RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GERALDINE BELL

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY
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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Geraldine Bell in Voorhees, New Jersey on January 23rd, 2012 with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here today. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Geraldine Bell: … I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 16th, 1925.

SI: It is just for the record, that is all.

GB: Let it go no further. [laughter]

SI: Can you tell me your parents' names?

GB: Anna and Phillip Greenblatt.

SI: What was your mother's maiden name?

GB: Pavel, P-A-V-E-L.

SI: Tell me a little bit about both sides of your family, their family background, starting with your father's side. What do you know about the family history and how the family came to this country?

GB: Yes, They came over with their parents in the early nineteen hundreds. My dad had two older sisters and an older brother, he was the youngest. The Greenblatts went to California. My mother's family stayed in Philadelphia. My grandfather Pavel was a horseman and a blacksmith. They lived at Third and Pine and he took care of all the horses for Abbotts Dairies. He could look at a horse and tell you how old it was, whether it was going to drop dead or not. I saw him do that, a very interesting man. My grandmother was the lady of the house. My mother was one of six children. My grandmother had eleven grandsons (three remaining) and just two granddaughters--I'm the one--remaining. My grandfather was always with horses. Now, I have a granddaughter who is crazy about horses so I know where it comes from.

SI: On either side of the family, did you get any stories about what life had been like in Europe before they came here?

GB: I didn't get that much. I know it was hard but they didn't talk about it. When they came over the children were very young. … My father's family they did not talk about it either, and they all settled in California. His one oldest sister worked for a movie studio, as a seamstress. His brother Harvey died young and his other sister was in real estate. When you lived on the East Coast and that part lived on the West Coast, there was not that much transfer of news. We did go to California the year of the World's Fair, because I saw the World's Fair in New York. We went by train to California and I saw it in San Francisco. We stayed a couple of months there and my Father was debating whether he should move out there or not. In those days if you went into business in L.A. your stores were open twelve hours a day. That was not for him, he thought it was ridiculous and my Mother really didn't want to leave her family, and she had a large family. So we came back to Philadelphia after six months.

SI: You were out there for quite a while.

GB: Yes, we were, … My Dad gave it a good shot, but he said, "We're not living out there," he thought it was the land of the "fruits" and the "nuts." [laughter] They were crazy.

SI: He started a business out there?

GB: No … My Aunt and Uncle were in the meat business but we had an experience out there. There was an earthquake while we were there, and my Aunt was cooking soup on the stove, and when the dog started to howl and run in a circle, she put the lid on the soup pot, put it on the floor, and turned off everything, "Everybody get in the car." We all got in the car including the dog. She turns the engine on, and we're sitting there, my Father says, "Okay, what are we doing?" She said, "Well if the ground opens up this way, we'll drive that way. If the ground opens that way, we'll go this way." He said, "And you want me to move here? Forget it." That did it. That was the icing on the cake. … We stayed a month later but we left, we all came back and he went into business here.

SI: What year was that?

GB: … When was the World's Fair, '39?

SI: I know that in 1939-1940 it was in New York.

GB: It was also in California.

SI: There were two of them?

GB: Yes, I think it was '40. [Editor's Note: The Golden Gate International Exposition was a World's Fair held in California in 1939 to 1940.]

SI: You were about fourteen then.

GB: Yes, I lost a year in school but I made it up through summer school. I had no problem but I had a wonderful trip out there. … It was an education. We have a beautiful country, everybody should take a ride and see it.

SI: I want to ask you a little bit more about this later on, but going back to your parents before they started their family, how did they meet? Were they introduced?

GB: Her elder brother introduced them.

SI: Was there a particular area of Philadelphia that they were living in at the time?

GB: … When they first came here, they lived at Third and Pine. Grandfather had a stable there because he took care of all the horses, but later on they moved out to West Philadelphia, …

Fifty-Ninth … and Baltimore Avenue. They had a beautiful house on the corner and in front of the house was a little park that had a fountain, and my grandfather, besides having horses and dogs, he had a parrot that he bought off a sailor who had come up from … the ship docks on the Delaware River. He came up Pine Street and he needed money and he was trying to sell that bird and my grandfather bought the bird with the stand and the filthy mouth it had. It had been on the ship for years. I was frightened of that bird, it was huge and then when they moved to the house in West Philadelphia, it was kept on the porch. He had a big cage but they also had a T-bar for it. That bird knew every postman, and every policeman. It was something else that bird. They put newspapers down on the bottom of the cage and it pecked at the newspaper and it died, from poisoning, from the ink. … I'm going back when I was maybe seven but that bird was something else. It hated one of my uncles.

SI: Around the time you were born, what was your father's occupation?

GB: He had a meat market. He was in the grocery business. He was with the Frankford Grocery Association.

SI: Was he a kosher butcher or just a general butcher?

GB: He was a general butcher.

SI: What about your mother, did she work outside of the home?

GB: She used to work down on Samson Street for one of the jewelers there. Then she worked with my father, and when he passed away she worked at Wanamaker's at the Eagle. She was the Hanes Hosiery lady. She worked there for years. … She was also a volunteer. She always volunteered at the Albert Einstein Hospital because she spoke many languages.

SI: Do you think she picked these up on her own or did they come through the family?

GB: A little bit of both. … Because I think when they first opened up the business, it was a neighborhood that was mostly Polish so she picked up Polish, and she picked up whatever my grandparents spoke and then she had a good ear for languages. There are people who do have a good ear for languages, I do not.

SI: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but when you were growing up was any Yiddish spoken in the home or were you exposed to any of that?

GB: No.

SI: Were you exposed to other European languages?

GB: Yes, … whether it was Polish or Russian or whatever it was. My grandparents didn't speak that much because with six kids, my grandmother didn't have a chance, everything was in English, because she wanted to be right up there with her children, and my grandfather, he spoke

many language. They spoke English at home, and they were very proud to be Americans, and very grateful.

SI: You are the oldest child in your family?

GB: Yes, it was only my brother and I. … He was younger.

SI: He was about three and a half or four years younger?

GB: Yes.

SI: Your earliest memories, were they still at the first place they were living or had they moved to West Philadelphia by then?

GB: No, I remember when I was born, they were living on Columbia Avenue, Tenth and Columbia, and he had a butcher shop, I remember that. … Temple University on Broad Street had a nursery school, that's where I went to nursery school. We left there and my father's older sister had a store on Wyoming Avenue in Olney, and my aunt and uncle went to California. My dad closed his store on Columbia Avenue and he took that store over. I went to elementary school. First to Thaddeus Stevens, Broad and Spring Garden, because I had started there so I went there and graduated from there. Then I went two years to Clara Barton for 7th and 8th grade because Olney High School started at ninth grade. I had two years at Clara Barton and then I went to Olney High, and my brother went to Central High, and then he went to Temple University, and I went to work for the Navy in 1943.

SI: Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood and what it was like on Wyoming Avenue.

GB: Wyoming Avenue, it had two trolley lines, the 73 and the 50. So there was a lot of traffic back and forth. We lived above the store on Wyoming Avenue, and it was the time that Hitler was coming to power. We saw the Nazi Bund come marching down Mascher Street with the flares and the horses, it was a scary time. That's when we left there and went to California.

SI: You think that was the reason your family left?

GB: Yes, we were scared to death. It was wild people, and only at night, I remember them marching up and down the streets, and my mother and father would never leave us alone. That's when my aunt said, "Get out of there," and we left. He sold everything, my mother gave things away, she had a cousin who had twin little girls, she gave her the piano, everybody got something. … When we came back we collected a little. [laughter]

SI: When you came back from California, did you go right back to the same living situation and business?

GB: No we went to live first with my grandparents in West Philadelphia -- then My Dad got established on Ogontz Avenue and we had an apartment above the store. Because I went to Olney High before we left for California I was permitted to go to Olney High. We went to

California by train. The train was air conditioned, and that was my first experience with air conditioning.

SI: Ok.

GB: Yes. The Train was "The Chief." The dining car had white tablecloths and napkins for each meal. The service was beautiful. Then we went down, on another train, from San Francisco to L.A.

SI: What are some of the things that come to mind that were different for you?

GB: When we went through Oklahoma, men got on the train with guns and sat in front of the restroom for the "Jim Crow" law and my father had a fit, and he asked, "What are you doing here?" On our car there were only seven people, two kids and five adults, and that was a big car. It was a brand new train. The man said, "This state has the Jim Crow law." He says, "I don't care what law you have, get out of here with those guns." It was scary. We went through two states like that and my brother, what was he, four years old, he didn't like it, he was scared, we never heard of that law. It was an experience that you don't forget. When we went through the town of Omaha, in Nebraska. I remember, it had one dirt street and I said, "How can that be a town?" Well, it's the West. … You were, when the train stopped to get off, walk around a little bit, and then got back on the train. It was fascinating and it had an observation car, you could go up top and you could see the Rocky Mountains. They are huge and if we went over in a covered wagon, we probably would not have made it. After I was married we went to California to see my family, and then we drove across. It was an interesting experience then too, but as a child it was fascinating. We were the only kids on the train. We were spoiled. It was a nice spoiled, but my Dad was furious, and my mother was upset, (Jim Crow law), he was mumbling all the way to Philadelphia. He kept saying to the conductor guy, …, "How dare you bring guns on the train like that, how dare you do this?" He says, "That's the way it is." Of course it had been repealed afterwards but the Jim Crow law was scary, terrible.

SI: Were you in school out there?

GB: No, we were there from--the end of May till September. It was summertime and there were other things. When my father and mother were thinking of moving there, they went to look for an apartment, big signs on the lawn, No dogs, No Jews, No blacks, all over Los Angeles. We weren't used to that, not used to that at all. It eventually changed. My aunt lived at Harper and Melrose Avenues. That became the "hippie-land." I mean when I went back later I didn't recognize Harper Avenue. … They had a lovely semi-detached ranch … with a pond. Now the incident with the earthquake business, when we got back to the house, in the pond which was in front of the dining room window, she had goldfish. … They were out, flopping around and we tried to rescue them, it didn't work, … and all her dishes fell off the wall.

SI: Was she in Los Angeles?

GB: Yes. She was in LA. Actually, it was Hollywood but the post office at the time was LA.

SI: That must have been exciting to be in Hollywood in the "Golden Age" of American cinema.

GB: It was fascinating, at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, you could step into the molds of the feet in the front, some feet were tiny, some feet were pretty big, but it was fascinating, it was a very interesting time. My aunt worked at one of the studios.

SI: She was a seamstress?

GB: She was a seamstress.

SI: Did she ever take you to the studio?

GB: No--too young--but she brought things home like sequins, buttons, and lace and I used to play with them [laughter]. It was a fascinating time. … My uncle, he worked from eight in the morning till twelve at night, and my Dad says, "Forget it." He wasn't going to do that.

