

SIDONIA LEVINE ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewee: Sidonia “Sid” Levine

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Sidonia Kessler Levine (b. 1919) began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in November 1942 and manufactured parts for ships during World War II. She worked as a mechanic helper and shipfitter in Building 4 while her husband was deployed in Europe, even making her work uniform herself. During her tenure on the Yard, she had her picture taken for the *Shipworker* and did an interview with the *Brooklyn Eagle*. When her husband came home from the war, Sidonia stopped working at the Yard and was employed in other roles throughout her career, such as an office assistant. She currently lives in Florida.

Summary

In this interview, Sidonia speaks about how she came to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard after spending some time at Western Electric. She mentions that she did very well on the Navy Yard test, on which she received the 15th best score out of 500 participants. Sidonia discusses the camaraderie on the Yard and the lasting friendships she made with the women she worked with in Building 4. She also details her job of converting blueprints into wooden templates and attending extra schooling at the Pratt Institute. Sidonia describes her visit to the Navy Yard in the 1990s as “sterile” compared to the liveliness of the atmosphere while she worked there.

Keywords

Brooklyn Navy Yard, Brooklyn, New York, women, Navy, mechanics, Rosie the Riveter, Army, factory work, patriotism

INDEX

00:00 – Working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in factory line work

04:19 – Transportation to and from work

05:02 – Taking a mechanical test for the Brooklyn Navy Yard
06:37 – Interviewer looking at a photo of Sidonia Levine working at the yard in the 1940s
09:14 – Being sent off to school to learn blueprint reading
11:05 – Responsibilities on the yard
16:34 – Operating dangerous mechanical tools at work
19:37 – Years at the Brooklyn Navy Yard
22:43 – Putting food in overalls
24:01 – Camaraderie between women
26:21 – Working on templates
27:45 – Brother and husband returning home at the same time
29:24 – Writing her husband overseas
31:30 – Friends from the yard, Rita and Pearl
34:22 – Overall uniforms for work
37:30 – Typical day on the yard
42:38 – Donating blood for the war effort
45:21 – Long-term effect of the work on her legs
49:12 – Building and repairing ship parts
50:06 – Other women at work
54:17 – Socializing out of work
57:48 – Men at work
58:38 – Job wages
1:01:19 – Physical space of the yard
1:05:41 – Going through the turnstiles
1:11:25 – Watching Marines do routines on the yard
1:12:52 – Reminiscing with Pearl and Rita
1:18:32 – Other buildings of the yard for ship building
1:20:53 – Mix of men and women at work
1:24:22 – Life before work at the yard
1:34:55 – Conclusion

STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Tasks at the Yard

[11:05 – 16:34]

JE: *And what did you do exactly?*

I made templates. I read the blueprints. Actually, I went to [the] Pratt [Institute] at night to further blueprint reading.

JE: *What does it mean exactly to make a template from a blueprint?*

You have to figure out how long it is, length, width. And then you have to also imprint on a template all of the information [unclear], which is: a bulkhead goes here; a chuck goes here; this is the waterline—all the information that they’ll need. This is the center line; how far you are away. And I loved it. And we worked in wood with nails and a hammer.

JE: *And how big would a template be?*

Well, the largest one that I took into the back yard was over twenty feet. That was the longest one I handled.

JE: *So is it a model of the whole ship made out of wood?*

One section, one little tiny place. I mean, it’s that wall, let’s say. It’s the pattern from which they will make the steel. Or not only that, but with that being steel or whatever it is, a certain place something joins it—it’s an indirect line that’s gotta go on, [or] there’s a waterline going this way. It has all the information they need to build.

Story 2: Tucking Food in My Overalls

[22:43 – 23:40]

Well, the reason I liked the overalls, they had millions and millions of pockets. And my mother made little rolls, like butter rolls. Each pocket had a roll in it. I loved to eat when I was working. One day, the big boss comes along—I also had a desk in the office, because that was where I would get my bill of ladings and things like that. He sneaks up at me, “Caught you that time, didn’t I?” It didn’t mean a thing. I just kept eating. She would make the sandwiches for me; well, I would put them in the pockets! *[laughs]*

Story 3: Camaraderie at Work

[24:01 – 26:19]

I’ll tell you one thing: we’d have a lot of camaraderie. We’d work together. You’d work with one of the male mechanics—we [the women] were actually mechanic helpers. That’s what we

were called. And when we'd come in in the morning—most of us, our husbands were in the service or overseas or something. So first thing we'd come in, like with [my friend] Pearl, "Did you hear from Jack?" "Did you hear from Murray?" That was the first thing. We were changing in the dressing room, and that was the first thing.

JE: *Did Pearl work with you?*

She was in the mold loft also with me. In fact, after a while I think she was partners with me with the bill of ladings.

JE: *Can you tell me again, the "bill of ladings," what is that?*

I'm trying to think. This is the blueprint here, what to do. And there are certain things that you have to put on there; certain little templates you have to make. For instance, you make them with the chucks, some of the chucks that go in. I don't know. I do know that I'd have to check the numbers and make sure that they were what they were supposed to be. And then I had to take them to the storage.

Story 4: Writing to My Husband [29:24 – 30:09]

JE: *You hadn't seen him at that point for—?*

Thirty months. He loved fruit; he loved apples. So I sent him cans of apple sauce. I also wrote him a letter one day—well, I used to write almost every day. But this particular day I got crazy, and I started the letter one here, one here [indicating different parts of the page]—you know, crazy. And the other one, I started at the top and I went around in a circle. In the middle I said, "I love you," of course.

But he has such a wonderful sense of humor. He said to me, "I didn't break my head reading it. I stuck it on the wall and spun it around."

Story 5: Physical Labor at the Yard [45:21 – 47:33]

JE: *And you said something about your legs was affected by the work at the Navy Yard?*

You see, you're squatting all the time because you were working on the floor. You put the wood down and you measured everything on that wood. You joined it, you strengthened it with the side things. And then you had to put information on it. That's how we learned you take a long string and as you pull it out, you're chalking it. And one person stands here at the spot to tell me this is the long line, and somebody stands at the other end of the line. It was very interesting.

JE: *Did you attach the string to the template, or you were drawing on the template?*

No, no. The line was where they needed for information: either something met it or something crossed it, or the particular line—I don't remember exactly what. I don't have a blueprint.

JE: *Did you draw on the template?*

Yeah, we wrote on the templates, of course. We wrote the information that we found on the blueprint. We'd translate all that information onto these wood things.

JE: *But it involved a lot of squatting on the ground?*

It was the only place, unless there were very small things, and you could do them on the table. You know, a chuck here, or for instance they'd extend it over for the windows to make the side one—I don't know, for some of the smaller ones, you could cut your wood and mark it up enough.

But you had to put signs all over these templates. Otherwise, when they cut the steel to it, they had to also transfer all that information onto the steel, so that the next party—whoever was supposed to weld it or maybe cut out for a doorway for a hatch or something—it would all have to be on that template.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Current 1

Portrait of Sidonia Levine (Courtesy of Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives)

Artifact 1

From left to right: Sidonia and her husband, Murray Levine, in 1941 (Courtesy of Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives)