The Baltimore Rosies: Disc One, Session 1

The Real Rosie The Riveter Project

Interview 5

Interview Conducted by

Anne de Mare & Kirsten Kelly

April 16, 2010

Baltimore, Maryland

For The

Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
New York University
De Mare: So, the first kind of thing... the topic that I’d like to bring up, um, is economics. That... What had... That, you know, I want... I’d love for you ladies to talk a little bit about coming out of the Depression, finding yourselves working. I don’t know- some of you worked before, some of you, this was your first job. But talking about what it meant to you as young women to be earning that kind of money and how it affected your lives coming out of... coming out of the Depression. So, I don’t know if anyone wants to start. You have... You have an expectant look on your face.

Simon: Oh. (Laughter)

De Mare: Yeah.

Simon: I was really just trying to think of different things because, after all, that’s been about sixty some years and its hard to remember everything. So anyhow, I
started at Martins when I was about nineteen. Well, it was in 1942 or three; I can’t remember the exact year. And I went into, um, doing electrical work at first because that’s what I thought they had. But I got a little bored in there and asked to go to assembly. I wanted to learn that; I had never done that. So I went to assembly; we got trained on the job, on the tail end of the airplane and we were to rivet and to buck rivets. But neither the girl with me or I knew what we were doing, you know, so we did have to have a lot of training. And we worked out very, very well.

Except one day I had a sputter (oil?), and, um, she drilled the wrong hole; you had to follow the regular route of the rivets. And she drilled in the wrong spot and got a hold of my sweater and pulled it in on the drill. Could’ve been me but it wasn’t. And that scared both of us and made us more, uh, observing of what we were doing.

De Mare: Right.

Simon: And we worked out fine; we did good as she doing the shootin’ of the rivets and then sometimes I would.
De Mare: Was that... Was that, uh, the case for most of you? That when you came in you really started on the fly? I mean, did you have training? Did you...

Ledbetter: No.

All: No, no, no, no.

Ledbetter: I was... I went, I reckon, to the job.

De Mare: Yeah. Susan, you... Yeah... Sorry, you started...

King: That’s fine. Me?

De Mare: Yeah. You started. Yeah.

King: Oh. No. Uh, after I finished high school in Baltimore, Maryland, well, we... You’re talking about economy and background: my daddy came to Baltimore, maybe in 1939 or 1940, to make five dollars a day with a family of five. And I don’t know how all of us got in that one car. But he owned his own home before he left Virginia, and he had this family of four... five, I think it was and, uh, he decided
that coming to Baltimore for five dollars a day and living in a very cramped-up apartment was the way to go, because he wanted his children not to live in poverty. And he wanted to put us in high school- as they called it down in Virginia- “up north”.

So we traveled up here- up north, as we thought- and after I finished high school, my objective was to attend college because many of my relatives in Virginia had the money to go to Hampton Institute, down there at Hampton, Virginia. And, uh, I could not find a job because we’re now... Now the war has begun. It’s nineteen and forty-two, we had another baby in the family so we had a family of six, so in order to save this ninety dollars to go to Hampton, I had to go to work.

And, uh, I went to what they called the, uh, Training School. Uh, Industrial Training School to learn to be a riveter. I went with two of my girlfriends who had finished high school at the same time, and after they trained us, we were selected to go to Eastern Aircraft. At that time there were very, very, very few afr... I don’t know what we were called at that time, but right now we’re called Afro-American women- working at Eastern Aircraft. And, uh, we went there and I had never lived in an integrated society because Baltimore was completely
segregated at that time. But when we went down there we found out that we could eat in the cafeteria and everybody was integrated.

And the little money that I brought home- first I bought a war bond and then brought money home- to save to go to college. So I stayed on at Eastern Aircraft for one year and at that time you had to have- they said that ‘you’re frozen on the job’ because they weren’t gonna let you just walk in and walk out- but they did give me a release to enter Hampton to study nursing, but I never became a nurse. After I got there I was never really interested.

