my third mission. And uh, spent 10 months as POW. And when the war came along- when the war was over, I came back to the States and uh spent, I stayed in the service two years just to fly around more. Different bases. And I end up at the last base in Greenville, South Carolina where I met her. And uh, that's how I met her.

10:05:20-----

De Mare: And and when you met, you were still in the Military at that time?

Ken: Yes, I- I 1947 I got I got out of the service and got married and started college at the same time.

De Mare: So you started college after after you got out of the service. Now, Kathleen, can you talk a little bit about how you said you wanted to help out as much as you could during the war and that's why you left your Town Clerk work and went on to do the other work. You worked at which aircraft company?

Kathleen: It was it was the Greenville Air Force base where B-25 pilots were being trained.

De Mare: Ok so did you actually work for the military?

Kathleen: Yes.

De Mare: Ok.

Kathleen: I was responsible for anything on the base that dealt with money such as a dry cleaning- or in other words people- a company would go on the base would go on the base and pick up dry cleaning or shining shoes or the jukeboxes was in every PX so that in anytime- so that the money in

the jukeboxes at the end of the day would come to me. The money from the PX would come to me. The money- and I would I would make reports and deposits and then they'd be taken to the bank at the end of the day or sometimes at the beginning of the next day.

De Mare: So what was it like to work on the base and watch these young soldiers come in and out?

Kathleen: Well it was rather disappointing in the fact that in the longer that you stayed there you realized they were training them as fast as they could so that they these B-25, he flew B-17s but there was a B-25 bomber. And they were trying to get them, and this was when Germany had control of the air and they were trying to get the Military, the young men trained at B-17s and as fighters and as bomber pilots as they could. So you would, you got to know some of them and then two or three days later in some cases we would say, "Do you remember such-and-such? Well he was shot down yesterday." So we so we were aware, we were aware of the seriousness of it. Now the humorous part of it was that I had a safe in my office that I dealt with giving 'em for change or bringing 'em in and so I had money all the time. I had- I was I was bonded for \$40,000

and even though I had just been out of high school just two years, I was still running money. ON the bottom shelf, here's some humor to add to it, on the bottom shelf of my self my safe there were boxes of nylon hoes that had been left from the beginning of the war when they were no longer being used for woman, they still had some on airbases. And I had a shelf in which there were nine boxes of nylon hoes. And now if if a man, a general or someone real important would come on the base, the Base Commander would call me and say, "Mrs. Owen, I'm sending my driver. Send me a box of sized nylon hoes." Now some lady very thrilled to death before she went to bed that night was given a box of nylon hoes, which was very, very important at the time because they were being used for parachutes and women knew- ladies didn't have them anymore. So it sort of got to be a joke during the war that I took care of nylon- that I took care of nylon hoes.

14:13:12-----

De Mare: That's a great story. That's really great story. What other things were like the hoes at that point? What else couldn't you get?

Kathleen: Oh a lot of things. Now the grocery store, where I- in my little town, at the back of the store he had stacks and when he would get a shipment of Kleenex, which was being used by the Military but when grocery stores would get in something, he would go and put on in each of the sacks of the regular customers. And then when two or three items would be in the sacks, he would deliver them to us and we'd pay for them or we'd go and pick them up. We did without a lot of things but it never occurred to me to be to be envious of not having. My mother, my mother saved grease from the frying pans and took them to the center town, took the bottles to the center of town and it was used for something that was important. And uh, and some the things that we did without that because the War Effort was something that was very important at the time. You did only the things that you could to be helpful.

15:34:12-----

De Mare: Now Ken, when you- when you were in the Military were you aware how much the women were doing on the Home Front?

Ken: Oh, yes. I was I was aware of what they were doing. They had that stuff in the Newsreels and Movies and stuff like that and we we saw them building the airplanes with rivets and stuff like that.

De Mare: Do you remember how you felt about it as young man because you weren't used to seeing women do that kind of work.

Ken: No, I'm proud of it. It's just something that had- everyone was doing something, the whole country. It's not like today the whole country was in the service. It was a total war.

De Mare: ...Total War... I like the way that sounds. Do you have something that you'd like to show us? Did you bring something to show us?

Ken: No, this is something of hers. Uh, I didn't what...you want to see this thing?

De Mare: I don't know, what is it?

Ken: This this I designed a logo for the Atlanta chapter of the Rosie and this is logo I designed for the Atlanta chapter. And uh, at first when they told me to do it, I made a sketch on a napkin of what my idea was and they approved it but at first I was going to put a B-17 up here and a ship down here where the Rosies were working on ships and things. And they said, "Well, bring it up to date so the young people today involved in it too." So I made Atlanta here and a Rosie down here because kids like you would be Rosebuds. Ant that's the reason it's like this. This is the Atlanta Chapter of the- of the Rosies.

17:25:00-----

De Mare: Interesting. That's lovely. That's lovely. Do you have something you'd like to show us Kathleen?

Kathleen: You were talking- this is just some of my memorabilia. You were talking about a total war. This happens to be a picture of a young model just staring out and they used her for one of the photographers. This is Marilyn Monroe when she first started out and uh used her for one of the Roise- for one of the Rosie commercials. Because they were trying- they were trying to get women to

be to be willing to come. And they did many, many things for example here are the rivets that they used and here are two of the ladies doing- I didn't bring these with to be used but these happen to be, these happen to be some of things that some that they used for it- now, of course this is the famous Norman Rockwell that was on the Saturday Evening Post and I'm sure you know that a year ago this was auctioned for \$4 million. And Mrs. Walton, that's husband owns Wal-Mart paid for this and it's now in her home and will eventually go into- go into a museum. This is some of the things- this is where they were making blimps. And of course is this one of the posters- uh, we can help- asking people to really- because this was new. Women didn't do things like that. Women did wear pants. I didn't wear slacks. Women didn't wear pants so it took, it took training to get people educated to get people to be willing to do all these things that they were asked to do- and did willingly. And did willingly.

19:23:19-----

Kathleen: Well, here again you just didn't wear slacks. Women didn't wear pants and women did do jobs like-

Ken: And the result you wear slacks.

Kathleen: You you to to work in the airplane- the airplane and the airplane factories, and the factories building ships were I guess the most important. And the more men-women that they could get to do those jobs faster and you heard in the program this morning, they told how many thousands of airplanes and how many thousands ships were made by Rosies and that because of that- the men were fighting but not doing those jobs so the women were employed to those jobs and did them willingly. Uh, I brought, I brought a story this morning from one of the ladies in my Rosie Chapter. She said that she wore pants and she was working with her riveter gun and that her pants got caught in the machine. And her pants were flapping round and round. They stopped the machine and took her pants away from the machine and she went back to work. Um you, she said that most- this lady said that most- that very few men objected working with them because they were aware that the job needed to be done and that it was going to take the women to do it. So that the men, at the very first were- I'm sure raised eyebrows but it wasn't very long before they were willing to have them work with them.

21:17:09-----

De Mare: Was it unusual for men and women to work together like that at that time?

Kathleen: Yes it was.

De Mare: And did you-

Kathleen: It was very unusual for men and women to do those jobs- any of those jobs together.

De Mare: And did you have interesting experiences with that when you went to work on the Air Force base?

