

Shirley Clark

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 21

Interview Conducted by

Kirsten Kelly

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Interview: Shirley Clark

Interviewers: Kirsten Kelly

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Place: Nashville, Tennessee

Clark: My name is Shirley Clark. I'm 82 years old. I'm from Flat Rock, MI and I was born and raised in Chicago. During the war years, in the beginning, I started working for um Chrysler Corporation and it was like a mailroom in downtown Detroit over a USO facility. We used to go in the back way and we didn't know at the time but it was secret. But there were architects and draftsmen on different floors and we delivered the mail to them. Then later on I was transferred out to Lynch Road, Dodge main plant where I was in the accounting department and um didn't know what we were doing but just worked in the accounting department. One of the things that I remember vividly is that we didn't make a lot of money in those days but they asked us to contribute to war bonds and id said I didn't want tot do that. My father cut his arm and nearly lost it so my sister and I quit school and got jobs so we could help my mom and dad. So we needed the money that I made but it was mandatory. They took it out of our pay. They said we had to support the war so we had to have a bond out and they

took it in increments out of each pay. And I only took home \$37.50 every two weeks.

Kelly: And how much was the war bond? How much would they take out of your pay?

Clark: Well I think they took it out in like four pays. You know and it was \$18.75 for a \$25.00 war bond. But... so the day they dropped the bomb, the day after, they called us out into the factory and there's a lot of dignitaries and they announced that Atom Bomb had been dropped and that we had been a part that, making that, manufacturing part of that bomb. And we all got one of these pins, a round pin that says "atom." So...

Kelly: Can you take me through that day when you found out and what was the feeling and what was?

Clark: Well we were stunned of course you know. Young. We were young. But I went home and told my parents and we talked about it and um and then all the people were killed- um I mean then it had an impact. It bothered me. It bothered me but my dad said, they were building one too. It could have gone the other way. It was war and those

things happen you know. So the more we talked about it the more I understood it. But like I say when you're so young it's- at first you don't think about that, it just grows on you. But even I understand the pilot of that plane took his own life eventually. It was awful. You see those pictures. It bothered me.

03:43:00-----

Kelly: How old were you when, when this happened?

Clark: Um about 18-about 17/18. I was young, yea, yea.

Kelly: I mean to learn, to go through this so young.

Clark: Well, so many of the Rosies were that age you know and I'm sure some of them even worked on the plane that carried that bomb. I wonder how they felt. I'd like to meet somebody that you know did that. Probably never will but.

Kelly: It's...to look..

Clark: What did you think about when you studied it? What did you think about that happening?

Kelly: It's interesting because my dad flew B-52 bombers in Vietnam so it's something he of course didn't want to talk about.

Clark: No, no.

Kelly: And you know he said, I'd rather be in the sky than- you know because he loved airplanes, but he was- I mean I know he didn't drop a nuclear bomb but he he-

Clark: Right.

Kelly: So you know I think to live with that is is a challenge in our world. I can't imagine being so young and learning that. How do you think changed your life for you?

Clark: Oh I don't know. I'd like to think that it made me be more thoughtful but I don't know, that's pretty far fetched. I don't know, Uh, I- when I looked at Japanese people after that, I wasn't full of hate I just felt sorry because I felt maybe they had a relation that was killed.

You know it didn't- it may have changed my outlook there. It did. They rounded up. "Cough" - excuse me. I know that they rounded up all the Japanese descendant people and put them in confinement, which I thought was terrible they had nothing to do with that. So you know, I had compassion for them. 'Cause they- we were doing what we had to do and they were doing what they had to do.

06:18:04-----

Kelly: What is it- I'm interested to know because this was such a big part of your life from such a young age, what does it make you feel about war now?

Clark: It's such a different war. It's such a nasty- I'm frightened for our young people. I don't think this terrorism will ever stop. It's the unknown. We can walk out of the hotel and a bus could be there and bomb. You know and in those days war was tanks and planes and it was in Europe. It wasn't here but we're getting a taste of it here now and that's very scary. I'm frightened for my grandchildren. (Shrugs) That's...I don't know.

