

Interview with Ruth Lockart

#VR2-V-L-2007-011

Interview Date: July 23, 2007

Interviewer: Sandy Wheeler

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Wheeler: Could you give me your name, please?

Lockart: Yes, Ruth Whittington Lockart.

Wheeler: And where are you from?

Lockart: I'm from Herrick, Illinois.

Wheeler: And what were your parents' names?

Lockart: Ray and Sarah Whittington.

Wheeler: Do you have siblings?

Lockart: No, I have no children.

Wheeler: You don't have any children, but do you have brothers and sisters?

Lockart: Yes, I have one sister in a nursing home, and one in Assumption, one in a nursing home at Pana [Illinois] Heritage Manor, and that's it. My older sister is gone and my brother is gone.

Wheeler: Ruth, I want you to tell me about your childhood, what it was like in Herrick, Illinois. Let's talk about a young Ruth.

Lockart: I had a good childhood, I was raised on a farm, and I still live on the same farm where I was born. And I had a good dad and mother, a real good dad and mother. They were good to us kids.

Wheeler: Was your mother a stay-at-home mom?

Lockart: Yes, she was.

Wheeler: Do you remember, did you have a high school in Herrick?

Lockart: Oh, yes. I went to Herrick Grade School and graduated from Herrick High School in 1941.

Wheeler: Do you remember where you were when you heard that America was going to war?

Lockart: I was at home on the farm. But then when the war broke out, being very patriotic I thought I should do something like a lot of the other women were doing, so that's when I left the farm, and I had a sister living in Chicago, and I decided to go up there and see what I could do helping out during the war.

Wheeler: So what was your sister doing at the time?

Lockart: At that time she worked for the federal government in the VA [Veterans' Administration] Office, and that's where she finished her 30 years.

Wheeler: Where did you live in Chicago?

Lockart: When I first went there, I lived at what they called the Eleanor Club for girls; only girls could stay there. Then four girls decided we'd get an apartment close by where we thought we could live cheaper, and we did, on Woodlawn Avenue in Chicago.

Wheeler: So you were there looking for something to do with the war effort?

Lockart: That's right.

Wheeler: And what did you decide to do?

Lockart: Well, then I went to the American Aircraft Institute and learned how to rivet, and I graduated from there. I did layout blueprints and so forth. Then after that I received my job at Howard Aircraft.

Wheeler: Did you have to apply for a job at Howard Aircraft?

Lockart: Yes.

Wheeler: You just didn't go in and say, "Here I am?"

Lockart: No. Where I worked for the American Aircraft Institute, they asked me if it would be nice, if I'd like to go there, and I went and applied.

Wheeler: Tell me what a day at school was like, learning how to work around aircraft?

Lockart: Well, quite different for me, of course. At the school, you mean?

Wheeler: At the school.

Lockart: Well, we had to work with the guns and everything, with a rivet gun. They taught us how to do everything.

Wheeler: I'm talking about when you were in school, what a day in school was like.

Lockart: Well, we learned riveting and all of that. And they had me make rivets all around a gas tank, make sure we riveted right.

Wheeler: How long were you in school?

Lockart: Well, let's see, I graduated from the school, American Aircraft, in April of '43. And I'm not sure just when I started. It was right away for Howard Aircraft, then I went to work there.

Wheeler: Was your father the right age to be drafted; was he in the war effort?

Lockart: No, my father was in World War I.

Wheeler: So he was a little too old?

Lockart: Oh, right.

Wheeler: And he stayed on the farm?

Lockart: I stayed on the farm until I went to Chicago.

Wheeler: And your parents stayed on the farm?

Lockart: Oh, yes, they continued farming.

Wheeler: Did you have other relatives that entered the war effort?

Lockart: Yes, my nephew was killed in Vietnam, and my husband was in the war. He went to Germany, Belgium and Holland, but we did not marry until after the war.

Wheeler: Did you have to pay tuition to go to school to the American Aircraft Institute?

Lockart: Well, I must have, I don't know. I guess I did, but I don't know.

Wheeler: But your father would have taken care of that?

Lockart: Yes, he would have taken care of that.

Wheeler: Was he a little troubled that his little girl was going to Chicago?

Lockart: No, not at all, because he knew that I had a sister living in Chicago and she was there ahead of me, so he was not afraid. My father always taught if we was in trouble or something to come home. We were always taught that.

