LUCILLE FORD ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewee: Lucille "Lou" Butler Ford
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ABSTRACT

Biography

Lucille Butler Ford (b. 1922) is an African American woman who grew up in Harlem and the Bronx. Soon after graduating from Wadleigh High School, Lucille looked for work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a friend who was also from the Bronx. She began working as a messenger at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and was soon trained as a clerk typist in Building 77. Two of Ford's brothers were concurrently serving in the military during World War II. After leaving the Navy Yard in 1945, Lucille began working for New York Telephone, which is now Verizon. She currently lives in Long Island, New York.

Summary

In this oral history, Lucille focuses on social life at the Navy Yard and the close friendships she formed during the three years she worked there. Lucille discusses the ethnic backgrounds and interactions between the female workers in Building 77 by sharing stories like those about Jewish friend who wanted to visit Harlem and how her mother made greens when she visited. Throughout the interview, Lucille reflects on race, family, and the professional and social world of women during World War II.

Keywords

Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, Harlem, race, African American, sailors, clerical work, typing, horseback riding, Building 77, women

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Wearing a Uniform
[11:25 – 12:36]

JE: *So then when you also got the clerk typist job, were you working in the same area that she* [*your horseback riding friend from the Bronx*] *was?*

Yes, I was. That's when we begin to meet a lot of the WAVES that came in.

JE: *Talk about that.*

Well, they were all like little bosses. They weren't bossy, but what I'm trying to say, they were on a different level. We were just clerk typists, and they were a different level.

JE: *And was that something that you felt because of who they were, or was it something that they gave you the sense of with their—?*

No, because they were in the Navy. They were in the Navy; they wore their uniforms. That's why I decided I liked the uniform, and I asked the ensign—she was an ensign. I said, "Could I buy one?" She says, "Sure." And I bought one, and I wore it a long time.

JE: *So you wore a naval uniform to work?*

No, I just wore it because it was a nice skirt and jacket.

Story 2: Rumors that Our Jobs Would End After the War
[18:50 – 19:40]

JE: *How did you and your friend know that—at the time—that things would be shrinking in terms of jobs?*

Well, reading the paper, finding out that the war was coming to an end and probably they wouldn't have a use for us. We had heard rumors that Building 77 will be the first to go, because all the other people who worked there, that actually worked on ships and stuff like that, their work was more involved. And it's something that they could continue to do. But they only needed us for paperwork, and that was coming to a close.

JE: *So did Building 77 have other activities going on in it that you were aware of?*

Not that I know of. And especially since I didn't continue to work daytime—and going in at night, all you did was go in and work, and that's it.

Story 3: Brothers in the Service
[47:04 – 49:31]

JE: *Did people talk about the war?*

No. I can say no, because we didn't—I mean, the group I was going out with. We'd say, "We'll be glad when it's over," but no details.

Both of my brothers were in the service. One was in Okinawa. He joined the 369th, which is an anti-aircraft group that was in Harlem—I don't know whether the building is still there or not. But anyway, that's my oldest brother, Harry. And he stayed in there until—when he came back, he had been in Hawai'i all this time, and when he came back, he couldn't wait. He went out every night. He'd get in the bathtub and get all spruced up—and winter, it did him in. He got real sick. I guess he went out half-wet, I don't know, wash his hair, and—

JE: *But he was okay?*

No, he died. He died from pneumonia. And he was going out with a nurse, and she came furiously into my mother's house saying, "Pneumonia is the easiest cure! Why didn't you take him, why didn't you bring him to Harlem Hospital?" I don't know. Sometimes you do things in kind of a backward way.

JE: *And that was shortly after he got out of the service?*

1945, ‘46—well, ’45, I guess it was.

JE: *Right. And where was your other brother?*

He had a hard time getting into the service. He wanted to get into the 369th because of all his friends were in there, and he got into another group. And he didn’t have a hard time—the war was coming to an end anyway.

Then my third brother was too young, and he had to go into, what was the war during—?

JE: *Korea?*

The second war—he was in Korea, the Korean War.

Story 4: Summertime in New York
[57:40 – 59:56]

I don’t know whether you know about the Dunbar Apartments? It’s a whole block full of the same buildings, and it was all connected. I think they made two, one in the Bronx, and then the other one was in Harlem. It was very nice. All of us kids—I knew him [my future boyfriend] from when I was a child—we had a park at the end of my block. It was a very, very long block. It extended from Macombs Dam Place to Seventh Avenue. And they had a playground right down at the end of the block. And at that playground, we used to play a lot of handball, boys and girls. We just had a great time down there.

You know, times aren’t like—we used to go out in groups. What we would do, we would go in the summertime to Brooklyn—and I tell my kids this—both boys and girls, and we’d line up the whole subway train. And we’d sing. You know how you sing and you move about like this? [*indicating*] It was just us in this [subway car]; I guess people’d say, “I don’t want to go in that noisy car.” So we would have a great time. And then we’d get to Coney Island, and go on the, what’s that big one—the Cyclone—and have a ball of fun!

Then on Sundays, we’d walk to the corner of Seventh Avenue and get the double-decker bus, ride all the way downtown to the Arc de Triomphe, and get out there, then walk around, then get back on the bus. Then we’d stop at Snooky’s, who was also a friend of mine, and have ice cream sodas. His wife still was running that place for a while, and then she got rid of it.

Story 5: Experiencing Prejudice
[1:09:26 – 1:10:19]

Oh, you wanted to say, “Was there anything that stood out?” So we would go everywhere. And one time we went to Chinatown—the telephone company girls and myself—and this white man walks through the door. And he stands up, puts his hand on his hips—because there wasn’t many of us—and he says, “Ugh, I see you’ll let *anything* in here!”

And that went through me. I felt so terrible. But what made it not so terrible was because the girl said, “Don’t pay that fool no mind.” You know, they were in my corner, and that made me feel better. So I tried to not think of that anymore.
JE: *Yeah. And did anyone reproach him to his face?*

No. They said, “Lucille, don’t pay him no mind. He’s a crazy man.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Artifact 1

Female workers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard carrying supplies (Courtesy of Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives)