

Wilma and Amelia Mathauser
The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 19

Interview Conducted by
Alexandra Naides and Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

June 26, 2010

Nashville, Tennessee

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

Interview: Wilma and Amelia Mathauser

Interviewers: Alexandra Naides and Elizabeth Hemmerdinger

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Wilma: I'm Wilma of the Mathauser twins. And this is my sister Amelia. We never really knew which one of us was born first. Our mother told us that Amelia was born first and I was the youngest up until our dad and then after that she changed it. And on our birth certificate, it doesn't tell us who is the older. Isn't that a shame?

Amelia: It doesn't matter. I am me and you are you...Right.

Wilma: So anyway, we were born in Burwell, Nebraska, a little town in the sand hills of Nebraska and graduated from high school. And there certainly not any opportunities in a small town like that so we took the civil service exam in Grand Island to try and get jobs for the government. And we had an older sister, Marie and she and Amelia got jobs and they said I didn't pass but I think I did. So they got to go to Washington DC and work and I stayed in Burwell and tried to earn some money to try and get out of Burwell.

Amelia: But uh, I thought it was good that Wilma was with my parents when our oldest, only brother was lost in an airplane, a B-17. May 6, 1942. And no- and no trace of the plane was ever found. Ten young men. My mother would never believe that they never found- that he would never be found. So that was kind of sad.

Wilma: Yes that was probably true. I was there with mom and dad when they found that out. It was an awful time in all of our lives.

Relative: So Amelia, how long were you in DC?

Amelia. We went on the 12th of February and I left in July. My husband to be had gone to Washington state to work and he convinced me to go out there. Leave Washington and go Seattle to work at Boeing to be near him. So that's what I did.

Relative: Then Uncle Wilber convince mom to come? Or you did?

Wilma: Probably-

Relative: You were looking for an escape.

Wilma: Yea and Wilber said, "come to Seattle and get a job at Boeing." So my girlfriend and I went out to Seattle with my boyfriend.

Relative: When you each left Burwell that was a big thing, right? Had you ever been out of the county before?

Amelia: Out of the county but I had never even been to Omaha before we went to Washington DC.

Relative: And you left, you didn't fly, how did you go?

Amelia: By bus.

Wilma: And I went by bus also. Ella-May and Bob and I, my future husband.

Amelia: Then I came home by bus, alone and then to Seattle.

Relative: From DC? Oh wow. So when you got out to Boeing was there an interview process or was it just they needed so many people they just hired whomever walked in the door?

Amelia: I think so.

Wilma: I think that they hired.

Relative: Now, did you have training or did-

Wilma: She did but I didn't.

Relative: So what was your training?

04:02:22-----

Amelia: Sort of like drafting.

Relative: And what was your position?

Amelia: I had to belong to the mechanic union but it actually didn't involve any mechanics. We worked on the radio room of the B-17. Just after the skin was put on and the skin that was sticking out would file off and if there

were any rivets- rivets that were not good, uh drill them out. And of course we wore bandanas and one time I didn't- you know you don't look very good in a bandana so I left my hair sticking out here and I was drilling up there and my hair got caught in there so I learned my lesson.

Relative: Ooo...scary. And you were a riveter, mom?

Wilma: No I was a rivet buckler. I held the metal on the inside of the skin on the tip of the wing. I remember when we came to work it was a metal frame for that last half of the wing. And I guess I guess I must have climbed inside and the rivet buckler put the rivet in and I just held the metal up to it.

Relative: Did you have gloves?

Wilma: No.

Amelia: You had to have it straight didn't you?

Wilma: Yes, yes...there were still a lot of young men working.

Amelia: Probably 4Fs weren't they?

Wilma: Well no, they hadn't been drafted yet. It was still 1942. And they had to change the names of jobs when women started working. They must have had vulgar names, very vulgar names.

Relative: Ah. What were the guys like when you were working with them?

