

Nell M. Conley

SR 9073, Oral History, by Sara Cook & Amy Kesselman

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

1981 March



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SC: Sara Cook

AK: Amy Kesselman

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Tape 1, Side 1

1981 March

AK: I might want to get some of your ideas about what you think happened, but it seems to me that – am I close enough?

SC: Let's see...

[Tape stops]

AK: What we've done, let me just explain what we've done, what we've done is developed sort of a list of quest...

[Tape stops]

SC: Put them where we both can see them.

AK: Maybe you'd start off by saying your name?

CONLEY: My name is Nell Conley. Do you want any other extraneous information about me?

AK: I don't know. [Laughs]

CONLEY: Did he get fixed? Thank you dear, thank you very much. Would you like some mint tea dear?

Unidentified male: Yes.

CONLEY: Good.

AK: Is that what it is, I was wondering what kind of tea it was.

CONLEY: I think you'll like this, [Inaudible]. I like to experiment with tea. He doesn't like tea tea, because they feed it to him in the hospital every now and then and it makes him ill.

Unidentified male: [Inaudible].

AK: Where were you living before the war?

CONLEY: In Portland.

AK: In Portland?

CONLEY: [Yes].

AK: And what, were you working?

CONLEY: I was not working at the time that war was declared. My husband was at home, and I had a small daughter who became four years old on the day that she said goodbye to her father when he went away to the Navy, he enlisted. I was just exactly 24 at the time she became four, and it was about nine months later that I went to work in the shipyards. And the reason I went there, is because I had a good friend who was going to go there, and we decided, why not? We both had to work, we both had children, so we became welders. And if I may say so, damn good ones.

AK: Did you, were you getting a stipend from the, from the Navy?

CONLEY: As I said, I had the allotment from my husband. It was about three months before I got any money from the Navy, though, at that time. Everyone was enlisting and I suppose it took a long time to process all that paper. And immediately after he left, I went to work for, as I said, Meier and Frank, and I found that I just couldn't make it. Then my friend went to work for the shipyards and persuaded me it was a good thing to do, and I went there, too.

AK: And you were supporting your mother as well as your daughter?

CONLEY: [Yes].

SC: How did your friend...

CONLEY: How has she done since?

SC: No, no, how did she get involved in getting the job at the shipyard?

CONLEY: I believe her brother was a welder. I'm not sure about that, I would have to ask her. It's been so long that a lot of such information has gone down the drain.

SC: Do you have an idea of how long you were going to work there, when you first got the job?

CONLEY: Our only idea, believe me, was until the war is over, when our people come back. We had no idea how long it would take. However long it took we were going to be there and we were going to do whatever we could.

SC: Had you, did you think you might continue doing a welding job somewhere else?

CONLEY: I thought about it, yes, because the pay was very good, but when our union cards were full there was no way that a woman could get into any of those heavy industries. The kind of women who were working as electricians, as shipfitters, a number of other jobs out there, and of course all of them were pulled, not just the welders. I incidentally, at the end of the war was not a welder, I was a crane operator. Probably, I don't know. I really can't say, I think I was one of perhaps three at Oregon Ship. There may have been more.

SC: You worked at Oregon Ship the whole time?

CONLEY: [Yes].

SC: Was that three years?

CONLEY: A little over three years, I think.

SC: And you started in 1943?

CONLEY: No, 1942.

SC: 1942.

AK: So you were among the first...

CONLEY: October 1942, I believe.

AK: So you were among the first group of women hired...

CONLEY: I'm not sure as to [Inaudible].

AK: What shift did you work?

CONLEY: I worked most of the time day shift. I did work the swing shift for a while, but since I had a small child, they did try to make it possible for women to work without too much discomfort, and it was easier for women to work during the day because you have your children's schedules to consider, too.

SC: Where was she while you were working?

CONLEY: Well, for the first six months or so, I got up at 5:30 in the morning, bundled my four-year-old child into heavy clothes and took her with two bus transfers to the home of a woman who was caring for three or four other shipyard mothers' children. I caught the Fessenden bus and went to work. Came back the same, the same bus pattern and fixed dinner for my mother and my daughter. My mother's health was not good, and frankly she was, some of her mental faculties were just deteriorated, so that I didn't feel I should leave my daughter with her. I thought she should have as much rest as possible.

