

Arkie Huffman
The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 20

Interview Conducted by

Anne De Mare

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For The

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New York University

Interview: Arkie Huffman

Interviewers: Anne De Mare

Date: June 26, 2010

Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Huffman: I was born in Harrison, Arkansas. A little town in Arkansas in the Ozarks. And my parents named me Arkie. It's very unusual no one (has it), you know- what's your real name? That's it. It's on my birth certificate. And I was only ten years old and went to Kansas with my parents. Uh I was in high school, graduated and went to Wichita at Christmas time to uh have a vacation with my brother and family. And I went roller-skating, which was a big deal then and I- you didn't wear slacks then, you know. You wore dresses and I had a sailor dress on and a sailor asked me-he said, "hey sailor," and I said, "well, hi sailor." So he asked me to skate and he was a fabulous skater. And we went from the rink to the movie and he's little sister went along. I was only 18 and I thought, he's pretty safe, you know, because his sister was along. And uh after- oh it was beautiful. The snow was falling, a nice feathery snow. It was very romantic and he ended up being home on leave. And I was due to go back to my little hometown of Pratt, Kansas to a job that I was hi- a telephone operator. 40 cents an

hour. It was a good job you know for a little town. And so because I didn't want to go home, I went to Boeing and applied for a job and I was hired. And as a result, I became a Rosie the Riveter and I said because I fell in love, I became a Rosie. But uh, I didn't work there too long at at Boeing but long enough that it was very interesting. I um was smaller then in size and I could climb into the Fuse Lodge and buck rivets so I was assigned to the final assembly and uh this is an interesting subject to me that I'd like to mention. The lady who drove the rivets that I bucked, they called it bucking, was black. And it- we had lunch together, we you know...I can't remember her name now at all but I've always thought- and this is 1943 and it was an introduction to me to accept and and I had always been very accepting but uh I don't think enough people realize how these service jobs that women did introduced a lot of things, like slacks, and um and working conditions. And one of the uh I had uh always very friendly with everyone and I really had a lot of fun working 'cause I was young, ready to learn and uh we were married shortly. I didn't work at Boeing too long but he was stationed in New Orleans and uh so we went to New Orleans and Higgens Aircraft was brand new uh building that our company- Higgens Boat Yards decided they'd build a plane and because

I had experience as a riveter, I was hired immediately and so there again I had all this experience working with uh people from Louisiana and I made friends with this one lady immediate and uh joined the Marines and then she came home on leave you know and we got together again, but um I got lonely in New Orleans without my family so I returned to Wichita. Well Wichita, Kansas is called the Air Capital of the World- of the United States because they had Cessna, Boeing, uh all and Beach Craft and my brother worked at Beach Craft for over 30 years before he retired and all the smaller companies had parts uh uh what do you call it? Contracts- with big companies and there was Northwestern uh, I think it was Northwestern in Kansas City had a contract with Coleman's Stove and Lamp. So I applied there and at time I worked 10 hours a day, night. I always chose to work nights because you made more money and I didn't have any children. I didn't have responsibilities so I-my idea was to make money.

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Huffman: And um, they were very good to me. My husband was on convoy duty in the Atlantic Ocean and when he came home, I I got to go see him, while he was in the country. So I

got to go to New York twice and once to Boston in this period of time I was working at Coleman. And I was a good worker because I was always a tomboy following my father around. And so I was very apt to the work I had to do and they always let me go because they knew I was going to come back. And Coleman, it was a very great place to work. And I that's that's about the end of my- I finally- he came home with- I mean for good. He was shore duty. Well of course I was going to join him. So we moved to Connecticut and that was the end of my work as a riveter or with an aircraft factory. And I became a mother after about uh nine months. That's all it took but we had been married three years. We had our third anniversary in the hospital room with my first child. So she was- I've had five since. She was born, I had four more. And I felt like uh I was accomplishing something. I was filling in for men. The men that worked with were always the supervisors you know, the managers or your foremen. But they treated you very good and we had a lot of fun and you know, there was a lot of respect.

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De Mare: Do you remember, because I know you said that you worked for 40 cents an hour as a telephone operator-

Huffman: Oh!