Wilma: They were great. Boy, you had a date two or three times but yea, I had my own boyfriend.

Relative: Good numbers, uh?

Amelia: I worked under a fella too and he was a nice fella.

6:22:22-----

Amelia: And I worked with interesting people. I remember a woman from England was there. Worked there.

Naides: Did those fellas eventually go off to war?

Wilma: Well you know, we only worked about a year, didn't we. And she and her husband- he got- was being drafted and went back to Nebraska- going to go back to Nebraska and work for his dad.

Amelia: He was a welder on the Liberty ships in Tacoma and we lived in Seattle so he had to go 50 miles to work everyday so he decided well why don't I move to Seattle to work. So he quit that job. Then the draft board noticed him I think so he was supposed to go for his physical and he came down with the mumps that day. So the doctor came to our apartment to see him twice to make sure it was the mumps. So in the mean time, the draft board and him decided to come back to Nebraska and help his father farm, which was a very big shock to me. In high school, I decided I didn't want to go with farmers because I didn't want to live on a farm. We had a bad impression of farms because our our double cousins lived on a farm in the '30s things were very rough.

Relative: Well that really set your life though because really then you spent most of your life on the farm.

Amelia: So we moved to Nebraska and we were there for 20 years until my husband got is had caught in the corn picker and had to have his right hand amputated. When he was in the hospital he decided he wanted to become a-

Wilma: Hospital Administrator

Amelia: Hospital Administrator and so then he studied and became a Hospital Administrator. And we were in a few little towns in Nebraska. But we finally came back to Burwell the little town we were born and raised in. I couldn't believe it.

08:24:13-----

Wilma: But when they left Seattle they talked me into quitting and coming back to Nebraska too. And so then, I went back and married my-

Amelia: Cowboy

Wilma: My Nebraska Cowboy. And we-

Relative: And then you both ended up on the farm.

Wilma: No. Ranch.

Relative: Oh yes the ranch.

Amelia: She was on a ranch and we were on a farm.

Hemmerdinger: I'd like to ask you, how much money were you making before you entered the defense work and then, you know when you had those jobs?

Wilma: I worked at the Gamble store in Burwell then and I probably got three or four dollars a week. And then they started a tanning factory and you got some wages, 50 cents an hour maybe so that's how I was able to save some money to be able to take the bus trip to Seattle. And and I don't remember the wages in-

Amelia: Seattle? I don't either. Oh in Washington DC we were paid \$1,400 a year, whichever however that comes out.

Relative: And where did you work in Washington? You were at the Pentagon?

Amelia: We were in the War Department and yes we moved over to the Pentagon before it was finished. And I worked there a while before I left. So that one lady was here who worked in the Pentagon.

Relative: Oh right, yea.

09:57:16-----

Hemmerdinger: But when you went to defense work, did you have a sense that you were making more money than you had been making?

Amelia: Oh I should say so!

Hemmerdinger: What did you do with that money?

Wilma: To just live. When you come there and don't have very much money. Why...

Amelia: And buy clothes. We didn't have very fancy clothes.

Wilma: That's right, we went shopping and you picked out some coats and we had to have fur collars on them, remember?

Amelia: Fancy. Fancy coats.

Relative: SO you got married pretty quickly though because you said you didn't have money to buy a dress for the wedding.

Amelia: Oh I bought a dress, but she didn't have a dress-

Relative: So you hadn't been there long enough to earn enough money to buy a dress for-

Wilma: I don't remember that but you told me that.

Amelia: OH you had forgotten that?

Wilma: You had lent me your dress to go to your wedding.

Amelia: November. We got married there- 60 in November. '42.

Relative: Wow, so then the rest of the war, what was your, what did it feel like? Did it feel like oh I'm not working? I'm not helping the effort anymore? Was it that kind of feeling? How was it- What was it like?

Amelia: It was to me.

