

WOMEN VETERANS HISTORICAL PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Mildred Ikard Billie Bourgeois

INTERVIEWER: Beth Ann Koelsch

DATE: May 12, 2010

[Begin Interview]

BAK: Hi. We are at the home of Mildred Ikard Billie Bourgeois. It is May 12, 2010. This is Beth Ann Koelsch. I'm doing an interview for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at UNC [University of North Carolina at] Greensboro. So, Ms. Bourgeois, please—I know you just told me, but please state your name for the record of how you would like it in the collection.

MB: Mildred Ikard

BAK: Billie.

MB: —Billie Bourgeois.

BAK: Great, thank you. So, our first—we start out [with] just some basics. Where and when were you born?

MB: I was born in 1920 in Cyril, Oklahoma.

BAK: Okay. What day? We just like to have the—

MB: What?

BAK: What day? What day?

MB: August 7, 1920.

BAK: August 7 in Cyril. How do you spell that?

MB: C-y-r-i-l. We have our way of pronouncing things there.

BAK: Of course, every place does.

MB: Cyril is a problem pronunciation.

BAK: Got it.

MB: Yeah.

BAK: And did you grow up there?

MB: Yeah, about twenty years.

BAK: About twenty years? So, tell me a little about your home life. You know, what did your parents do?

MB: Well, let me tell you a little bit about it. Both sets of grandparents—

BAK: Okay.

MB: —came in to this area when it was still Indian Territory. My maternal family came [in a] covered wagon from Kansas. My paternal family [laughs] couldn't make enough money in Tennessee to raise a big family, so he put his whole family on a boxcar and went to the end of the line, which was Chickasha, Oklahoma, nearby where he settled. And so they were farm people who had difficulty getting land because the land, rightfully, had been given to the Indians. But the Indians didn't want to farm, and so they were glad to lease it out to farmers. Okay. So, I grew up with Indian kids who were making the painful transition from nomadic life to settled life. They didn't like it much, but they were nice people. We liked the Indians that we grew up with.

BAK: What tribe was—

MB: What?

BAK: Was there one tribe?

MB: No, several of the Plains tribes. Comanche, Apache.

BAK: Okay. So, your parents were farmers then?

MB: Right.

BAK: And what did they grow?

MB: Cotton and wheat. And so I knew how to chop cotton and pick cotton and had—

BAK: Hard job.

MB: And chose my job on wheat harvest. I delivered water to the crews. [laughs] That put me on a horse, which made me happy.

BAK: Right. Did you—Do you have any siblings?

MB: Yes, I had three younger brothers, one of whom was adopted.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And even to this day I am thick as thieves with my brothers.

BAK: Great.

MB: Yeah. We're the best of friends.

BAK: So, how did you like school?

MB: I liked it, but I didn't take it seriously. [chuckles]

BAK: Oh, okay.

MB: Until I got to college. I managed to stay in the top ten percent of the class just by drifting along. But when I had to make money to keep myself in college, I got serious and I made A's.

BAK: Okay. Did you have a favorite subject?

MB: No, I sort of liked a lot of things. I changed my major several times.

BAK: So tell me, so you went directly to college? Where did you go to college?

MB: I went to Oklahoma College for Women [now The University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma], and—But in my junior year, the war broke out. And I came from a very patriotic family, and I didn't think they could win the war without me.

BAK: Okay! [laughter] That's a great line. I love that.

MB: So, I left. And it was a while before the first WACs [Women's Army Corps] came in. And you wouldn't believe it but they turned—I passed the IQ part of it, but they said that I was underweight, if you can believe such a thing.

BAK: Now, I know a lot of people were because of the Depression and all.

MB: Right. So—

BAK: I'm sorry? I just—

MB: So, then I went to radio school quick, quick, and got certified, and then the signal corps put me to work in their labs. And then the air force said, “We need people with those skills,” and so I got sent to California.

But eventually I got to working with a sorry bunch of men. You know, they were draft dodgers and they had bad tongues. You let somebody miss a day's work and they—They killed you that day. And I thought, “Hell's bells. I didn't leave college to end up in the war doing this kind of thing.” So, I went to the War Manpower Board [War Manpower Commission] and I said, “I want to quit.”

And they said, “Well, what do you want to do?”

And I said, “Join the Navy.”

They said [“Great!”—MB changed later]. So, that's what I did.

BAK: Okay. Well, let's just kind of go back a little bit and just—[pause] just start. So, you went—What was your first year of college? What year? Nineteen—I guess 1938?

MB: [19]39.

BAK: Nineteen-thirty-nine. And what was your major?

MB: I think phys ed [physical education].

BAK: Phys ed, okay. So '39-'40, '40-'41—

MB: Okay. That's right, through '41. By '42 I was off in that radio school.

BAK: Okay. So, do you remember Pearl Harbor? When you heard about it?

MB: Oh, indeed.

BAK: Can you tell me—

MB: I was in college and had been to church. [I] was thinking about going to the movie when the news came on the radio.

BAK: So, you wanted to work for the war effort, so at the end of the semester—

MB: That's right.

BAK: How did you get—I mean, how did you actually get the first position you had? What did you—how did you—The [National] War Labor Board, what was the process there?

MB: Wait a minute. My first job was with the signal corps—

BAK: Signal corps.

MB: —in Red Bank, New Jersey.

BAK: Okay. So, how did you get from Oklahoma to New Jersey?

MB: Read everything that came out in the newspapers and found out they were hiring radio technicians.

BAK: Okay.

MB: Applied and got the job.

BAK: Wow. And did they—Did you go out over there on your own dime? And how did you find a place—

MB: Yes, I did. And it was pretty interesting. At that winter, my job was to work in a tank to see if we couldn't get some of the static out of there, because the fellas in North Africa were having a devil of a time hearing their commander. It was so noisy. And incidentally, that was the sorriest tank.

BAK: Yeah. I heard they—

MB: It really hurts me that we had Americans in something as bad as that.

BAK: Yeah, the Nazis had much better tanks. The Soviets had much better tanks.

MB: Yeah.

BAK: So, they trained you on the job to work, you know, trying to adjust radios?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: And did you—Did they give you living quarters, or you just sort of found it on your own?

MB: Oh, no. I found that on my own.

BAK: Very independent then. [laughter] And were your parents supportive of this?

MB: They were. They were.

BAK: Okay. And were your brothers too young to join? Did they join or were they drafted?

MB: They were too young at the time. But as they matured, they did. And the youngest one, he was a big kid, and recruiters were always taking a look at him. But he had an ear condition that they used as an excuse not to take him in. So he—That one ended up in the Merchant Marines. That was not too—But the oldest brother went in the [U.S.] Army, the adopted middle brother went in the [U.S.] Navy, and the young one went in the—

BAK: Merchant Marines.

MB: —Merchant Marines. And my dad, who had served in World War I, went with a construction company to build an air strip on Adak, which is one of the Aleutians [Islands], way toward Japan. And my mother took a job cooking in a military hospital.

BAK: Wow.

MB: So the family was involved.

BAK: Very much so. And just personally, why did—of all the occupations that—you know, reading about it, why did you pick the radio? What personally—

MB: It was just the first opportunity to get involved.

BAK: So, you were there how long?

MB: What?

BAK: In New Jersey?

MB: Let me see, from '42 to '43. That's when they sent me to the air force out in—come on—the capital of the state of California.

BAK: Sacramento?

MB: Sacramento.

BAK: Okay. And there was an air force base in Sacramento?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And I served there. But as I say, the quality of the work deteriorated with this sorry bunch of men I was working with. And so that's when I went into the navy.

BAK: All right. So, you said you were disgusted. And what branch—I mean what occupation was that that you were working with? Was it radio technician?

MB: Aviation radio technician.

BAK: Okay. So, at this point it's 1943, you said?

MB: Yes. No, no. It's '44 now.

BAK: Forty-four, all right. And you were just—one day you just had it, and you—Who did you say you spoke to again?

MB: What?

BAK: Who did you say you spoke to again about joining the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service—U.S. Navy]?

MB: The War Manpower Board. I couldn't—You weren't allowed to quit an essential job. But I had a good reason, convinced them of it, and they applauded my going into the navy.

BAK: And why'd you choose the navy?

MB: Well, I guess I just thought I'd like the navy.

BAK: Okay.

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Okay. And what date did you enter the service?

MB: It was August of '44.

BAK: And just so for the records, what date were you discharged?

MB: [March—MB added later][19]46.

BAK: Forty-six, okay. So, a lot of the recruiting posters at the time said that women that enlisted were freeing a man to fight. Did you view that as—

MB: Yeah, I knew that I was not going to [chuckles] be fighting, but I had a skill that was necessary. And so I went to boot camp and enjoyed it. [laughs] I laughed my way all the way through boot camp.

BAK: Because?

MB: [It was] Hunter College, in New York.

BAK: Right, okay.

MB: And all the officers were Hollywood beauties.

BAK: Now, were you in as an officer?

MB: No, no, no.

BAK: Enlisted.

MB: Enlisted. And they would talk as if we would lose the war if you don't get real salty and get salty in a hurry, which just amused me. I was twenty-four at the time, and so—and tall and on the last row in the squadron, so I could laugh whenever I wanted.

BAK: [laughs] Okay.

MB: And I laughed all the way through boot camp, you know. The lectures could be—They were just riotous. And you know, it was serious, but we knew we were not going to be identifying ships at sea.

BAK: Okay, So, you were amused that that's what you were learning?

MB: Yeah, that was—Yeah, and amused at the intensity of becoming salty all of a sudden.

BAK: Now, I guess I'm not—

MB: And the language, you know.

BAK: So, you felt—When you say “salty,” what does that mean? Just—

MB: That means using swear words, navy-like.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And throughout your conversation you had to be real salty.

BAK: So, that was encouraged by the officers?

MB: Oh, yes.

BAK: Really? I have not heard that. Wow. And did you resist that, or did you—

MB: No, I just thought it was funny.

BAK: It was funny. Okay. So, you spent boot camp kind of laughing. So—

MB: And some nice things happened in boot camp.

BAK: Well, tell me about it.

MB: You know, they tell you, “Never volunteer.”

BAK: Right.

MB: So, the first thing I did was volunteer. And I—I tried out for the singing platoon and made it. Well, the singing platoon got to go to Broadway shows to, you know, sing with the [cast—MB corrected later.]

BAK: Oh, did you—

MB: Got to march down Fifth Avenue several times, you know. So—Oh, I got my money’s worth out of that short time.

BAK: Wow. And what kind of—What did you sing? What kind of songs? Do you remember any of the songs you sang?

MB: Well, a lot of patriotic songs. And incidentally, we did that as we marched around Hunter—

BAK: Oh, really?

MB: —College. And I loved that, too. It suited me. I just—

BAK: You liked the marching and—

MB: Yeah. And I was amused, also, with the—going through the physical thing at the beginning, because there were these nice little girls, you know, that had never had to disrobe. [laughter] And then when they made you cut your hair—You know, it was fashionable to have Rita Hayworth long hair, and here they were chopping off your hair. And the girls cried, and I thought that was the funniest thing I ever—[laughs]

BAK: Now, did they cut at Hunter College or just off campus?

MB: It was on the college [campus—MB added later].

BAK: It was on the college. Okay.

MB: We had all our classes at the college.

BAK: Now, did you—how long did it take you to get your uniform when you—

MB: Just a few days.

BAK: Just a few days. Okay.

MB: Of course, you remember there were ugly shoes.

BAK: Right. [MB laughs] We have some of them, but the rest of the uniform is very nice.

MB: Yeah, I thought the uniform was fine.

BAK: Now, the college was still going on at the time.

MB: Yes, it was.

BAK: And how was the relations between—

MB: I never knew. Nobody ever fussed at us about that, so apparently we did not offend.

BAK: And how many other women were in boot camp with you, about?

MB: I'd say a few hundred.

BAK: A few hundred. And any memories of your, you know, your thoughts of the COs [commanding officers]?

MB: Well, the first time I got to vote was while I was in boot camp.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And it had—A terrible storm had blown into New York, and we were soaked to the skin because there was the traffic pattern you had to follow. You could not back up on the traffic. So we—You know, between classes, we were getting soaked throughout the day. And—

BAK: When you say “traffic pattern” you mean marching.

MB: Marching. There was only one way you could go.

BAK: Really?

MB: Down certain halls, in the street and so forth. It was a one-way thing.

BAK: Wow. Why did they do that, do you think?

MB: Well, so it wouldn't make confusion.

BAK: They just march—

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Okay.

MB: So when I got back to the barracks that night I wanted to vote. [President]Franklin Roosevelt was running for the fourth time, and I wanted the pleasure of voting for that man. He had reviewed us, by the way—

BAK: Oh, really?

MB: —while I was there.

BAK: Wow. That must have been quite an honor.

MB: Yeah, it was. You know, came by in his convertible, you know, with his cigarette.
[laughs]

BAK: Right, right. Very classy.

MB: What a treat, because I had supported Franklin Roosevelt since I sat with my Democratic grandmother, you know, and all that good stuff. So, that was a pleasure.

BAK: Did you salute him? Did you—

MB: Well, of course.

BAK: I just didn't know if you—And were you singing?

MB: And hoping that my doggone knees wouldn't give out—

BAK: Oh, wow.

MB: —because I was so excited about it.

BAK: Right. Did you sing for him?

MB: What?

BAK: Did you sing for him?

MB: No. No, we didn't have that opportunity. And anyway, when I got back to the barracks—And the barracks, by the way, were apartment buildings in the Bronx.

BAK: Okay. So, you didn't live on campus.

MB: No, no. We had—

BAK: Okay.

MB: So, you had to go before your commanding officer to vote, and so—So, I went back through the rain, and that was a couple of miles, you know, after being wet all day, and cast my vote. And the next day, here the news was that Franklin Roosevelt had won a fourth term.

And a lot of the girls in my outfit were saying, "Oh, you know, we're heading for something terrible in government." You know, "A president that won't leave."

I said to them, "Well, did you vote?"

They said, "No, I wasn't going back in that rain."

And I said, "Well, I did." [laughter]

BAK: Who ran against him? I can look that up. It's mostly just—

MB: [Thomas E.] Dewey?

BAK: Was it Dewey? No, Dewey defeats [Harry S.] Truman. That was the next one. [Wendell] Wilkie?

MB: Maybe it was.

BAK: Wilkie. Okay, that's just—I can certainly look that up. [MB laughs] I'm just testing my own history here. So, what did your family think about you joining the navy?

MB: Well, my dad was off in the Aleutians. And he said, "Honey, you go."

BAK: That's great.

MB: The oldest brother was always the more traditional in our family, and he was a bit concerned.

BAK: What were his concerns?

MB: You know, that I would be harassed or something. And I was a very good-looking, healthy kid at twenty-four. And I was never harassed. So, you can guess, I behaved myself.

BAK: Right.

MB: Sure.

BAK: What about your middle and younger brother?

MB: Oh, that was all right with them that I joined.

BAK: Wow. That must have been hard for your mom, that your—How long was your dad away?

MB: I think he was gone about a couple of years.

BAK: Wow. Very strong family you had.

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Any reaction of any of your friends at home or—

MB: No. You know, if people disapproved, they were afraid of me [laughter] and didn't want to say so.

BAK: What about the men you worked with in Sacramento? Did they have—

MB: I don't remember they had anything to say when I left. But they were—You know, in a whole long lifetime, that was the worst bunch of fellas I ever ran into.

BAK: Now what did—besides having, you know, salty language, what else about them was—

MB: If somebody missed a day's work, they would talk about that person all day. And they would think up all the bad things they could think of.

BAK: Very gossipy.

MB: Gossipy, gossipy. Ugly stuff.

BAK: Wow. And were you the only woman there that worked with them?

MB: No, there were several.

BAK: Several women. Okay.

MB: But I was the one that was the most offended by it, I'm sure.

BAK: Got it. Now, you joined up in Sacramento?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: And what was the train ride like? Were there a lot of other recruits there?

MB: Okay. I'm going to tell you, the train ride there was not very—Let me think. I stopped off to see a friend of mine get his commission in Georgia, on the way, because he and I had gone all through high school together so that mattered. It was my—it was after I finished boot camp it was assigned. And incidentally, I had the good fortune not to have to go to any school.

BAK: You had it.

MB: I had a skill that was needed. I got sent straight to a squadron.

BAK: Wow. Okay.

MB: Which I just loved.

BAK: Now what rank—did you move up in rank or were—

MB: No, no. I was a—Well, I guess I became an aviation radio technician third class.

BAK: Third class. Okay.

MB: And I spent the whole time in the navy with the same class. I didn't advance.

BAK: Okay. Where were you sent for—

MB: The Naval Air Station in Oakland [California].

BAK: Oh, you went back all the way! Wow! [laughter]

MB: Went back. And the train ride was a riot. It was a riot. They would—what they did was swing hammocks in railroad cars—you know, cars that you—railroad cars that moved automobiles, new automobiles.

BAK: Oh, wow. Okay.

MB: So, what they did was put hammocks in there. And sometimes there was a dining car in the train, and sometimes there wasn't. And you know, sometimes we'd come into a city and boy those lovely Red Cross girls had doughnuts and coffee, so we swamped them just like a bunch of fellas would, all right. And we were low priority, being just a bunch of WAVES. High priority stuff went through on the railroad, but they jig-jogged us across the country. It took a week to cross the country, jig-jogging as we did.

BAK: Did you have to keep changing trains?

MB: What?

BAK: Did you have to keep changing trains?

MB: No, we stayed.

BAK: Stayed on the same train.

MB: Stayed on the side, you know.

BAK: Oh, okay.

MB: But yeah. And in Salt Lake [City, Utah] there was a tragedy. Sometimes cars would join our train, and then sometimes we'd drop off cars. And when we got to the Great Salt Lake and were over water on a bridge, train stopped and it was stopped and stopped. And we found out that a fella on another car someplace had jumped off and killed himself.

BAK: Oh my.

MB: So, that was the sad thing that you remember about that trip.

BAK: Now, when was this? This was summer of 1944, about? Where—

MB: Yeah, this is getting into the late summer.

BAK: Okay. So you—in Oakland, where—what was the base, the name of it?

MB: Oakland Naval Air Station.

BAK: Okay, so you get there. And how many other WAVES were on the train, swinging in the hammocks there?

MB: Oh, there probably was a couple of hundred of us.

BAK: And were they all trained for radio work or just all over?

MB: No, no. All kind of things.

BAK: Okay. So, what was a typical day like for you there? You get there and—

MB: I got there, and there were two or three WAVES in this radio shop that I got assigned to.

BAK: Now, were you repairing radios or were you testing them?

MB: What you did, the squadron we were in flew the Pacific. What they did was take out materiel that was needed throughout the Pacific and they brought home the wounded.

BAK: Did—They had to stop. Did they stop in Hawaii? I mean there's nowhere—

MB: Yeah.

BAK: A few other—

MB: All kind of places.

BAK: Right, okay. I just—they couldn't make it all the way in one—

MB: No, no, no.

BAK: Yeah, okay.

MB: So, it was hopping here.

BAK: What kind of planes were they flying?

MB: Old [Douglas] DC-3s and [Douglas] DC-4's.

BAK: Okay. Wow. So I'm sorry, so what did you do with—So, they were flying materiel and dropping it.

MB: Yeah, taking it in where it was needed and picking up wounded and so forth. And there was a big hospital in Oakland.

BAK: But not on your base, just—

MB: Not on my base.

BAK: A military hospital, I guess?

MB: What?

BAK: A military hospital, right?

MB: A military hospital, yeah, which I visited. Now, where am I?

BAK: Oh, just what was your actual job? What did you do?

MB: Well, you'd have to go out to the airplane and pull the radio gear, bring it into the shop, and fix it.

BAK: So, was it checked every time or just when it was broken?

MB: You had to check it every time.

BAK: So, you pulled it every time.

MB: Because those guys were making many, many miles and it needed to be—

BAK: Right. Okay. So, did you enjoy the work?

MB: Oh, sure. I must say, though, when I [laughs] joined the squadron, the first job they gave me was making coffee, and I was not amused. I did not join the navy to make coffee for a bunch of guys.

BAK: In Oakland, we're talking about?

MB: What?

BAK: In Oakland, we're talking about? This was where you were making coffee, in Oakland?

MB: Yeah, and furious. Furious, mad as all get out. Then I found out that it's the newest guy in the squadron who has to make coffee, so my coffee making days didn't last all that long.

BAK: Well, that's good.

MB: And my anger went away.

BAK: So, a guy might have to do it, too.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

BAK: Well, okay, that is good. All right. So do you—you worked with the other men—with the men okay?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: All right. And you were treated—

MB: The only time I was ever uneasy—there was one chief—and this was—there was a lot of this that went on. This was being salty, you know. You'd sit around and brag about your conquests.

BAK: Sure.

MB: And this chief was bad about it, you know. He just went on and on and on. And one time I was working the night shift, and the admiral wanted to go and his plane was way out on a revetment, you know, a few miles from there. Wasn't anybody to go but that chief and me.

BAK: Oh my. To drive him over there or to bring the plane back?

MB: To check out [the radio in the airplane—MB added later].

BAK: Check out. Right, right.

MB: All you had to do was check out the radio of the plane.

BAK: Got it. Right. I'm sorry.

MB: But I can tell you, I was uneasy about heading into the dark [laughs] with that guy. But it turned out to be just professional. We did the job we had to do and came back and that was all there was to it.

BAK: So, they didn't really adjust with all their bragging around you?

MB: Well, anyway—I guess they knew not to pick on me. I like fellas. I like fellas a lot. I came from a house full of brothers.

BAK: Right. So you weren't—right. [laughter] So, you weren't taking any guff.

MB: No.

BAK: Got it. Okay. So, you would work night and day shifts?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Okay. What was the hardest thing you had to do, physically or emotionally, while you were in the service?

MB: [pause] I really don't know.

BAK: Okay. Now, did you spend the rest of the—did you—were you transferred again, or did you spend—

MB: No! Spent the whole time there.

BAK: In Oakland. Okay.

MB: And while I was there I dated a fair amount, and one of them turned serious.
You know, I remember when I met him, I was checking out tools, and I said,
“What’s your name?”
And he said, “Bourgeois.”
And I had heard that at muster, you know. And I said, “Is that really your name?”
And he said, “Yes.”
And I said, “Shucks. Where I come from, that’s a cussword.” [laughter]

BAK: That’s great.

MB: But he and I were friends before it changed. But eventually, in ’46, I married that fella.

BAK: Wow. So, what did you do for fun there? What was your social life like on base?

MB: Oh, god. Here you are that close to San Francisco. Gee. You get into San Francisco for concerts and musicals and just having a drink. The U.N. [United Nations] was formed, you know, in the summer of ’45, so San Francisco was running over with all these exotic types, you know, and so forth. So, it was really an exciting place to be.

BAK: I imagine. And did the locals—how did the locals—did you have any—how did the locals—What did they think of the WAVES? How did they react to you?

MB: I guess I didn’t really know. I didn’t deal that much with them. I went to church on base, you know, and—

BAK: Did you dance? Did you like to dance or—

MB: Yeah, yeah.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And, you know, Berkeley was just up the hill, and all kind of nice things went on in Berkeley. We went there frequently.

BAK: Intellectual things or cultural?

MB: Yeah, yeah.

BAK: Now, I would imagine there was—since you were on the coast, there were a lot of—You know, they had to do a blackout every night. Were you ever worried about, you know, being invaded or bombed?

MB: No. You know, early in the war, when I worked for the signal corps, my friends and I took a house right on the beach. And there were times that German subs were destroyed off of that beach. And the house that I lived in was right on the beach, so we had to keep it blacked out. However, I never really had fears, and never had fears once I got to Oakland either. I felt secure.

BAK: Was there less of a worry by that point, do you think, or you know, was it—

MB: Well, we were carrying the war to the Japanese, for sure.

BAK: Right, okay. So, you were there through—Do you remember VJ [Victory in Japan] Day?

MB: Oh, lord, yes. [laughter]

BAK: I can imagine. What was that, in San Francisco, I can only imagine.

MB: I—It was the only leave I got while I was in the navy. And I had friends in New York City that I wanted to visit, so I was in New York City.

BAK: Oh, for VJ Day.

MB: For VJ Day. And I wanted to go down on Times Square, and my hosts said, “Honey, you really don’t want to go down there.” [laughter] “Instead, go with me to Lewisholm Stadium.” There was going to be a concert there that night. And [Mayor Fiorello] La Guardia was—conducted the symphony orchestra.

BAK: Really?

MB: Yeah, yeah.

BAK: Wow.

MB: And so—and it was—I took a train to go up to the stadium. And as we passed through Harlem, there were conga lines just up and down the street.

BAK: Wow. Yeah.

MB: It was really nifty.

BAK: Okay. So, you eventually went back to Oakland, and you were there for the duration plus six, or when did you get married, or how did that turn out?

MB: Let’s see. Got married in January of ’46.

BAK: Okay.

MB: And by that time they were discharging people, and so they discharged me in March of '46. But the husband was not going to—He was really good as a technician. He could troubleshoot the quickest and the best of anybody you ever saw. And the admiral hung on to him for a while because he knew that, you know, quick, quick, that guy can get me flying. So, while I was waiting for my husband to get his discharge, I went to the University of California, Berkeley.

BAK: Oh, okay.

MB: Then the husband got out, and Eastern—He had worked for Eastern [Air Lines] previously, so they wanted him back in Houston [Texas]. Oh, I bet you can imagine what Houston was like after four years in the Bay Area. Hot. Oh, my goodness, before air conditioning.

BAK: Right. You get used to having a breeze, and then all of a sudden.

MB: Right.

BAK: Wow. So, what did you study in Berkeley?

MB: Well, I took a music course, and I took a course in French, and just sort of scattergun stuff.

BAK: So, when did you go back to Houston?

MB: That would have been July of '46.

BAK: Wow. Moving to Houston in July. Okay. [laughter] So, he had a job at Eastern. So, you never thought of staying in the navy as a career?

MB: No.

BAK: No, you just—

MB: No, it was just because my country was at war.

BAK: Got it. Besides FDR, what other heroes or heroines did you have?

MB: Well, I guess we all liked Churchill. And a number of the military—though I'm trying to think of the—the guy who came out of the Philippines—

BAK: [Douglas] MacArthur?

MB: Yeah. Wasn't particularly crazy about him. He was something of a snob.

BAK: Yes, he was very impressed with himself. It must have been hard the day that FDR died. Do you remember that?

MB: That was real, real sorry to lose that man. And you know, I was really angry when he ran for office that he chose Truman as his running mate, because I liked the man who'd been his vice president. And I didn't know anything about Harry Truman, and I sure had some doubts about him, but he proved himself. I ended up with a very high regard for Harry Truman.

BAK: Yes, I always liked that he didn't have a middle name, just an initial. What'd you think of Eleanor Roosevelt?

MB: Oh, I liked her a lot. I really did. I thought she was a great aid to her husband and a great aid to the country. And she was unattractive, and boy, don't think they didn't make fun of Eleanor Roosevelt.

BAK: I know.

MB: They did. She got the worst kind of press, but I liked her a lot.

BAK: Do you remember any favorite songs or movies from that time?

MB: Good lord, you're just asking me at a wrong time. Of course! I think the very best music was the big band that, you know, we did.

BAK: Sure, sure.

MB: And I like to dance. Wow.

BAK: Who was your favorite band?

MB: Black bands, for sure.

BAK: Count Basie, Chick Webb?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Yeah, they could swing.

MB: Sometimes those bands showed up in Berkeley. Oh. [laughs]

BAK: Do you remember—I'm a big jazz fan, so do you remember anyone you saw?

MB: Right now I don't, dad-gummit, I hate it that I can't tell you that. But I'm a jazz fan.

BAK: Yeah? Same here. So, you're in Houston now, July '46. What was your adjustment like? I mean, you'd been working for the war effort for a long time.

MB: So, I took a job as a park director there. And my first child was born there, and—But it didn't suit me to go to Rice [University]. It wasn't until my husband was transferred to Nashville [Tennessee], which is a marvelous city that's just running over with colleges, that I knew I could go back and finish my college. So I did. I got my bachelor's at Peabody [College], which is now part of Vanderbilt [University]. And then I got my master's at Peabody.

BAK: And what did you get your degrees in?

MB: Education. Because it was when I was marching back in boot camp that I said—was saying to myself, "What are you going to do when the war's over and you get out of here?" And of course, being in the navy was not at all a choice or being a radio technician, because I was kind of mediocre. Not the best. I decided that educating children was what I wanted to do. So, that's why I went to Peabody instead of Vanderbilt. It was a very—it's a very fine education school.

BAK: And what years was that? When did you move to—

MB: Okay. Now we're into the fifties.

BAK: Okay. And you're raising your—

MB: I had a daughter and then, while I was there, my son was born.

BAK: Wow. So, you're going to school full-time and raising two kids?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: Lot of energy. [laughter]

MB: I've always been high-energy, up until just a few months ago.

BAK: I'd still say you're peppy. Okay. Do you feel that the military—You seem like you've always been a very independent person. Do you feel that the military made you more independent, or how did it change you or—

MB: It was just something I was proud to be a part of. I remember the day I got my discharge. I felt desolate. I felt lost. I felt like an orphan. It had meant so much to me that I was really sad.

BAK: Okay. So, were you expecting to feel that way?

MB: No, not necessarily. I was rather surprised to find myself on such a downer.

BAK: Okay. You know, you were married and so—yeah. How did your husband—what was your husband's view of—Was he surprised that you felt that way?

MB: I don't remember.

BAK: Did you feel that you were encouraged to return—I mean, after World War II, women were sort of encouraged to return to their traditional roles. Did you feel pressure for that?

MB: Not really. As I say, I had made up my mind that I was going into education—of course, what I was used to, what I could do was run that park. And I did that and liked it, so that was fine. But I really liked being a student. That suited me plenty, to finish my schooling there at Peabody. And I got my master's in the summer of '55, when my husband was transferred to Charlotte.

BAK: Okay.

MB: Okay. So, I rocked along, and I was a good teacher.

BAK: Yeah? So, where did you teach?

MB: Well, I taught for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system. And in my early fifties—okay, I guess I'm skipping a bit there—I got real restless. Something was wrong, something was missing, and I didn't know what wasn't right in my life. And, I was—you know, my husband and I had a good relationship—scrappy relationship, but a good one. And I told him how restless I was and so forth.

Finally I said to him, "You know I've always thought I was smart enough to earn a doctorate, but it's scary as all get out. You can get into it and five years later, you know, when you're defending a dissertation, if the politics are not right, you can lose the whole blame thing. But it's just that kind of a risk I feel like taking."

And like my father, my husband said, "Honey, you go."

BAK: You've got some great men in your life.

MB: Haven't I. Yeah. So, he ran the garden and kept the house when I had to do a residency in Greensboro [North Carolina], but—and I was out of G.I. funds by then, so I was paying [laughs] my way through the university. But—

BAK: At the Women's College?

MB: Yeah. That's where I got my doctorate.

BAK: Okay. In education.

MB: Yeah. And oh, lord, did I love that. Do you happen to know [Dr.] David Purpel?

BAK: I do not.

MB: And I don't know if he's there. He's about fifteen years younger than I am, but he was my advisor. A good old Jewish prophet kind of like. [laughter] Who demanded the best of me, you know.

BAK: So, he was your advisor.

MB: Advisor. You know, and I'd be writing for a week and I'd go there. He was on the editorial board of a publishing firm, so he knew good writing and rejected bad stuff. And I absolutely loved having to come back. And I guess that dissertation, I wrote that thing seven times.

BAK: Wow. What was your dissertation on?

MB: Citizenship education.

BAK: Okay. And what year—When was that?

MB: That was in the early seventies.

BAK: Early seventies. Okay. One of the older students, I guess?

MB: Oh, yes. [laughter]

BAK: Yeah. You and the hippies walking around the quad, right?

MB: Yeah, yeah. [chuckles]

BAK: So how many—So, you had two children?

MB: Two.

BAK: Two, okay. Many consider women in the service in your day to be pioneers. Do you feel that way?

MB: I guess we were, all right. I—I didn't feel as if I were breaking precedence, in particular.

BAK: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

MB: Well, truth is I never was denied many things that I really wanted, but I realize a lot of women didn't come on as strong as I did. An awful lot of women can be put down fairly easily, and I was concerned for them. And so yeah, you count me a feminist.

BAK: Okay. Have any of your children—Are they in the military?

MB: Yeah, my son was—

BAK: Navy?

MB: Navy.

BAK: And where did he serve?

MB: He got his commission in Pensacola [Florida], and wanted to be a fighter pilot and didn't make it. So he—His service was short.

BAK: Okay. What about your daughter?

MB: That never occurred to her.

BAK: Okay.

MB: Nor my granddaughter! [laughs]

BAK: Nor? Okay. Would you encourage her to join?

MB: Sure. I would encourage every kid in high school to think seriously about the opportunity to serve your country, because I saw it as an opportunity.

BAK: What are your thoughts on women in combat positions?

MB: I don't really know. There may be women who could do that. I'm not sure that I could. And I will tell you this: Back in 1917, my dad went to the recruiters and he said, "I want to serve my country, but I don't want to kill anybody. Don't be giving me a gun." So, they put my dad in something called a sanitary train, which means he trained, he went to France, and he picked up the dead and wounded.

BAK: Wow. Wow. That must have haunted him.

MB: Well, if it did, he didn't share it with us.

BAK: Right. Wow. So, they're going to allow women to serve in the submarines now. That's pretty controversial.

MB: [laughs] Yeah.

BAK: What do you think of that?

MB: Why not try it?

BAK: Right. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that I haven't asked? Any thoughts, any experiences?

MB: Maybe just to go back to say that, you know, I know what's going on in Israel, and I approve of young people serving their country. You know, [pause] we owe it. This is a special place we live, and I am not unmindful of my many opportunities and advantages. And it doesn't hurt to pay back.

BAK: Just a final question: How do you feel your life is different because of your time in the military and, of course, besides meeting your husband there?

MB: Well, I think—I think I would have been disappointed in myself if I had had the opportunity to serve and did not. And I've never had a moment's regret. I've always been very, very grateful for the opportunity to serve, even the short time that I did. And—and the VA [US Department of Veterans Affairs] contacted me twenty years ago and said, "Ms. Bourgeois, you know you're eligible for our services."

And I said, "Yeah, but I've got Medicare and my own health insurance, so I'm okay."

They said, "Well, just keep in mind. Think about it that you are eligible."

So, I got to thinking and I thought, "Well, you know, the day might come when I need it." So, I did go over there, and I'm absolutely delighted with the people in that hospital. It's old, but it's clean and shiny, and the staff treats veterans with respect, in every instance that I've seen.

And I show up once a year for a physical, and they say, "Old girl, keep on doing what you doing!"

BAK: [laughter] That's good.

MB: And I am hearing impaired, and part of that is genetic, but part of it is those radio shops that I spent the war time.

BAK: They were loud? What was the—

MB: God, you talk about loud. And the high-pitched sounds that are coming out of the radios—

BAK: When they were testing them?

MB: Yeah.

BAK: I hadn't thought of that.

MB: And you know, you've got maybe twenty guys in this shop, all of them working on radios, all of them screaming, you know?

BAK: Wow. Did they give you any earplugs, or you just had to do that at the time?

MB: Oh, you know, dumb, dumb, dumb. You didn't think about it then. I would certainly advise young people now because—because I find it pressing to keep up with my world with my hearing as bad as it is. I belong to a book club and I'm into *Theology on Tap*, which is a discussion group, and things like that. And I just kill myself to hear everything that's going on because I want to hear. So, don't think I don't regret that I didn't take good care of my ears. But I certainly put a blessing on the VA. They got me these terribly expensive hearing aids I've got.

BAK: Well, good for them.

MB: Some snippy little doctor came in there—she's foreign-trained and that sort of thing—and she sat down and turned her back to me to look at this screen and was asking me all kinds of questions, which I wasn't hearing. And about the third time I asked her to repeat, she whipped around and she said, "You don't hear worth a darn." [laughter] "I'm sending you to audiology." Ooh. Send Br'er Rabbit to the briar patch.

BAK: Right. [laughter]

MB: I was amazed that they were such high quality things.

BAK: That's great.

MB: And they give me as good a quality life as I can have right now.

BAK: That's great. I realized actually, I never followed up. So, you got your PhD, so you're Dr. Bourgeois, and it was the mid to late seventies. Then what happened? I realized I didn't follow up there.

MB: Okay. I taught at Lenoir-Rhyne [College] for a while, and then Charlotte-Mecklenburg took me on as director of citizenship education. And I held that job until I retired.

BAK: And what class were you at the W—or was it UNCG then? When did you get your hood—hooding ceremony?

MB: I can't—seventy-something. [chuckles]

BAK: Okay. We can probably look you up. All right. I think that's it. Any final thoughts?

MB: No.

BAK: Okay.

MB: But I appreciate the opportunity to share my story.

BAK: Well, and I appreciate you sharing your story.

MB: I've written several books—family history—and understand research is altogether changed now. It's on the internet, and you have to know how to go, but you can—You don't have to run down to all these little county seats in seventy areas. I don't know but what I'm kind of glad that I did it the old way, but it's nice to know that people nowadays can do that sort of thing in just no time flat. And it took me years to do it, but loving every bit of it.

BAK: Love of research, love of education, I can see that. Have you ever—Do you ever get on the internet?

MB: No, I'm ashamed to tell you. I was on the internet for a while, and then I got so—I was spending all my time in my garden. I just never, never went to that computer, and I finally let it go. Now I need to go back to it, because as I age—and boy, I am aging—you know, that computer can be a great companion.

BAK: Okay. Yeah, well, please look us up. See what you think.

MB: Sure I will.

BAK: Okay.

[End of Interview]