

Violet Johnson

The Real Rosie The Riveter Project

Interview 3

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

April 14, 2010

Lutherville, Maryland

For The

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

Interview: Violet Johnson

Interviewers: Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

Date: April 14, 2010

Place: Lutherville, Maryland

De Mare: Can you tell me your name and tell me when you were born?

Johnson: I, I'm Violet Johnson, was born in, uh, 1924.

And...

De Mare: And where were you born?

Johnson: I was born in Pennsylvania in a small town called Klingerstown and, uh, I was born on a farm.

De Mare: Can you, can you talk a little bit about your childhood?

Johnson: Um, well, um, my, um, most of the time I lived with my grandparents and, uh, they were wonderful to me, and then when I, uh, my grandparents had to sell their farm and I went to live with my, my parents. And, uh, I was

eighteen and, when I came to Maryland. I graduated from high school in 1942 and there was no work up there. There was, I, since living on a farm I would work on a farm, maybe for someone else some days, maybe you'd get a dollar a day for (pick), for picking potatoes, or something like that. I didn't want to live like that so I decided I would like to come to Maryland. My cousin and his wife had come down here because of the war, he worked at the shipyards, and he said, "Why don't you come down and live with us?" and that's what I decided to do.

So I came right after graduation. First my mother said I had to stay home and help pick the strawberries, so, which I hated, I hated that job. But I had to pick strawberries and so I stayed for that and then in August of Nine- no, July of 1942 I came down to Maryland. And by August I had a job at Martins. And uh, first of all, I had to go to school to learn to run different machinery and I had to learn to do a, do a drill press. I had to run a drill press. And I remember very distinctly, I took a rag to hold on to what I was working, holding on the drill, holding on to, boy, that was a no-no, immediately they told me, 'cause that, that drill press would pull that rag right into the, uh, you know, and I could cut my hand. So I

learned a lesson right then and there before I even went to work.

And when I went to work- first of all, I worked in small parts assembly and in there I did, uh, they, uh, tubing. I had to put fitting on tubing and it was called "Working in the Breezes" and that's what they called the, uh, it was a electrical conduit where electric wires would go through, and we had to clean the ends and put a fitting on that. And I worked- first of all, I worked from eleven to seven at night, and uh, I remember this one lady and I, we would softly sing "Oh, How Lovely is the Evening", in a round, and we got a big kick out of that.

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But I worked there a good while and then I was sent to Plant Two at Martins, and um, I worked there as a riveter and that was my big experience because I worked in, I did horizontal beams. They were large, um, large beams and we had to drill holes in them and put rivets through them. And you had to put, uh, the rivets were kept in a freezer, and I think they were easier to buck that way because of the, you know, 'cause you used a big rivet gun and the uh, the air, you, it was driven by compressed air. The rivet

gun was driven by compressed air. I was the buckler, I mean I was the shooter and one of the fellas was the buckler. He, he buckled, uh, the other end. And, um, I worked in that for a long, long time.

And then, uh, just before the war ended I was sent to Plant One again and I worked on the skins of the airplane and you had to be really careful because if you would, uh, if you would drill a hole, you had to watch so you didn't drill into the skin of the airplane. And, uh, one day I was drilling, and, uh, someone above me, working above me, dropped a, a C-clamp, on my hand, you know I had the drill in my hand, that really hurt. It, because of the hardness, you know.

But, um, the, everybody was, I mean I met a lot of nice people. Most of the people were from out of state and, um, we, some of us became, uh, permanent friends, you know. And, uh, but uh, a couple times I was sent to the tool crib, you had to go to the tool crib. First of all, before I got a job I had to buy a toolbox with a bunch of tools in it and then, um, but then there were tools that you didn't have in your toolbox so you had to go to the tool crib to get them. And you had to get a, a slip from your supervisor, and, uh, some of the times the men would tease you a little bit and once they sent me for compressed

air or something like that, which is unavailable, you know, but then when you'd get to the tool crib they'd laugh at you. But other than that, the men were very nice to you, you know, treated you well but we thought that was real cute. So.

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De Mare: What was the financial arrangement, I mean did you have to kind of invest in order, before you could...

Johnson: Yeah, there weren't too many tools then, I remember an Allen wrench with different uh, uh, size Allen, you know, wrenches, and then a small hammer. Just a few things that we had to have. It wasn't very... but that was with your own money. You had to buy that yourself.

De Mare: Do you remember how much money you were paid?

Johnson: I don't remember, but I remember at one time, which I don't think was very long after I started work, I, I, I think like thirty-six dollars a week. Because I remember, it seems that way, but, uh, you know, it's so long ago, but I remember one of the uh, first things I

bought was a wristwatch for myself because I didn't have a wristwatch. And I remember another time that my mother, she cooked a lot, and I said to her "When I get, uh, you know, uh, the chance I will buy you a, a mixer master" and I bought her a mixer, and she was so happy to have that because, uh, we, we didn't have things like that, you know. In fact, when I grew up, I was, uh, I guess, uh, just before I came to Maryland was when we first got electricity because we lived on a farm, you know. So it was, it was... so that money, that was a lot of money for me, you know, to get that. And I worked third shift and then I went second shift for ten months, I think, just a, and then I went on first shift, which was seven to...