Wheeler: And then you went to Howard Aircraft?

Lockart: Howard Aircraft.

Wheeler: And you walked in and said, "I know how to rivet."?

Lockart: Well, I think really the school sort of encouraged me to go there, and that's how I got the job.

Wheeler: Did you consider entering the military during that time, or did you think you had found what you wanted to do?

Lockart: I just knew it was during the war and that I wanted to do something to help because I thought I should. Being patriotic, I thought we should do something to help during the war and win this war.

Wheeler: Were there a lot of women working there?

Lockart: Yes, there was, quite a few women. It was a good-sized plant.

Wheeler: How old were you then?

Lockart: I would say maybe 20 years old.

Wheeler: How about men? Were most of the men in the service? Did you have a lot of men at the factory?

Lockart: There was men there, but I don't know; we were in different sections in the plant. There was a wing section, and different sections. So there were some men there but I don't know how many.

Wheeler: Well, let's talk about the airplanes themselves. What service were they for?

Lockart: They were Navy trainers, four to five passenger Navy trainers.

Wheeler: And did they make different models or were they all one airplane?

Lockart: I think there was different models, but I don't know too much about them. The one I worked on, it was called the Nightingale, and I don't know just what it was like.

Wheeler: I think it was the G-3. And why did they call it the Nightingale?

Lockart: I don't know, but I like that.

Wheeler: Was it used to transport wounded soldiers?

Lockart: Oh, yes, yes, transport soldiers.

Wheeler: Florence Nightingale, because they used it to transport the wounded.

Lockart: Yes.

Wheeler: What was a day like when you went to the aircraft factory? What time did you have to go to work?

Lockart: Usually early of a morning, around eight o'clock. I was off maybe at 5:00 in the evening.

Wheeler: How did you get to the factory?

Lockart: Streetcar.

Wheeler: And your sister was working for the VA?

Lockart: She was working for the VA.

Wheeler: Did either of your two roommates also go to the factory, or were you on your own?

Lockart: I was on my own.

Wheeler: Was that frightening to live in Chicago?

Lockart: No, not at all. It was quite different then than it is now. I wasn't afraid then but I think I would be now. Times were different; we could walk down a street. It was just like being in a small town. We weren't afraid. We could go to the meat market; they knew us; we could do anything like that. We weren't afraid.

Wheeler: When you worked at the factory I would suppose you had a supervisor.

Lockart: Yes.

Wheeler: Would they check your work?

Lockart: Oh, yes. If we did something wrong like when you rivet the plane, and the rivets had to be just right, you couldn't make a ring around the rivet. If we did, it had to be drilled out and done over. You know, if you move your gun it made a ring around the rivet and you'd have to do it over.

Wheeler: So they were looking over your shoulder?

Lockart: Sure, sometimes.

Wheeler: Was there a great source of pride, Ruth?

Lockart: Absolutely. I've always been proud that I was a Rosie the Riveter. I have been.

Wheeler: And well you should be. How long all together did you work at Howard Aircraft?

Lockart: Well, I started after I graduated in '43. I worked all through '44, and then if I remember correctly, our contract at the plant was closed. And then I think I worked at Signal Depot for a little while. Then I left Chicago and went to beauty school.

Wheeler: Was the Signal Depot in Chicago?

Lockart: In Chicago. And they also moved out of Chicago to Decatur, Illinois.

Wheeler: Did you go to Decatur with them?

Lockart: No, I did not. I went to beauty school at Paris, Illinois.

Wheeler: Did you go home first? Did you go to Herrick and say, "Hi Mom and Dad?"

Lockart: Yes, I did.

Wheeler: How did you decide to do beauty school?

Lockart: Well, I had relatives in Paris, Illinois, and they wanted me to come there, and that's why I went there. And I was, you know what, I took my state board in Chicago for beauty school. I made a 96 average. I was real proud of myself.

Wheeler: Well, you should be. Did you get grades when you were in the aircraft school? Did they grade your work there?

Lockart: Yes, they did.

Wheeler: How did you do?

Lockart: Well, I thought pretty good, in the 90s.

Wheeler: Did they ever fail anybody?

Lockart: I don't know whether they did or not. But I was all right, they let me go.

Wheeler: And you had different areas of aircraft work that you had to do?

Lockart: Yes, blueprint and all of that.

Wheeler: So, how did you end up with being Rosie the Riveter? With the different areas that you studied, did you just show a special knack for riveting?

Lockart: Well, not necessarily. When I entered the plant I guess that's what they wanted me to do, and that's what I did.

Wheeler: Did you get paid?

Lockart: Oh, yes. My salary was 80 some cents an hour, and I thought I was rich. Back then that was big money, I guess. Isn't that something?

Wheeler: That is something.

Lockart: And I think I have my withholding statement for that year of 1944; I made only nine hundred and some dollars for the year. And then out of my withholding they took one hundred and some dollars. That was big money.

Wheeler: Now that was the whole year? Nine hundred sixty four dollars for the whole year?

Lockart: Right. That's on my withholding statement. Now that would be nothing, you know.

Wheeler: Well, you worked forty hours a week, and that was enough to pay your share of the apartment?

Lockart: Well, we all shared the apartment; that's the way we did it.

Wheeler: What did your other two roommates do?

Lockart: I don't know what they did. One was from North Dakota, but I don't know what she did. She stayed at the Eleanor Club for girls, too, and that's how we decided to room together.

Wheeler: What did your sister do at the VA?

Lockart: My older sister worked in the Chief Attorney's office and did veterans' claims, hired, fired and so forth. She had a good job.

Wheeler: And she stayed there for a long time?

Lockart: Thirty years—a long time. She worked her way up from a two to a nine. [Government Service employees pay rates GS-2 to GS-9] And when she retired and left Chicago, [she] also moved back home on the farm.

Wheeler: Back to Herrick?

Lockart: Back to Herrick.

Wheeler: How long did you stay home before you went to beauty school in Paris?

Lockart: Not very long. They begged me to come and I did.

Wheeler: But you had relatives there? You weren't alone?

Lockart: My relatives. No, I was very careful what I did.

Wheeler: How did you meet your husband?

Lockart: Well, he was from Cowden and I was from Herrick and that was about nine miles apart, and my grandmother lived in Cowden. And I guess we met at church. My grandmother thought everybody should go to church. In August we had big family dinners; that's how I met him. And I knew he was in this class when we went to church, and I thought at that time he was stuck up, didn't care for him. But we met after the war again and that's when we were married.

Wheeler: So you didn't go to the same school?

Lockart: No, he went to Cowden School and I went to Herrick School.

Wheeler: How did you get back together?

Lockart: Well, after I came home he called me and we started going together, and that's the way it was.

Wheeler: What was his profession?

Lockart: In early years he was a barber, and then later in life he became a real estate and insurance broker.

Wheeler: So you were a beautician?

Lockart: I was a beautician and he was a barber early in life when he came back from service.

Wheeler: Where did you live after you got married?

Lockart: In Cowden.

Wheeler: Do you have children?

Lockart: No, I have no children.

Wheeler: And you have three sisters?

Lockart: I have two living sisters, but I had three; one is gone.

Wheeler: Nieces and nephews?

Lockart: Yes, but they all live away. Most of them live around Davenport, Iowa and Decatur. I was talking to my younger sister and she thought the other day that they moved to St. Charles, Illinois, but I don't know whether they did or not.

Wheeler: Tell me where you were when the war ended.

Lockart: In Cowden.

Wheeler: So they closed the factory before the war was over?

Lockart: Yes, it was closed.

Wheeler: What was it like to hear that the war was over?

Lockart: Very happy, very happy.

Wheeler: Was there a lot of celebrating?

Lockart: A lot of celebrations.

Wheeler: Were you and your husband seeing one another then; had he gotten home by then?

Lockart: No, he had not come home yet.

Wheeler: Where did he serve during his time overseas?

- Lockart: In Germany, Belgium and Holland. He was in the Army.
- Wheeler: Was he wounded?
- Lockart: Well, he came back with some shrapnel all in his legs. They took care of him overseas.
- Wheeler: Did his injury bother him later in life?
- Lockart: He didn't talk too much about it; he would just talk about the shrapnel. He was in the Signal Corps.
- Wheeler: What did they do?
- Lockart: Well, I don't know what the Signal Corps does, but that's what he was in.
- Wheeler: How long was he overseas?
- Lockart: Maybe close to three years, I think, something like that.
- Wheeler: Was he an officer or a non-commissioned officer?
- Lockart: He came back a T-5, whatever that is. [T-5 was Army slang for a Technical Sergeant, pay grade E-5, distinguishing him as having a technical skill versus a leadership position.]
- Wheeler: Did you spend a lot of time later in life talking about your wartime experiences?
- Lockart: He never said too much about it.
- Wheeler: Did you find that rather common among the people that have been involved in the war effort?
- Lockart: Well, I think so. He just didn't say much about it. I know there's a book out, *Timberwolf Howl*, and I have it. It tells all about [the unit's experiences]. That's what his outfit was called, the Timberwolves. [The nickname for the 104th Infantry Division, U.S. Army.]
- Wheeler: What did he think about you working in a factory?
- Lockart: Well, he never said. He was overseas while I was back here working in a factory, so I guess it was all right. He never said. But, you know, back then, we was all patriotic; we felt we should do something to help the war.
- Wheeler: When you were in Chicago did you go to any USOs?

