

Museum of History and Industry
Historical Society of Seattle and King County

Transcript

Edith Robertson - taped interview

January 6, 1985

corrected and edited transcript, approved February 12, 1985

Side A

This is an interview with Edith Robertson, on the 6th of January, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. Let me start out by asking you what were you doing when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

Mrs. Robertson What was I doing? Well, I was down at my mother-in-law's, washing clothes - it was on Sunday. And I remember my husband was out washing the car, and I was in the house. I remember I ran out to tell him because we heard it on the radio.

He said, "Oh, we'll lick them in two weeks!"

Q. Is that what you thought, too?

Mrs. Robertson Well, I don't know. At the time... Of course, we didn't know the complete damages they had done at Pearl Harbor.

Q. Were you afraid?

Mrs. Robertson Well, I don't know that I was so afraid, but I remember going downtown the next day - we lived up at 23rd and East Union - and I went downtown on the bus. And everybody was talking to one another. It was like you get on a bus now, where you just sit down and you don't talk to anybody, unless they're sitting with you probably. But everybody was talking about it. Everybody was so concerned, wondering what was going to happen, because it was the first time we had ever been attacked like that.

Q. Were you ever afraid that the shore would be bombarded?

Mrs. Robertson Well, I was kind of afraid when we had the blackout. I just don't remember how long after [Pearl Harbor] that was - I guess that was right after they bombed Pearl Harbor.

I remember we lived in this apartment. We weren't allowed to have any lights or anything on. I got up this one morning, after we had been told - probably the first morning or something like that. I got up to get breakfast because my husband was going to work, and I didn't go quite that early because I was working in the beauty shop at the time.

I thought, "Oh, in the kitchen...", and we lived in this apartment and there was a building and

everything there - no one could possibly see any light out that window. So I put the light on, and just a few moments later there was a rap at the door, and somebody telling me that my light was on.

Q. My goodness, was that the warden?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, the warden.
And when I think about that - the blackout and all - I think that scared me more than anything. I don't know - I don't really believe I was ever too scared. You know how, in those days, we were - we just thought that nobody could attack us.

Q. Did you have any children then?

Mrs. Robertson No, I have a stepson, but he wasn't living with us.

Q. Was your husband concerned about being drafted? What was your family situation?

Mrs. Robertson No, he was just kind of in between - I think he went later on and tried to sign up, but he was just over the age that they were taking. That was my first husband. And he was working at Todd's [Shipyard] at the time this happened, so then of course when he was working there, that kind of exempted him, too, from being drafted.

Q. Was Todd's busy even before Pearl Harbor? Were they building a lot?

Mrs. Robertson Well, they were busy in this way - though my husband could probably tell you more since he's worked at Todd's for years - but I remember they would get a ship in, and it was more repair work. They would get a ship in and work seven days a week, overtime and all that, maybe for two or three weeks. Then, maybe they'd be laid off for a week. That's the way it was, as I recall, when my husband was working there.

Q. Did you go into Todd's right away after the war began?

Mrs. Robertson No, I didn't. Pearl Harbor was in 1941, and I went in the middle of '42, because I was working in a beauty shop. I was supposed to get through at 5:30, and it seemed like this woman I was working for, at five minutes to 5:00, would always give me an appointment. And I'd be there until 6:00 or 7:00 at night, so one morning I just got up and said, "Well, I'm going to go to work someplace where when the whistle blows, I can quit."

My husband had sent quite a few different women that we knew - told them to go down and see somebody at the union office, I guess, and tell them that he'd sent her. So I said to him, "Why don't you me a job out there?"

He said, "Oh, you wouldn't want to work out there."

So this morning, I got up and I just went down by myself. And there was this big long line of people lined up and they were all getting their pink slip. And there were just two of us - we were the last two in line. We got up there and they said there wasn't any more jobs. They said, "There's only two jobs left, and they're graveyard shifts, and you wouldn't want those."

And we said, "Yes, we do."

So we got the jobs. We didn't know one another, but it happened that we just lived two blocks apart.

Q. Another woman?

Mrs. Robertson Uh-huh.

Q. And was this at the Boilermakers Union Hall?

Mrs. Robertson No, I think this was through the - well, golly, it was the sheet metal shop. I think maybe it was through the Machinists Union.

Q. Do you remember where it was?

Mrs. Robertson Well, at that time, the Machinists Union used to be in the Eagles Building, there at Seventh and Union.

Q. Yes, I believe you're right. So you just decided all this in twenty four hours?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, just all on my own.

Q. Was there any patriotism driving you to work in the shipyard?

Mrs. Robertson Well, yes, I think so. Because at that time, they really needed women in there. All the younger men were being drafted. They used to say that most of the men in there were 4-F's - I don't know what the "F" stands for now, but they weren't able to go in service anyway.

