

Beatrice Marshall Oral History June 11, 1981
Northwest Women's History Project
Tape 1, Side 1
11 June 1981

Beatrice Marshall
Or Hist 9081

BM = Beatrice Marshall
CP = Christine Poole and Madeline Moore

CP: It's June 11, 1981. This is Madeline Moore. Christine Poole and I are going to interview Mrs. Marshall.

Before we actually get into the shipyard work, would you mind telling a little bit about your early childhood and your background?

BM: I was raised on a farm in Illinois. I went to school in southern Illinois. I finished high school the same year the war broke out in 1941. I went off to college at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois.

When the war broke out and everybody was leaving and taking up wartime jobs, my sister Ida and myself decided to do some work for the wartime effort. So we didn't have any training at that time because we were just out of high school. So they had an organization called the NYA [National Youth Administration], which was for the youth program during that time. So we signed up for that, with a government project. The government paid all of our expenses, including food, lodging and the whole works. They sent us to South Bend, Indiana for training.

We had a choice of what we wanted to do to prepare ourselves for wartime work. Some of those choices [were] airplane riveting, you know, working on airplanes, drill press, steel lay. It was mostly machine shop work. We were very interested in that, so we took up several trades to make sure we could fit in to one. The requirement was about six to eight weeks training before we would even be able to go out on the job. We went to South Bend and we stayed at a camp that was specially prepared for youth at that time. We completed our eight week's training. At the government's expense, they sent us to the job. They paid our way and everything.

At the time we finished, we had planned to stay in and around about Illinois, Ohio, and like that, but they didn't have any employment at the airplane factory in Ohio. So we had a choice to come to Portland, Oregon or some place in California to work in the shipyard. So not knowing where either one of those places was on the map, we decided to come to Portland. They got us prepared and put us on the train. But before we left the camp, we had to pass the test in drill press, steel lay, and airplane riveting.

We had our address where we were going, but we wasn't on our own. It was a lady from the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] that had charge of us when we get to our destination because we didn't know where we were going or what we was going to do. We were still just young people at that time.

When we got to Portland, they was supposed to have a place for us. They didn't. We stayed at the Y, I think it was that one night. Then we went to Eugene, Oregon at the University of Oregon.

....We were there to complete the final stages of our training. I don't recall just how many weeks we were in Eugene before we came back to Portland to work in the shipyard. When we got to the shipyard, we had to apply to the work. They told us that they didn't have any openings as steel lays and drill press operators and that we would have to either accept [work] as painter's helper or sweep. We didn't know what a painter's helper consists of, but we felt that a painter definitely would be a little more sophisticated than just sweeping. We chose that. To our surprise, it was something that we really wished a thousand times we hadn't taken, because the job was in the bottom of the boat. I don't mean the lower deck. I mean the hull that sits on the water. We had to go through holes – manholes – the round holes that were made, and we had to crawl on our hands and knees and carry a light and extension cord to see because it was pitch dark in there. Then we had a little tool, something like a spreader where you scraped the rust off of the bottom of the boat where they had to paint.

We had to wear masks because it was so much dust in there until you couldn't hardly breath and you had to come up, you know. We complained because that wasn't what we was trained for. We asked for a job with what we was trained for, and they said there wasn't any available. So my sister Ida and Leona and Myrtle, they decided that they didn't want to work in the shipyards anymore. So my sister was the first one that left

because we wasn't getting what we wanted. They said they didn't have it available. Leona, she lost a relative in Los Angeles, so she left and went to Los Angeles. Myrtle went with her. That left me in the shipyard by myself. I mean, with the group that I came in with.

So I was really depressed with the job that I was doing. I didn't want to continue with that because it was hard. It was really making me sick. So they finally gave me a job on top of the boat sweeping. Well, that was much better than in the bottom. I did that for several weeks. I finally found out that they had work as drill press operators and steel lays, but they weren't hiring Blacks.

At that time, if you would walk off of the job once you had a government job, you couldn't get one no other place unless you had a clearance from the personnel office. So I went to the personnel office and I asked for my clearance. He said, "Well, you can't have a clearance because we have work here for you to do." I had my papers. I still have that little card that we graduated. It's something like a diploma, but it was in a card form. I still have it, but I haven't been able to find it. I showed them where I was really qualified and how many hours we had us in training for that.

He said, "Well, there just isn't any openings for you."

I said, "Yes, there are openings. They just won't let me have it." So he called the machine shop to see if there were openings. The man at the machine shop told him that there were openings, but they just wasn't hiring Blacks. So he had to give me my clearance.

But before I got my clearance to go, my sister Ida and the other three girls and myself, we tried through the Urban League to get the job that we was qualified for. It wasn't too much they could do. It came out in the *Observer* at that time as to our plight trying to get the work that we were qualified for and couldn't get it. But at that time, there just wasn't anything they could do about it.