SC: So then when you came home, you began caring for her and for your daughter.

CONLEY: Well, she had done the same for me when I was little. And for my brother and sister also. That's something we owe our parents, I think.

SC: In, was that, this bus business, did it ever, did it improve, did transportation improve so that you didn't have to spend so much time on the bus, or that, was that just...

CONLEY: What actually improved was the fact that the, Oregon Ship built a nursery, a nursery school I should say, to take care of the younger children. And after about six months or so the building was completed and they hired a staff, and then we took the children by bus to the nursery and then hopped on the bus again to go the mile or so down to the shipyard.

SC: Was it, was it a good nursery school?

CONLEY: I think it was, I think it was. We each, I believe, now I'm not sure of this, but I think we paid according to our salary. I was paying \$14 a week or something like that. For a little bit over eight hours of care. Of course that included the child's meal during the day. And unfortunately, great wastage of cod liver oil and orange juice. [Laughs] My daughter informed me after she grew up that she took great pleasure in throwing up immediately after having been forced to take the stuff every day. So they were trying to care for the children's health.

AK: Was the daycare center full the whole time?

CONLEY: I think it was...

AK: Full to capacity?

CONLEY: I'm not sure what the capacity was, but my impression is that it was.

SC: And this, it was actually operated by Oregon Ship, the daycare center?

CONLEY: Well, the facility was built by Oregon Ship. I think that they hired the staff, and maintained it.

SC: Someone said that Kaiser...

CONLEY: Quite possibly. I don't know what the Kaiser arrangement was either, out at Swan Island. But, either they may, of course, have rented the facilities to some care group, but I don't think that was the case.

AK: Did you choose which [Inaudible] you wanted to do?

CONLEY: There were welding jobs open, we took welding jobs.

SC: And they trained you?

CONLEY: Yes.

SC: Was the training good?

CONLEY: Oh, I think so. I enjoyed it, and it was very, actually, I shouldn't say it. For me it was very easy. I enjoyed it. It was the same kind of skill it takes to embroider or crochet.

SC: Huh, how interesting. You're the first person that's made that kind of comparison.

CONLEY: But actually, you have a stinger, that's the thing that holds the welding rod, and through which the electricity goes. And you have two pieces of metal, cold metal, here, and a hot metal rod in your hand. And what you do is weave that together. And you melt this into this and also into the piece that you're conducting the electricity with, and it takes the skill, eye and hand, that any other small work takes, that's all. And I enjoyed it for that reason. Incidentally, several ships went out of Oregon with roses welded into the after part of the ship.

AK: You did that?

CONLEY: [Yes].

SC: Was it heavy, was the equipment heavy to ...

CONLEY: What was heavy was the leather clothing we had to wear. I think it must have been about twenty-five pounds or so, perhaps more. Very heavy, and especially when we first started out there, we had to wear men's clothing. The trousers, of course, were suspended from the waist and that was very, very bad for women, because it put all the weight on their hips, and women have enough difficulty anyway. One of the things that I was very happy to do was to cooperate in a fashion show they were going to have for women in the shipyard. And they were bringing Edith Head up from Hollywood to put it on, and I thought oh, what god damn foolishness, for women who only want decent clothes to work in, to bring that kind of thing here. So I fussed a bit, and I had a friend who was on the counsel staff, the counseling staff I suppose you should call it – and incidentally, that would be an interesting woman for you to talk with. Her name is Viva Anderson, it's V-I-V-A and she pronounces it with a hard i. She is now retired from government service, she retired from the Foreign Service, the Department of State, after her return from Korea. She's a lawyer.

SC: And she's living in Portland.

CONLEY: She's not living in Portland now, she's living in Virginia, I can get her address for you from her sister. She became the, she was the last American woman out of Korea at the time the North invaded the South. Prior to that she was in the shipyards. She had just, I remember the day she learned she had passed the Oregon Bar, and we celebrated a little bit, great gal.

SC: During the war?

AK: So you talked to her about the nature of the fashion show?