And I do remember a man in there that was a leadman and he only had one eye. He had a glass eye. And he went down to the [physical] examination when they had drafted him, and we all thought that they wouldn't take him and they did.

Q. Had you wanted to work as a sheet metal - should I call you a "sheet metal mechanic"?

Mrs. Robertson It didn't matter - I just wanted a job. I didn't know what I was going to get. It just happened, I guess, that they were hiring for the sheet metal shop.

So they told us - I think we went to work that night. No, the next day. We went in the daytime, just to hire in, I guess, and then they had to teach us what to do. And this was on the day shift. I know we both worked so hard. We both nearly worked ourselves to death, because we wanted the job so badly. On the way home, I know the

buses were all full up. I think about it often now. We were so tired, we sat down on the floor in the bus to get home.

The next night was when we went on the regular shift. I worked one night and I got home at eight o'clock in the morning, and there was a telegram under my door that my stepfather had died over east of the mountains. And I had to leave. I think I got home at eight o'clock and the bus left at about 9:45, or something like that, and so my husband called the shipyard and told them what had happened. And they gave me two weeks leave of absence, and I'd only worked there one night.

Q. That is amazing.

Mrs. Robertson So they evidently needed help quite badly.

Q. Had you seen advertisements in the newspapers from Todd's for women, or was it just something ...?

Mrs. Robertson I just was going to go down and put my application in. I didn't know they were hiring. Maybe they hired every day, I don't know, but I just know that we had friends and one woman would say she'd like to go to work at the shipyard. He would tell her - I think he knew this man who was at the head of the Machinists Union, and he'd give her a little note to go down there. But he wouldn't give me one, so I went on my own! (laughing)

Q. What was your job? What did you do?

Mrs. Robertson Well, when I first started, I was a helper. We went on this graveyard shift, and this night, we were the first women they had on the graveyard shift and it seemed to me like there were about ten of us. So the men could all choose who they wanted as their helper. I'll always remember - this was my nickname the whole time I was there - this one man said, "I'll take Pinky," meaning me, because I had red hair, I guess. And that was all I was ever known by when I was in there.

So I just don't remember how long I worked as a helper. And by the way, I started at \$.95 an hour.

Then I became a trainee, and we went to school. I think we had to go a little early in the evening - I think we went two hours early two nights a week, and had a teacher there.

Q. On the site, at the shipyards?

Mrs. Robertson Yes.

We had to go just so long - I don't remember if it was three months. Then we became - let's see, when I went to school, I was a trainee. And then I became a journeyman.

When I was a trainee, I think I got \$1.05 a hour, and as a journeyman, I got \$1.20 an hour.

Q. What did the work involve?

Mrs. Robertson Well, in the sheet metal shop, we did ventilation ...

Q. Ducting?

Mrs. Robertson Uh-huh. Ducting and all that. But I never worked out on the ship. Some of the girls did.

We made foot lockers. We had to rivet those together. That's the one thing we learned as trainees - we learned blueprint reading. We had these patterns, and we cut them all out and riveted them together. We added hinges, and padlocks and everything on them.

Then we ran punch presses - these big machines that punch holes, and we ran the saws that saw these things. There was a big thing they called a shear, as long as this room (approx. 12'), and we'd have these big long pieces of material and it would be steel, I guess, and we'd have to mark those off and cut them.

Kind of scary, those big machines.

Q. Did anyone get hurt?

Mrs. Robertson One girl did. I remember she got quite badly hurt on a big machine. Someway her arm got in there - I can still remember her screaming and all that.

Q. How did you dress for work?

Mrs. Robertson We dressed in slacks. Some of them had coveralls, but just slacks. And no fancy [top], just a sweater or something. Where I worked, it was warm - they had the heat on. But for the girls out on the ships - well, it was cold out there.

Q. Did you have to wear a bandanna?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, we had to wear a bandanna. They had safety men, and they'd let us get by for just so long. They'd come around and tell us we had to have these bandannas. Of course, we all hated to wear them. And after a week or so, we'd kind of gradually get away from it. And he'd let us go maybe a month and all of sudden he'd come around again, and we'd have to put them all on.

And we had to wear goggles when we did any of the grinding, or anything like that.

Q. Did you have special shoes, heavy shoes? Or did you wear just your own.

Mrs. Robertson No, we wore just our own. But we maybe shouldn't have, because I remember I dropped something on my toe and broke it. It wasn't that serious.

Q. Did you hurt yourself any other ways? Cuts or burns?

Mrs. Robertson No, I didn't, except I was always

getting things in my eyes. I don't know why. If I was grinding or something, even with glasses on, it seemed like it must have been three or four times I got steel in my eye.

And one time, a piece rusted in there. I got up one morning, and I had such terrible pain in my eye and I couldn't figure out what was wrong. Well, they had nurses right there, you know, and I went in to the nurse. She tried to take it out, but she couldn't and they sent me in to an eye specialist. He put novocaine, or something in my eye - just a drop - and took a magnet and pulled it out. This piece of rusted steel.