So eventually, when they gave me my clearance, I left Portland and went to Los Angeles to get the work there. That was around the first of '44. It was 1943 when we came out here. In early '44 is when I went to Los Angeles. They didn't have anything available there, but I did get a little better job in Los Angeles than I did in Portland. So I decided to go back to Illinois and finish another year of college. I had just about

completed one, and I finished my two years of college. That was the end of my shipyard experience.

CP: Which shipyard was this?

BM: I worked at Oregon Shipyard.

CP: When you were going through the training in Indiana, was there any indication that, because you were Black, you wouldn't be getting a job when you came out to Oregon?

BM: None whatsoever because there were Black and White working together in the training camp, you know what I'm saying? I mean we worked together. There was no indication whatsoever and I was really surprised that we wasn't able to get it. Especially when we were sent out here at the government expense.

CP: Did you feel like you could get in touch with any government agency, the people who had paid for your training or anything?

BM: We tried with – I can't recall now who was in charge of us when we first got here. They tried and everybody that we was involved with tried, but we ourselves didn't know what channels to go through except the Urban League to try to get what we was trained for.

CP: There was no one at the shipyard who was supportive of...

BM: No one, no. In fact, they was denying that there [were] openings for us. But eventually they did admit that there was openings but they wouldn't give it to us because we were Negroes.

CP: Did you feel like there was anybody, legally, that you could go to? Any law authority?

BM: No, I didn't. Being at the age I was, I just really didn't know that there [were] channels that I could go through, you know.

CP: There may not have been so many, either, in the '40s.

BM: There probably weren't. I didn't know what to do. The only thing we knew to do was to go to somebody that we felt knew more about it than we did. That was Urban League.

CP: Do you remember what specifically their response was?

BM: I can't recall just exactly what response they had because it's been so long ago, but I do know they tried their, you know, whatever channel it was they had to go through to do it.

CP: Oh sure. Was this the first time something like this had been done to you so openly?

BM: It was. It was the first time that I ever experienced discrimination. When I was in school in Illinois, I went to an all-Black school, except college. I went to SIU in Carbondale, Illinois. But I never experienced any discrimination that I noticed, you understand what I'm saying? None whatsoever.

CP: How did you feel?

BM: I really felt hurt and I felt that we were sort of mistreated because after taking the training and being prepared to do the job, we should have been able to do it. That was

really my first experience with discrimination and it really did do something to me. But I lived through it.

CP: Did it affect the rest of your life? What did you take from that?

BM: It did affect my life quite a bit because at that time I was young and it was really the first job that I ever had tried to get. Really the first job. Except, you know, I worked on the farm with my family picking beans and strawberries and stuff like that. Like most kids did. But that was really the first job on my own that I had ever tried to get. The way we was trained for the job with kids that were White and Black all together, and there was no problem there, I just couldn't understand it when we got to Portland and couldn't get the job.

CP: Were they giving the jobs in Los Angeles? If you were trained in Illinois and you had gone to Los Angeles, do you think you would have gotten a job that you'd trained for?

BM: No, I don't think I would have. I don't know.

CP: There was less discrimination....

BM: Yes, now, there were better jobs in L.A., in the shipyard there. Like my own [sister] that left, Leona, she got a job as an airplane riveter. You know what I mean. If that same job had been available in Portland, I don't know if she'd have been able to get it or not. I really don't. One of the girls that left, she went to Seattle. I guess that was [an] aircraft place up there that she worked. What she specialized in was just aircraft riveting. But we had several, you know, specialties. We could do that or drill press. I felt that I was really a champion in the drill press. I really did like it...

Coming to Oregon, when we left South Bend that evening and they put us on the train in Chicago, we didn't have any seats on the train. I was thinking maybe a little farther down the line we will get a seat because of myself and sister Ida and Leona and

Myrtle, we was in the Ladies Lounge to start, waiting for somebody to get off a little further down the line. We had to ride the Ladies Lounge all the way to Portland.

CP: Was it because of discrimination?

BM: No, that wasn't because of discrimination. That was because there wasn't any seats on the train. Everybody was coming to the West Coast. That train was full. It took us three days and three nights to get to Portland. The lounge that we were in, it had nice seats in it, you know what I mean. It was quite comfortable. We didn't have to stand up all the way. No, that was not discrimination. It just happened that the train was crowded. When we got to Portland, that's when the trouble started.

CP: What about housing?

BM: We stayed at the Y until they found us a place in Vancouver. We didn't like Vanport¹ because it was a little different than what we had been used to. They would not give all four of us an apartment together. We wanted to save money and all four of us have an apartment together. My sister and myself could have an apartment together because we were related, but the other two could not stay with us. We had to rent two apartments. We didn't like that. We wanted to come into Portland. We wanted to rent a room and not an apartment because you know how Vanport was, it was just a housing project. It really did seem kind of rough to me and coming from a farm, I didn't appreciate that.

The lady that was in charge for a little while, she found us a room. A nice room that we wanted over on Southeast Tibbets with Mrs. McCleary. It was in a private home. This house had a large room upstairs with two double beds in it. It was just what we wanted. So we lived over on the Southeast side.

