

**Billie Strmiska**  
Northwest Women's History Project  
Tape 1, Side 1  
14 June 1981

BS = Billie Strmiska

KW = Karen Wickre

MS = Mr. Strmiska

*Transcribed and edited by Donna Sinclair, August 2003*

KW: This is Karen Wickre interviewing Billie Strmiska at her home... in Wheeler, Oregon, about her experiences in the Portland area shipyards during World War II. This is an interview for the Northwest Women's History Project, and we are on tape one, side one.

Well, you want to start with where you were born and who your parents were and how you grew up? Did you live in the country?

BS: Part time, part time in the country.

KW: Where were you born?

BS: In Texas...

KW: That's right.

BS: Penelope, Texas.

KW: Penelope, now where's that?

BS: That is twenty miles east of Waco.

KW: Ah-hah. What did your parents do there?

BS: And we pulled jokes on each other you know. I picked up a bunch of scrap iron one time and put it in Kay's bucket. And going out of the yard I was, we were walking out together and here I was just digging on the inside, but she was carrying it. And what she had done – she saw me do it, and she took it out of her bucket and put it in my lunch bucket and I was the one that carried it out. [both laugh]

We did things like that. Like one time we were working in the superstructure and we were just freezing to death. So there was a barrel there, we got a barrel and we put a lot of junk and scrap wood and all kinds of stuff and set it on fire, and you should have seen the smoke pouring out of the port holes. [both laughing] The fire department came! Oh crap, we did all kinds of things.

KW: I hope you didn't get in trouble for that.

BS: No, they didn't say anything. They knew we were cold.

KW: Yeah, I imagine that working outside – the superstructure was kind of the last thing that would be worked on, right? They do that differently.

BS: Yes, and if we were working on a hatch, that was outside. In the superstructure we were inside, but opened you know, and ohh! God it was cold. But anyway, I remember once it was snowing and we were working on the hatch. Is that what they called it? Yes, I guess. And the snow was – you'd bend over and weld you know, and the snow was falling down our neck. But we'd laugh it off.

KW: You didn't get sick?

BS: No, isn't that something? Never even had a cold.

KW: Yeah, yeah. How were safety conditions?

BS: Questionable.

KW: Seems like so many people, such a big place. There was bound to be a lot of accidents.

BS: There were, there were.

KW: You weren't involved in any of them.

BS: Yes, this helmet saved my life. [sound of moving around, showing helmet] [undec.] so bent. Must have been this. Anyway, it was all out of shape. But this band here – I was working in the bottom of the fore or the aft of a ship, you know they'd build it down in the yard, all the floors and all. And they had to be something that had to be repaired down in the bottom. And I was sent there. So I went down the ladder and there it was so, I was bending over and welding, and something hit me...

MS: Something clipped the back of the head...

BS: They called it an iron dog, they use it for bracing.

MS: A clip.

BS: It weighed eight pounds. And it hit that band. See that's awfully hard. And then it bounced off of that, onto my head, and I still have a dent. And it cut my head and then it hit my shoulder. That hurt my shoulder. But after that, after that was reported, why they did cover those places where you went down.

KW: Oh I see.

BS: There was no cover. Little things like that.

KW: I'm surprised more people...

BS: Yes...

KW: Seriously hurt. Was there a safety crew or someone to come around and say, "Get your helmet on?" or...

BS: No, I didn't know of any.

MS: No, but the workers were well taken care of, the hospital [undec.], they'd take them right to the hospital.

KW: Could you leave work then and go?

BS: Yeah, they took me to the hospital and they patched it up and put me to bed, and in the morning I went home, and I stayed off work for a while.

MW: Say about two or three days.

BS: No, worse, it was worse during the contest. I thought that I would do my overhead first, then the others were a snap. So I started my overhead and I don't know what had happened, but somewhere through that blast, a hot slag got blew, and it landed right in the pupil of my eye. So I squinted my eye, I didn't say a word, and with one eye I did all that welding. And it became awfully, awfully sore, so the next day when I went to work I went to the hospital there, and they drew that out. Actually I think they used a magnet.

KW: Ooh, was it covering your eye? I mean could you still not see the next day?

BS: I could see, it was just...

KW: Cloudy.

BS: That little bit of slag landed right in the pupil and it became very, very sore. So they fixed it up and I went back to work with a patched eye, and then it got worse again, so I went back and I don't even remember what they did, but it's okay. [laughs]

KW: Got it out, did whatever to – a magnet – that would be interesting.

Tell me about this welding contest. Now was that a common thing that they did at the shipyards? Was it for publicity? Why did they have that?

BS: I think that the yard [undec.] a challenge, other yards. And uh, Oregon Shipyard accepted and then they started running this contest.

KW: Was the contest just for women or did they have all kinds of categories?

BS: No, just...

MS: Just them two women. Women, yard women.

BS: I don't know if Vancouver participated or not, I do not know that. Actually, it as a West Coast champion, it was California also.

MS: Oh, but that was hard to [undec.] welders...

KW: Oh, in your yard there were, they had the hundred best... And in other yards it might have been a different arrangement.

BS: Yeah, mm-hmm.

KW: Now when was this contest? When did it start? '43?

BS: In '43.

KW: Mm-hmm. So how did you, did you do this on work time, the contest or?

BS: Yes, uh-huh. They just, you know, the principal even allowed me to go to school and practice on these two foot plates.

KW: Who decided what the contest was? I mean do you have any idea if they, who said, you know, okay the contest is going to be an overhead and a flat and a vertical.

BS: Well, that's what they, they had the plates prepared. I'd go in and, I went in a couple of times and ran those two-foot plates.

KW: What did you like about welding?

BS: It was fascinating, and it was such a thrill to do a good job, you know when your machine worked properly and, for a while we didn't have good rods. But you had good rods and good machines, set right. I mean it was fun.

KW: Every day at work, or every shift at work, did you have different kinds of stuff to do? Was it challenging?

BS: Yes. And then, different kind, or mostly patch up work. I had to do a lot of that. Even on the ship on the outside, after the ship was all there you know, go up on that high scaffold and had to patch a scene, they'd chip it out and... [MS: undec.]

KW: Was that, somebody else had not welded it very well.

MS: That's it, yeah. The [undec.] welders gonna pick up the welders, we call it. Like I said, those days, them welders come in, that guy come just like, well demanding us few – do you realize there was only three of us on graveyard? That crew down there, out of 26 that could weld, everything all around. Imagine, the foreman, Billie and I.

KW: Sounded like a lot of men go through the training.

MS: And the rest of them was women.

KW: Sounds like maybe after you started then they forgot this training bit...

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]