De Mare: Can you explain that, can you explain what those, what you mean by first shift, second shift..

Johnson: I can.

De Mare: So the factories worked, they worked..

Johnson: Yeah, around the clock. They worked around the clock. And uh, uh, (nigh) night shift was eleven to seven, that was my first job, and then the other is three to,

three to eleven, and seven to three. The day work was seven a.m. to three, three p.m. and then the three, three o'clock would come in 'til uh, eleven and then eleven would be until seven in the morning.

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De Mare: What was it like as like a farm girl to come to this place that was just turning out airplanes?

Johnson: It was unbelievable, boy. I remember the first day I came to Maryland, I looked out and it was really foggy and hazy and I thought, oh, I don't know if I'll like it here, but I really enjoyed it, and, uh, it was just hard to believe that, you know, I came from a farm and I just loved, uh, being here and the experience I had. It was an experience I'll never forget. It's something, you know, the war was on, and I met so many people, I met a lot of servicemen and, and you know, wrote to them and, and.. I remember one of the girls one time said to me, I said to her, "What, you know, if you write to the boys in the service, what would you send them?" She said, "Foot powder, because they have a problem, you know, with their boots and everything" and I said, "Oh, that's so

embarrassing". I thought that was embarrassing to think that, that you bought foot powder and send it to the boys in the service, but, you know, but...

Uh, and I, uh, I, I'm still, um, where I live there's a, a couple that also came down from Pennsylvania to work and I see them when I go to dinner a lot of nights and he, um, he worked in um, one of the departments and every, um, we didn't have a telephone at the time. I didn't have a telephone at the time, and uh, I would go to his department. His sister would send me notes 'cause she graduated with me, his sister would send me notes and, uh, uh, and I, another day I'd write to her and then I'd take a note over to him so I teased him now he was my special mail man.

But, uh, oh, uh, oh, and another thing, when we had a regular lunch break, at uh, and um, our lunch (hour), our lunch break would be a half hour, I think, and you'd have, and I always talked so much and the girls would tell me, "Quit, quit talking and, and, and eat your dinner because we've got to go back to work". So I, I remember working at, from eleven o'clock at night, uh, uh, when's it, one Saturday night, I guess it was...

Kelly: Sorry. Sorry, could you move your hands?

Johnson: Oh, my hands.

Kelly: I just want to, no, it's fine, it's just blocking your voice. So I was like, I wanna hear everything you're saying, so...

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Johnson: I remember working one Saturday night, from eleven o'clock til seven o'clock in the morning, and then that morning, my, uh, my cousin came over from Washington, she worked over there, and, for a civil service, and I (picked), uh, I met her at the, uh, bus station, and we went to a amusement park that day. And then that night I went back to work, she went home and I went back to work without any sleep at all. And when it was time to go to lunch, I told the girls, "I can't stand it". And I laid my head on my workbench and went to sleep. And a lady who was so nice, she brought me a couple candy bars, and she said because I hadn't had any lunch, she wanted to.. But oh, the people were so nice, a lot of the people, a lot of the women were older that I were, was because, but then a lot,

there were a lot of people just graduated from high school who came to work. But...

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De Mare: What was it, to, to go back to what you were saying earlier about, you know, it was so different for women back then, you didn't have the freedom, it sounds like you had a lot of freedom when you started working, can you talk a little bit about that?

Johnson: What do you mean by, um, by...

De Mare: Well, I mean, you know, at the time we, you were saying that women didn't have the freedom of movement until this time.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: You know, and then here you were an eighteen year old girl, kind of going to the amusement parks on your own, earning your own money...

Johnson: Uh huh...

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about, about what that was like for you at the time and how you saw your future, you know?

Johnson: Yeah, well it was really, because I had never had any money before, you know, because, I remember when we lived on the farm when my grand(mother), my grandfather died, um, my uh, my aunt and uncle moved on to the farm and, uh, on a Saturday night they gave their, my cousins, a dollar and they gave me a quarter. I'll never forget that. And, uh, for a quarter I could've bought a, like a, a sundae, you know, a hot fudge sundae? And, uh, that's all, you know, I had. And so when I came to Maryland, any money was wonderful because, you know, it was hard. You just didn't have any money, as a child, you know. I even wore boys tennis shoes, I remember, on the farm, and uh, so it was really, it was really hard to make a living and uh... So when I came to Maryland, I think I, uh, uh, well I used to meet girls downtown and we'd bowl and we'd all go home at, late at night and never be afraid, but I, I don't do that anymore. I mean I, I wouldn't go downtown now for anything, (y'know), even if I were younger, I wouldn't go downtown at night. (Y'know).

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Kelly: Do you remember what, um, when you started getting that, that paycheck, do you remember, was it, what, how did you feel about having this?