CONLEY: So, yes, I talked to her about my dissatisfaction with fashion shows, and she suggested to the powers that were at the time that perhaps a welding style show would be a pretty good idea.

SC: Remind me to get started on mine yet. [Laughs]

CONLEY: So, I was told that, "Well, if you can find something to show, we'll show it." So I went to all the stores in town that sold welding clothing, and told them what we wanted, and somehow or other they came up with some women's outfits. I think they must have hurried awfully fast to get some, with the overall bib-type thing suspended from the shoulder and jackets that would open on the side instead of down the front because we were always getting slag down the front of us and it isn't very comfortable.

AK: Well it wouldn't be comfortable for men either, would it?

CONLEY: No, but they wore heavier clothing underneath. I didn't know, I don't believe I knew any women who wore flannel shirts and things like that [Inaudible]. By the time that

the stuff would burn through a flannel shirt it's no longer hot, it's not going to burn your clothes. At the same time I designed some welding clothes, I wasn't able – I talked to a manufacturer here in town, but he was unable to get federal permission to retool his shop in order to make that kind of thing, so it came to nothing. But at least I had the satisfaction of making a statement, and thereafter there were much better welding clothes on the market here in Portland for women, but we had to make a fuss about it first.

AK: So you had a fashion show at which you showed...

CONLEY: We had a fashion show, and somewhere around in a trunk somewhere I have some pictures, publicity pictures that were taken at the time.

SC: Maybe after you retire you could find them for us.

CONLEY: I'd be delighted to, I'd like to see them again myself. [Laughs]

SC: That's the kind of thing, really, that we would like to find to, to put in this presentation, I think it would be very interesting, yes.

CONLEY: There, did Mr. and Mrs. Barber tell you that there was a shipyard paper that was published here, the *Shipyarder*. I reminded them of it the other night when they called me.

AK: Well, I know about the *Bos'n's Whistle*, which was for all the three yards, but I don't know...

CONLEY: But there was also the *Shipyarder*, which was not published by the shipyard, it was published downtown somewhere, and I got into trouble with Aaron Frank who was still alive at the time, by writing an article about the, the style show for the *Shipyarder*. He

was convinced I hadn't, I had said something bad about Meier and Frank's. I hadn't of course, I had simply mentioned the fact that there was nothing there for a shipyarder woman. But he was unhappy at me for a while.

SC: For saying something slightly critical.

CONLEY: Yeah, I gather he thought, considered that critical. Matter of fact.

AK: How did your, did you feel your welding job compared to the other jobs you'd done before and since?

CONLEY: It was much more fun than anything I had done up to them, but what I had always wanted to do was write, and that's what I've been doing since.

SC: At the telephone company?

CONLEY: [Yes].

AK: You mentioned Viva Anderson as a counselor. Were you, I've noticed that not all of the women that we've talked to were aware that there were counselors there. Was the counselor system something that was present in most women's working lives, or did you have less contact...

CONLEY: I think most of them knew they were there, I happened to, I'm just lucky I guess. The way that I met Viva was rather interesting. There were, can't call them lounges, rest areas for women, a large room and restrooms. And they were not comfortable, there were benches along the walls of a concrete and plaster building where people could come and sit down for a few minutes and rest in between jobs that they had. And I was there one day when this woman who was in trousers but not in welding clothing or shipyard clothing

was trying to quote a poem to somebody else, I think it was another counselor. She couldn't remember the words and I supplied them for her and then we started talking.

AK: Do you remember the poem? What a romantic beginning for a friendship.

CONLEY: Yes [Inaudible].

SC: Really?

AK: That sounds like something out of a movie.

CONLEY: It does, doesn't it? It was fun.

AK: What was, what was your relationship with the male workers like there? Were they friendly?

CONLEY: The men I worked with, nothing could have been better. They were wonderful. The people I did not know who considered me just another woman taking a man's job on the buses, people I had no reason to, I had nothing to do with, they did not know me, and I didn't mind fighting with them a bit. The men I worked with, we, it was a matter of mutual respect. They knew their job, I knew mine. Great bunch of guys, loved them.

SC: Well, so what was going on with the people on the bus?