SI: I want to ask about the Great Depression. When you were in Philadelphia, did the economic downturn have any visible effects on the community?

GB: Yes, he was in the food business and the State gave us powdered milk packages of certain foods. Customers came in with slips of paper, that they were entitled to this food for free. A loaf of bread was a nickel, I and he knew his customers and he knew they were really hard up against it, he'd slip them an extra piece of soup meat, or an extra piece of something, whatever it was to tide them over, and he ran what they used to call "a book" charge. All but two of his customers paid up. It was a tough time for everybody. I remember, as a kid, my family in California sending me clothes because two of us were the same size. They were wealthy, and I got hand-me-downs, and had no problem with it. Today, it's fashionable.

SI: Do you recall any other things your family did to stretch the household budget?

GB: Well, it was a big day when my mother got an ABC Spinner washing machine. We used to do laundry in the bath tub with a washboard and then things got a little better, we had this washing machine. You still hung the clothes out to dry or over the radiator. We didn't have dryers and the refrigerator was an ice box on top was a section that held a block of ice … a pan with water and you had to empty that pan and if you forgot you were in trouble. We didn't do vacations like they do today. If you had a day at the zoo, consider it a vacation, because it was different.

SI: Did you have the ability or the freedom to go around the city on your own or with friends?

GB: As a child?

SI: Yes.

GB: No. When you got to high school, if you were lucky, we had fifteen cents for a round trip to school. If you wanted to walk and save eight cents and buy an ice cream, you could do that, but you didn't have that privilege. … Originally I went to the Thaddeus Stevens School of

Practice at Broad and Spring Garden and I had a Miss McCullough, in sixth grade. She gave every one of us a PTC map, that was the Philadelphia Transportation Company map, and she said, "I want you to find out where you live and how do you get to school." You know what, I learned to love maps. I am a map reader. When I worked at the USO, people wanted to go someplace, "Go see her, she'll show you how to get there." I was a map reader from day one, I really enjoyed it and it helped many times. Today people go on the expressway and there's a blockage or something they can't get through, they haven't got a clue how to get off and where to go. If they have to get off, … they don't know where they are, they sit there. I don't sit, I go, it was great, we learned. One of the residents here also went to school with me. … When I first came here, I looked at this woman and I said to myself, something is familiar about her and I got out my kindergarten picture--there she was.

SI: What were your impressions of these early schools, particularly Thaddeus Stevens and Clara Barton?

GB: Excellent. Whatever the teacher said you believed. You didn't argue and there were no altercations. My Dad took us and picked us up later by trolley and subway then I was old enough to take my brother. The operators of the trolley and the subway, they knew who you were. Thaddeus Stevens was attached to the Philadelphia Normal School so we got an excellent education. When we lived on Wyoming Avenue, I didn't have many friends there because I was the wrong religion.

SI: There was a lot of anti-Semitism?

GB: Oh, yes. That's why we went to California.

SI: Was it mostly a German neighborhood?

GB: Yes, and when we came back we went to Ogontz and Olney Avenues and watched Central High go, from the ground up, and La Salle College was up the street, but the Girl's High School hadn't been built yet.

SI: You mentioned that the Bund would parade through your neighborhood.

GB: Yes, that was on Wyoming Avenue, and down Mascher Street.

SI: Were there other expressions of anti-Semitism, such as writing negative things?

GB: Yes, all of that.

SI: Any examples?

GB: Laundry kept getting stolen when you hung it out to dry, things like that. A lot of people left the neighborhood, that weren't Jewish, but they didn't like what they saw. They left.

SI: Were there any physical altercations?

GB: No, but seeing those horses and these men with torches marching down the street singing, that's enough to scare the "bee gees" out of you. No, but we had to get out of there. Didn't stick around to get hit on the head, you leave.

SI: What role did religion play in your life growing up?

GB: We went to Sunday school and we celebrated the major holidays but that was about it. We are Reformed Jews, we didn't go to the extreme, more liberal. Admiral Korn was our Rabbi and he led the Keweseth Israel Synagogue which is Reformed. My sons were Bar-Mitzvahed there and they were Confirmed, my Mother and Father loved it there, they thought it was great and they were comfortable.

SI: Was he your Rabbi when you were growing up or later on in life?

GB: Later on in life, later on.

SI: Do you remember the synagogue you went to growing up?

GB: Frankly, no. There's a lot of things I don't remember, I'm sorry. [laughter]

SI: That is okay. Do you have any other memories about the Depression's impact on your life or things that you saw in your neighborhood or even traveling across the country?

GB: Across the country, yes. … It was sad some of the towns you went through. People pan-handled. The Indians had it very hard even when we drove, across in '50 and '51, throughout the Southwest, you could see things were tough. … Of course with my family out in California, they were in a different world and they lived differently. I'm the last one left. All my cousins are gone, it's just me. My aunt had two daughters, my other aunt had one son and my other uncle he had two sons. Everybody's gone. One of my cousin's sons is left, just one, and he has three boys. They're all gone. My one cousin was in the Merchant Marines, he came to visit my father, when he came into port. He told my father, "We caught a fish." Dad said, "What are you fishing for off a boat?" He said "That's a torpedo," my father had no clue. My other cousin he flew over Italy, he was a bombardier. My brother was in Japan. They were scattered all over the place but they came home.

SI: That is remarkable.

GB: That was good.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your education at Olney. What interested you the most in terms of subjects?

