

# Alice A. Erickson

SR 9078, Oral History, by Amy Kesselman

Coll 883, Northwest Women's History Project records and interviews

1981 June 5

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AK: Amy Kesselman

Transcribed by: Unknown

Audit/edit by: Donna Sinclair, 2003

## Tape 1, Side 1

1981 June 5

AK: Why don't we start by talking a little bit about your background – where you were born and where you grew up.

ERICKSON: Well I grew up in the State of Nebraska. My dad was a corn farmer you might say.

AK: When were you born?

ERICKSON: Now you're getting...

AK: If you don't want to answer...

ERICKSON: No that's okay. This silver dollar was coined the same year I was, 1900. I was born in November, 1900.

AK: And how was farming in Nebraska in those days? Was it – was he a successful farmer?

ERICKSON: Well I don't know how you would – he did pretty well considering that there were ten of us kids to support. We didn't have any of the luxuries that kids take for granted nowadays.

AK: How many boys and how many girls?

ERICKSON: Six boys and four girls. And there are still six of us living, three of my brothers and one of my sisters have passed away.

AK: What did you raise on the farm?

ERICKSON: Corn and pigs, and he had cattle, a few cattle, not great herds of cattle like they do out here in the west but he had oh I would say maybe a hundred, but...

AK: And did you all help on the farm?

ERICKSON: We had to. It was a way of survival and I learned to milk cows when I was probably eight or ten years old.

AK: Was that considered women's work or men's work or anybody's work?

ERICKSON: Everybody's work on the farm. My dad used to tell me that I was the best boy he had. I liked to do things. It was an excuse to get out of doing housework and if I could go out and work in the barn or in the fields or anyplace I was a lot happier than I was doing housework. I think I was the biggest disappointment in my mother's life because she wanted me to be a lady. Well we lived in Nebraska until I was 16 and then we moved to South Dakota.

AK: To another farm?

ERICKSON: Yes. My dad expanded his interests a little bit in South Dakota. He bought a whole section of land and he raised more cattle. It wasn't a corn country like it was in Nebraska.

AK: Was it wheat and cattle for just dairies?

ERICKSON: Mostly beef cattle.

AK: And where did you go to school?

ERICKSON: In Nebraska I went to a country school and when we moved to Dakota I kind of dropped out. I had gone the second year of high school in Nebraska and when we moved to Dakota I didn't have any more interest in school so I didn't go any further. I never did graduate from high school.

AK: What were you interested in?

ERICKSON: Riding horseback and helping round up the cattle. I was still my dad's boy, I guess.

AK: Were you the youngest, the oldest, middle?

ERICKSON: I was the oldest girl. I had two brothers older than myself and I was the oldest girl so I learned what responsibility was at an early age.

AK: So then you just helped out around the farm for a while?

ERICKSON: I met my future husband and was married before I was 18, so then I took on more responsibility.

AK: Was he a farmer too?

ERICKSON: Yes.

AK: So you took up farming in South Dakota.

ERICKSON: Well, not for very long. We moved to Northern Idaho then.

AK: What do you raise in Northern Idaho?

ERICKSON: Well, we gave up farming. We lived in town and he worked for a transfer company.

AK: So you lived there for...

ERICKSON: Until, well he passed away in 1941 and then...

AK: How many children did you have?

ERICKSON: Four children. Yes and they're all living. The youngest boy lives in Salem but the rest are all here in Portland.

AK: Do you want to stop and get some water?

ERICKSON: I think I'd better.

AK: So there you were with four children to support.

ERICKSON: Well, no, my daughter was married and the oldest boy was in the Navy at that time. So I was with the two younger boys and my daughter and her husband were living in Boise. So we went down there and stayed with them for a while and she was working and kept house and the two boys were with me. The older of the two boys graduated from Boise High School. He was in the same class as Frank Church, who was a senator from Idaho. He was in the same graduating class with him. Then after he finished school he came to Portland and the rest of us came later on. My son-in-law was transferred to Portland so...

AK: So what made you decide to get a job in the shipyards?

ERICKSON: Well, I needed to work and...

AK: You were self-supporting with your children?

ERICKSON: No. The youngest boy was working in the shipyards too at that time. He was only sixteen but they were taking kids from sixteen on. And the other boy was signed up to go into the navy during – what year was it? I don't remember the year but he went into the navy. Shortly after that the youngest boy wanted to go into the Navy. He was 17 and could have gone in. I was trying to talk him out of it because, well, I already had two boys in the Navy and I wanted to keep him home as long as could. But he finally said, "Well, you're just trying to keep me tied to your apron strings," and that did it.

I said, "I've got better plans for my apron strings than to have you dangling from them." So I signed up for him to go into the Navy. He was on one of the oil tankers.

AK: Then what made you decide to work in the shipyards?

ERICKSON: Like I said, I needed work and that was the best paying work that I could get so naturally I took it.

AK: What year was that?