De Mare: Do you remember how much you made as-

Huffman: I started at 65 cents an hour so that sure I didn't want to go home. I called my mother and said, "I have a job here. I'm staying in Wichita." And I was lucky enough to stay with my brother and then you had um, nobody had a car except certain people and when they did they used it very economically so it wasn't long before I had a group in a carpool that I rode to work with and that was interesting. Made friends there and we all had the same thing in common and one thing that I heard uh some stories by coming to the Rosie Conventions of things that happened to people and I would go home from work and here's this huge big hanger that had to be big enough to hold a B-29, which was one of the biggest bombers that was built and you think about it but I eyes would always bother me. They were sore. Well I had to go to the doctor and I had aluminum dust poisoning in my eyes so as soon as I left work I would have to use a eye wash to clean my eyes. Now, I almost forgot about that. Sometime or another I was thinking about it. I've had cataract surgery now. I'm 86-

85, I will be 86 and so I was thinking that's something I haven't heard mentioned uh a problem with the aluminum dust. You don't think about it but here, that's what we were using, you know aluminum so..

Naides: Did they give you any type of protective gear when you were doing this?

Huffman: Eyes. You're supposed to wear just safety glasses but it wasn't like a mask or anything. It was just glasses.

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De Mare: So the dust would get in. Do you remember when- because 65 cents an hour at that time was a lot of money and you were not living at home at the time? You- were you living with your brother? Or were you-

Huffman: I lived with my brother.

De Mare: Do you remember what you did having your own money for the first time? What that was like for you? Do you remember?

Huffman: Oh yes.

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

Huffman: Well, uh, before I was married, um, see the reason I went to work was because I met my husband. Okay, I had two brothers, eight and ten years older than I so I had no sisters. And I grew up all by myself in a pla- bouncing a ball against a wall or just playing with dolls. So I just thought it would be wonderful to have family when I grew older. Well, here he was the oldest of six- nine children. He had six sisters and then he had two little brothers so I got every weekend, I'd go to their house. Nine children- they weren't- they needed things so I buy socks and pants and little underwear. I remember I bought two of the little sisters coats. I was so proud I could buy these coats for them. And I always bought treats, toys, but I always saved too. And my brother had a little girl that today I influence to become a Rosie too. She still lives in Wichita and she uses the Rosie theme a lot in the things she does with her church. So um I did save and it helped because when I went to New Orleans we needed rent money and a a sailor at that time, I don't remember what his salary was but it wasn't very much a month so I was able to- I had it

in savings because I remember my mother sending money, you know when I'd ask and then uh when I went back to Wichita I worked these 10 hours and by this time my pay was a lot more than 65 cents. I don't remember exactly but I was able to save. I didn't do anything but work. I rode my bicycle to work. I got an apartment that close and um so I would- when I got the chance to go to New York and Boston, of course we didn't fly we took a train but it was great you know. I could always do it.

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De Mare: Can you talk just a little bit about because you said something so interesting about all the different people that you met that you worked with someone who was a different race than you. Can you talk a little bit more about- can you just explain a little more how the service jobs really opened up that kind of connection? Like were there men and women working together in ways that they hadn't worked together and can you just talk about the make up of the plant? About how many- you said the men were mostly supervisors- can you just talk a little more about that because I think it's a really interesting point that a lot of people don't understand.

Huffman: Well uh it seemed like the only women I worked with, I mean the only people I really worked with were women. You know, but they- men would come and explain what we were expected to do and they would be the inspectors and they would be our foremen and uh I didn't really in Kansas at Boeing, I didn't really become too connected with people. I think I I- just working with them yes but I didn't go out later with them on a weekend or anything. All I did was work actually and sleep. And I spent time with my own family but I did go to a blue print class when I had time and it was at high school that I would take a blue print class to learn how to read them you know because that always helped. And that did help when I went to New Orleans then.

De Mare: Do you think that the work that you did as a Rosie, do you think it changed you in some way?

Huffman: Sure

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

Huffman: Well I just like- I felt, gosh here I was making money you know. That to me that was really a lot and I was able to take care of myself. I mean I didn't have to call my mother and dad for stuff, you know. And yes, I think it helped uh all of the women. One of the best friends I had in my little town, she had worked there also and she was able to help- she was from a very large family, and she was able to help he younger sisters go through trade schools and she helped her brothers go through trade schools, to learn uh- a trade that they could make- She always kept track and they would pay her back eventually when they got through their schooling and got a job, they would pay he back. And I just- see I didn't have any little brothers or sisters and I just admired her. And she's a Rosie also from Kansas but in New Orleans like I said, I worked with different nationalities than me, you know. I remember an Italian girl that I just thought was so neat and we worked with her, together. And it was- all of this is different coming from a very small community, a little town you know and not having a lot of education. I had a high school education where a lot of my friends who I graduated with went on to college and that was what my brothers and mother expected of me but I decided to get married instead. I don't know is that enough?

De Mare: I think that's enough. That's lovely. Thank you so much. It was really a pleasure to talk to you.

Huffman: Well thank you, Anne.

De Mare: Now I'm going to have to look and see if I ever meet another Arkie. I'm definitely going to have to do that..

The End.