AK: Yeah, where were they working?

CONLEY: They were also working at Oregon Ship, but apparently in some part of the yard that I didn't work in, and it just happened that we perhaps lived in the same part of

town or at least used the bus going on that particular route. But there were a few middle-aged and beyond gentlemen who had grown up in another generation and were as nasty as they could be to younger women who had to work.

AK: It's the impression that you get is that women were encouraged, you know, to take these jobs.

CONLEY: Officially, yes.

AK: And it's interesting, you know, that with all the propaganda that we see, that people would still, or men, or whoever, would still hassle you.

CONLEY: As I said, they were the older men, and they had grown up in another age, and remember this wasn't very much after the big Depression when any job at all meant life or death. There was no Social Security, there was no way people could get food if they didn't have it or couldn't pay for it, and I think that those men actually felt that we were a threat to them.

AK: Did that continue on for the whole four years?

CONLEY: Oh, yes.

AK: Or was this mostly at the beginning, that it carried on?

CONLEY: No, it continued, you bet it did.

SC: I noticed in my research that it reappears again with a vengeance towards the end of the war.

CONLEY: Oh yes, and immediately after, and this is something I would like to get into a little bit later.

SC: Okay, well. Did you, how about the other people that you worked with, the women? Were, did you women, were you able to make friendships with other women?

CONLEY: Oh yes, yes. They were very much like me, some of them a good deal older than I, some quite a bit younger, but we were there because members of our family were overseas and because we knew we were building ships to carry whatever they needed to wherever they were.

AK: Portland had a massive immigration of people from outside town...

CONLEY: From the South, usually.

AK: How did all of the different groups of people get along?

CONLEY: Some of the Okies I knew were friends for years after, until they moved on. They were nice people, they were good people. One woman I enjoyed meeting very much and I often wonder what happened to her, was named America, and she came from the Deep South, well, I suppose from the Great Smokies, really. And she would have been extremely pretty, she was about 18 at that time, but all four of her front upper teeth were gold. One time I was so rude as to ask her why on earth she had had her teeth replaced with gold, and she said, "Well, my husband wanted me to." And that intrigued me, so I heard the whole story. It seems that she had married at 12. Her father had not approved of the much older man who wanted to marry her so they had run off and gotten married and her husband had had her front teeth removed and replaced with gold to show Papa that he could take care of her. [Laughs] She was looking forward to going back to where she had lived before, and she was looking forward also to being away from her husband, and

she and her mother were going to not raise tobacco and the government would give them lots of money so they could live without working. They had a pretty good handle on it.

SC: Well, what about working conditions, were, did you feel like – for one thing, were women and men treated equally on the job?

CONLEY: So far as I could see, they were. I'm probably chauvinistic in saying so, but I think that women were much more faithful in their attendance, and I know darn well that they stayed on the job better. They did not scoot off and find a place in the after hold to curl up and have a cigarette or play blackjack with the boys. The men often did.

SC: Despite the fact that women often had kids to care for at home who got sick and...

CONLEY: They also had husbands overseas and they wanted their husbands to come back, so they felt that they were there to work. The men were there for money because it was a job, and to take care of whatever family they had. Remember, most of these men were over age. I'm probably being unfair to some of them. One man I remember was a foreman, he had been in the construction business for a long time, and all three of his sons were in the Sea Bees and he was breaking his neck trying to get assigned to a Sea Bee outfit so he could go to war with his kids. But, he was a great person to work with, he, there was no slacking where he was concerned, and women were treated according to the job they did, just as the men were. So, it's good and bad.

SC: How about the union? You joined it when you...

CONLEY: We joined it, the union dues were taken out of our paycheck, we never saw an union representative.

SC: This is the Boilermakers, right?

CONLEY: [Yes], Builders and Boilermakers.

SC: And if you ever had a complaint, did you know what their union grievance procedure was?

CONLEY: I wouldn't have known where to find the business form.

SC: Was the union receptive to having women members?

CONLEY: I think the union was told, you have to have so many people on the job, and there weren't that many men. So of course they had to take women.

SC: It was a closed shop.

CONLEY: [Yes].

AK: There was a fight about it being a closed shop. The C.I.O. [Congress of Industrial Organizations] challenged at one point, I've been reading *The Oregonian*, and the *Labor Press*. I don't know if you remember this, but there was, the C.I.O. was trying to organize in the shipyards, and they challenged the Boilermakers, who had already signed a contract with Kaiser, but they lost.

CONLEY: I don't remember that at all. As I say, we had very little contact with union or union personnel.

SC: Well, how did you, what were your wages like? You said you had been making \$60 a month at Meier and Frank. What were you making as a welder?

CONLEY: As I recall, we were paid every two weeks, and I think my first check was \$28, which was tremendous. I thought that was great. Because I had, prior to that, been very, very short of money. I think the most I ever made in a check, let's see, I can't remember now if we were paid every week or every two weeks. I remember the largest check I ever made was \$82 for one week, and that was one of the weeks in which we built an entire Liberty Ship. No one took a day off. There were quite a few times when we went two or three months without a day off, actually.

AK: And did the childcare center function every day?

CONLEY: Yes, every day that the shipyard was working, and it was working every day?

[Tape stops]

SC: No, go ahead, go ahead.

AK: Did you feel like the job changed you in any way?

CONLEY: No, I don't think so. I had always been a feminist. I raised a rumpus in grammar school because I couldn't run to be president of the class. And in those days, no girl was ever president or vice-president of anything.

AK: Really.

CONLEY: You remember, don't you?

AK: No.

CONLEY: You don't?

AK: It's true, I mean I've heard that, yeah.

SC: I remember forms of that. I remember that you could, that theoretically you could do it, but practically you never did, you aspired to secretary.

CONLEY: Secretary, yes, by all means, those were the work jobs, they were not the prestige jobs.

AK: I don't think we ever had them, president and secretary of our class.

CONLEY: How about high school? And did you ever have a woman president of your student body?

AK: I don't think so, but I think there were women who ran.

CONLEY: They didn't get it.

AK: I think there were girls who ran but, no, they didn't get it. But I think the girls ran for vice-president.

CONLEY: An interesting time. I wouldn't want to live it over again.

AK: As a, I was wondering, as a feminist, whether you felt that, what you felt about the time span from say, 19, in the beginning of the war to the end of the war in terms of support for feminist ideas. Was there, did you feel more supported during the war for your ideas or less?

CONLEY: I think that I felt as, I believe most women did, that everything was in a state of suspension.

AK: During the war?

CONLEY: After the war, we'll see about this, right now we had to get busy and do what we had to do.

AK: And then after the war, what was the feeling like?

CONLEY: Straight blazing anger.

SC: Could you talk more about what that was like?

CONLEY: Well, there were very few places, very few jobs women could take where their salary was anywhere near what a man's would have been for the same kind of work, and there were many, many kinds of work that were simply out of bounds for women. And, I feel that after the war, when those of us who continued to work went into other fields, there were quite a few of us who worked our head off, and made, actually made jobs for ourselves by assuming responsibilities. About seven or eight or nine years later, when we'd worked ourselves into key positions, the young men were coming out of college then, and were encouraged to come in at the same positions that we had worked for so long to get. And I noted at the time that a number of women who retired were replaced by not one man, but two.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Tape 1, Side 2
1981 March

CONLEY: We no longer had jobs, we no longer were members of the union, we turned in our union cards along with our welding equipment, and we were without jobs. We didn't mind it too much because, after all, it was the end of the war and we were looking forward to our families coming home, to return to normalcy.

SC: But many – but your husband didn't come home for another...

CONLEY: It was several more months. August 14, as I recall, was the day, and October 8 I had a telephone call from him at Swan Island. That is, he was at Swan Island. I had stayed home because I felt I would hear from him that day. Ridiculous isn't it, but it's true.

AK: Isn't it amazing?

SC: You worked for Siberian?

CONLEY: Yes.

SC: Until he came back, and then you stayed home until 1946, and then joined the telephone company. What made you go back to work at that point?

CONLEY: As I recall, we had bought quite an old house which needed a lot of redoing and for which we didn't have the money, and our old, old refrigerator failed, and I decided I was going to go to work and earn the money for a refrigerator. Of course, in the meantime other things failed, daughter needed things, I needed things, and I stayed on the job.