But that’s the part of my story- I don’t know how much you want- and after that I stayed at Hampton for three years and of course we still had economic problem in Baltimore City- after I left Hampton, my… One of the sisters, course, was suffering of cancer, so that took the economy of the family down, and I entered Morgan. After finishing Morgan State University, I married the then… who was a young professor at the college, had two children; I went on to work as a counselor in Baltimore City Public Schools, stayed there for twenty-two years. I have now seven grandchildren, thirteen great-grandchildren, so I
guess that at eighty-six, life has been good to me. I
don’t really have any complaints.

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De Mare: That’s wonderful. Um, I want to open up... I
thought it was very interesting what you said. So the
money that you earned, you... The first thing you did was buy
a war bond with it.

King: Yes.

De Mare: That’s re... Did... did... did all of you buy war bonds
with the money?

All: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Henninger: Stamps and war bonds.

De Mare: Stamps and war bonds. And then you... You put your
money away for college.

King: Yes.
De Mare: So you didn’t… you… You didn’t have to contribute to the family at that time.

King: Just a little, but not that...

De Mare: A little. But... but most of it you could save away for your future. Um, what... what about the rest of you ladies? When you got your first paychecks, what was... what was... Where did the money go? Did it go back into the family? Were you able to think for the future?

Simon: Well, I sa...

Ledbetter: Yeah. My...

Simon: Uh, my money...

De Mare: Hold on, just a second. Yes, go ahead and talk.

Ledbetter: Back in the... Back in the family, I mean... My husband and I was... uh, I was already married when I come here in forty-two. And, uh, we, um, bought a... a used trailer- have a place to live- and he worked at Martins and I worked at Martins.
De Mare: So…

Ledbetter: So we used the money to… just… for living.

De Mare: Do you remember how much money you made when you…?

Ledbetter: I made sixty cents an hour and my husband got started off at sixty-five, and I passed him up and was making a dollar and something, and it just killed him. I never will forget his… look on his face.

De Mare: Do you remem…

Ledbetter: I… I… I… I was more energetic…

Simon: You know, your money went farther then…

Ledbetter: …and I could learn things fast and I was doing every job in the department, so I moved on up.
Simon: Your money went farther then...

Ledbetter: It did.

Simon: ...and things were much cheaper. But my father had died when I was young so I always helped at home. And, um, at that time I was planning on getting married and my future husband was going to be a Marine. Well, he would stay on there, I guess about three or four months, and after he became the Marine and it was settled where he was going, then he came home, we got married, and I quit my job to go down and, and live at the... North Carolina. Jerry Point, North Carolina. And I worked there then, until he was sent overseas, and then I came back home. In the meantime I was pregnant and when he came home, uh, we settled in Maryland and stayed there. And I worked then, went back to Martin’s about four or five times. Such a, you know, a great place to work, and you made more money there which helped out at... at home.

De Mare: Yeah.
Simon: So I went back, I guess about four or five times, while I was, uh... and my children were taken care of by my mother.

De Mare: Now, what, um... Was that good money, sixty cents an hour at the time?

Simon: Oh, yes.

All: Yes.

King: We’d have but five dollars a day. (Laughter)

Brunner: Especially it was big money if you’d never worked and it was your first job. ’Cause I was raised on a farm and never been away from home; I was nineteen years old. My sister, Ruth, she was here before I was, and she says, “Oh, come off the farm where you get a job where I’m working, at Glenn L. Martins.” Off I came, and I got the job, and I worked forty-two to about forty-five. Then I got married, had three children, and all I got... was able to send them all to college. One’s up in the banking business, and my daughter’s a professor at Talson, and life’s been good to me.
De Mare: As young women earning money for the first time, how did that change how you felt of yourself? I mean, how did that... yeah, go ahead.