Kelly: What- So what's, let's go back to- What was your life like back before you became a Rosie?

Clark: Before I worked, I was very young. I don't know I had a wonderful upbringing, you know my mom, my dad and my sister, loving grandparents and uh went to school and um and when I was very young, I took dancing lessons. And you know, my dad took us camping; we just had a great, great upbringing. A great childhood. And um my dad was brick-layers in Chicago and occasionally he would bring home one of the laborers to eat and it'd be a black man so my sister and I were exposed to black people and living in Chicago we didn't have the same feeling as people living in the south so I've always been very respectful of black people like I said, we had- I had a wonderful childhood.

Kelly: I lived in Chicago for a while. Where did you live?

Clark: South side. Roseland. Are you familiar with Payless Park.

Kelly: Yea.

Clark: My father built all those stone steps. Yea, that's quite a thought. And we used to go to Star Rock. We'd pile in the car and my mom would pack sandwiches and we'd go you know. In those days, you didn't go into restaurants. Nobody could afford it. Yea we went through the depression. My dad peddled handbills and cleaned Pullman cars anything to make a living. We were on relief. We had to take that paper to the grocery store. Get our groceries. My sister would never go. She was so ashamed. But I guess I didn't care. (Laughs) But we had a loving bringing up.

Kelly: And do you have brothers and sisters?

Clark: I have- I had a sister. I lost her about four years ago.

Kelly: And how- It sounds like your dad was a pretty great guy.

Clark: He was. He was...

Kelly: How how were the- during those times, how was the feeling about women and women working as you went into work-

Clark: You mean during the war? Yea...

Kelly: Yea, or just leading up to the war. Like was it like for women.

Clark: Well, my mom didn't work you know. Well I should take that back. Years ago, my mom worked in the laundry when we were very young. But my mom didn't work later years. But when the war came and she did get a job in the factory and my dad tried to join the Merchant Marines but ya know he was too old, they wouldn't take him, but he felt real strong about that. Um but he was all for women going in and working. He felt that it was necessary. And uh he raised rabbits and he had a victory garden. And he he was supportive.

10:31:16-----

Kelly: So were you- did you move from Chicago to Detroit to become a Rosie? Can you talk about that?

Clark: No, I I I um I was 10 ten when I moved from Chicago. My father came here because of work. Like I said he was a bricklayer and then my mother came and I stayed with my

grandparents for a couple of years. And then my sister and I came here and went to school and that's you know, then I started working here.

Kelly: How did you hear about the jobs?

Clark: Through my uncle- well through my step-grandfather. I called him my uncle. My step-grandfather worked for Dodge and he put a word in for me and that's how I got the job. He made it easy.

Kelly: Do you remember your first day?

Clark: My first day? Yes, I was frightened- I was scared to death. And they put me in a car and I had to go to another plant for an interview and then they took me downtown to this building and I started that same day and and I was frightened but everyone was very kind. The woman in charge was a - she had it all together. She was full of authority, you know. But kind to me. There was a young man who also worked there and I can remember he had he had health problem. She was very very thoughtful of him. SO it was a good experience.

Kelly: So for someone who doesn't know what that was like, can you talk through the details of what you did on that first job. What did you do as your job?

Clark: well, a truck would come with mail, like big manila envelopes, packages and that would be delivered and we would sort it and then we would get on an elevator. You knew what floor to go to. Um we couldn't go into the areas though we could only go up to the door and there would be a box there and you'd lay the mail there and we had no contact with the men at all. It as all men there were no women. So I did not know if they didn't have women architects in those days or drafts- I want to say draftsmen but I don't know, there were none there. And there I'd just go back downstairs you know and do whatever else I was asked to do. It was simple. It wasn't a hard job. It wasn't like riveting.

Kelly: Did you- Was there a feeling that you understood something secretive was going on? Or was that just how you thought things were?

Clark: No, I just I just thought that's the way it was. We weren't to bother anybody, that's what I thought. You know,

we weren't allowed to bother anybody. So it never dawned on me that it was secretive.

Kelly: Was there I'm curious at the time that you may not have known that this place, but was there talks about the war and anything new developing other places?

Clark: Umum. Never, nothing.

Kelly: So this idea of this nuclear bomb, totally took people by surprise when it happened?

Clark: I think so. Maybe people in the factory weren't that surprised but people around me were. So- It just never occurred to us and then we'd leave the building across the street, there were prisoner's of war from Germany. They were working in the yards. They had big POWs on the back of their shirts. And they'd hand on the fence watching us. It was a little scary but it was pretty contained.

Kelly: Do you know what they did for work in the camps?

Clark: I think, oh maybe loading trains or trucks, things like that, just manual labor. Yea..

Kelly: What happened, I, what happened with the camps so close to you, what happened when the war was over. Did they get shipped back? Or what-

Clark: I imagine they were shipped back to their country, yea, the Germans. I don't know but that's what I would surmise.

Kelly: What happened when you found out the war was done? Was it that day? Or was it- did you keep working?

Clark: I kept working for a while, yes. I kept working until I got married and then I quit. My husband was in the Navy. He was on a destroyer escort. We were married before he went to service and he was torpedo man in the Pacific. Saw a lot action. So we were fortunate that he came back.

Kelly: And what happened- What did you do? What did you both do after the war?

Clark: Before he went in, he worked as a mechanic. He did breaks and so he came back and he did get his job back but it didn't pay him very much so my dad taught him how to lay

brick. And made a brick layer out of him and he made a better wage that way too.

Kelly: And you stayed around the Mich-the Detroit, Michigan area.

Clark: Yes we did. Then we moved out to um a suburb, South Gate, we had five children. (Laugh) Yea, Yea. So we had a lovely family.

Kelly: Did you have, uh, what was the, your children? Boys? Girls?

Clark: I had a boy, a girl, a boy, a girl, a boy. (laughs) yea, yea.

Kelly: What was it like for you after- do you think that the Rosie experience influenced you in how you raised your daughters?

Clark: I don't think the Rosie experience influenced me as much as my education. I wanted my daughters to have an education, and my sons and they all did. That influenced me. I felt that that was important. When I was young,

education was for the very rich. You had to have money to go to college. My reason for quitting school was my father, but a lot of young people didn't go onto school because they couldn't afford it, but uh, I'm uh, my children are educated. I'm happy about that.

Kelly: Did you, if you could look back on the time when you working during the war and you look at yourself during that time, would you- what would you say to that young girl? Would you give her any piece of advice or say anything to her at this time in your life now?

Clark: Yes, because I know about education now, I would have said you know wait a while to be married, get to school, further your skills because I was limited. I was self-taught but get some skills so when and if you are ever left alone with a family you can support them because that can happen. That's what I would have done. I didn't take the opportunity. I just went on and got married and I was a stay at home mom and I'm not ashamed of that, a little disappointed that I didn't have more education so but.

Kelly: Was there- were there times in your life after Rosie that you- there were certain things you wanted to do or certain jobs that you wanted to try? Is there something...

Clark: I can't say that.

Kelly: Yea,

Clark: I can't say that.

Kelly: Yea

Clark: Nope. Pretty plan.

Kelly: Ok so let me- just a couple more questions about um the time during the war. Do you- were there any- what were the feelings about all these women going to work at the same time? What do you think the world felt about that? Men? Or women themselves?

Clark: Uh it it was strange because like my sister and I rode the streetcar to work. My sister worked in the same plant as I did and it was strange because it was all women on the streetcar, you know in the morning. And a lot of us

had curlers in our hair or put bandanas on and when we got to work you know then we'd rearrange ourselves and but very few men on the streetcar you know where there used to be men waiting on the corner to transfer. You know what I mean when I say transfer? You get a streetcar so far and then you have to get another one but I remember it was mass of women all the time. And and we'd go to USO dances you know and uh a lot of women and not many men of course and uh but we, yea it was a big difference, big difference.

Kelly: Is there- I remember my grandmother was a Rosie too and she talks about going to the dances and that's that's really when women started dancing with each other. In a way-

Clark: Oh yea because you stand there and stand there and finally are just like, "let's dance." Being a wallflower is no fun but most- the men that were there were lonely and they'd dance. I always felt good about going.

Kelly: Were you hearing from your friends or other women-girls who were Rosies- did they experience challenges as far as going to work for the first time and gender

relations at all or was it- did you hear any stories of any challenges?

Clark: No. No I didn't. I really didn't. Most of them you know, their parents encouraged them and uh no I- there were never any conflicts like that. They were happy to be working you know. I was delighted to get a paycheck.

21:48:00-----

Kelly: Do you remember- what did you do with the money that you were making?

Clark: I gave it to my mother. My sister and I both because my dad couldn't work and my mother didn't work. So I turned my paychecks over to my mom and she would give me an allowance you know. And if I needed anything, she would see that I got it. That's the- That's the way it was.

Kelly: And when did you meet your husband? Was he already in the Navy? How did you meet him?

Clark: I met him before he went into the service. I met him- it was kind of a blind date. I shouldn't have even

been on it but my sister had a girlfriend who played in bands. She played the accordion. And she played in these little neighborhood taverns and whenever she would get a job, she would go to see what it was like so this one evening they were going to go see what this one place was like and I begged to go with and uh they said okay. And we were walking and it was quite a walk cause in those days you just walked. And uh like a delivery truck pulled up, a van, with a light and we yelled at the man, "give us a lift, give us a lift" and he did. I mean, we jumped in and he took us. We met these three men at this tavern and one of them was my husband. And he had been brought along to be with my sister well, I wasn't let my sister going to let my sister have him. So I met him, we spent the evening dancing. I lied about my age. And uh so he- I saw him a few times and he came to my house for my birthday and I had to tell him how old I was and I thought I'd never see him again but it was okay.

Kelly: So what was the age- What did you tell him and how old were you?

Clark: I told him I was 18 and I 16. (laughs) So but that's what we did. We just loved dancing and we'd go to a tavern,

a neighborhood tavern. I don't know if your parents ever talked about that. They'd always have little bands and I would have a rum and coke and it would sit on the table all night. I was a very reasonable date. So..

Kelly: You were there for the dancing.

Clark: Yes we were. Yes we were. Till he died, we loved dancing. Yea, it was one of our favorite things to do.

Kelly: How long were you married?

Clark: 40 years. Mmuh. And he died at a dance so. He died doing what he enjoyed. There were three things that my husband liked. You may not want to do this but he liked golf, Budweiser and me. I was in the top three.

Kelly: That's an amazing thing that always happen with every relationship does it. That was lucky.

Laughs.

Kelly: Uh I just wanted, because a lot this is learning the history work-

Clark: I know, I'm sorry.

Kelly: No, no no. This is all- It's also the history of how life has evolved so it's great. I want to just before I have to let you go because I know we're tight on time, I want to talk about your move from one place to the other and when you came to be working in the accounting department. And what was that change like for you and what did you do day-to-day when you moved the accounting department?

Clark: Well, I typed ledger sheets. They had huge typewriters. And I was frightened because you know I hadn't been through it home and I had it in school and my speed wasn't great but I had to fake it to keep the job and uh I worked real hard at it. But what we did was type columns of figures and it was with carbon paper and you probably don't even know what carbon paper is and if you made a mistake you had to go back through everything and erase it. Oh it was terrible and you had to balance these great big sheets. You had to balance all of these columns and add them all up and count and it was freight- it was intense at first. I was really thinking maybe I shouldn't be doing it for a

while you know. And my mom and dad said, "just keep working at it," keep trying, you know. And I did have a very nice boss. So finally I got there.

Kelly: How long did you do that particular job?

Clark: Several years, yea very nice. It was a nice facility, you know.

Kelly: And what did you wear to work? And and-

Clark: Always skirts. We didn't wear pants in the office. The factory, they had to wear pants but I always wore a dress of a skirt and hoes. You dressed up to go to work.