I don't know why it just happened.
Whether it was me or not.

Then when I got to be a journeyman, I had a helper.

Q. Was that a woman?

Mrs. Robertson Yes. I think all the men had become journeymen.

Q. How were you accepted by the men?

Mrs. Robertson Well, with most of them it was all right. But there was a few... There was jealousy - you could tell that. I never thought men gossiped until I got in there - they're worse than women. (chuckling)

You could see them. They were a little bit jealous if you got a job that they thought they should have. Especially when we got doing repair work, and we got more money for that. We got \$1.34 an hour for repair work, and if the women got that and the men didn't, you could tell there was jealousy.

And we kind of thought, too - sometimes we'd get a big load of steel come in, and it would be awfully heavy. They would always send - it would always be the women that unloaded that. So we got kind of tired of it, and one time we complained about it. That's when they said that they were all 4-F's and couldn't do any lifting.

But as a general rule, the ones we worked right with and the leadmen - they were nice to us.

Q. Were you a full member in your union?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, uh-huh.

Q. Were you when you were a trainee, or when you became a journeyman?

Mrs. Robertson Just when I became a journeyman.

Q. So you could vote, and you went to the union meetings?

Mrs. Robertson Yes.

Q. Did they make any special accommodations for women in either the shipyard or the union? Was there any - Surely there had been very few women in that union before the war...

Mrs. Robertson Well, do you mean like special rest periods? I don't believe so. We could go to the restroom whenever we wanted to - there was no restriction, as long as you didn't stay too long. Like if you had to go to the bathroom, you didn't ask, you just went.

But we didn't have 15 minutes - don't they have, most places nowadays, a break with 15 minutes in the morning and in the afternoon? We never had anything like that, but they never said anything to us when we -

There's always a few that will take advantage, and there were some girls that would go and they'd stay too long. And another thing they used to do once in a while - first, one girl would go to the restroom, and the first thing you know, every girl in the shop would be in there. Get in and visit. They didn't all do that, but there's always a few that will.

Q. You said that you were a member of that first group of ten women on the graveyard shift at Todd's. At other shipyards, the toughest time for a woman to work was the graveyard shift and the toughest place was out on the ships. It just got rougher and rougher. Were you ever harassed in any way?

Mrs. Robertson No, but of course, I wasn't out on the ships. But, no, I never was. I was treated very well.

Q. What were the other women like that you worked with? Were they all very different from each other? Were there any common characteristics?

Mrs. Robertson They were just from all walks of life. There were an awful lot of them from North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota - it seemed like they had come out here just to work. Several beauticians, I know, same as I was. Some were housewives and some were young girls. There were quite a few, especially on the day shift, that their husbands were in the service. Either their husbands or their boyfriends were in the service and they were working there.

Q. Were there a lot of women with children?

Mrs. Robertson No, I don't believe so. Not too many at that time. There may have been some women with children - there were a few older women in their late forties or fifties. Not too many, but there were a few. And they could have had grown children.

But then, of course, when I got on the day shift, there were quite a few women on there and there could have been some. You weren't as intimate as you had been on the night shift, because we had all gone on at the same time, just ten of us.

And we did notice - well... They transferred the whole graveyard shift and we had our choice of going to days or swingshift, because they were taking all the women off the graveyard shift. And we noticed when we first went on days that the day shift women didn't like us

too well to start with. But then we got over it.

Q. Why do you think they felt that way?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, I think there's always a little of that between the day shift and the night shift. The day shift kind of thinks they're a little bit above the night shift. I think you find that. I know my husband said that even with the men, they were that way.

Q. Were there any programs, as far as you know, that Todd ran to help out women that were working, like childcare or meals?

Mrs. Robertson No, I'm sure there weren't.

Q. Could you get meals in the plant?

Mrs. Robertson There was a place where we could. Yes, cafeteria style. But most of us took our own lunch because they had a nice big lunchroom, off of where they had the restrooms. They had benches in there to sit on, just for the women, and there was a woman in there made coffee for us. They had a big urn of coffee. And she kept the place clean. So most all of us took our lunch, because you only had a half hour, and it seemed like you stood in line so long to get into the lunchroom. We felt like we wanted to rest during that time - just relax and eat our lunch.

Q. Did you get tired? Did you find it hard?

Mrs. Robertson It depended on whether you liked to work hard or not. There were some - I would rather work than stand around. I'm still that way. And it seemed that if you wanted to work, you got more of the hard jobs and things. My helper and I mentioned it one time to the leadman, "How come we got all the hard jobs?"

He said, "Well, we have to put somebody on it that'll do it."

