

ALFRED KOLKIN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Alfred Kolkin (b. 1918) grew up in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx. After graduating from high school, Alfred worked for the Sperry Gyroscope Company in Downtown Brooklyn. He started working as a mechanic at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1940 and was later promoted to a managerial position. During his time at the Yard, he was also an editor of a local union newspaper.

Alfred married his wife, Lucille “Lucy” Gerwitz Kolkin, shortly before enlisting in the U.S. Army during World War II. He began his training as a U.S. Navy Radio Technician in Sampson, New York, in 1944. Alfred was subsequently transferred to Chicago for more technical training and then on to California, where Lucy joined him. In the summer of 1945, he shipped out to Japan as a radio technician on the U.S.S. *Patroclus*, an auxiliary repair ship. Alfred completed his military service in January 1946 and then returned home to Brooklyn.

Summary

During this oral history, Alfred speaks about his life growing up in New York and trying to find a job after graduating from high school during the Great Depression. He discusses his work as a machinist in Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Building 128, where he made ship parts and used a horizontal boring mill to finish the surfaces on castings for ship artillery. Alfred provides an overview of his union involvement and the difficulties of getting by with a family during union strikes. He further recalls his naval service and seeing Japan surrendering aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* at the end of World War II. Alfred concludes this interview by reflecting on his jobs he took after the war concluded, including his work in machine shops, a tool and dye factory, and a printing factory.

Keywords

radio technician, auxiliary repair ship, U.S.S. Patroclus, aircraft carriers, castings, boring mill, U.S.S. Missouri, V-J Day, Pearl Harbor, Japan

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Creating Castings

[09:00 – 13:29]

JE: And we saw the building where you worked, which you described as being full of noise and machines at that time. What kind of work did you do?

I worked on the horizontal boring mill, machinist's work—. I'm trying to remember some details that are not really relevant.

JK: I think you made parts. You made machine parts, right?

Ship [parts].

JK: Ship parts. He made ship parts.

JE: And you worked on the horizontal boring mill? Was that a large machine?

It was quite large, yeah. One of the largest machines there.

JE: Hmm. Did you work as a group on that machine?

I sometimes had an apprentice who worked with me.

JE: What did the boring mill do?

The boring mill was used to finish castings. Castings were poured metal, I don't know—.

JK: What were the castings for? What were they used for?

The casting were mostly artillery, bases for artillery on ships.

JE: Ah. So like places where the artillery would be mounted?

Yes.

JE: *Were the castings large?*

The castings were larger than a person—I'm trying to remember. There were some castings which had an interior area that I could get into.

JE: *And so you worked with the boring mill on these large castings?*

Yes.

JE: *I see. Did you work with other machines too, or was that your main machine?*

Well, I worked on milling machines, which were smaller. It's hard to give you an overall picture.

JE: *That's okay, just whatever you remember is great. We're not expecting everything. Just whatever comes to mind.*

Story 2: Constructing Aircraft Carriers

[28:07 – 29:17]

JE: *You mentioned that you knew which ship the parts were going to. Did you actually go on any of the ships?*

No, I didn't.

JE: *Are there particular ships even now that you remember the parts were for—particular projects?*

Well, at that time, there was the *Missouri*, which was a battleship. They were also constructing a couple of aircraft carriers at that time.

Story 3: Life in California

[42:44 – 46:27]

JE: *Do you remember how long after you married you actually joined the Navy and were called up for service?*

I don't remember.

JE: *I know that you did some training in Chicago.*

Yes, I took an exam [so] that I was able to go to special electronic training in Chicago. And from there I went to another training school, and—.

JK: *Was that in San Diego?*

JE: *Or Del Mar?*

I went to one in California. I don't have it clear in my mind.

JE: *And is that where you were in California when Lucy came to join you?*

Yes. I was going to school, and she took a train out to California and got a job as a waitress in that school. There were other students whose wives also worked there.