Kelly: Did you have panty-hoes all the way through the war? Or did you have to draw lines?

Clark: My mother would go and stand in line when they were handing out hoes for us. So that we would have something for work. On the summer, you know girls would paint their legs but in the winter it was cold and we needed nylons and she would go stand line for us, bitter cold. I hadn't thought about that in years. Yea, everything was rationed,

you know, sugar, gas. I still have some ration books that my mom had.

Kelly: A little bit different than now, uh?

Clark: Oh yea. Yea, so different. And when you talk about these things sometimes, my grandchildren are at an age where they are interested in the history, you know. And they ask me questions, you know. It's kind of fun.

Kelly: Well life is like we learn from generations. What do you think- There seems to be a patriotisms, there was a unification during the war that is very different form now.

Clark: Oh yea. Right.

Kelly: Do you have thoughts about that and what-

Clark: OH yea. Right I just-I'm upset that we don't show more patriotism than we should. I'm very patriotic. I just like the events. I sing. I'm astounded that young people don't take off their hats. They are so disrespectful. And that should be taught in the home. I'm sorry, that's- and they're so lucky to be here. I just want us to really love

our country and and stand up for it. And speak out for it. And be committed to it, you know. So I think in that era we were. We were very patriotic and a few years back, remember we went through a sprit. Remember the flags were up and the songs were out and we lost that again.

29:28:23-----

Kelly: How do you-I just want to keep talking to you because you're so wise, why do you think that is? What has changed? What in your opinion are some things that have changed?

Clark: I don't know if it's the- life is so fast right now. People don't have time for just the common things. There is no commitment, you know. I shouldn't say young people aren't committed. You're a young person; I don't mean to include you. ON the whole there's not a whole lot of commitment from young people. I don't know. I don't know what the answer is except that we, as the older generation have to instill that in our grandchildren and I do. I do. I have a little story. I have a grandson in Cincinnati and he had as son who just had a birthday and rather than these bouncy things he built and an obstacle course in his

backyard, invited all the little neighborhood boys and he was a drill sergeant and they had to go under fences and through water and salute the flag and he sent me a picture of all these little boys saluting the flag and it was just so patriotic and just so nice to see. And they were following rules. He was teaching them things as well as having fun. Now I like to see things like that and I like to encourage it so I tell people that. You know, don't take them to a shooting gallery, do something in the yard.

Kelly: That's a great story.

Clark: Yea. Oh, it was so sweet. Seven years old, you know, very impressionable. He has a tree house that his daddy built him with a big American flag hanging from it so that's kind of nice. His dad was in the Coast Guard so, and my son was in the, in the Academy. Uh not the- The Air Force Academy.

Kelly: The Air Force Academy, wow! That's really impressive. It's really hard to get into.

Clark: Mmuh, it was, very hard.

Kelly: What did he do in the Air Force then?

Clark: He didn't stay in. He was in for two and a half years. It just wasn't for him but he had a good experience, a good education too. Yea, but he chose to come out.

Kelly: Is there, Elizabeth, is there questions sitting over in the corner that you have?

Hemmerdinger: No, I feel so lucky that we had time.

Clark: I don't feel like I've done anything. It's just been fun talking to you. You're sweet, so sweet.

Kelly: Well, the interesting thing is that I'll say to you that the majority- the best interviews we get are usually the shyer people who don't want to talk. And to talk to you about this huge event in your life that happened when you were so young.

Clark: Yes. The older I get the more I realize what it was. You know, at first you're just too young to realize it but as you go along you think oh yes you know and Donnaleen is so dedicated. She's a wonderful leader. Yea, I like her.

Kelly: It was exciting to sit in that meeting yesterday and hear the numbers grow from 3,000 to 4,000.

Clark: Yes, wasn't that something and you have helped us to gain new members. That's wonderful. I hope to see you in September.

Kelly: Yea, well we hope to be there.

Clark: Yea, that would be great.

Kelly: Well, thank you Shirley.

Clark: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

The end.