

PEARL HILL ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewee: Pearl Margolis Hill

Interviewer: Jennifer “Jenny” Egan

Archival Processor: Isabela Antonio

Copyeditors: Erica Fugger and Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: February 20, 2007

Location: Deerfield Beach, Florida

Session Number: 1

Project: National Home Front Project

Interview Contributor: Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

Accession Number: HillPearl_HFN-OH_022007

ABSTRACT

Biography

Pearl Margolis Hill (b. 1923) grew up in the Middle Village neighborhood of Queens. Pearl attended Grover Cleveland High School and two years at Queens College. After her husband joined the Army in the early 1940s, she decided to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in order to contribute to the war effort. Pearl has two sons and currently lives in Florida.

Summary

In this interview, Pearl details her work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as a shipfitter in Building 4 and her later role in the mold loft after an injury. She fondly remembers her friends at the Navy Yard, seeing them in passing on Sands Street and working alongside other married and unmarried women as welders. Pearl also speaks about working the graveyard shift, writing to her husband, what she wore to work, and her longtime friendship with Sidonia “Sid” Kessler Levine.

Keywords

Brooklyn Navy Yard, ships, women, New York, family, templates, welding, social life, letters, Middle Village

INDEX

00:00 – Introduction

00:48 – Starting the Brooklyn Navy Yard job

01:08 – Working longer than Levine; working in Building 4; describing her job

02:25 – The *Shipyard Worker* paper

03:15 – Getting hit by a gun turret

05:50 – Living in Middle Village; reunion of Middle Village
07:00 – Using a pattern of a ship for metal; tools used to make the patterns
08:53 – Pattern of a ship was first made on wood; size of the template; kneeling to do this work
11:17 – Getting the wood from another department
12:30 – More details of working with the templates
13:40 – Shoveling sidewalks for parents
14:10 – Receiving welding training at the Navy Yard
15:07 – Length of training; being sent to classrooms at the Yard; Men and women both in the school
17:12 – Seeing the Navy Yard position in the newspaper
17:45 – Having a husband off at war
18:20 – Working with a black girl for the first time
19:15 – Most of the women working were single; activities and socializing on day off
20:00 – Son working as a fisherman
21:10 – Socializing with the other girls, con't
21:35 – Having to stop working at the Navy Yard
23:00 – Not imagining doing that kind of work
23:40 – Further details on welding
24:25 – Getting a paid four week leave for an injury
25:10 – Working the graveyard shift
26:20 – Transportation home
27:40 – The reasons male workers at the Navy Yard weren't soldiers
28:10 – Socializing amongst the workers
29:15 – Getting letters from husband
31:00 – Talking about work at the Navy Yard
31:35 – Coffee break conversations
32:00 – Being married for a year when Jack went away
32:23 – Going out for lunch; going to someone's house for lunch
34:42 – Diversity at the Navy Yard
35:30 – Jewish women working at the Navy Yard
36:55 – Not being allowed to walk aimlessly; needing a pass to get into other buildings

38:30 – Work going into original ships; ships being christened by Truman
40:05 – Being present at the ship launches; not remembering the ship names
42:05 – Celebrations at the Navy Yard
42:40 – Walking in groups for the graveyard shift
44:00 – Outfits at work
45:05 – Details of work schedule
46:00 – The living quarters at the Yard
46:45 – Not seeing the sailors on the ships
47:45 – The social separation between single and married women
48:30 – Dancers performing at the Navy Yard
50:00 – Being busy for the past few weeks; going to New York for grandson's wedding
52:05 – Remembering the dancer's name was Lilly
52:35 – Recalling that the work was not dangerous
53:10 – Cranes around the Yard
54:30 – Enjoyed meeting friends at the Navy Yard
55:00 – Having two boys; staying in Middle Village for fourteen years after the war
55:50 – Making templates in the mold loft
56:32 – Meeting Sidonia in Building 4; meeting Lillian in the Mold Loft
57:25 – Never going on the ships; not caring about going on the ships
59:20 – Talking about locations on the yard
1:00:05 – Working with only some men; remembering the men as very nice; not minding
working with men
1:01:40 – Not working after husband came home from war
1:02:00 – Still thinks about her time at the Navy Yard; sense of pride in contributing to the
war
1:03:05 – Doing physical work at home
1:03:25 – Educational background; going to Queens College for two years
1:05:18 – Leaving college because of marriage; meeting husband
1:06:35 – Finding more papers
1:07:20 – Meeting grandson's girlfriend; story about grandson getting engaged
1:09:55 – 83 years old at the time of interview

- 1:10:55 – Laughing and making jokes; “I enjoyed working there”
- 1:11:37 – Using a saw to make the templates; more details on how to saw for the templates; the construction of the templates
- 1:13:29 – Sometimes getting help for this work
- 1:14:46 – Supervisor checking to see if everything was correct; having to fix some “human error”
- 1:15:47 – Having about two supervisors for fifty people
- 1:16:16 – Time shift start and end; more on after work activities; looking for letters from her husband
- 1:17:13 – Going to Manhattan to see shows with friends; having Navy Yard friends sleep over; seeing dancer Ruby Keeler in a show
- 1:19:27 – Visiting her teachers on the way to work

STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Making Ships from Templates [08:52 – 11:15]

Mr. Eichelroth [*phonetic*] would have the blueprints, and he would trace it down onto a small piece of, a pattern. And you would have to do that in wood. The pattern of a ship is made in wood first.