GB: Well, I started out Academic and that year it was my ninth year and we left for California, I wasn't coming back, I thought. When I came back I switched to commercial … but they wanted to leave me back to ninth grade so I went back to ninth grade but I took four majors instead of

three--stenography, commercial, biology, you name it, I took it. If there was a space I took it, and I got out with my class because I made up for time. It was wartime and, the military used the building at night for classes for new recruits coming in. Naïve, I was very naïve. I was in biology class and the girl sitting at the table next to me wanted to know if she looked fat. I said, "I don't know, just your stomach." I had no clue she was pregnant, never saw her again. It was a naïve world, you didn't have television, you had radio, Saturdays you listened to *Let's Pretend*--but you didn't have the world, the things you see today on television. I would have been shocked to have seen all the guns, the killing, the mouth, the comments, and the piercing it was disrespectful. You didn't have a chance to be disrespectful. … When you were little and you got that "finger" [pointed directly at you], you were scared to death, and they have highli paddles. You know what a highli is? It was a paddle and it had a long rubber band with a ball at the end of it and you could hit it. They took the rubber band off, the staple off, that was the discipline paddle. There was one in every room. You didn't have a chance, and you know what, it was a quieter time, it was calm, you respected everybody and if anybody stepped out of line he was stomped on right away. You weren't afraid of anything, there was nothing to be afraid of. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Going back to high school, you were in the Commercial Course. Is that something you wanted to do? Did you chose to go in the commercial course?

GB: I wanted to go Academic, I wanted to go to College, I wanted to be a Nurse. There wasn't any money for that. So, my mother says, "Be smart, take the Commercial Course and if you can type, take shorthand and with what have you, you can always get a job." Okay, I listened, so I took Home Economics and Commercial, I took five majors, I wanted to get through in a hurry, I was going to be wonderful and then I was in one of the shows, I was assistant to the director on a show, it was called *Hit the Deck*. I had a great time. I thought it was pretty neat and we had a good class. Del Ennis was in my class, he was a baseball player with the Phillies, he was good, and from our class we had a lot of surgeons, lawyers, really a very good class. It was a wartime class, and it was the smallest class at graduation because we all fitted on the stage. Usually, it's on the stage and down below and around, but we all fit in on the stage. It was wartime and graduation was during the day. … I went and took a civil service exam, I never heard anything. … I figured, "Well, I'll try elsewhere." So, I went to the Telephone Company, Insurance Company, they wouldn't hire me because of my religion. As soon as you put it down, "Thank you, we'll call you." They never even read it. That's okay, the Navy called me and I went to work for the Navy department, started as a clerk typist, went right up the ladder. Fascinating time, you had a different group of officers every so often. Every nine months or so they had to be deployed, come back, whatever, and between buildings, main building and building two, the Admiral in nice weather had muster, walked up and down with an Aide behind the Admiral. First summer there, leg makeup came out. … Oh, that's great, you don't have to wear stockings. First of all you couldn't get stockings. So I wore leg makeup and a group of sailors picked us up. Two sailors in the back, two in the front and there was a girl in front and me in the back and we got a ride to work. We get out of the car, and each sailor had an orange streak down the side of their white uniform, the leg make up came off. Well, when they went to muster they got pulled out, told to go home and get changed and we were told, "Don't you ever wear leg make up again if

you're riding in that car." So, we never did. … For months we were teased about it, but we were young, we were seventeen, we didn't know--it was a new product.

SI: Did you graduate in 1942 or 1943?

GB: '43, January. They had two classes in those days. You graduated either in June or January. So, I graduated in January.

SI: How long was it before you got the job with the Navy?

GB: Six months.

SI: You start in the summer of 1943. Going back, were you following what was happening overseas in Europe?

GB: Oh, sure, because I had family in the war. We sent care packages all the time.

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, were you following the news coming out of Europe?

GB: Yes, because we figured … we were going to get into this. There was no other way and Roosevelt was the President and we were following it very carefully. It was a scary time, my father was an air raid warden, he had to walk the streets at night with a flashlight and if somebody didn't have their windows covered … or the lights on, knocked on the door, "You got to cover up." There were other men that wanted the job. So, he said, "Yes, you can have it." He gave up his car. … Gas was rationed so he gave up the car.

SI: Being in the meat business which was rationed, how did that affect his livelihood?

GB: Very much. You had to have a coupon to get the meat, and he had to give the coupons to the meat distributor. He also had an egg and butter man, they used coupons and if somebody wanted something and didn't have enough coupons and if somebody else had extra coupons they gave it to him to help somebody else. … He had good clientele. They were mostly working people, they were in the apartment building across the street, … a notch above. Everybody worked, nobody was out of work. It was a brand new apartment house and Central High was brand new, and La Salle College was up the street so it was a very affluent neighborhood at the time. He didn't have any problems. He took care of his customers, they took care of him. If he couldn't get lamb, he got pork. If he couldn't get the pork, he got beef. He'd jiggle it around whatever he could get, and one time a new distributor's driver came in to service him with beef, he took one look at him and took one look at the meat, he said, "You're not bringing that in here, that's lousy meat--out." He was the kind of a man he could go like this with his thumb on a piece of meat and tell you exactly what grade it was with a touch. He was an excellent man that way and he used to paint his own signs on shelf paper, with red paint, he had beautiful handwriting. … He could do a nice job.

SI: Do you know if he taught himself how to do all this?

GB: Yes. He worked for his brother-in-law in the meat business and then he went out on his own but the painting business, we never knew he could do that. He kept it hidden. I said to him, "When did you learn that?" He said, "Oh you know, it's nothing." … Okay, "nothing."

SI: Growing up, did you ever have to work in or help out at the store?

GB: Yes, … my brother and I had to clean off the onions and clean out the bin. The potatoes, dust them off, and clean out the bin. He was particular for keeping things clean and he used to put sawdust on the bench then, he scrapped the block, everything had to be just so, he washed everything. … We would have chores and then he found out I could bake, he says, "You go upstairs, I think I need some cake today," or, "I need cookies today." And he was a thin man, my mother and I used to walk by the table and the pounds would come on. My brother was also thin, and Mother used to keep my brother in bed, one day a week, and feed him milk shakes, he was so skinny, that aggravated me. How would you like to sit there and watch your brother get all that stuff and you couldn't take it, you'd be aggravated also. My Dad loved to eat, he had a sweet tooth that was unbelievable. So I became a baker. When I went to work I even baked cakes for the office and here I bake also. I make all kinds of stuff because I enjoy it. If I ate everything I made I'd be huge, so what I do is I wrap it up and I take it downstairs, I give it to all the waiters, I slip it to them, nobody should see. A few people I will give things to but I give it to the kids. They do a nice job and I appreciate it, and I give to my neighbors. I have enough chicken chow mein here. One of my neighbors, just came home from the hospital, I'm going to offer her that for dinner. I had the people downstairs up here for chicken chow mein Sunday night. They would have choosen to go out but the weather was terrible. So I'm always cooking, I'm one of the few people that don't use the oven for a storage area. I use it. I enjoy it.

SI: Was your father just eating this or was he selling it in the store?

GB: No, he was eating it. It never left the apartment.

SI: It sounds like your father's store was more than just a butcher shop.

GB: It was a grocery store. … The United Frankford Grocery Association was a wholesaler, and you'd belong to it and they supplied you whatever you need and he had Meat and he had a butter and egg man, a poultry man, and he had groceries and paper products. It was a regular mini-market.

SI: Were there other items that he had trouble getting during the war?

GB: Yes, a lot of that stuff was rationed. Sometimes you could get coffee or tea, sometimes you couldn't. That's when butter was a problem and they came out with Spry and Crisco. That would be more readily available than the butter. … He used to get sweet butter in a five pound roll. … He sliced it so everybody had a piece, he made sure everybody got some. There were items that were tough to get. Paper products were not as available as they are now. We used dish towels, we didn't use paper towels. We used cloth napkins, we didn't use paper napkins. It was tough to get and you saved your used fat when you cooked. It was collected and used to make something. I don't remember.

SI: Was it during the war for the effort?

GB: Yes, at Ogontz and Olney where he had the market, we had the apartment house here, Central High here, stores here, and we were here, but past Central High was an Armory, the soldiers were there. One summer there was a strike in Philadelphia, with the Public Transportation Company. They didn't have washing facilities there, so my Mother went down there, and she said, "Bring your laundry to us." In the apartment building they had two washers and dryers in each building (3 buildings), "We'll wash your clothes." So she organized that and the city of Philadelphia thanked her for it. Those soldiers were on the streetcars because there was a strike. It was summer and no air conditioning on the street cars. They washed and dried their clothes. Most of the ladies in the buildings helped, but Mother organized it.

SI: Does anything else stand out about the strike?

GB: I thought it was a waste of time. It was pain in the neck. I think it started with the unions but I really don't know, people had to get to work, it was wartime, they had to do whatever they did. That's all I remember.

SI: Before World War II came around, what did see yourself doing in the future?

GB: I was going to be a nurse.

SI: You mentioned that.

GB: Of course, then I had bad eyes. I couldn't see very well.] I really wanted to be a pilot, but forget that, I couldn't do that either.

SI: Why were you interested in be a pilot?

GB: Fascinated with airplanes since I was this big--fascinated.

SI: Getting to your experience in the Navy, did you have the option to choose the Naval Aviation section or did they just put you where they needed you?

GB: No, they opened up near me. There used to be a brick yard behind Sears and Roebuck Company on the Boulevard … with a railroad siding. The Navy needed space in a hurry and they had the Philadelphia Navy Yard which was busy doing other things, they didn't have room for ASO. So, they got this space, they built it, they didn't even have a floor plan, they didn't have a building plan, they didn't have anything so, they took a hospital plan. The only rooms that were air-conditioned were down on the first floor. That's where the operating room would have been. That's where they eventually put the computers. It was built like a hand with wings and each wing had three decks, … and they built it fast and then they built the warehouses where everything was stored and because it had the railroad track, it was perfect, and they had a tall smokestack. I went to work there because I could take one trolley to get there. It was easy and when you got off at Devereaux Street and Rising Sun Avenue, you walked. Most of the streets

weren't paved, so it was dirt. … Tabor Road at that time was not paved, it was dirt. Once a rainstorm came and I lost a shoe somewhere in that street. We had military men on duty with bayonets and I'm standing there, guard comes out, "What's the matter?" "My shoes." He's digging with the bayonet, couldn't find it. So they took me home and when I walked in the house my father said "What's the matter?" I said, "I lost a shoe on Tabor Road." "You lost a shoe on Tabor Road?" Yes, in those days shoes were expensive. I had to go upstairs and get another pair of shoes and they took me back to work. Every time I go by Devereaux and Tabor Road, "There's a shoe down there, someday someone is going to dig it up and they're going to say, 'I wonder who had one foot?'" I loved working there, it was wonderful and I felt like I was doing something important, a lot of nice people. The Admiral had a chauffeur, his name was Bradley, very nice gentleman, and I don't know how the conversation started, I said, "Good morning," to him one day and every day after that I got a, "Good morning." A lot of women didn't do it, but I did it, he was a very nice man.

SI: Why did a lot of women stay away from him?

GB: He was black. Some women thought it was beneath them. You had that all over.

SI: I have heard that about Philadelphia, that there is a lot of de facto segregation in the city. Was that your experience?

GB: The city was ... built mostly neighborhoods, there was the Italian, Polish and the Irish neighborhood, and that's the way it originally started. Nobody thought a thing about it, and in Elkins Park which is a suburb, mansions, but another section they built just for the black help, but it was just the way it was, like the South, I didn't pay attention to it, it didn't bother me. In my class at Thaddeus Stevens, someone in my sixth grade class we had a young lady I was a friendly with, her name was Peggy K, a black girl, smart as a whip. Her Dad was … one of the first Black Military Medical men in the service and she became a very famous ballerina. I think she danced for Catherine Littlefield but I don't remember if that's true or not, very nice lady. I was more liberal than most didn't have a problem.

SI: Were you free to associate with whomever you wanted to?

GB: Yes, not a problem. Some people had a problem, our family didn't have a problem.

SI: Again going back before World War II, had your family been involved in any kind of community activities such as local groups, charities, or anything like that?

GB: I'm trying to remember. My mother was in a charity but I can't remember, she was busy working. She didn't have time. She also volunteered at Einstein [medical center] for years because she spoke a few languages. I don't remember anything in particular, she did not belonging to a bridge club or played cards. She didn't have time, never learned to drive a car until she was sixty, then you couldn't keep her still. She was all over the place but she never got lost, had a good sense of direction. But my Dad gave up his car with the onset of the war. We didn't get a car again until after the war was over. Mother got a used car and my brother lived in New Jersey, she scooted over to New Jersey . When she couldn't drive anymore, because

everybody screamed at her, she never had an accident, and she knew how to take the busses. She could get wherever she wanted to go. She was an interesting lady and she would volunteer for anything, if she could. She passed at 96 years of age.

SI: What do you remember about the day Pearl Harbor was attacked?

GB: I was doing homework in our apartment, it was Sunday. … I was doing something with bookkeeping. I must have added the column three times, I couldn't get an answer and I had the radio on, I ran to my mother and said, "We've been bombed!" She said "Where?" I said "Hawaii!" She said, "You're out of your mind." I said "Listen." … Everybody sat, … the radio was sitting right there, "I don't believe it. I don't believe they were dumb enough to do something like that." That's where we were, I was doing homework. The next day in school, we were shocked. Nobody could stop talking about it, even the teachers were beside themselves. It was unbelievable. I never finished that darn column of numbers … because when I went to class, nobody finished it. So, I didn't become a bookkeeper.

SI: How quickly did you start seeing changes on the Home Front after that?

GB: In a week. Gasoline was rationed immediately. Father got notice about this, you couldn't get that, … sign up for this, … blackout curtains. … Like within a week my mother was sewing black out curtains.

SI: Was there any concern that the war would affect the United States?

GB: Would it come to us?

SI: What we tend to forget now is the fear in the United States during the first year of war.

GB: Oh, yes. You walked down the street, you kept looking at everybody. There's a very famous German butcher shop on Rising Sun Avenue, he makes the best stuff you ever ate. We wouldn't go to him, we were afraid, you just didn't know, you didn't know what kind of a nut cake was walking around. We lived across the street from an apartment house, "Somebody in building 'A' had the light on, Daddy." He gets his hat and his coat on, he gets his flashlight, and he runs out there, goes in the building, he's banging on the door, "Where's your blackout curtains?" It was three buildings, it was a big complex on Olney Avenue. … After a while my mother said to him, "You're a little too old for this," you know, "let the younger men do it."

SI: How many nights a week would he be doing that?

GB: Three. He and his boyfriend used to do that. The other nights they played cards. [laughter] These guys were not in great shape, let's face it

SI: How many hours a day would he work between that and the butcher shop?

GB: He worked from eight until six every day in his store. My mother watched him, you know, took care of him, everybody watched him, and unfortunately he met a very untimely death. …

SI: You described how you got the job at the Navy Depot. What were your first few days and weeks there like?