But some of the girls didn't work too hard. They weren't too fussy about it as long as the government was paying for it. I don't think they cared. But when they got on repair work, I guess the government wasn't paying for that and then they really wanted you to work hard.

I think it's still kind of that way.

Q. You were a journeyman with a helper. In the group your leadman was leadman for, how many journeymen were women and how many were men?

Mrs. Robertson I think - of course, there were only ten women on the graveyard shift... Let's see... I think there were only three or four of us that were journeymen of the women.

Q. Out of a group of how many journeymen altogether, including the men?

Mrs. Robertson Golly, I think there must have been fifty in the shop on graveyard, altogether. And most would be men.

Q. You were very good at your job then, to have become a journeyman.

Mrs. Robertson Well, I think so, uh-huh. I don't meant I was the only one - there were others, too.

Q. Well, three out of fifty. That's impressive, that's not very many.

Mrs. Robertson Well, of course, there were only ten women altogether. But on the day shift, there would be a lot more women, and there were a lot more men [journeymen] than women.

Q. Did you respect and like your shop steward and your leadman?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes, they were very nice. When I was on the night shift, there was a foreman and the one leadman. When I was on the day shift ... there was the superintendent, and the quartermen right under the superintendent, and the foreman, and then the leadman. They were very good about if you got stuck on something, and didn't know how to do it, the leadman would show you and help you as much as he could.

Q. Were you ever interested in making a career of this?

Mrs. Robertson No, I wasn't. I thought of it as working there while the war was on. At that time, I don't know if you could have made a career out of it because the shipyard was a little different. I don't think you could have gone out, and gotten a job in a sheet metal shop [outside the shipyard]. I don't think they would have hired a woman.

Now, I guess they do.

Q. Why would you not have wanted to continue?

Mrs. Robertson Well, I had my beauty work that I liked.

Q. You liked it better than working in the shipyard?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, I enjoyed working in the shipyard because it was different - I'd never done any work like that before. I really enjoyed it, but I don't know. I just didn't even think about a career out of it because I thought... Well, as I say, at that time, women just didn't get those jobs. I guess I thought I couldn't.

Q. So you thought it was just for the emergency?

Mrs. Robertson Uh-huh, just for the war effort at that time. Now, maybe I'd feel differently. They almost have to

take you now if you can do the work.

Q. Would you have felt like you were taking a job away from a returning serviceman if you had stayed? Did that enter your mind at all? Did you feel that that was a man's job?

Mrs. Robertson I guess maybe I did. In those days, I think you thought more that way.

And then, I'd always wanted to have my own beauty shop. So after that, I got my own beauty shop.

Q. How did your husband feel about your work?

Mrs. Robertson Once I got the job, he thought it was all right. He just thought I wouldn't like it after doing beauty work. He'd see them there, working, and it wasn't such dirty work where I was, but on the ships it was...

I don't know how come I didn't get put out on a ship.

Q. I think out on the ships it was so cold, dirty, noisy... Your working at night - did it put any strain on your marriage?

Mrs. Robertson No, because he was working the same shift. That's the reason I wanted the graveyard shift.

Q. How did your lives change? That must have been very strange to both be coming home at the beginning of the day.

Mrs. Robertson Yes, because it was hard sleeping. He could go to bed and sleep a few hours and get up, and go back and sleep again later on. With me, if I went to bed and woke up in two hours, that was it. I couldn't sleep any more. Then, too, he worked at Plant A and I worked at Plant B. I guess when I went on days, I had to ride with someone else. They all had car pools where you rode with others. I think there was five of us in the car.

I can remember in those days - this fog here (gesturing out the window) reminds me of it - it just seemed like we had so much fog. I used to be more scared of that than anything else trying to get to work. It would be so foggy.

Q. You'd started out taking the bus?

Mrs. Robertson Well, we took the bus just for that first day. After that, we rode - both this girl and I - we rode with my husband. It seems to me like he had some other riders, too.

Q. How did working graveyard shift affect your social life? And when did you buy groceries? When did you get your ration book? How did you manage all those little jobs?

Mrs. Robertson Well, we usually came home and went right to bed, and then we'd get up and have the afternoon until evening. We lived right across the street from the

grocery store. In an emergency situation like that, it's just different. I don't know if I could do it now. Of course, I'm older, too.

Q. Did you have any sense working there of there being any precautions about security? Did you have a badge?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes. You had to have - that's one thing. I never was able to get a birth certificate. I was born back in Kansas City. I guess I was born at home or something, and I wrote back and tried to get my birth certificate [after hiring on at Todd's, but the authorities in Kansas City couldn't locate one.]

Side B

Mrs. Robertson so my aunt and my mother made out an affidavit, and signed it, and they took me in the shipyard with that.

Yes, we had security. I don't think it was when we came in, but when we went out, we had to have people there and you had to open your lunchbox and show them that you weren't taking anything out.