ERICKSON: I think it must have been 1942 when I started working in the shipyards and I worked there until the end of the war then.

AK: And what shipyard was it?

ERICKSON: I worked in the Oregon Shipyard and also at the Swan Island yard.

AK: And how did you choose to be a driller or how did that...?

ERICKSON: Well, I was what they call a tack welder. I was welding just the tack welders for the ship fitters. And that was interesting. I watched the guys on these drills and I just thought it would be interesting to operate one of those big drills and after I asked the lead man and kind of talked him into it, why then I worked on that until – anyway that was at Swan Island and I worked there until Swan Island closed down, and then I went to the Oregon Shipyard and worked.

AK: What exactly is involved in the drilling that you did?

ERICKSON: Well these big steel plates, some of them were, I would say, I don't know the size of them – half as big as this room anyway. They were brought in and laid on the platform and they were all marked, there were marks on them where we were to drill these holes, you know, for different size holes; this was for the hull of the ship.

AK: These are holes that they're going to use for rivets.

ERICKSON: For rivets, [yes].

AK: Did you use electric drills?

ERICKSON: Yes, they were electric. It's what they call the air drill. I don't remember but they were run by electricity and they were, I think the biggest drills were an inch and a quarter in diameter. But we had to learn to sharpen our own drills. It was interesting work.

AK: How long did it take to learn it? Did you just learn it on the job or did they give you special training?

ERICKSON: Well, I just started in and it was really quite – you know there was nothing to it. All I had to do was just know how to pull the drill over; it was on a track and I'd pull it over on top of this plate and set it down on the mark and drill.

AK: And were you the first woman to be a driller at?

ERICKSON: In that shipyard I was. I think I was the only woman that worked as a driller.

AK: Now what union did you belong to? Do you remember?

ERICKSON: Boilermakers Union.

AK: The same union the welders had.

ERICKSON: Yes, I think most of us – I never transferred to a different [union]. It was Boilermakers I'm sure. It's been so many years ago since I've even thought of it.

AK: Do you think about it much?

ERICKSON: Not really. I have other things to think about now, like grandchildren.

AK: You were telling me before I got the paper [Inaudible] a story about your lead man.

ERICKSON: Oh, when I asked to try out on the drill, he looked at me kind of funny and he said, "Well I've never had a woman driller on my crew."

And I said "Well, I think I can handle it." So he allowed me to try out and I worked for, I don't remember exactly how long.

But anyway, after I'd been on the drill for quite some time he came by one night and told me that I was the only woman on the crew and he said, "You're also the only one who has never drilled a hole in the wrong place that had to be welded shut and re-drilled." So about two or three nights after he told me I did it. And I told him it was all his fault.

I said, "If you hadn't told me that it wouldn't have happened." He understood, because the men had all been goof – you know, it's only human nature to make a mistake and it wasn't any big deal but we tried not to do it. And I don't think I ever did it again.

AK: Really. Did you like the work?

ERICKSON: I did, [yes]. I was glad when it was over with, because this was what I wanted. I was praying for the end of the war.

AK: So was everybody.

ERICKSON: My main concern was to get my boys back home again.

AK: And did they all come back?



ERICKSON: All three of them came back and I thank God for that.

AK: They were all in the Navy?

ERICKSON: Yes. When the youngest son was bugging me to sign for him to go in and I was trying to talk him out of it, one of his brothers was home on leave at that time and he said, "Oh mom, you don't have to worry about him," he says. "It takes a real man to get in the Navy." You know, just kind of – so that did it. Leon was determined to then that he was going to get in the navy or break a leg trying. So, anyway, I finally signed papers for him to go. I wanted him to go on and finish high school, but he promised me that he would, you know, they could do this. They could go on and take their high school training and he did. He got the equivalent of a high school diploma. After he was through he went on to school farther.

AK: You were working on the actual hulls. Were you working on the ways?

ERICKSON: [Yes]

AK: Were working conditions pretty safe?

ERICKSON: Pardon?

AK: Were working conditions safe?

ERICKSON: Well, there's always danger where you're around machinery but they had a lot of safety rules and regulations and as long as people abided by the rules there was comparatively few accidents, I think, when you stop to think of the number of people working in the yards.

AK: How did it feel to be working with men?

ERICKSON: Well, I wasn't the only woman working with – there were other women around all the time but they – it was okay.

AK: Did the men seem to respect the women workers as workers?

ERICKSON: Yes, most of them did. One, the driller I worked – there were two drillers on these plates, one at each end and this fellow – if I'd be working he'd say, "Out of the way, out of the way."

And I'd say, "Well, I'm working here too." And he tried to, you know, he resented me because I was a woman but he was the only one that ever treated me like that.

AK: When you were working in that, did you think you might like to continue doing something like that after the war was over?

ERICKSON: No.

AK: What did you think you wanted to do?

ERICKSON: Well, I went to work in Meier & Frank store then. I worked for a number of years there and then I had a chance to go work for an insurance company and I worked there until I retired.