Johnson: I went home one time, and, uh, I went to church and I had bought a new coat and it had, I remember having a fur coat, I mean a coat with fur and it was like, they called it tuxedo style, I think, the fur came... and one of the boys I went to high school with said, "Country girl goes to city and makes good". I thought that was really cute. It went to... It was wonderful, you know, and I guess we didn't think anything of it, working, because, you know, no matter what they told you to do, you worked it, you know, and so, it was very interesting to me.

De Mare: Can you go back a little bit just to explain on camera, you were talking about, you know, you were, you were the riveter and there was a bucker. Can you explain what you actually, physically did 'cause a lot of people don't know...

Johnson: What it is.

De Mare: ...what it is, so can you talk us through what that really means?

Johnson: Ok. First of all, we had a large piece of metal on a, on a, what was called a jake, which was a, a, I guess a wooden form that held this piece of metal. And then, but I do not remember why we had to rivet it. I don't know, we must've riveted a piece to it, but I don't remember that part, and that... So the rivets were kept in the freezer and a rivet is something almost like a nail but it's uh, it has a, a rounded head, a rounded head. And then you had a rivet gun and the gun had a, a, a pin, I guess, a pin that you would stick into the gun, it was driven by, um, com, compressed air, forced air, which came out of the flooring. And that, that, round, that pin would be round and fit right over the head of your rivet. Then on the other side, this person would stand facing me and he would have a large, heavy, metal bar that would hold it against, as the rivet came through and flatten, he would hold it against there, and that would flatten the rivet out. So that was, you know, to fill that hole up. Evidently we, which I can't remember, we must have had to rivet something onto

another piece of metal, you know, and that's why it was what we had to do. So. And that was...

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De Mare: Was it, was it, I mean, you grew up on a farm so you were used to doing physical work, obviously..

Johnson: Right.

De Mare: Um, but was it, was it unusual for, for women to be doing that kind of work at that time? I mean, I know that they hadn't been, but can you talk a little bit about what that was about? You said you had to go to school to learn, what that training process was like, how you were (trained), how you were brought through that.

Johnson: I don't know, it just came natural. It just came naturally to, to just be able to do it because we were, as a child, from the time you were a child, you had to help load hay, you had to, to do things like that. And uh, work in the fields, and I guess it just came that no matter what they assigned you to, you were able to do it, you felt like you, "Well, I can do that", you know, and uh, you had to

learn what, to do it the way they wanted you to do it, of course, but it was interesting to, to...

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Kelly: I'm sorry.

De Mare: No, go ahead, go ahead.

Kelly: Were the hours, I'm curious about the, you know, so you had all this farm...

Johnson: Uh huh.

Kelly: ...work behind you...

Johnson: Uh huh.

Kelly: What was it like, when like the first day that you went to the factory, and was it, did it seem like a long day, did it, what was that like for you?

Johnson: I don't, I don't remember, but uh, I remember, first of all, you know, we had to uh, we had to go get a

blood test, we had to have, you know, we had to have our birth certificate, which, mine, mine had been lost during a, because Harris, I lived, I had been born in Pennsylvania, and Harrisburg had had a fire, and my, so they had to, and I don't know how they got (that), but my mother had to send for a new birth certificate for me. And uh, uh, I don't know how that all worked out but anyway, um, I, I think that I probably felt like I had an easier day than picking potatoes for a whole day, for a dollar? That was hard work. You know, because uh, so, I think that, uh, it was easier to work in a factory and I didn't think a thing of it, you know, not that I was actually working in a factory, because I also felt like we were helping win the war and, uh, and the boys we knew that graduated with, were, us, were fighting the war so we felt like we were helping out.

De Mare: Yeah. Did you have any family overseas? Did you have any brothers or sisters...

Johnson: No, my brothers were younger than I, but, in, in fact, my one brother's five years younger than I was, but, and my other brother's twenty years younger than I am. So, any, but I didn't, but I had cousins overseas. And then

when I met my husband, he had been in the Pacific. And he told me a lot about his life, and, overseas, which was not easy, you know, I mean, in the Pacific.

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De Mare: Can you talk a little bit, since we're on the subject, we're gonna, we're jumping around a lot, but that's ok, um, can you talk a little bit about what it was like during the war to be home, to be on the home front, what it was like hearing news about the battles, can you talk just about what the experience of being a young woman at that time was like?

Johnson: Um, you know I guess I didn't really take, take it to heart too much because I'd go to work and I'd come home and I, I guess I didn't really, uh, I know that some of the boys that I graduated with, one of the boys got killed in the war, and we felt, we felt real bad about that. But I think that most of the time we just, I mean, took for granted, the war was on, and, and uh, and we worked and knowing that we, we had to do this to win the war.

De Mare: So you definitely felt connected to the war effort with the work you were, you really, I mean obviously you were building the airplanes, it's very easy to see what you're doing.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: Um, what, do you remember the kind of airplane that you built?

Johnson: Uh, the B, B, what was it B 3, thir-- B, B..

(Unseen): B 26.