Q. Did people try to smuggle things out?

Mrs. Robertson Not that I know of. You never know, I guess. I heard since then of people who do things like that. I don't know of anything they had that I'd have wanted to take, unless it would be bolts or nuts, or something like that.

Q. Kind of a hard shop to steal from, with those huge machines.

Was it a huge place, full of people?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes.

Q. Thousands and thousands?

Mrs. Robertson Well, on the night shift, there wouldn't have been that many, but on the days there were.

I was just in the sheet metal shop, but they had all the other shops, and the ships they were working on, too. There was Plant B, and Plant A was the first one started.

When I first started there, I think they called it Todd's Pacific and then they changed it to Seattle-Tacoma.

Q. When you worked on days, were you working on new construction or repair?

Mrs. Robertson Both.

Q. What was the new construction they were building there? Who was it for, the Navy?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, they were building destroyers.

Q. Baby flat-tops?

Mrs. Robertson No, the flat-tops are aircraft carriers. The destroyers go out, and carry the bombs. We built mostly destroyers.

Q. You were there about two and a half years, and you never planned on making a career out of it - were you interested in increasing your responsibility? Did you want to become a shop steward? To become a leadman?

Mrs. Robertson Well, no, but I don't know if a woman could at that time. We had a shop steward, and he was always a man.

Q. Could you have become a leadwoman?

Mrs. Robertson I don't believe so. I don't think there was any woman that would lead, at either place. I think journeyman was about the highest you could go.

Q. Sometimes in books I've read about the war, they've talked about the defense plants being the first time that men and women had ever worked side by side. Women had always worked in the offices, but this was different. They were working together in the shops and on the ships. With so many women's husbands gone and with so many families disrupted by husbands and wives sometimes working different shifts, they talk about a new morality, a wartime morality, in which sexual things became more free and easy - there were more relationships. Did you see any of that among the women you knew?

Mrs. Robertson Yes. I saw it with some of the women whose husbands were in the service. There was not too much of it, but there was a few of them - I think there were romances going on there.

Q. Did you know any of them well enough to know why, whether it was loneliness?

Mrs. Robertson I think it was loneliness probably. Maybe their husbands were doing the same thing. I don't know. With some, you would be quite surprised that it would happen, because they would seem so concerned [about their absent husbands].

 I wouldn't say it was a common thing, because there were quite a few that didn't. But there were also some who did. Just from observing.

Q. Did any divorces come out of that, or was that less common?

Mrs. Robertson It happened, I imagine, after the husbands came home. They were all away while we were working there.

I do remember this one girl. She said her husband hated to go in the service so bad. He was always sick, and she always thought - she told us that so many times - he was just trying to get out of the service because he hated it so bad and didn't want to go in the first place. And she got word that he was in the hospital in Hawaii, and she said, "If he's doing this just to get out of the service, I'll never forgive him."

And about two weeks later, she got the notice he was dead. They found out he had inflammation of the heart, and I guess all this time he had been ill and he wasn't putting on.

I often used to think afterward. I wondered if she remembered all the things she told us.

Q. Did you become chums with a group of women from Todd's, or did you not see them much outside of work?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes. I had some of them over for dinner, and I went to their house for dinner. Once in a while, maybe one of the women in the shop would invite some of the women and their husbands - those who had husbands - and some of the men who'd bring their wives. And we'd have a party - go their for dinner or something like that.

This one girl - she and I were quite chummy. Her husband was in the service, and her mother and dad worked there, too. She was from back in Kansas someplace. Her husband was here on leave for a while, and I had them both up to the house for dinner.

It was quite interesting, because you met people from all the different states. Now I don't know where any of them are. They were all so anxious to get back to North Dakota and Minnesota and all that... A year or so later, I saw several of them that had decided to come back here again.

Q. How had they been recruited to come? How did they know where to go?

Mrs. Robertson I don't know, but they tell me that Boeing has a standing ad in the papers for help back in those states, so maybe the shipyards did, too.

Q. Did they live in the housing projects, or did they live scattered in apartments and houses?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, I think they lived scattered around. I think they lived pretty much wherever they could get a place to live.

Q. There was quite a housing crunch, wasn't there? Didn't they find it difficult to find...?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, they built these government houses. So maybe some of them lived in there.

Q. Were there any black women?

Mrs. Robertson It's funny, but I never saw a black woman when I worked there - day or night shift - in the shops.

Q. In any job?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, unless they could have been out on the ship. I don't recall that there was a black woman on either the day or the night shift.

Q. Who performed the job of scaler, at Todd's?

Mrs. Robertson That's out on the ship, isn't it?

Q. Well, it sounds like it's janitorial service on the ships, or in the shop.

Mrs. Robertson I don't recall that there was anyone in there that was called a scaler. To clean the shops up, they had these big air blowers, and we never had to do any cleaning or anything.