JE: *And did you live in an apartment or in military housing?*

Well, I was in the Navy, going to the Navy school, and she got a job in the Navy school as a waitress.

JK: *Did you live together?*

No.

JK: *Or you had to live like in a dorm, in Navy housing? Like a barracks—did you live in a barracks?*

I lived in a barracks, but she lived in a—.

JK: *She shared an apartment with other women, right, who worked there?*

Yes.

Story 4: Concluding the War in Japan **[46:32 – 49:07]**

JE: *When the war ended, were you still in that place or had you—.*

When the war ended, I was in Japan on a repair ship. And one of the ships that I mentioned, the *Missouri*, participated in the ceremonies at the end of the war.

JE: *And at that point, where were you? You were still in Japan?*

I was on a repair ship.

JK: *Apparently, I guess the signing of the surrender of Japan was on the Missouri, and the other ships were lined up and everybody was watching.*

JE: *Oh, so you were right there?*

Yeah.

JE: *And when you shipped out from California, did you go straight to Japan?*

From San Francisco, we went across the Pacific to the Hawai'ian Islands, and then to Japan.

JE: *And where did Lucy go when you shipped out?*

Well, she had been working in the Oakland Army Base in the personnel department. She got that job because they liked the idea that she had experience working in the Navy Yard.

Story 5: Launching the U.S.S. *Missouri*

[1:02:27 – 1:04:38]

JE: *Do you remember any sort of big events that happened while you were at the Navy Yard? Any times when the work routine was interrupted or something special happened? Just any memories that stand out like that?*

Well, the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i took place while I was working at the Navy Yard on a Sunday, I think it was. And that was a big event.

JE: *I can imagine. What do you remember about that? Do you remember how people reacted or what the atmosphere was like?*

I remember going with Lucy to the launching of the *Missouri* from the Navy Yard into the East River.

JE: *You went together?*

Yeah.

JE: *Were you both working that day?*

Well, apparently we took time off from work. That was a Sunday.

JE: *Do you remember any details about the launching?*

We have a photograph of that, I think, that's in that—.

JK: *One of those recent albums I made?*

The album, yeah.

Story 6: The Snapper
[1:11:50 – 1:16:54]

JE: *Were there many African American machinists?*

There were a few. I wouldn't hazard a guess as to how many.

JE: *Do you remember how things were organized? Did you have a supervisor that you reported to?*

Yes, there was a supervisor, what they called a "snapper" at that time—they had a term for it.

JE: *And was that someone that you liked, do you remember?*
Respected would be more like it.

JE: *And the man that you went on the boat trip with, was that someone you worked with directly?*

Well, we were in adjacent machines.

JE: *Do you remember his name?*

Cator, Benjamin. C-A-T-O-R Benjamin.

JE: *Do you remember anything about him, his life or where he lived?*

I think he lived in the Bronx. He was a friend of one of the popular black artists or—what's the name of a singer, a black singer?

JK: *Like Al Jolson or Sammy Davis, Jr.?*

No, a woman.

JE: *Ella Fitzgerald?*

JK: *Aretha Franklin? Nina Simone?*

JE: *Sarah Vaughan?*

JK: *Billie Holiday? Was it Billie Holiday?*

No. She was probably part of his—

JK: *His family?*

His neighborhood.

JE: *Did you go to hear her sing?*

No, not at that time.

JE: *But some other time?*

No. But he was proud of being an acquaintance of hers.

JE: *I see. And so that day where you—?*

Lena Horne.

JE, SS, and JK: *[simultaneously] Oh!*

JE: *Wow. So that was a visit to his neighborhood that day?*

Yeah.

JE: *And was he still working there, Cator, when you left?*

I never got in touch with him after the war.

JE: *But he was one of your friends there?*

Yes. Life was very, very complicated at that time.

JE: *How so?*

Well, being married and with children, and looking for employment and—.

JK: *This is after the war.*