Henniger: Well, when, uh, uh, I came to Baltimore and went to work at Martins, as I said, I trained riveting in one of the hangers here. And, uh, so my first pay... paycheck, they paid in silver dollars. And I don’t remember just how much it was an hour, because that was in 1944; October. And so, uh, uh, I lived with my aunt Nina because she worked, like I said, on the PBM, uh, inspection in D Building. And, uh, I was working in B Building and, uh, on the, uh, PBM’s— you called Step B— and it was a good experience for me.

And, uh, I was at a high school; lived on a five hundred acre farm and, uh, uh, the... One of the guards were teasing me when I went to ask a question 'bout something; I don’t remember what it was. And he looked down and I had... and I had the... little, uh... More of a southern accent than what I have now. (Laughs) And so, uh, he said, “I betcha that’s the first pair of shoes you have on.” I said, “Yes,
it is and I’m glad to have them.” (Laughs) So he didn’t make anything on me.

And, uh, I, it was this, uh, two weeks, uh, training. And then, um, like I said before, whenever, uh, I went out on the floor to work in the... the B Step, there was, uh... There were twelve to... men working there and, uh, some of them, about six of them left to go away to war and, um, I had to train on the different jobs that they were doing. Like, cutting tin, you know, the metal and other than riveting, and then they... We had to make shims, so I had to learn to use the, uh... the machine that we did the shimmin’ with. And then, uh, we had to put some kind of a coating on that to, uh, take care of the surface that was sk... uh, shim. And then we put it in where it needed to be put in the sides of the plane that, uh... That’s a PBM, isn’t it?

De Mare:  I...

Henninger:  Looks like one.

Unseen:  Yes.

De Mare:  Yeah.
Henninger: Yeah. And, uh, so, uh, I worked... my working career at Martin’s wasn’t too long. It was about seven months. And, uh, I met my husband; he was home from the Navy, uh, from the European Theatre of War. His, uh, ship helped to prepare for D Day, and, uh, uh, then, their tour was over. And at that time if, uh, the men were in the European Theatre in the Navy, or in the... the branch that he was in. He was in the, uh, uh, surface of uh, uh... What was the name of his ship? Well, anyway, uh, they weren’t to go back to the, uh, Europe; they had to go to the Pacific to fight the war there with the Japanese.

De Mare: Now did any... did... okay, so your husband was in the military. Did any of the rest of you have husbands, boyfriends, brothers in the military?

Ledbetter: Yes. A brother.

De Mare: You had brothers?

Ledbetter: Brother-in-laws.

De Mare: Yeah.
Ledbetter: Yeah. Seven. Seven of them all together.

De Mare: Oh, wow.

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De Mare: Um, I’d like to talk a little bit about, um... You worked with men on the floor. Um...

Henninger: Yes.

Brunner: Yes.

Simon: Yes.

Ledbetter: Yes.

De Mare: Yeah. Um... Can you talk about... What was the relationship like with the men on the floor? How did... How was the working relationship between the men and the women? Um... Did you...

Henninger: Well, they wouldn’t... Like I said, they wouldn’t cuss in front of me and they really respected me because...
Like I say, I, uh, it was my first job and, and, uh, I was like maybe their sister. They treated me as a sister would be treated and out of all those men, uh, I was very well respected. And, uh, and, uh, I just enjoyed working in... in the area with them.

De Mare: Did any of you have a different... Yeah?

King: I think back in that time when we worked with men, men were probably more respectful of young women, you understand, trying to do. Because most of the, uh, we called the ‘unskilled, able-bodied men’ had gone on off to war. So it was left behind the very skilled people, uh, who missed the World War II because they were doing something for the defense of the country. For instance, my husband was in Tuskegee, Alabama, along with the 99th Squadron, and he was trained. But because his major was botany and he did so much work for the government in plants and animal industry, he was omitted when it came to the war. So these men, of course, they probably had their pick of women, but they were all so very kind and conscientious and... to us women who went out to battle the, uh, front. So I don’t think we had what they called harassment and all these things that we think about today on job. (Sounds of
general agreement) The men were very kind and very respectful of the women who came out to brave the elements.