Q. You've mentioned women from Wisconsin, and the Dakotas - did you know any women from the deep south?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes, my helper was. I don't know if you'd call it the deep south, but she was from Virginia. I used to get a kick out of her. I think about her every once in a while. Her name was Iva, but I don't remember her last name. Everything was "you all."

Q. Tell me about her. How old was she?

Mrs. Robertson I think probably at that time, she would have been about forty years old. But she was very interesting to talk to and a lot of fun. I don't remember if she was married or had a husband.

Q. She had come all the way from Virginia to Washington, to work in Todd's shipyard?

Do you know what she did afterward?

Mrs. Robertson I never did. I never saw her after I left there because I was in the hospital and had an operation. I remember getting this big bouquet of flowers from her, and then I had a couple of little things she gave me - a little Dutch boy and girl, carrying water, with a little yoke across here (across their shoulders), made of china. I wanted that for a keepsake so badly, because I liked her so well. One of the neighbors came in, and she had a little girl, and I put it up on top of the refrigerator. The mother reached up and gave it to her, and she just whammed it and broke it all to pieces.

Q. What a shame! And you've lost track of her?

Mrs. Robertson Yes. I don't know anyone that I worked with there.

Q. In the newspapers in the '40's, there's a lot of editorials and letters to the editor about low productivity and absenteeism, about loafing in the shipyards. Did you see any evidence of that kind of thing?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, there was loafing.

Q. What does that mean, exactly?

Mrs. Robertson Well, they just don't work! (laughing) Especially the men, I think. They'd stand around and talk. And there was some girls, too.

I remember this one girl telling me, when we first went to work there. She had worked at Boeing's, and she said, "You don't have to work hard. Just make up to the boss. That's all you have to do, and you won't have to work hard."

She was one of them that did that - when I said there was some playing around.

Oh, yes. There was some who'd go back to the restroom and stay for forty-five minutes which kind of spoils it for the rest of you. Because they'd let you go when you really wanted to, but then they'd clamp down on everybody.

Yes, I think there was quite a bit of loafing, but then there was work, and the work had to be done, too.

Q. You said you could see a difference between work that was done for the government contract and work that was done for repair contracts?

Mrs. Robertson There was a difference because of the bosses there. When it was for the government, they didn't seem to care whether anybody worked very hard or not. I think they got cost plus so much. I forget exactly how it worked, but the less work they did, the more money they got. So they didn't care whether anybody worked too hard or not.

When they got the repair work in, they really clamped down on you, and saw that you worked real hard. I worked the same all the time anyway, because, to me, it's harder to keep out of work, trying to hide out and things, than to just get in and do the work. Time goes faster.

Q. Yes, it makes the time go.

Did you ever see anybody playing cards or sleeping?

Mrs. Robertson No, I never saw anybody playing cards, but we did have a man that was in the toolroom - the toolroom where we'd go up to get tools. I guess he was an alcoholic. This was when I was on the night shift, and he'd sleep most of the night and the foreman kind of covered for him. I don't know why - if he was a friend of his, or what. But he (the foreman) would get the stuff.

I never knew at the time (that he was an alcoholic), but I saw him afterward, over in Yakima. I was

staying in a hotel there, and he went up on the elevator with me, and I just said hello to him. He was with a couple other men. The next morning, we were having breakfast, and he came in and talked to me, and told me that he had been an alcoholic and that he had lost his wife. I think he had two daughters, and he was going to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and that he hadn't drank in many years, he told me.

So then I figured that's why he was sleeping all the time, because he'd come to work drunk.

Q. Did you ever see any signs of drinking on the graveyard shift? Smuggled bottles?

Mrs. Robertson Well, one time I remember - I think it was Christmas or New Year's Eve - they had quite a party. Different ones brought maybe a pint, but not everybody. Some of them had too much. But other than that, I never noticed anything. If they drank, they did it [quietly]. I don't think any of the girls did. Of course, with the men, I don't know. They could have.

Q. Did Todd's sponsor bond drives?

Mrs. Robertson I guess they must have, because there was quite a few bond drives. Then, of course, we all bought bonds. They took so much out of our pay check every time. You know, you'd buy so many bonds, you'd sign up for them.

Then I know every once in a while they'd have [a rally]. I remember one that was on our lunch hour, and Jack Benny and his whole troupe came. And I guess that was their reason for coming.

Q. Did you get to see them perform?

Mrs. Robertson Yes.

And I remember - oh, who was that man that Alice Faye was married to that used to be with Jack Benny? Oh, dear, what is his name? Of course, Alice Faye's way before your time.

Q. I'm sorry, I just don't know. It couldn't be Rochester?

Mrs. Robertson No, he was with Benny, too. But this man - he was the band leader. He's still around. But, anyway, the girls always said they wondered why Alice Faye ever married him, and then after they saw him, they could understand because he had such personality.

And I think it was Shirley Jones - one of those actresses - who was there. And they would talk about buying bonds.

Q. Were there rewards for good ideas to make production go faster?

Mrs. Robertson There was a suggestion box, yes. I never got any of it. (laughing)

Q. Did you ever see much of upper management at Todd's? Did

you know who the big bosses were, after working there a couple of years?

Mrs. Robertson I knew who the superintendent was - he was right there in our shop all the time. Everybody was scared to death of him - his name was McLaughlin. He hardly ever spoke to everybody. I guess we'd say hello, and he'd just look at us. After the war was over, I was at Longacres Racetrack one time, and he came up to me and you'd think I was his long lost buddy. He was just so friendly, and talked to me. He wasn't working there anymore either. And I though, gee, we were all so scared of him and he was nice when he got out of work. I suppose because he was a boss...

Q. Did the Navy ever tour? Did you ever see Navy people?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, that picture I had was the admiral - well, not the admiral, but the guy who takes the ship. Who would he be?

Q. The captain?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, the captain. ^TI was a large picture, and showed nearly all the girls I worked with there, and we were all shaking hands with him.

Q. That would sure be nice to find.

If you had not become ill, would you probably have worked to the end of the war?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

Q. Did your illness have anything to do with your job?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, I don't know. It was a hysterectomy, and I don't think it had anything to do with the job because I had tumors. But being on my feet and working and lifting, I just got real sick. So I went and had the operation.

I would have gone back, yes. But they were kind of finishing up, and they were laying off, and I didn't even try to go back.

Q. Do you know - you may have left too early to know - whether women were laid off in larger numbers than men were at the end of the war? Did they tend to lay off the women first?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, I think so.

Q. Do you? Because it was "men's work" or because the women were less qualified?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, I think it would be because it was men's work. I think that some of the women did the work better than the men.

Q. Did you keep up enough with any of the women to know

whether they wanted to stay on themselves? Or whether they all just left?

Mrs. Robertson Well, no, I didn't. But I think they all just felt like me. I don't believe these women could have stayed on. Maybe if they had fought for it. But I don't believe there would be any sheet metal shops, at that time, that would have hired women.

Q. Did Todd's get far smaller after the war? Did it shrink way down?

Mrs. Robertson Oh, yes. The building where Plant B was, I don't think they even [use]. I don't think Todd's now has many people working there any more.

Q. Just in general about the war, did you think the war would be over more quickly than it was?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, very much. Especially the Japanese war.

Q. What did you think? Two years?

Mrs. Robertson No, I didn't think it would last that long. I would have thought a year at the most.

Q. How did people's attitudes change when it dragged on and on as it did?

Mrs. Robertson I don't think their attitudes changed. Everybody was very patriotic. It was different than they were in the Viet Nam war. Everybody was, well, just mad because they had attacked us at Pearl Harbor. There were so many people there I knew. I had a cousin there on a battleship - the TENNESSEE. He was in the gun turret, and he was the only enlisted man who came out alive in his department. He got shrapnel in his knee.

You know, there were so many boys killed there. And we didn't know when we heard that... My cousin was only eighteen, he'd gone in when he got out of high school. We were worried because we didn't know whether he was killed, and I'm sure there were a lot of others that felt the same way. I think after about a week, he got word home that he was all right.

But, I think people would feel the same again if they came in. Don't you think they would? Don't you think the younger generation would?

Q. I think that was just a different war. People have called it our "good war," and I think it was like that. People felt that Hitler was someone who obviously had to be stopped. Japanese imperialism was obviously something that was wrong.

Mrs. Robertson Yes, especially when they came in there [to Pearl Harbor]. Even the Japanese people felt badly about it, the ones that were here.

Q. What did you think about the internment of the Japanese-Americans?

Mrs. Robertson I thought it was necessary for their own safety, as well. I felt badly about it, because I knew Japanese people. But I really think it was the only thing we could do.

Q. Did you feel their lives were in danger? That they might be harmed?

Mrs. Robertson Well, they might have. There were so many - There's people that are still mad at the Japanese. I never felt that way, because I don't feel it the people's fault.

What were those pilots? The kamikaze?

Q. The suicide planes?

Mrs. Robertson I don't know whether they had to do that or not.

But I would hope that people would feel differently if we were attacked - differently than they did in the Viet Nam War.

Q. When the atomic bombs were dropped, after the German surrender in Europe, and before the Japanese surrender, did you have any idea when you were reading the papers of how immense those bombs were? What did you think of that, that day, when that happened? Those days, I guess.

Mrs. Robertson Well, I suppose that we were kind of glad that it would end the war, but it was still a terrible thing. All the people that were killed and maimed for life.

Q. Were there celebrations in the streets? Did people realize right away that that would mean the end of the war?

Mrs. Robertson No, I don't remember any celebrations. If there was, I don't remember it.