AK: What did you do at Meier & Frank?

ERICKSON: Just clerk.

AK: How did that compare with your shipyard job?

ERICKSON: Well, it wasn't as hard work but it didn't pay as well either.

AK: How much were they paying, do you remember, Meier & Frank?

ERICKSON: It was minimum, I don't remember. I kept all my check stubs. I had a bundle of them that thick from the shipyard and from Meier & Frank until just recently.

AK: Really?

ERICKSON: I was going through some papers and I thought, why do I want to keep this stuff for? And I threw it all away. And I kind of wish now I hadn't been in such a hurry to destroy it, but I couldn't see what good it was doing and when you get to be my age you kind of wanted to clear out a lot of things and not leave a lot of junk for your family to take care of after you're gone.

AK: Well, the next time you're clearing out you might call the Oregon Historical Society or something. Sometimes they're interested in things like that. Sometimes they are interested in old papers.

ERICKSON: I have about ten years' worth of *Reader's Digests* here if they'd be [interested]. No, I have been wondering if any of the libraries or any place would be interested in them but...

AK: I can't think – just recycling places.

ERICKSON: I suppose.

AK: But old letters and diaries and personal things, the Historical Societies are interested in.

ERICKSON: Right off hand I can't think of anything that...

AK: But I would have been interested, just because I'm, I think from the research that I've done that Meier & Frank was paying between 60 and 75 cents an hour, but I'm not sure. Does that sound right to you?

ERICKSON: I was working five days a week, eight hours a day and my pay check was, I don't remember exactly, but \$24 or \$25 a week.

AK: So that was about five dollars a day, so it was under a dollar an hour.

ERICKSON: It was under a dollar an hour.

AK: So how else did it compare to the shipyards aside from the money.

ERICKSON: Well, it was cleaner work. I didn't get my hands near as dirty. It was, I worked in the art needle department which I enjoyed and I met a group of nice women that I worked with.

AK: And how long did you work there?

ERICKSON: About eight years.

AK: And how did you hear about the insurance company?

ERICKSON: Well, one of the women who had worked in the same department went to work for this insurance company and she was telling me that there was a vacancy, so I went and applied for it. I was past 50 at that time but the boss said that age was no barrier and said, "If you're willing to do the work," which I was more than willing. I was anxious because it was better working conditions and they paid better.

AK: It was office work?

ERICKSON: [Yes].

AK: I understand that during that time in 1952, and probably still today, [it was] hard for people over 40, women over 40, to get jobs.

ERICKSON: Well, it was in a lot of places, but for the insurance company, they felt that sometimes the older workers were more dependable than a lot of the young kids who came to work. So many of the young people, and I think this is true today maybe more so than it was then, that they come in with the idea they're going to get their pay check and that's all they care about. I don't know how that situation came about.

AK: Were you in your early 40s when you worked in the shipyards?

ERICKSON: Yes.

AK: Was there any discrimination against older women there?

ERICKSON: No, they were glad to get workers at any age.

AK: Do you have anything you want to add?

ERICKSON: I've probably talked too much already.

AK: No, you haven't, but do you feel that this shipyard experience affected you in any way, changed you in any way?

ERICKSON: It gave me self-confidence because I had never worked outside the home before and it gave me confidence that I could work with other people and meet them on their own grounds and that I could – was just as capable of doing the work as anyone else. Because, like I said I had never worked outside of the home before. I had just been a housewife and happy to do it. But after my husband passed away, I knew that I had to make my own living and I wasn't going to be the kind of mother that expected my kids to take care of me, because I felt that they had their own lives to live too. If I was able to take care of myself I didn't want to be a burden on them.

AK: Do you feel that after the war, it was difficult to support yourself on the wages available?

ERICKSON: No, I didn't have any problem. In fact, I was buying a house and had it almost paid for on the wages I had at Meier & Frank. I'm a Scotch-Irish and my kids tell me that the Scotch is predominate. But as I said, I was raised in a family of ten kids and there was no such thing as waste.

AK: When did you get married again?

ERICKSON: In 1918. I was almost 18 years old.

AK: The second time though.

ERICKSON: Oh. My husband and I will be married 17 years in August. It was the second time around for both of us.

AK: This was when you were working at the insurance company

ERICKSON: Yes. And then right after we were married he wanted me to retire so I retired at the age of 62. I've never regretted it. I would be getting more money if I'd worked until I was 65. My husband retired when he was 62.

AK: So you wanted to be able to travel together.

ERICKSON: Well, this is what we thought, but we haven't done much of it.

AK: Too many family things?

ERICKSON: No, well, in your own home there's always things to do. We shouldn't let it keep us down but somehow or other we do, especially now when there's so much vandalism going on you're almost afraid to go away from home. I think if I caught any – but we had our house broken into once...

**[End of Tape 1, Side 1]**

**[End of Interview]**