Kathleen: No because we were just trying to get the job done and they needed somebody, they needed somebody that could deal with money and that I had had the experience dealing with money and knowing how to deal with the bank and knowing how to make deposits, all the things that were needed and so I had no difficulty. You just didn't find- I don't think I ever encountered anybody who said, "Why are you doing this job?" I don't ever remember anybody encountering me to do that. In fact, in fact toward the

end of the war when I was still working for the town, I was still working for the town and one man came in to pay his taxes and said, "Mrs. Owen, now why don't you run for Mayor the next time." And I thought that's the last thing in the world that I want to do would be run for Mayor. And I- it was I was responsible for elections and the county would bring a little metal box and the county and the county's election places still bring boxes of materials to the precinct to vote and they brought the box of my materials. And they gave them to me with instructions, these are the ballots and this is what you do and this is where you make your report. So they gave me the ballots and they handed me the ballots and they said, Now this- these are Republican ballots and these are Democratic ballots. You put the Republican ballots in the drawer desk and put the Democratic ballots on top of the desk and if anyone came in who wanted to vote on the Democratic ticket they had to ask- I mean on the Republican ticket. And I would have to go in the drawer and take it out and give it to them. So you wouldn't find that today. You would not find that today.

De Mare: That's very funny.

Kathleen: But uh very few, very few people as his word was total war. Very few people would do something against, against what everybody else was trying to do. And we'd go to the movies and see the and see the- we didn't have television. And the only way we saw the news was on the Newsreel that came on before the movie and so if they would show something that was going on in the war during Germany where Germany was the enemy or Japan was the enemy everybody in the movie theater would clap and cheer because that's where we got our news other than the newspaper.

24:34:09-----

De Mare: Do you remember what it felt like when the boys started coming home after the war? Can you talk about that being a young woman, watching them?

Kathleen: Glad to see them (laughs). Glad to see them. I was young. I was young and see, I was sort of at a disadvantage about men coming home because I already had one at home working with him everyday.

Ken: Best years of our lives.

Kathleen: And so but very- it was people who had- I corresponded with five different guys not because they were friends but because they liked to get mail and I enjoyed writing to them. So it wasn't it wasn't a boy-girl date. You just wanted to do something for the War Effort, to be able to share a news of home. This is what happened today at your at your town. So that- and so when they came home. When they came home most of them- a lot of them had had news from some member of their family or some friends.

De Mare: Before you took the job at the County Clerk, before you started working at the Air Force base, could you ever have imagined that you'd be working on things that were that important as a child?

Kathleen: (Shakes Head)

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about that? About how it lifted you up or about how-

Kathleen: I was I was, well I was just very pleased to have a job. You know, as he talked, his father lost his business; they lost their home, they he lost everything. And one day he had a business and the next day he was

selling donuts on the street. So it was just that scary in that you didn't- that you were in a depression. You didn't have money and you didn't- you you did what you could with what you had. You know my mother made biscuits every morning. I don't remember having a slice of loafed bread until I was a teenager because you did what you did with what you had. And people- and so as I had- I had no idea that an opportunity would open to me. Never, never thought an opportunity would open to me in the fact that I would be, I would be in a place where a government would be able to supplement the little town income so that I would have \$75 a month to pay rent like \$12 and lights and water was \$12- two or three dollars and a phone when we got one was \$2 or \$3 so it never occurred to me that money, that money would be, would be as plentiful and would be as- and I could work and earn more money to have more things. I had a horrible looking old sofa and I kept thinking, I wish I could afford a sofa. So one day I went to the store and he said; "Now I can sell you this sofa." And it was within my means to pay for it, but he said, "The pillows are going to be flat because there going to be no springs in them see." And they said, "there are going to be no springs in them but when the war is over you bring these pillows back to me and we'll put springs in the pillows."

28:11:22-----

De Mare: So they sold you the sofa without the springs in the pillows?

Kathleen: And so at the at the end of the war, I don't remember taking them back because I had moved a couple of times with him going to college and those sofas didn't become important then.

Ken: I'd like to make one statement about the- not just the Rosies, but the contribution of all females to the purchase of freedom for this next generation. Uh, because of your contribution, when my plan was shot down at 28,000 feet and I jumped out of that plan and because of what you all did, I was able to reach the ground a live coming down on women's hoes. Nylon hoes.