Lockart: No, I did not.

Wheeler: Did you hear about the dances?

Lockart: No, but I never went.

Wheeler: Were you too shy?

Lockart: No, I just didn't do things like that. We would go downtown on Sunday to the Chicago Theater, [The Chicago Theater was a large movie theater at the edge of The Loop which, before each movie feature, had a live act ranging from big bands to magicians, etc.] somewhere like that, you know, or to the Trianon [Ballroom] to hear Sammy Kaye, Lawrence Welk, [who] was always at the Trianon. [The Trianon was a famous swing era ballroom on the south side of Chicago, catering to an upscale and sedate crowd.]¹ And we'd go down there; they would be dancing. They were close to us on the south side. I lived on the south side of Chicago, what they call the Hyde Park District.

Wheeler: So that's what you did on Sundays?

Lockart: Lots of times we did, or go down to the Trianon. Lawrence Welk would be at the Trianon and Sammy Kaye was usually down at the Chicago Theater.

Wheeler: Did your roommates go?

Lockart: Oh, yes.

Wheeler: Did any of them meet any soldiers that they ultimately spent their lives with?

Lockart: Well, yes, the girl that was from Nebraska met her husband somewhere in Chicago and she went back to Nebraska to live, yes.

Wheeler: It had to be an interesting time. How did you and your roommates deal with keeping food on the table with the rationing?

Lockart: Well, let me tell you how we did it. One week one bought the food, one week one did the dishes, one did the housework and one did the laundry. That's what we had, it was a routine. That's the way we did it. We all paid our share.

Wheeler: But you had to deal with couponing? So many things were rationed.

¹ See <http://chicago.urban-history.org/ven/dhs/trianon.shtml> for a description of the Trianon in its heyday.

Lockart: Yes, the sugar was rationed.

Wheeler: What was your uniform like to go to work in the factory?

Lockart: Well, we mostly wore blue jeans or something like that; like a coverall.

Wheeler: Not too becoming?

Lockart: Well, it was all right for us, I guess. You know, to rivet cowlings on the airplane you had to go up on the ladder sometimes, on a ladder to get up there because the front part of the plane was off the ground.

Wheeler: Ruth, you're a tiny woman, it had to be a pretty big ladder that you had to climb.

Lockart: Well, that's all right, we did it.

Wheeler: So, didn't you go up by the propeller?

Lockart: The cowling was up near the propeller, it's the belly of the plane. The cowling is the belly of the plane.

Wheeler: Every part of the plane had other people working on it?

Lockart: Yes.

Wheeler: How many people would you say were working on a plane at the same time?

Lockart: Maybe four.

Wheeler: So you were at the front, somebody's in the middle?

Lockart: I don't know where they all were at the time but they were on different parts of the plane. The wing section was done in a different part and then they were assembled in a different assembly.

Wheeler: So when you were doing your thing the whole plane wasn't put together yet?

Lockart: No, not yet. I just did the cowling, maybe the wing was done somewhere else, and then it was assembled.

Wheeler: Was it a big airplane?

Lockart: Well, I don't know how long it was. It held four to five passengers so it wasn't considered large. It was a navy trainer; that's what it was used for.

Wheeler: Were these planes all in one big factory room, or were there different sections?

Lockart: Different sections.

Wheeler: Were you in a room with one plane that you were working on?

Lockart: Yes, one part.

Wheeler: And when you'd finish your job it would go to the next step?

Lockart: Next step. And then we would work on another cowling. That's all we did.

Wheeler: Do you have any idea how many airplanes you worked on in that length of time?

Lockart: No, I don't, but they did a lot of them.