GB: Well, you had to learn the routine, and every letter had to be in a special military way. I wasn't used to it, I had to learn--subject, to, from--and how to type it up. I had a lady that taught me because they started on the Naval Base, but they didn't have enough room so they brought ASO up and built the building. She taught us how to do the military war to do mail, how to answer the phone. After I was there for a while, we had these summer kids in, a phone was ringing and I was already on one phone, I said to her, "Get the phone." She picked the phone up and said, "Yeah?" You don't answer the phone like that, wait a minute. I said, "Just a minute," handed over the phone. I say, "You say 'Good morning, this is the Aviation Supply Office, whom do you wish to speak to?'" "Oh." It could have been the Admiral's wife [use] your head. So, after a while, everybody learned what to do, the right way, you have to be taught. You don't pick up the phone, "Yeah?" That was back in 1943. I worked for many years. When I got pregnant, I left. When my sons went into high school, I came back. We had summer kids again from high schools around the base. They had the summer jobs and darned if I didn't have another one, picks up the phone and says, "Yeah." I was ready for her. I was out of my seat in a flash and I grabbed the phone, "Good afternoon, this is the Naval Air Technical Service Facility, may I help you in some way?" "I want to speak to the Commander." "Yes, sir." Click, click, click. I said to her, "Where the did you learn to answer the phone?" She says, "I didn't know who it was." "You don't have to know who it was, you answer the phone properly. Didn't they teach you this in school?" So that was my first week there, and I had a "Yeah" on the phone. I had a Lieutenant very nice officer, and he said, "I don't ever want to hear that again." This is another idiot I had for the summer and she must have been about fifteen, sixteen, it was unbelievable. We learned the ropes, we learned what to do, we learned the proper way to do a letter, it's not like a civilian letter, the Navy is different. How many inches in, how many inches down, … space whoever had to sign, and then how to clip it together, how to do the envelope, how to present it to the officer. One officer he only wrote every other line on a lined tablet that you copied. The second line is just a personal opinion, you didn't type that, you only type every other line. Every day was a different day, every day something happened and they had people working around the clock. I didn't, but they did so when you got in the morning you had a stack of paper to sign, type, whatever it is, and don't forget to file. We had some girls who used to put filing in the drawer, they didn't want to file. When they got caught, they were shown the door, you don't do that. You learn how to answer the phone properly and how to address an officer, don't chew gum in the office, do not smoke in the office. I didn't do either one, I didn't care but there were people that were always smoking and there was no smoking allowed! Do not eat at your desk, you had thirty minutes for lunch and you had to go from wing three or wherever you were to the cafeteria, get your lunch, and get back. That was not easy all the time because there were always lines. One group went at eleven, next eleven thirty, then twelve, it was staggered. There were a lot of people there, and walking down that hill in the rain was a joy and you had to get on the boards to get into the base. Then I finally got to drive with a group of people and some military people moved into the apartment house and this one officer, who was a Commander, says, "How do you get to work?" I said, "I get a trolley. Can I get a ride, I would appreciate it?" He said, "Well, I go in every day, you want to go in with me, I leave five minutes earlier than everybody." I said, "That's okay with me." I said, "and I'll pay." So, we made a deal, five dollars a week.

That was a lot of money in those days. When I started work, I made $1440 a year, then I got a raise, it was $1660, another raise $1880. I was moving right up the ladder, but in those days that was a lot of money, families lived off that and we didn't think anything of it. We were doing our bit to fight the war, whatever we could.

SI: Describe for me your office at this time. How many people were in it?

GB: A lot. The building was laid out like a hand. I showed you photos of the front.

SI: I thought you were describing the whole building.

GB: … It had four wings. You walked down the corridor and there's wings … and there are stairways in between that go up and down. There were no elevators for us to use, you walked. This side of the room could be Stock Control, this side of it could be Technical and you had file cabinets and desks interspaced. You could have fifty people on that side and fifty people on this side, you had a lot of people there, and then there were the warehouse buildings. Computer rooms and mail rooms were air-conditioned. We were not. In the summer it was hot. The maintenance crew was excellent. Those bathrooms were kept spotless. They had a barber on board, he'd do anybody's hair, mostly the military but you had a moment and … you need a haircut, you could get a haircut. In the summer the Corpsman came down, and everybody had to take salt pills. I never took a salt pill in my life, and in the water when there was flu going around they came down, everybody got a shot, and I got sick every year. When I left the Navy Department, I never took another flu shot for many years. Some areas worked shift work, eight to four-thirty, four-thirty to 12:30 am, eight hours later. Some people came in at ten and left at seven, it was staggered, and it was humming all the time, and some departments worked around the clock.

SI: Which department did you start in?

GB: I started in the Aviation Supply Office, Technical. When I came back, I worked in Naval Aviation Technical Supply Facility, NATSF. Everything you buy, you get a manual, you buy a washing machine, you get a manual. You buy a TV you get a manual. We did the manuals for the airplanes. Anything that was bought, NATSF did the manuals and then, I went into Naval International Logistic Command Office, and I kept trying to get back into the ASO Technical Area and I didn't get picked up, couldn't figure out why. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: I just wanted to ask a few more questions about your initial few years at the depot. What was the typical day like for you and what would you do?

GB: Oh, I got up at six thirty and was at the depot, before 8 am, and if there was a night crew on, you'd say, "Hello," or, "Goodbye," and sit down at your desk and go through the "in" basket. Whatever has to be done gets done. Filing was a big thing there. Nobody liked to file. I filed, … phone calls came in, we had things like Shipping Requests, people needed parts, do we have stock, I had to go to Stock Control, check that out. We bought an item from a manufacturer and,

it was due on the 1st of August, "Where's that order?" "Never came in." "Really?" Get on the horn (Telephone), "Where's our order?" "We're a little backed up." "Did you ever think of calling and telling us? We have aircraft sitting on the ground." … You got to get a little testy with them, and one guy said, "Well, you come after so and so and so and so." Next time he came in for a bid on a contract he did not get it. Commander said, "He wants to play stupid, we'll show him how to play." You're supposed to deliver on the 1st of August, if you're not going to make it, call us in July and tell us, because then we can try to … a few items from another station and give it to the station that needs it so aircraft does not sit on the ground. … That's what we did, every day was a different challenge. We had one gentleman that I worked with Al, I'm still friendly with him. We bought some equipment from Westinghouse and evidently they were having troubles with it, they never called him. This manager is standing up at his desk, "What do you mean you haven't got it," You could have heard him a mile away. So The Commander says, "What is the matter, Al?" He says, "Those low-lifes, they can't get the parts, they can't do this, they don't call me. I don't know." He says, "I'm going to have planes down," you know, that was the theme, you got to get them up and get them running and be safe. Well, they called Westinghouse in, I don't know what was said but through closed doors you could hear them and somebody got on the stick and really did the job, and all calmed down. When Al got excited, he had good reason to be excited, did not get excited for nothing. Then being a secretary, you'd do a lot of things, you type up the orders for people that go out on business trips or go to a base or whatever they have to do. You made sure everything is lined up and everything is signed, everything has to be just so its run like a ship. They cleaned the offices every night, everything is tight and everything is locked and you don't talk about anything. What was, was time.

SI: How many clerk-typists were in the office and how many officers were in the office?

GB: … You had a Captain and you had maybe four Commanders, and you had Lieutenants and Lieutenant JG and you had Ensigns, you had all ranks. During the war we had Sailors but after the war we did not have money Sailors but we still had rank officers. In a big office, there could be one head secretary for the Commander office, one for the Captain, and one for the Junior Officers, and then each division would have a secretary. Under the Captain was the Commander, and there was an officer, two officers, and then there was Department Heads, and I was his assistant. They had a lot of people, and everybody had a job to do, everybody worked with each other. If not, "You see the door you came in, that's the door you will go out." … Summertime, we used to hire the kids from the local schools upon recommendation, and we had these students and The Department Head put me in charge. I said, "I left children home." He said, "Yes, but you're the only married lady here."

SI: This is after you came back to the position.

GB: Yes. … We get a call from the guard at one of the main gates on the base, and there's a smokestack on the base, like eighty feet in the air. We get a call from the gate, The Commander came out, "Get your coat!" "Why?" … "We got a kid who climbed the smokestack and they think he is ours." We get our coats, The Commander gets a bull horn, and a jeep. It goes like this, "Young man," you see the kid's head turn. "You have two seconds to get down." That kid came down fast. "Why did you go up there? "I wanted to see what I could see." "You see the gate?" That's where I learned this one, "You're going out that gate, you're not coming back."

"But I need the job." "You should have thought of that." There are two other kids waiting to get that job because we had a pool of kids to pick from. The Commander says, "Don't come back," and drove him over to the gate, "Have a nice day." I said to him, "You handled that beautifully." He says, "Wait, his Mother is going call me." I said, "I'm not taking the phone call." That kid climbed smokestack and all it has are these things, iron bars to hold on to.

SI: It has little bars to climb up.

GB: Yes, little bars, you put your feet on and you hold on for dear life. I wouldn't send a gorilla up there. The Commander said, "I don't want to see that kid in the office." I said, "I don't think you will, sir." And "all other duties as assigned" comes under that. The military never asked me to get coffee, they got their own coffee. There was a flood once in the middle of Pennsylvania, and a call went out if you have linens, clothes, towels or any household items that you don't need, were sending a truck--I'm talking a semi there to Altoona, I think it was. Those people lost everything. The Commander is sitting there and he's looking out the window and he's watching what's going on. … He's watching people for three days and he says, "I'm counting how many people are doing something." He says the same people are coming back and forth, every day they bring something and some people just keep walking." He was getting more upset and, I said, "Sir, there's nothing you can do about it," and this other lady who was his assistant, she says, "Why don't you bake him a cake tomorrow to calm him down?" I said, "He's really getting annoyed because a lot of people weren't doing anything, but some people were doing constantly." He said, "It's not right." I said "Yes, sir." You don't argue with him, but he was right and that type of a man. By the time he came back from lunch he was really annoyed, but he was a good man, he was a good officer, he was smart, but he wanted everything to be fair.

SI: He was the Commander when you came back after your children were in school?

GB: Yes.

SI: Who was the commander when you initially started there during World War II?

GB: I had a Lieutenant… I don't even know the Commander. I worked closely with Lieutenant, I worked electronics. I don't remember. That's a long time ago.

SI: Was there a lot of formality between the officers and the civilians?

GB: Yes. It's always, "Sir, yes Sir, no Sir." They never asked you to get coffee. You do not touch them, you do not smoke, don't chew gum, no private conversations on the phone at any time. Whatever the officer wants, he gets, like silly things, "I need a couple of number two pencils." "Yes, sir," go get them right away, don't ask questions. "Can anybody in this office work Saturday?" If it wasn't your turn, and usually somebody would say, "Yes, I'll be glad to work," but you respected them, they had muster every Friday morning between buildings One and Two with the Admiral and the Aide and there was never any problems, everybody was respectful, quiet, no loud talking, no giggling, no personal nonsense going on. It was run like a ship.

SI: Did any WAVEs ever work in the office?

GB: Not that I remember. Toward the end we had two in our office we only had these two ladies. I can't remember if they were Commanders or Captains, but they were ranked. I only remember two. They didn't stay long. I had no idea what their expertise was.

SI: I was just curious. It was mostly a male environment.

GB: Very much so, and one day they had the Harrier Plane come over Roosevelt Boulevard and land on our lawn. It stopped traffic, the police angry, "Why didn't you tell us it was coming in. We heard about this third hand!" He was a little put out, I guess it did stop traffic because it was so unusual, that type of Aircraft.

SI: You want to break for the day and we will come back another day?

GB: Yes, you may do that.

SI: Thank you.

GB: You're welcome.

SI: Thank you for all your time, I appreciate it.

GB: Oh, you're welcome, going back to those days is very interesting, you know, you forget a lot of things and if I think of anything at ten o'clock tonight I'm not calling you. …

SI: You can write it down for next time. Thank you very much.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Katie Ruffer 5/15/13
Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 6/3/13