Johnson: B 26. Bomber, it was a bomber. And uh, uh huh, and that's the one we worked on. So.

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De Mare: How would you, uh, how would you describe, you know, how many women worked at the factory, how many men worked at the factory, like what was the, 'cause you said the man who was your buckler was a, he was a man.

Johnson: He was a man, but then he got drafted. I remember while I was working with him he got drafted. But uh, I, then I guess, I don't remember, uh, who else I worked with at the time until, you know, 'cause, uh, and I guess I worked into another department because... It's funny but you just can't re, you just can't think of everything anymore.

De Mare: Oh no, of course not.

Johnson: Yeah, it's been a long time.

De Mare: But do you remember how many, so the men were being drafted away as you were working?

Johnson: Uh huh.

De Mare: Um, was it mostly women by the time they ended the war?

Johnson: A lot of them. But I don't know, mostly, because there were a lot of fellas that were, they, they called it 4F because they couldn't, they had, uh, they had maybe bad

eyesight or something, you know, that they felt that they didn't need to go in to the service and so there were, uh, there was fellas that worked and uh, and maybe older men that, because they put a, a time limit on the draft. Uh, people were drafted only up to a certain date or had so many fam... if they had so many children, or farmers, you know, weren't drafted in that, in that time, you know. A lot of farmers. So, so they did what, so there were a lot, still a lot, a lot of men worked but they were older men, like...

De Mare: Yeah. And how were your relationships working with the men as a woman?

Johnson: I think just fine. I mean, we just got along well with them, you know, and...

De Mare: Do you remember, did you earn the same amount of money as the men? Did you know about...

Johnson: No...

De Mare: Ok...

Johnson: ...we knew that we didn't earn the same amount of money...

De Mare: Can you talk about that? Can you go back and tell me, you know, tell me that you didn't and talk about that a little bit?

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Johnson: Yeah, we, we knew we didn't earn the same amount of money. It does make you feel bad to think you, you worked practically the same type of thing but you don't get the same amount of money. They were, uh, most of them were supervisors, uh, that they, y'know, they, they supervised us and told us what to do, you know. But I'm sure the fella that bucked the rivets made a lot more money because he had a family and he couldn't have supported that family if, with the money I, I made. Thirty-six dollars a week, although that was a quite a bit of money in that, in, during that time, compared to what people make nowadays, you know.

De Mare: Um, was there a union? Were you a part of the union?

Johnson: No. There was, they were starting a union, and I remember one day that I was working and some man came, and he was a union man and he bugging, you know he was bugging me to join the union and I, I didn't know anything about unions and I said I'm not interested 'cause I didn't want to, you know, I didn't want to join the union, and so I, I, I said I'm, I'm busy so he didn't come back anymore, but, uh... And I remember when... do you want me to tell you about how I remember when the war ended?

De Mare: Yeah, please.

Johnson: Well, I was on vacation when the war ended, and because we did get vacation, and we, uh, the way I remember it, we worked six, when we did work, we worked six days a week and then had a day off and then every so often you'd have two days. You'd have the long weekend, like Saturday, Sunday and go back Monday and with working third shift you had all, all day then like you, you'd go back for Monday, after, but... I was on vacation when the war ended and I was up in Ocean City, New Jersey, when the war ended and I remember we were going to, to um, um, uh, to Atlantic City on a trolley. And these whistles blew and then we stopped

and they said, "The war was over." But then they said, "That was a false alarm." So the next day was the day that the war ended. And, uh, it was so exciting. By then we were going into Philadelphia to my girlfriend's aunt and uncle, and we rode the trolley and there were just a, lots and lots of people. We didn't go into the city of Philadelphia; we went to visit her, y'know, to visit her aunt. But, uh, I'd often wished I'd been here in Baltimore, where I knew, where my friends were, y'know, that, because they say that was so exciting, the day the war ended.

Well, then I, I went back to work after my vacation was over, I went back to work, and that's when they sent me down to Plant One, from Plant Two down to Plant One of Martins, and I worked there a little while, and then the, um, they said to me, "Bring your toolbox and come with me." And that was the end of the... that was the end of my job. I had worked there three years and eighteen days. I remember it so well.

De Mare: And just like that (snaps) it was over.

Johnson: It was over. Uh huh. Just like that my job was over.

00:23:01:11-----

De Mare: What did you after the war?

Johnson: Well, I didn't want to tell my mother I had got laid off and so I quick got a job in a department store so she wouldn't make me come back home. And so, then I called, um, I called my mother up and I said I had lost my job but I already had gotten a job and so then I worked in a department store for a while.

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit, can we go back and you talk a little bit about your home life when you were working at the factory? (Unintelligible) Um, what I'm, what I'm interested in, you, you, I'm, let's go back to when you first, when you first came here. You said your cousin knew that there was work down here..

Johnson: Uh huh.

De Mare: ...and so you came and did you move in with your cousin? Did you...?