AK: Well, what do you think are the most important things for us today to understand about women in the World War II era?

CONLEY: The most important thing? Especially now, I think is that in spite of the fact that shipyard work paid better, that was the least of our concerns. We felt we were doing something for the country, and I'm sure that most of us who worked there still feel the same way. Whenever it's necessary for us to do anything for this country, we'll do it.

SC: Do you think if you had been able to work in the shipyards later, after that, even if there wasn't a war on, you would have done it?

CONLEY: It would have depended, I think, on how much success I had with the thing I'd always wanted to do, which was writing. I might possibly. [Laughs] I had an idea, just prior to the time, some silly woman came out from the East to do a story about Rosie the Riveter. I had an idea that I would like to do a story about women in the shipyards, but I was so annoyed with her, and with the reception that that book got, and the jokes about Rosie the Riveter thereafter, I decided that was one subject I wouldn't write about.

AK: When was this?

CONLEY: It was during, I guess, about 1943, 1944.

AK: Was that Augusta Coffman [Clemson?], who...

CONLEY: I don't remember her name, I think I have willfully forgotten it.

AK: Really? Was she a person, Augusta Coffman was a person who worked at Swan Island I think, for a while. She was sent by the labor department to find out what was causing so much absenteeism among women.

CONLEY: Absenteeism among women? I'm surprised that there was any to record. Among the women I knew, everyone was on the job whether they were sick or not.

AK: Evidently, before there were adequate child care facilities, there were...

CONLEY: That could have been, yes. I don't know about childcare [Inaudible] when I went at all. They may have had...

AK: Well, they developed it later. But she then wrote about her experience called *Memoirs of a Woman Welder*.¹

CONLEY: Could be.

AK: Well, what didn't you like about the way this person treated it?

CONLEY: I can't even – I bought the book, I recall. I don't remember much about it now, what my gut feeling is, there's just the reaction to what other people were saying about the shipyard workers and women. And I associated it with whatever it was she wrote in that book. It really is very unfair, isn't it? I should dig it up and read it again.

AK: Well, I'd like to know what you didn't like about it. That would help us understand it.

CONLEY: It's been so long, that's quite a while ago, and I can't remember specific things about the book.

SC: Do you feel like it was deprecating to women?

¹ They are likely talking about *Shipyard Diary of a Woman Welder*, by Augusta H. Clawson.

CONLEY: I think my feeling at the time was that it wasn't fair and she really didn't know what she was writing about. I know that she was supposed to have worked in a shipyard for something like two months or three months or something like that. I also knew that she was under the wing of a couple of men, one of whom I knew, who was in charge of welding. I didn't think that she was qualified to write about women in the shipyards, any more than I would have been qualified to write about men in the South Pacific.

AK: I remember when I read it a few years ago, I remember feeling like it was incredibly superficial, that she came from a, that she had been working at professional jobs, and she was sort of doing this for a lark.

CONLEY: It may have been something of that feeling that came through to me. At any rate, I resented her very much, and I resented the fact that everyone seemed to have read her book and to have just accepted whatever she said when I felt that she really didn't know. As I say, I'm not sure it was this particular woman.

AK: I can't imagine what other book it would have been.

SC: That was the book you looked at the other night.

AK: Yes, a friend of the Barbers had had dug it out, and she had words with her, evidently, and she was remembering what she was like.

CONLEY: Well, she has firsthand information then, mine is strictly secondhand and forty years old.

AK: I just ordered the book to look at again, maybe if I get it you'll be interested in looking at it and telling us what you...

CONLEY: I would, yes.

AK: Okay, I'll give you a call. Well, are there any other things that you feel like it's important, that you'd like to talk about, about the experience?

CONLEY: That's hard to say. [Inaudible] is something I'm not at all sorry that I experienced except of course for the reason for it. It was in many ways a lot of fun, I worked with some wonderful people. Those men were great. They had a lively sense of humor, too. I remember one young man, a boy, I suppose he was 17 or so, who came to Portland from Eastern Oregon where he lived on a ranch, and the fellows did tease him unmercifully but he was also a good sport. One day he came to work with, his lunch consisted of a tuna fish sandwich, and they had gathered in the doghouse –.