JE: And you would do that using pieces of wood?

Yes, pieces of wood. Like, it was really like three inches or four inches by ten inches, say, thin. And we would make the pattern out of those pieces of wood. The whole ship is made into a pattern first. Even a dress maker can't make a dress unless she has a pattern to make the dress. And that's the way we made the ship.

JE: And how big would a template be?

Some would be about ten feet; some would be five feet. It's all different sizes [for] where that template fits: if it was the side of the ship, they made ten pieces, maybe ten pieces long. If it was the portions of a turret or something of the ship, it would be four inches long, or five feet long. It didn't matter—the sizes are what the map called for.

JE: And did you stand up to do this work?

On your knees. The floor of the template was beautifully laid out, where you'd—what's that word? You know, inlaid wood that you would kneel on. And of course, you wore dungarees. So

it shouldn't bother, the girls couldn't bother their own knees that much. *[laughs]* Everything was done on the floor, or we had tables on horses, wooden horses.

Story 2: Working with a Black Woman for the First Time
[17:47 – 19:12]

JE: *What made you want to do that work?*

Well, I was just married, and my husband went to war. And I felt, “Well, as long as he went to war, I’ve got to work, do something for the war, to help them.” And that’s how I went down there—it dragged me. *[laughs]* It was wonderful.

Oh, there was one girl I remember: her name was Jackson, a colored girl. And I was steadily with her, and she was very nice. Of course, we were not used to being with black people at the time. And after that we got very used to it; we loved them. They were very, very nice. And I don’t know what happened to her. But I just remember her name was Jackson.

JE: *Did you feel hesitant at first, because you weren’t used to working with black people?*

No, no. I fell right in *[unclear]*. It was my everyday work.

JE: *Did the Black women that you worked with have—how were their lives different or the same from your life?*

Well, we never discussed—well, we did discuss it. It was the same. They were the same as our lives.

Story 3: Her Husband’s Letters
[28:10 – 31:02]

JE: *So there was some socializing among the people that you lived with, and the other girls that you worked with?*

Yes, yes. There was some socializing that wasn’t too—you know, like we knew some that were married, and they went out with this one and that one. But we’d never talk about that. We never did.

You know, when your husband goes to war, you never know whether they’re coming back or not. But Sidonia and I, we’d say, “Good morning,” “Good morning.” “How is Murray?” And she would say to me, “How is Jack? And what did he write? And what did he call you?” He used to call me, “My tootsie-wootsie!” *[laughs]* “Hello tootsie-wootsie!” And he would go, *[unclear]*. He would tell me all sorts of things. *[laughs]*

In fact, when he came home, I saved all those letters. They were small letters. I saved them all in

a box. I never went and read them and reread them. Once I read them, that was enough. I had other things to do. But those things got him ten percent—and no, not just ten percent—a hundred percent in the Army. He was in Patton's Fifth Division or something.

JE: *And how often did you get letters from him?*

Oh, I got—at one time I didn't get any letters at all for a month or so. And then I would get ten or fifteen letters. And he'd tell me all: the jeep turned over, and he fell out in Ireland somewhere—no, they shipped him to Ireland for the hospital. And all those letters I presented to the board. And he got hundred percent in the Army, when he came out with the jeep turning over. But when he died, it didn't come to me, because his money just depleted. He didn't die of his foot injury; he died of a heart attack. So that was it. *[laughs]*

JE: *So he would write you fun letters.*

Always. *[laughs]*

JE: *And you would talk with Sidonia about it?*

Right. Oh, Sidonia and I, we'd all discuss it, of course. That's why they blocked out a lot of letters. They don't want people discussing it. There's a reason for all these things.

Story 4: The People Who Worked on the Ships [57:20 – 58:31]

JE: *What about the ships? Did you go on a ship at all?*

No, I never went on a ship.

JE: *Did you expect that you would be able to go on one?*

No. If we were working in there, we never went on a ship. There were certain girls that they had do the work on the ship. And they may have done repair work, or maybe when work had to be placed there, from the seal loft and the mold loft, that these girls did. And I remember, there was a group of black girls on the ships. That's all I remember.

JE: *So you only knew black girls who went on the ship?*

I think no. I'm sure they had white—I'm not sure though. I'm not positive.

JE: *How did you know about the black girls going on the ship?*

Only from talking, from hearing talk.