Ledbetter: One time I was, uh, finished up a job that we were working on, and they, four or five of us girls was being moved to another job. Well, the both men of the job that we were going to saw me and he known I, I worked for him before. So he took his men together and talked to them and then come got me and I worked a long, long time, with twenty-six men. Just me. It wouldn’t... it wasn’t bad; they respected you real good and they treated you nice. If they slipped up they apologized.

Ledbetter: Well, I came here, uh, in last of, uh, 1942, and they already had someone in before I got in.

Simon: Well, what it was all, I mean, you did your job and you did it well, but you were trained well, you know. And I think the men were surprised that the women could really do what they did.
King: Now as... as the women in the workplace, it’s my understanding, and I didn’t know it then, that Eastern Aircraft was the first division here to hire Afro-American women. And they really had to have a protest, I think. My daughter brought a paper in telling me about the protest they had at Martin’s to hire Afro-American women.

Kelly: Did you... when you started, um, was there... I loved what you were saying about, um, everything seemed, uh, mixed. You could eat together and you could do... Was... did you experience any struggles when you began?

King: No, there... no there wasn’t any struggles or color struggles or color strifes on the job. It was just back in Baltimore where we could not eat at... downtown at the... Well, like in the southland, Baltimore was southern in this respect- of where we were going to eat at the counter, and women... black women trying on clothes in stores. Baltimore was integrated in, uh, transportation, this kind of thing, and... But it was segregated in schools and where were you going to eat downtown, where you... black women could truly shop downtown.

This was the... and I tell my grandchildren, I said, “Really”. They say, “Grandma, how did that affect you?” I
say, “You know, it’s something like the south, even though here they don’t claim to be southern. But if you’re young and this is all you know, this is all you know. It wasn’t until the big struggle in the civil rights, uh, struggle that people really realized how poorly black people had been… had been kept down in America. It was just something that everybody accepted. And gracious young people today didn’t like it, but they were afraid to move out of line to rebel.

De Mare: Do you think that the war… and this is just a question… Do you think that, y’know, the women entering the workplace, and the African-American women entering the work… that there was a… do you think that there was a shift at the time? Did you feel like you were able to be more… were you out in the world more, working as young women? I mean, up until that point a lot of women were just in the home, in the situation… Can you talk about, like…

Henninger: Sure.
Brunner: Sure, it made us more independent. We could go out with young...

De Mare: Can you talk about that?

Brunner: Well, I had never worked in there, like I said, and the money... And I went into this working world, I just thought I... 'This is it.' And, you know, with the money and all, and I... it was just great. And like you were talking about the war bond, a fella didn’t have a, a bank account; they had war bonds.

King: Yes.

Brunner: I remember my husband had nine hundred dollars worth of... Oh, we thought we were rich. (Laughter; unintelligible) And I still call them war bonds today; they don’t call them war bonds.

King: What’d they call them?

Brunner: I don’t know. It was eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents you paid for.
Henninger: Uh, and you know, back then during the war, uh, different things were rationed and you had to have stamps for them. You, you would, uh, save, uh, some for shoes, some for food, and, and like that...

Ledbetter: Some for gas.

Henninger: ...because if you didn’t- and gas allotted- and, uh, it was, uh, uh, everybody seemed to work together in World War II, and pull together. And, uh, I had, uh, an uncle in the Pacific. He was in nineteen different battles. And he was a cook. He would cook for the, uh, the, the, his, uh, group, and then he would go out and fight the Japs.

And, uh, when I hear... heard to... you know, with, uh, what’s going on in Washington, and about the C.I.A. and the, uh, um, F.B.I. treating the terrorists... Well, the Japanese, when they go in to take- uh, this is what I was told- and I saw it on the news ‘cause when we went to the movies- and they had pictures in the newspapers back then, but I was too young to save anything like that- but it showed where Japanese would go into a home and ram the
bayonet in a baby. Wherever they were conquering, you know, the islands that they were taking over. And, uh, and men- when they were in prison- well, they were treated terrible by the Japanese. And, uh, it was nothing at all like waterboarding.