Johnson: Yeah. They worked, he worked at the shipyards and he had, he and his wife had a new baby, and I lived with them. Sometimes I would babysit for them and while on my days, uh, off or while they, you know, went to the grocery store or something. And I stayed with them until December, and then he got drafted so that was only a couple months. And by then I knew Baltimore pretty well, so I had to go look for, and that was hard, I, I, you know, I had to go find a place to stay. Uh, one time I stay(ed), I had an apartment with another girl, and that didn't work out real well. And then I got a, from then on I got a room, I would stay at people's houses, but I was very lucky. I stayed with people who, who were like family to me. And a, another girl and I ate with them, and uh, it was, and uh...

De Mare: Was that the way a lot of the young women lived?

Johnson: Yes.

De Mare: Was in like rooming house situations like that?

Johnson: A lot of them did that. You know...

De Mare: Interesting.

Johnson: ...a lot of...

De Mare: Do you remember how much you paid for rent?

Johnson: No, I don't. I think eight dollars a week or something like that. It was, seems like that, but I don't know.

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De Mare: And did you get your food with that as well?

Johnson: And then I got a food with that. And then since we had been, since my parents lived on a farm, I gave my um, the, the one lady I lived with, um, I lived with she and her husband and her, their children and uh, meat was, y'know, it was hard to get because you had ration coupons, and uh, I would, my mother would send down her ration coupons, so this lady could keep buying meat and sugar. Sugar was rationed, shoes were rationed because uh, you know, I think you only had a couple pair of shoes a year. Well, when we graduated from high school, tires, well, tires were rationed. And we were supposed to come to

Washington on our uh, on our trip, and we couldn't come because of, um, the ra- the, uh, tires were rationed and, uh, there was a shortage of gas. They had to watch, y'know, about using the gas. So we had to um, you know, we couldn't come to Washington like other classes did.

De Mare: (Unintelligible)

Johnson: So, but then when I moved to Baltimore I got to go to Washington anyway, so I was pretty lucky. I felt real lucky that I was, uh, able to come to Maryland and uh... My mother was very strict as we were growing up but then when we reached eighteen we, we were, my broth, my brother, you know, he, he joined the navy when he was eighteen. So we were left, go then, you know, to do what we wanted to do.

De Mare: I think that's amazing, I, I, it, it makes such sense but I never thought about the fact that the farm families wouldn't need their coupons as much...

Johnson: No, because...

De Mare: ...as the people in the city.

Johnson: ...they raised their own pigs, and beef...

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnson: ...and uh, so...

00:26:34:24-----

De Mare: How do you think it changed you to, to work that way? I mean it seems like you had a big change from being on the farm to...

Johnson: I did.

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

Johnson: I, I, well, I, I think I was bashful. And when I, I came to Maryland, I think I was, you know, I just, I didn't know a lot of things because we were, we were brought up in a elementary, in a... My elementary school, there were seventeen kids on my fir- on my first grade picture, I think, and that was eight grades. Seventeen kids so there were like one or two kids in a class. And,

uh, I remember crying when I was in first grade and then teacher sat me on his knee. Now you know they wouldn't dare to do that anymore... but uh, sat me on it, on his knee to make me, uh, you know, feel comfortable.

But, uh, uh, but, then when I was eight, in eighth grade we had to take a, a high school entrance test and it was timed. It was like, kinda like a SAT right now, and to see if we were eligible for high school. So, I, and I think I was kind of, you know, bashful, and I think when I came to Maryland I, I became more uh, outgoing person, outgoing person. Where I felt like I, I was brave. I went downtown, I had to, my, when I first came, my cousin's wife was pregnant, she couldn't go with me to look for, to do anything, my cousin had to go to work, so I had to go find the city life myself, and find a job and so forth. So.

De Mare: You were very brave.

Johnson: I was. I felt like I was.

De Mare: Yeah. It's amazing, actually.

00:28:20:10-----

Kelly: Can you talk about after, so after the war...

Johnson: After the war?

Kelly: And you, you look at what you did after the war,
and after your Rosie...

Johnson: Uh huh.

Kelly: ...experience.

Johnson: Well.

Kelly: How did that affect you? And...

Johnson: Well, I, after that, I mean I went to work in a
department store, and then, uh, while I was working there I
met my husband. And he had come back from the war and, uh,
he worked at Martins, and a girl I had, I had worked with
at Martins, she and I used to meet downtown, and, and uh,
so this one night, she uh, she, uh, we were going to meet
downtown, and when, when we met another fella was with her.
I said, "Well, I'll go back home." He said, "No," he said,
"I'll take you both to the movies." So, then he said,

asked me if I would meet uh, one of his, like roommates. He lived in a boarding house, a real boarding house and so that happened to be, finally became my husband.

Because the man I met then, so um, uh, then, uh, he took me back to Martins, because I had gotten a letter from Martins after the war asking me to come back. But I was working and I felt like I didn't want to go back. And so I, uh, uh, I, I didn't go back then but then my uh, my husband to be, I came one morning, and he said "I'll see if you can get a job back at Martins." And he came, he, he worked third shift, I think, or second shift and so he came one morning and picked me up and asked, said, took me over to Martins but they didn't want me then. They didn't rehire me.