Kathleen: At the end of the war, oh four five years ago a lady had kept her husband had been shot down in some sort of training and he asked to keep is parachute and they said he could. So when he came home from the war, she took that parachute and made a baby dress for their little girl and she brought it to a meeting and held it up and said this

this was my husband's parachute. Now he's a member of the Caterpillar Club and I don't know if you know about the Caterpillar Club.

De Mare: No, please tell us.

Kathleen: The Caterpillar Club was if you had ever come down in a parachute to save your life. Now this is not like skydiving today everywhere. But if you went down in a parachute like he did to save his life. After the war was over they organized what was called the Caterpillar Club and in his memorabilia he has it because he has a little tiny caterpillar that he can wear as a result of being- because he used a parachute to save his life.

Ken: Nylon hoes.

Kathleen: That called- so he's a member of the Caterpillar Club.

De Mare: Do you remember what it was felt like to jump out of that plane?

Ken: Oh sure.

De Mare: You know what we have a minute. We don't have someone for another minute. Can you just tell us what it felt like to jump out of that plane?

Ken: I can tell ya- I guess this is. I can tell you this experience. They gave us, we were issued a D-Bar, a chocolate bar, like the size of a cake of soap, but it was a hard chocolate. At 28,000 feet it's 40 below zero even in the summer time. We put that chocolate bar over our instrument panel and after we'd drop our bombs and head back to the base in England. We- Now, my pilot and I, I was a co-pilot. I would sit there and chew on the D-bar because the plane was on automatic pilot and there weren't any fighters around and we enjoyed that. Well when we were shot down on the next day, the next mission was the next day and it was the same target, an eight and half mile trip. Uh the minute our plane was shot down, flack knocked out both engines on the right and it damaged the bombays. The demolish bombs had already been dropped. The incendiary bombs were tangled up in the bombays and they wouldn't release so they were all tangled up in the bombays. And fighters were shooting and knocked out the other two engines on the left. Now believe it or not none of the crew

were killed. We were shot- but I started to go back to the back of the plane to make sure everybody could get out but I couldn't get back because of the incendiary bombs. But the pilot said, "get out pal so I can get out." So I rolled up- put the chest shoot, rolled out the hatchet and what do you think my first thought was?

De Mare: Chocolate bar.

Ken: Oh shucks, I'm not going to eat that chocolate bar. That was my experience coming down in a plane.

Kathleen: Tell them about counting and turning dark.

Ken: Well, you want to hear more of it. You got time?

De Mare: I think we've got a little time. Ok yea, we'll finish the story.

Ken: Alright, alright I became a Christian when I was ten years old and coming down I was falling through clouds at 125 miles and hour. The fast as you could fall...holding you back. I was going to count to 100 because of the height 24,000 feet when I left the plane, but 78-78 in my count

everything started turning dark. I figured maybe I was closer to the ground, maybe a mountain around something I didn't know about. So I pulled the ripcord and I came through the over-cash, which is about 3,000 feet up and it was raining on the ground and the it as real cloudy and I could hear the bombs still going off all over the city. And the whole city was on fire- Munich. I uh was praying but I wasn't praying about my life because I knew it was in God's hands and I expected the worst 'cause we had been instructed- briefed if we, if you got shot down Germans were killing 'em with pitchforks and hanging them on trees and telephone poles. Killed 'em everywhere. I expected that. But I was praying because when I was 12 years old, I broke my hip and I knew what pain was like and I didn't know how I was going to take the landing. So I was praying about my landing. Well I had the softest landing in the history of parachutes. I came right through a big tree. The umbrella just went right over that tree and I just went through all the twigs and branches right by the trunk of the tree spring up and down like that about three feet of the ground but the tree was surrounded by 14 Germans with guns pointing at me. But George Washington went through several wars and his clothes were ridden with bullet holes and his hat knocked off and had two horses shot out from

under him and he didn't get a scratch. And I had the same experience in World War II.

De Mare: Thank you for sharing that story. Thank you both for spending time with us. Um, we really appreciate it and thank you for everything that you did.

THE END.