Kelly: What... do you, um, do you remember the time during the war, um, in terms of Europe and the Germans and, um... what was the feeling in A... in America about why we’re fighting this war.

Henninger: Why we were fighting the war? Because the, uh, uh, Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the Nazis were taking... trying to take over Europe. And Hitler, uh, and Mussolini- they were terrible, terrible men. And that’s the re... reason we went into this war. For peace for our fellow man. It was called ‘Wars’ now, not a ‘conflict’ like they’re trying to call it today in Washington. With Afghanistan.

Brunner: And I remember when I graduated in ‘41, all my classmates had... the boys had to go in the war. Most of
them was killed. And they... and like if you met a feller, and he wasn’t in the war, like a... my husband wasn’t in the war because he had to take care of his father and mother. That’s why... and he was in 1A. If it’d a kept goin’, he woulda been called. And, uh, so there wasn’t too many good pickins’ around.

De Mare: If you could look back on that young woman who was nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old working, what would you like to say to her, um, now, like with your life experience you look back at that young woman who was forging her way in the world for the first time and, and entering the workforce and... what would you like to say to her?

Ledbetter: I grewed up on a farm, and whenever I graduated from high school my dad said, ‘Got... You gotta get off my corn because I got four more children to raise.’ And I got out and got a job, and working at, uh, Base of the Rock in Chimney Rock, North Carolina. And be... before that I had worked in a hosing mill for ten cents an hour.

Henninger: That’s how much it was back then.

Henninger:  Men making ten cents- dollar a day.

Brunner:  I...

Simon:  But then you learnt so much. Each job you went to you would learn something else. And it would stick with you, you know, you’d never forget it.

Ledbetter:  No. But after that uh, I, uh, took... Well, I was good at typing and shorthand and I, I would do that on the side. And, um, then I got married and, and, uh, we, uh, moved out into a home and stayed for about a year and a half. And that’s... After that, why, my brother-in-law had come to Martins- and rode a freight train up here- and come back and he had got a job- and he come back and he talked my husband into goin’ back with him. So, he went back with him.

De Mare:  Susan, do you want to say something?

King:  I would want to say to all the young women today, looking back on my experience, that life is really, really
precious. And if you have the opportunity to be a forefront and to forge the way—regardless black, white, red or yellow—do it, and do it with... earnestly. Because life is not promised to you and war is not pretty. I don’t care how... where you say you’re fighting for the war, you’re fighting for the boys overseas—war is not pretty, but whatever you can do, do to make a difference in the world.

Ledbetter: I agree with that a hundred percent.

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Henninger: Well, you know, I, uh, thank god that I had the opportunity to help our soldiers wherever they were because they were fighting for our America freedom. And, uh, I don’t know whether Washington respects that or not. You know, we have to bring that in because it’s a truth. And, you know, uh, in the bible it says, and god says, ‘there be wars and rumors of wars’ and, uh, uh, before Jesus comes again. And I just love my country and I don’t want my freedom taken away from me. And that’s one of the main reasons, I guess, I came to Baltimore; to help the men at the time and do the job that they left behind. And I took
over, uh, five or six jobs of the men that left to go into service.

De Mare: Yeah. Ok, we’re going to have to wrap up. You wanted to say... did you wanna say one thing?

Brunner: Well, if I had mine I woulda got more education, and all, but even I didn’t, I had three children and I made sure they all went through college and got their masters, you know, and then...

De Mare: Yep.

Simon: We had so much offered to us here and you gotta take advantage of it. Use it.

De Mare: Yeah. I wish we had so much more time to talk to all of you. Um, but we’re gonna have to bring another group of women in. But I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you ladies coming in and talking to us. I really can’t. I really can’t.