Q. You had coped as a cook with sugar and butter and meat rationing - did you have to learn to cook differently during the war?

Mrs. Robertson We ate an awful lot of hamburger! (laughing) It was the only meat you could get that was fit to eat.

Sugar didn't bother me, though my in-laws were great sugar eaters. I've never been a sugar eater. I know that they would get their tickets, and I would give them mine. About two days after they'd get their tickets, they'd be up to get mine because she'd bake pies or cakes. And they drank a lot of tea - they were Scotch and drank a lot of tea - and I guess they used sugar in their tea. I never have used sugar in coffee or tea or anything like that.

Butter we couldn't get. I remember I used to buy whipping cream, and use an egg beater, and make my own butter.

Q. Would you add salt to it? I've often wondered...

Mrs. Robertson Yes. I was raised on a farm and my mother made butter. So I knew how to make butter.

I think I missed cheese about as much as anything, because I do quite a bit of cooking with cheese. Your cheese and meat came on the same stamps.

Q. Oh, the red stamps?

Mrs. Robertson Uh-huh.

There was the two of us. And if you went out to eat, you couldn't get a decent meal in a restaurant. About the only place you could go to get a decent meal was where we used to go. They used to call it Crawford's, on the waterfront. You could get a fish dinner, and you'd get a nice dinner. But to go out and eat.

And the service - that's one thing I noticed. When I was young and I first started to work, I did waitress work. I couldn't believe, when you went into a restaurant, the service you got... They just acted like they didn't care whether they waited on you or not. You never got any water with your meal, or anything like that. They'd just kind of throw it at you.

Q. I wonder why? Did they have a captive audience?

Mrs. Robertson Well, you know how they get when help is scarce. They just don't care if they work or not, and they just kind of slam it at you.

Once in a while, we'd go up to Canada, to Vancouver, and get a good steak or something up there. The meals were so cheap up there then. Now they're more expensive than we are.

Of course, you couldn't go too much because of the gas rationing. I know I went over east of the mountains when my mother was sick one time, and I got back as far as North Bend and the gas tank registered empty. And I still had to go to Twenty third and East Union, and I didn't have any stamps to get any more gas. I just sort of came in on a wing and a prayer. I made it home because my car, even after it registered empty, still had two gallons in there. I came as fast as I could, not thinking that the slower you go, the less gas you burn. But I was going fast to be sure I'd get there! (laughing)

Q. How strict were they? If you as a woman driver alone in the car had come into a station in North Bend and said, "please, can I buy a gallon of gas?", do you really think they would have turned you down?

Mrs. Robertson I don't know. It was the law, but I don't know what they would have done. I'd have probably tried it, but I don't know.

Q. How did Seattle change during the war? From a woman's point of view, if there is such a thing. How different did it become?

Mrs. Robertson Different in this way, and I don't think it ever went back to the way it was before. Everybody used to dress up when they'd go downtown or anyplace. You'd never think of going downtown without a suit, and a hat, and gloves, and all that. Then during the war, everybody got more casual and started wearing slacks. You wouldn't think of - even riding the bus going to work with slacks, you felt kind of funny.

Q. What did you wear on your legs when you didn't have slacks on? Were you able to get nylons, or did you use rayons.

Mrs. Robertson Rayons. (ruefully) And they would wrinkle.

And then we couldn't get those. We used to paint our legs. They had something kind of like face makeup...

Side A of Tape 2

This is an interview with Edith Robertson on February 12, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. You were telling me a story that during the war, Shirley Jones came to visit in the shipyard. Would you tell me that story again?

Mrs. Robertson Well, it was during our noon hour and she came selling bonds. In those days, we couldn't get nylons. We had these rayon hose that would be baggy and would get runs in them.

And she was beautifully dressed in a brown gabardine suit, and her hair fixed nicely. And then we looked at her stockings, which you couldn't help but notice, and they had runs in them. Those stockings would just twist around your legs, too.

It just spoiled the whole effect of her outfit. But that's the way it was with everybody.

Q. I wonder why she didn't wear leg paint.

Mrs. Robertson Well, maybe they didn't have it yet. I remember getting it - it was like a liquid makeup that you'd put on your face, but in darker shades. Maybe this was before that came out.

There would be lines downtown. You'd get in front of the Bon or Frederick's and you'd see a line maybe a whole block long! And you'd just get in the line. It always seemed to be my luck that I'd get almost up to the window where they had the nylons and they'd be all gone.

Q. Did you learn how to mend runs?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, we did. I don't know what they were called - they looked like a little crochet hook. Someway you went back and forth with it and mended the run.

Q. Did the rayon stockings have a seam up the back?

Mrs. Robertson Yes, I think they did. I think it was after the war that the seamless ones came in.

Q. So, did people then draw the seam when they wore leg paint?

Mrs. Robertson No, we didn't do that. (laughing)