So I, I kept working at department store until after, then, after I had children, I went back to work and became a teller at a bank, and that I really loved. I loved that job. I never had, my, my parents never had the money to send me to college, or anything. So, I felt like my life was pretty well fulfilled anyway.

00:30:33:00-----

De Mare: Can you talk about, you know, the things that you learned doing the work in the factory, you know, learning how to that kind of heavy-duty physical work and, and that precision work you did. Do you think that that helped you later in your life?

Johnson: I, I don't know if it did or not. I, I don't know if it really helped me or not because I, I mean, I never was good at fixing anything. I, I, to this day, my one daughter and I, we both say we don't, you know, if something breaks down, we don't know how to fix it, you know, and, and, uh, but, but, I, I don't know. I only knew, I think, what they taught me to do. I think that's one, you know, whatever they taught me do is what I learned.

Kelly: In terms of, you, so you had, how many daughters did you have?

Johnson: I had two daughters.

Kelly: Two daughters.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Kelly: What do you think the Rosie experience, what do you think you were able to teach them?

Johnson: Oh, I don't think, think they thought much of it. But when I told them you were going to interview today, they got, they got real, they got real excited about it. And, and also we, we were interviewed one day for the historical, Maryland Historical Societer, Society, and uh, I got a, uh, uh, DVD on that. And, uh, my one daughter watched it and the other daughter I haven't had a chance to show it to her yet. But, uh, they, they were really excited about that. But when I told my grandson, when he was little, about me working in the defense plant, and working on airplanes, that's when he said, "That's when women weren't important." And my daughter said, "Oh, Gregory, don't say that." So, we got a big kick out of that.

But, one day I was visit, one time I was visiting my daughter in Atlanta and they had, they had friends come in, and the boy uh, the, the friends that had a son, he was a teenager, and when he found out I had been Rosie the Riveter, he kept asking me so many questions, he was so

interested that I was Rosie the Riveter. He's the one that was more interested than my grandchildren were. So.

00:32:44:00-----

De Mare: When you think back to that time, to being a young woman, and moving to Maryland, and, is there anything you would've done differently?

Johnson: I don't know. I don't know, I just, I felt like, uh, I guess maybe, I don't know what I would've done differently. I th(ink), I...

De Mare: You don't have to have done, wanted to do any, I'm just curious to think...

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: ...you know, sometimes with hindsight people look at their life and they wish...

Johnson: I guess everybody says that if I could've done, lived my life over, maybe I would've done something differently...

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnson: ...you know.

De Mare: Yeah. (Unintelligible)

Johnson: But I don't know. I don't know what I would have done.

De Mare: Um, when you think about what life is like for working women now, um, it's so different from, from that time, um, when your own daughters were, were growing up and going out and making their way in the world, did you, just, can, do you want to talk about how that made you feel? Coming from the farm and, and having that experience?

Johnson: Well, I know that, and I, I think that my working hours were eight hours, and my daughters now: their working hours are a lot longer than my (hours). I, I feel sorry for them because I feel like, you know, even though we felt, now, uh, that, well, the farm life wasn't easy, but as a child I probably, mine wasn't as bad as if I'd've been an adult and, you know, real, because I came when I was

eighteen, but, but after, after, if I'd've stayed on a farm, that would've been really, really hard work, you know. And it's, uh, not much, it's not much money involved but, uh, I feel like, uh, nowadays the, I think that people have to work harder and longer hours than I did, you know, and yet, you know...

De Mare: Interesting, interesting.

Johnson: ...'cause I know my, my daughters put longer hours in than I, I, my one daughter flies all the time, you know, to her jobs and I think that's hard.

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: Yeah. Um...

Johnson: And my other daughter, you know, puts in a lot of hours, works off, on her days off a lot of time to catch up with everything.

De Mare: Yeah.

00:34:52:20-----

De Mare: I was wondering if you could talk about, you know, you talked about the great camaraderie with the other women that worked there. I mean, can you talk a little bit about the relationships you formed when you were there, um, and, and what the, what the other women were like, were they, you know, because obviously they would've had different experiences up until that point.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: So what that was like to meet all these different people and encounter... can you talk a little about that?

Johnson: Well, I still, I still have one friend down Lithicum (?)*, Lithicum (?)* Heights that uh, oh, and I have one in Essex, uh, I mean, where, close to where you're going to be staying tonight, that uh, they worked at Martins, too. And uh, uh, uh, well, the one I worked with uh, the one I worked, uh, that lives here now in Lithicum (?)* Heights, she, uh, she worked right next door to me at, and she worked in uh, she said they riv- they sautered

little like radio boxes that's what they did. And I remember her saying, um, uh, uh, "We sautered little wires." Because she was from south, she was from North Carolina. But I met so many nice people and I stayed in touch with a lot of people, uh, afterward, but, um, of course I don't, there was only a few people left that I really was close, you know, that I, that I can remember now, but...

00:36:12:00-----

De Mare: Yeah. One of the things that I think is interesting, and I don't know if you can speak to this specifically, and, and I don't want to lead you, but I want to ask you: some of the women that we've talked to have talked about, they would never have met the variety of people that they met...

Johnson: Oh, definitely...

De Mare: So, can you talk a little bit about that?

Johnson: Oh, it's unbelievable the amount of people, you know that you met in that, that time because you were just

like thrown into a bunch of people. Some were a lot older than you, they had, they were already had families, and then there were the young girls like my age, that were, came to work there. So, uh, it was just, and I remember having a family that I was very, very close to, she already had three boys, and she was, could've been a, but she was kind of like, uh, someone that I felt close to.

(Unseen): Watch your hands.

Kelly: It's okay...

Johnson: I work with, I talk with my hands.

Kelly: It's good. It's good. No, we...

De Mare: (overlapping) That's good, no, no, we just, you don't wanna touch the microphone.

Kelly: We wanna hear you.

Johnson: I, I, you know, I really felt like, you know, they were kind of guardian for me in a way, because, uh, that's how I felt about the older women. The one night

that I, that night I told you I took a nap and, and this, this lady brought me a candy bar, she was a lot older than I was, I bet she was just a sweet lady and, uh, I guess she felt that we being uh, young girls, looked at, you know, should be looked after.

Oh, and another thing, I remember having an autograph book at that time, and, uh, uh, a lady that was good bit older than I was wrote this and I'll never forget it. She wrote, um, "When I was young, my how time, time flies. When I was kissed, I would close my eyes. But now that I'm old, older, and see what I can, see what, how men can be, I keep my eyes wide open to see how they can be." Something like that, we... I'll never forget that. It was, it made an impression on me because she was... it was advice and she was an older woman.

De Mare: Yeah.

Johnson: You know.

De Mare: That's awesome.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: That's awesome.

00:38:20:10-----

De Mare: Were there um, was, was it mostly white women that worked at the plant?

Johnson: Yes. I, you know, I'd hardly any... remember any black at all, at that time, and I was not familiar with black people because in Pennsylvania on a farm, where I went to church, school, and everything, there were no black people. But uh, then um, and when I first came to Baltimore there weren't that many black people lived in Baltimore. Very (few), they, just in the past years since that, that, the population has gotten more black. But I don't remember black people at Martins, you know.

De Mare: Yeah.

Kelly: Do you think, um, can you remember, maybe not with yourself, but with maybe some of the other, um, people who worked there, was there any, um, any struggles in terms of, could be, male/female, or could it be, you know, boss/workers? Was there struggles?

Johnson: I don't think too much. I don't think too much.
I think that everything went pretty good. I can... That's
the way I, I felt anyway. If there was, I didn't know
about it.

00:39:32:03-----

De Mare: Well, it's interesting 'cause you said that after
the war, Martin, they contacted you again about staying on
there. I mean, that's very unusual that they would
continue to hire women.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: Uh, and I think maybe we can talk to that
tomorrow when we talk to the women who did stay.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: But, but you, you, you, you were not interested
right after the war...

Johnson: No, that, I wasn't interested anymore, because I, well, I had gotten a job at this, uh, uh, in, uh, department store and uh, I mean it was uh, it was a lot less money, a lot less money. I think I got eighteen dollars a week. I think that's what it was, when I first went there. And I think when I left there in nineteen four... uh... I left there nineteen fifty one... nineteen four... uh, fifty, I think, I was making twenty-eight dollars a week. And that's all.

De Mare: So that's significantly less than you were making during the war.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: That's interesting. And the men who were working at the plant during the war were making more money than you were making.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: But you were able, were you able, you were able to support yourself, renting a room, and all of that.

Johnson: Right.

De Mare: Okay.

Johnson: Yeah.

De Mare: That's very interesting.

Johnson: Yeah. I, I just felt, I, I think I felt fortunate to be someone who was able to come and, and work and help, you know, and work for and... I, but I think a lot of girls would have looked down at factory work, you know, and I think to this day people look at it, you know... And I know that they can't understand how excited I am about belonging to Rosie the Riveters. I know that they don't look at it like I look at it because, you know, that's uh, they don't know that, the experience I had, y'know.

00:41:11:23-----

De Mare: Can you talk a little bit about, 'cause you said a couple times that you really wanted to get off the farm. Can you talk about when you were a young girl and you saw your mother and the other women who were in that life, what

life that, what, how you looked at that life, and, and talk a little about your desire to get away from it.

Johnson: Because I just felt there was just, it was, they did, they just had a hard life. They had the housework to do, they had the farm work to do, it was long hours. I had to milk cows, and uh... then...

I remember the kids who didn't live on a farm, there were some kids who, maybe that... I remember one girl, her dad was a blacksmith or maybe, you know, an undertaker or something like that, they were, you know, and then, and then... I remember we used to have picnics at the park. It would be an all day affair. I'd have to go home and milk the cows and then come back. Well, after you milked the cows you had to take a bath, you didn't have a bathroom, you had to do it in a basin, you know, and, and that, and so, you had, you, and you, you were... You'd think, oh, the kids are having a good time while you're home working on the farm. It, you know, farming is no fun.

I used to tell my mother, "I'm never going to marry, I, I don't want to live on a farm." She said, "Well, then you have to stop liking the farming, the farm boys." And that's, so, that's what I did. I stopped liking the farm boys.

00:42:41:07-----

De Mare: That's awesome. Kirsten's a farm girl.

Johnson: What's that?

De Mare: Kirsten's from, Kirsten grew up on a farm.

Johnson: You grew up on a farm? Where did you, you...?

Kelly: In Michigan.

Johnson: Did you really?

Kelly: Yeah.

Johnson: Ohhhh...

Kelly: We had uh, cherries, apples and asparagus and peaches.

Johnson: Ohhhh! Uh huh. So...

Kelly: A lot of picking and, you know...

Johnson: Did you like working...

(Unseen): Didn't have cows.

Kelly: I didn't, that's why my dad didn't have cows.

He's, he's like...

Johnson: No milkers.

Kelly: ...we didn't wanna miss the fun.

Johnson: Did you like work- living on a farm?

Kelly: I did. A lot.

Johnson: Well, we had lots of food, I mean, you never, you know, you just... Uh, just on Sunday, a girl at church, after church we sat in the fellowship hall and she said, "You mean that you...?" I said, "We hardly ever had to buy food at the store. It was like sugar and flour and those type of things but other than that you ate what, what was raised on the farm. You ate the fruit. You had apples galore,

and you had peaches, and all that kind of stuff. You had your own potatoes and your, all your other vegetables. And your meats. And you didn't have to buy much. Which we, we were well fed. You know, but...

Kelly: And you canned a lot. I mean, you...

Johnson: Canned. You canned...

Kelly: Yeah.

Johnson: ...and you smoked the meat. They smoked the meat, a lot times, and...

De Mare: How, do you remember how they did that? Did you have a smokehouse?

Johnson: They had a smokehouse, uh huh. They had a smokehouse and, and uh, you smoked all the meat in there.

00:44:09:14-----

De Mare: That's amazing.

Kelly: You could, you had quite a journey. I loved hearing your stories...

Johnson: Do ya?

Kelly: ...'cause of this, it was a farm thing...

(Unseen): That was before freezers.

Johnson: Yeah.

Kelly: You know, farm going to...

De Mare: Yeah, yeah, that was going to...

Kelly: ...the big city...

Johnson: Big city.

Kelly: That's what, that's what happened to me. And I was like, "Whoah!"

Johnson: Like the boy saying the farm, "Poor farm girl went to the city and made good."

De Mare: Is there anything else that you want to talk about from that time that we didn't touch on?

Johnson: I don't know what to tell. I don't know.

De Mare: Is there any other story that sticks out in your mind... or...?

Johnson: I remember about, a, a story about, 'bout when, when my mother, when I was living down here, and my mother had a, had problems, she went to the hospital, and I thought she had gall bladder problems and, uh, I, uh, and I was twenty years old, you know, and I went home and I said, "Mom, what, what did they tell me, what did they tell you?" She said, "Well, I've been trying to tell you, I'm going to have a baby." And I was twenty years old! But I was, my mother was only nineteen when I was born, 'cause people were very young when they got married in those days, and so... Anyway. So. She was only nineteen when I was born so, uh, I mean, so she was only thirty-nine when my brother was born, but I thought she was old, you know.

00:45:25:25-----

De Mare: The only thing that I would ask, if you want to talk to it, is you said that your, your husband was in the service...

Johnson: Yes.

De Mare: And that he was in the South Pacific. And you made, you made reference to the fact that it was tough for him.

Johnson: Uh huh.

De Mare: It was a tough experience. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Johnson: Well, he talked about when he would be in a fox hole, which I can't picture what a fox hole is, but he said, you know, when, he said when he came home, he said he just cried and cried 'cause his nerves were so bad from having been uh, in, you know, in, in such, in the fighting. How, and, uh, I just can't picture it, you know, and uh, but he... I, I really think it took a toll on the men, uh, because a lot of the men who were in the service, I, well,

he died when he was seventy-one, and I feel like, would he have lived longer if, um, you know, if he hadn't been in, in that stressful time? 'Cause stress can take a lot out of you.

De Mare: Oh yeah.

Johnson: So...

Kelly: Did the men, did the men talk about it much? The experience...?

Johnson: At first when we got married, he did, but my girls, my girls say, "Why didn't we ask Dad more questions?" But he didn't talk about it to them. I don't think he wanted to, you know, maybe he felt like they shouldn't have to know what he went through. Maybe that's the way it was. I don't know. But they often say they wished they'd've asked him more questions.

00:46:52:00-----

De Mare: Yeah.

Kelly: Great. Well, thank you, yeah.

De Mare: You're done.

Kelly: Yeah.

De Mare: You are done. You were wonderful.

Kelly: Thank you so much.