Wilma: Well, we were raising cattle and the army needed cattle to feed the army so no, I didn't feel that way. And my mother-in-law was so great about making packages to send the servicemen. Making good candy to send to the servicemen.

Amelia: Is that right? I didn't know that.

Relative: And your mom also worked at a defense plant right?

Wilma: She started to work in uh a bomb plant in Grand Island. And she had never ever worn slacks and they had had to wear slacks of course and shoes that had metal toes. And she sent me picture of herself in a slack-suit and a bandana around her head and said, "Don't I look awful?" So that picture is in one of the Rosie books and and she must

have been allergic to the powder. She couldn't keep on working. So she must of only worked a few months.

Relative: Is that when she went into nursing?

Wilma: Well she had been a practical nurse so then she got a job in a hospital and so that was her war effort, working in the hospital.

Amelia: And dad worked out of the airport.

Wilma: They were in maintenance I think, wasn't it?

Amelia: They were making the new airport.

Wilma: Oh.

Hemmerdinger: How did it feel for you ladies to put on the slacks? Was it unusual for you too?

Amelia: No, no.

Wilma: No. It was great to be able to wear slacks, yes.

Amelia: Growing up we couldn't wear slacks to school.

13:01:22-----

Relative: Yes. But you were already wearing slacks on your own, before you had to wear them to work.

Amelia and Wilma: Um uh, yea.

Hemmerdinger: If you could go back in time and each of you tell it separately, tells tell that young woman or your sister something that you know now. Do you have some words for that young woman? You have a lot of experiences now and each of these two young women who you were were fresh to the work force and to life.

Wilma: (laughs) Well we certainly were green when we left Nebraska. We never had much of an opportunity to travel so I I guess it's paying attention to to- maybe listening to elders more than we did.

Amelia: Well I wish we had studied more in high school.

Wilma: Yea, I was thinking about that. But we we didn't' have any advisors in high school and mom and dad never tried to influence us in anything that we did, did they? Just thought that we could go ahead and do anything on our own. I I wanted to go to college in the worst way and couldn't afford tuition at all. Then we got married. Here you feel in love and that was the most important thing. (laughs) It seemed.

Relative: From here does it feel like that was the most important thing?

Wilma: Yes. It still was.

Relative: Cool.

Amelia: Then we raised a family. I had three boys and one daughter. Finally had a daughter and that was important. It's funny, uh our kids kind of corresponded a little but we had, she had a son and I had a son that were born in the same year and out of all our children there are the only ones that are left handed.

Hemmerdinger: How do you think- Can you give us a little wisdom on how the world had changed between then those war years, life after the Depression, how difficult life was for the both of you and how young women who would have be your age now who were your age then, what would you tell them? Or how do you see the word for young women who are making it now.

Wilma: Like my granddaughter, she had such an advantage. She lived in in Scottsdale and she quit high school before she graduated but then she went on to take college courses. She didn't get a GED, she she got a diploma from high school and then has taken college courses but she never really graduated from college. Um, she had all these advantages but yet she didn't have any common sense and I think maybe growing up in a smaller town we had to do with- without much advantages. You learned to to appreciate and do with what you had instead of getting your credit card out and wasting, wasting money really. And then get in debt and then have a problem getting out of debt. So I think so maybe they had a lot more advantages but they still didn't have common sense and I-I think we had common sense, don't you?

Amelia: It took us a while to get it.

(Laughs)

Hemmerdinger: And how would you answer that question?

Amelia: I I think children need an education now much more than we did. They need to go to college. If it isn't uh a regular college a business college or community college they call it. Everyone should go to college.

Hemmerdinger: And how does society seem to you now as opposed to back then?

Amelia: Oh we're so rushed. We have washing machines that do everything and dishwashers and everything to help us but we still don't have any time. We're too rushed.

Hemmerdinger: Wonderful, wonderful. I think you guys are just terrific and that you should have lunch.

Amelia: Yes.

THE END