Wheeler: And when they closed the factory obviously you were still making airplanes. Did that frighten you a little bit?

Lockart: No.

Wheeler: Because?

Lockart: Because I knew I could always go home.

Wheeler: How old were you then?

Lockart: Maybe twenty-two, twenty-three, somewhere along there.

Wheeler: And how old were you when you got married?

Lockart: Twenty-six. And see, as old as I am now, I kind of forget all those things.

Wheeler: Going from riveting in an airplane factory to being a hairdresser had to be quite a switch. I still would like to know how you decided to become a hairdresser?

Lockart: Because I had relatives at Paris, Illinois, and they encouraged me to come, that's how I did it, so I went to Paris, Illinois.

Wheeler: How did they know you had a knack for that?

Lockart: I don't know, but I worked quite a while and I had a girl working for me. I had my own shop.

- Wheeler: And how long did you do that?
- Lockart: Oh, maybe six years or more, a long time. And then finally I decided to retire from the shop and I sold my business to her.
- Wheeler: And how old were you then?
- Lockart: Oh, my, maybe in my thirties, maybe thirty-five.
- Wheeler: How long did your husband stay a barber?
- Lockart: Well, maybe forty-five or something like that. And then he went into real estate and insurance.
- Wheeler: In Cowden?
- Lockart: No, we left Cowden, sold our home and moved to Assumption [Illinois]. And then he became a barber there first, and then we sold the building and shop and everything there, and then he became a real estate and insurance broker.
- Wheeler: I understand that there's someplace in the United States that honors the Rosie the Riveters?
- Lockart: Oh, yes.
- Wheeler: Tell us about that.
- Lockart: I hear from them all the time. In fact, I sent some of this literature to them. It's at Richmond, California. It's a museum out there, and I hope someday I get to go.
- Wheeler: How did you feel when you'd see these posters everywhere with Rosie the Riveter and that they were needed? Did you have a sense of pride?
- Lockart: Very much so. I've always been very happy to know that I did something during the war.
- Wheeler: Well, back in Herrick, and probably being a farming community, were there other war efforts going on?
- Lockart: Yes.
- Wheeler: Did women get together and fold bandages?

- Lockart: Well, I don't know so much about that. See, after I left and went to Chicago I don't know too much what they did back there. But I know a lot of them went to Illiopolis, Illinois to something there. I think they made bombs or something. [Illiopolis was the site of an ordnance plant during the war.]
- Wheeler: What surprises me is that you went to Chicago when Illiopolis was so much closer.
- Lockart: Well, I thought I was as big as my sister, and that's why I guess I went. Really, that's true.
- Wheeler: So your sister was your get-out-of-Herrick card?
- Lockart: Mentor, yes. I think they still have the mounds at Illiopolis where they had those underground places stored away.
- Wheeler: When you think back to those years, do you think you would have done anything differently?
- Lockart: No, I've had a good life, I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't change it at all.
- Wheeler: When the war was over was life a little tough?
- Lockart: I went to beauty school and worked. Back then we didn't have the prices we have now. As a hairdresser maybe I gave a permanent for five dollars where now they're twenty-five, but that was still big money. You see, we could buy more for what we made than what you can now.
- Wheeler: What kind of products did your folks grow on the farm? Was that helpful to you in the big picture?
- Lockart: Well, it was a cattle and grain farm.
- Wheeler: So if you were running a little short on meat could Dad...
- Lockart: Oh, sure, they butchered. Back there the neighbors all got together and butchered; that was a big time.
- Wheeler: Well, from what you've told us, your parents were very supportive of your whole life?
- Lockart: Yes, even when I started to beauty school, my Daddy helped pay my way. That's right, he did. Of course I tried to pay him back. But you know, that's the way we did it.

Wheeler: It must have been a good life.

Lockart: I did have a good life, and I've always been proud that I was a riveter, and always will be.

Wheeler: Well, I have to say, you're the most beautiful Rosie the Riveter I've ever seen. And thank you so much for this interview.

Lockart: Thank you. But I just hope some day that I will get to go to California, and I was glad that I could send them all the literature.

Wheeler: Is your picture out there?

Lockart: I'm not sure. I sent a picture of the plane and everything.

Wheeler: It should be an interesting trip. We wish you well.

Lockart: Thank you very much.

Wheeler: Thank you.

Lockart: I've enjoyed being a Rosie the Riveter, and enjoyed this interview.