Are you familiar with the term doghouse? The construction under concern, any kind of a shack or lean-to, any place that they go to to eat lunch, to get out of the rain, anything of that sort. And we'd eat our lunch in the doghouse. The riveters and the shipfitters shared it with us, this was when I was in the crane. And they had makeshift rivet heaters made out of chunks of what would otherwise have been waste metal, up on four legs, about waist height, with a box about like so, in which they had their fire materials. I don't know what it was, briquettes or coal or something in which they would put the rivets until they were white hot, and then with long-handled tongs the men closest to the rivet heater would throw them to the man up on the edge of whatever part of the ship he was. He'd catch it in a metal funnel-shaped bucket and put it out with his own tongs and then apply his rivet gun.

At any rate, this thing was still hot, of course, during the lunch hour, and the men would toast their sandwiches on top. This kid got out his tuna fish sandwich and was about to put it up there one morning and the men said, "What kind of sandwich is that?"

"Well, it's tuna fish."

"Tuna fish? Fish?"

"I mean there's fish in there."

“There’s a dead fish in that?”

And the kid says, “Isn’t it good?”

“Good God, no, who’d eat a dead fish?”

Poor boy, I think he went without his lunch that day. [Laughs]

AK: That seems a little cruel.

CONLEY: Well, yeah, I suppose in a way it was, but he got back at them. It was just a good comfortable working relationship. I think that people really became fond of the fellows they worked with, and also those of us who were not fellows. The man who worked the night shift on my crane and I became friends although I never saw him. One night I left a book that I had been reading under the pillow on the seat, and the following night –.

You must understand that there were long periods when a crane sits idle when men are putting the material together on the ground preparatory to moving it, there’s nothing that a crane can do to help them. But the shipfitters signal for the crane and signal what they want to do with it, a big prefabricated chunk of a ship, and then the crane is lowered and it moves it away. So for long periods, someone would just sit, and would just watch the fellows, or read, or I took my crocheting along and sometimes read and crochet and wait for the men.

At any rate, the night operator would leave his mystery books under the seat, under the cushion on the seat, and I would leave mine, and we traded back and forth for a number of months.

AK: How long did you do the crane?

CONLEY: Possibly about ten months or a year. I developed from the welding and in the welding, a very, very bad case of sinus infection and I had to, I remember I had to go for, I don’t know, for many weeks, every third day to go and have my sinuses washed out. And at that time they arranged for me to get, to work on a crane instead of welding anymore,

because of course you breathe an awful lot of heavy smoke and it doesn't do you any good.

SC: Did you like the crane operating job?

CONLEY: Oh, that was fun. That was another case where skill was very important. You had to judge, it was another instance of your eyes and your hands working together. You had to judge how far this thing was to go out, how far it was to drop, and in instances where two cranes were working together to lift a 70 ton section, it's very, very touchy. You have to almost feel what the other person is doing, and I enjoyed that tremendously. It's just a skill I imagine that a golfer feels when he hits a ball he knows is going to be a hole in one, or a skier must feel when sailing up there, knowing he's going to come down perfectly. It's just – or a skilled writer feels when they find just exactly the right word, and they say just what they want, that nobody can possibly misinterpret, and that's a skill I think that everyone who works and enjoys his work feels. And I enjoyed that.

As a matter of fact, I even sang up there. I do not have a voice, I never sang, but up there, who knew? [Laughs]

AK: After the war, did you feel like there were, there were as many opportunities for women to experience that kind of excitement?

CONLEY: No, although, I must say, the degree of skill – I guess I am an individualist as well as being a feminist. I think that one develops skill only when pitted against oneself. And operating, doing a telephone operating job at that time was a skill thing, too. You, if you enjoyed it at all, you played a game with yourself and you tried to have as many conversations going as your, your cords could carry, and you tried to do everything as fast as possible. Of course, the company was timing you, too. Everything you did had to be done within a certain number of seconds, but it was fun to shave those seconds and do so much better than was expected of you. But that was, that was a challenge, that was fun.

Challenge, I hate that word, everybody says it. It was just, like anything else that you like to do, you enjoy doing it as well as you can. It was fun. I'm sure you have experienced the same thing.

AK: Very, there are some, there are some times when you have more control, more leeway, more ability to do that than others...

CONLEY: Certainly there are...

AK: And I remember feeling that the opportunities to do that, say, when I was working as a maid at the Hilton were very limited there. Not so much challenge to put a hospital corner on a bed.

CONLEY: But, you were pleased with yourself when you were able to do it quickly and neatly and know that nobody could possibly say it wasn't done well, weren't you?

AK: For a while, although I think that what made that job, for me, unpleasant, was that we had to do so many, we had to eighteen rooms in a day, so that you didn't get a chance to develop your own goal, because the goals were set. Just, you know, maximum, at maximum stress. So I imagine jobs where you have a little bit more ability to control the work process give you more opportunity.

CONLEY: I suppose. I think though, probably lots of telephone operators and ex-telephone operators who thoroughly hated the job because they felt that it was a dead end, which it was. It was a dead end job at that time, you weren't going anywhere, and everyone, myself included, bitterly resented the timed aspect of it, and we resented, of course, having even every word we said dictated to us. We could not use our own words or phrases, we had to use the set phrases, and that was irritating, but there was a kind of pleasure in doing that, too, and doing it well. I guess, I guess I just like to fight. It was not –

I was very pleased to get away from that kind of work, because I really don't enjoy being angry all the time, and when I could forget the annoyance part of it, I did enjoy doing the best job I could. I was very glad to get away from it, that's the Siberia of the telephone company, I felt, until I got into the engineers and then I was sure that was the Siberia of the telephone company. But, one does the best one can, and I was very happy to get away from that and into P.R.

SC: Can you think of any things we didn't cover?

AK: Did we cover all the questions you'd given us, the first questions? You said that there were some more interesting in there. Did we, did you feel like the ones that you got to elaborate on?

CONLEY: I think that the one I was chuckling about was something about the counselors, and I was recalling having met Viva in the women's room, but I was also thinking, there was some difficulty with some of the southern Negroes and white people in the shipyards. Most of us, we weren't aware of it. We were so unaware of it that I unwittingly contributed to some of it, I'm afraid. There are several types of welding rods, and on the work on the deck where the plates are an inch or an inch and a half thick, where they're beveled to meet in a "v" shape like this, and you have to weld those together and fill the space in between. You have a very large, thick welding rod, and at that time there were some that were coated with red, and some that were coated with black, and we used to call that "red devil" and "black devil". I recall one time I had been in there with someone who asked me how the job was going, and I said I'd just been having a hell of a time with that black devil today. And there were two Negro women there who were insulted, and who were sure that I had been talking about one of their sisters. I hadn't, but it wouldn't have occurred to me to say that about them, I saw them so seldom anyway. But I'm sure that many of them took offense at that sort of thing without ever really understanding what was said.

SC: Well, we've gotten the impression that there were some acts, some real tension between white and Black workers.

CONLEY: I heard that there were, and as I say, I probably unwittingly added to it without ever being aware that it was there, really. I imagine that you could talk to any of the counselors. They would have heard about it, because they would have been the obvious person to go to with any kind of a problem.

SC: Were there any Black counselors?

CONLEY: I don't recall having seen any, matter of fact, the only one I can remember is the one who became my friend, because, you see, I didn't see very much of them. I have no idea. I do remember one more. The woman who was in charge of the counselors, I think was named Jane Ross, and I believe that she was at the telephone company when I went to work there, and I think that she was in the employment office. I didn't go through the employment office to become employed however, so I didn't meet her until about a year later.

SC: She was a counselor? Jane Ross?

CONLEY: [Yes], I think she had been...

SC: [Inaudible] phone company?

CONLEY: Maybe, she's been many years retired now. I think that she was an employment interviewer, or she may have been [Inaudible]. I can't tell what her job was. But she was in the employment office when I met her some time later, but I had had no problems with her at the ship yard.

AK: I can't think of anything else, unless...

SC: Not really. Close it off?

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[End of Interview]