Our first day at the shipyard, after we came out of the holes from the work, I really was embarrassed to get on the bus to go back home because of the condition of our clothes. When we were training in South Bend, we wore blue jeans and light blue

¹ Vanport City, the nation's largest WWII housing project.

blouses. We kept them neat and ironed like that. So that's what we wore to work because we had a couple of changes of those. That's what we wore to work, and I wish we could have seen us. When we came out of that hole, we was nothing but rust. Dirt in our hair, just all over. Because when you just down in a hole where you just can't hardly move and scraping and the rust and the dust from that is coming up in your face, and you just can't hardly make it. When we got home and took a bath, it was just nothing but rust in the tub. We just couldn't take it. But we had to keep that job until we got a payday or until we got on our feet because we only had about, I think it was \$36 apiece that we were required to have to come to Portland. That was the only thing that the government didn't furnish for us was \$36. They furnished everything else. They even paid us, gave us a little money each month plus our board and our room.

CP: Did those folks who were paying you ever know that you didn't get the job that you were trained for because you were Black?....

BM: Not that I know of. I don't think they do unless they knew the rules and the regulations. I don't think they knew because I don't think they would have sent us out here. They might would have, you know.

CP: Were the trainers Black and were the trainers mixed, or were they all one race?

BM: It was one or two Black in the personnel department in South Bend. The trainers that worked in the machine shop, they were all White.

CP: Were they all men?

BM: The teachers. Yes, they were all men.

CP: I was wondering whether, after you got out here and didn't get the job, whether they ever learned later that all their training was for naught?

BM: I don't know, because I was really so disgusted with the whole situation in the personnel out here until I didn't have enough confidence to try to find out if there was anything that they could do.

CP: The personnel here in Portland was White, then.

BM: Yes.

CP: How did the White women get trained when they were here?... That had the jobs that they wouldn't give you.... Whether they trained or not, or they just had on-the-job [training].

BM: That's right, they probably had on-the-job training because there was a lot of people [who] came to Portland didn't have any training at all and they were trained on the job. That's why I couldn't understand why we had the training and they wouldn't give it to us. We were the only ones from South Bend in that group that came to Portland at that time.

CP: How long was your initial employment with the Portland situation?

BM: It was about – we came to Portland in, I think it was April, in the spring. It was March or April of 1943, and my employment with the shipyard was until January of '44.

CP: So you were in Oregon nine months. You were a painter's helper for how long?

BM: I was a painter's helper maybe about two or three months.

CP: Then you were a sweeper for the rest of the time?

BM: I was a sweeper for the rest of the time.

CP: So you could have come out from any place with no experience and gotten the jobs you got.

BM: Oh, yes.

CP: There was no experience in painting necessary?

BM: Oh no. There was no training necessary for what we was doing. I could have just picked up and left Illinois and come out here. No, there was no training required for the sweeping and scrapping.

CP: So mostly the trained Blacks would just get disgusted like you, then, in that sense. The ones who remained would be the ones untrained or had no aspiration of going further than they could.

BM: That's right.

CP: Did you see any Black women in the skilled jobs?

BM: No. None whatsoever. The only Black women working that I saw was either sweeping or doing what I was doing – scraping.

CP: Were all the painter's helpers Black, or were they mixed?

BM: I don't know. No, they weren't all Black, I don't think. I don't remember seeing any White ladies in our group, you understand what I'm saying? I didn't remember seeing any. In our group it was just us.

CP: You were the only painter's helpers?

BM: In our group, you see, we had a lead man.

CP: The lead man was Black?

BM: No, the lead man was White....

CP: And then you and your sister and Leona and Myrtle all worked together for awhile as painter's helpers, correct?

BM: Yes. Yes. We worked together. The painter's helper crew.

CP: Well, I've got some other questions for you. I'd like to hear you describe your training a little bit if that would be okay.

BM: Okay, the training with the drill press, we were making tools. We would make bolts, screws, nuts, and things like that. With the drill press, this was the steel lathe. With the drill press, we were drilling parts. Just for an instance, if something needs a hole in it, we would be drilling the hole. We were making parts for the boat or the airplane or whatever it was we was working for. It was really skilled work. It was something that we enjoyed.

CP: How long was the training?

BM: The training was eight weeks.

CP: How did you find out about it, being in southern Illinois and having to go to Indiana?

BM: We found out about it through the school. We were on the campus at Southern Illinois University at that time. There were people leaving all around, going to different parts of the United States, working for the government. We thought it would be a little patriotic to get into the act... I had not planned to come to this coast. We just wanted to

work in an airplane factory or the shipyard or whatever, so we got prepared for both of them. When we completed our training, our counselor checked where we wanted to go. There wasn't any opening there at that time, and she told us. Now I'm beginning to wonder if it was some kind of conspiracy where they knew. There were openings all over all the time.

CP: There should have been openings where you wanted in the first place, even in Illinois.

BM: In Ohio, yes. It should have been opening there, but they told us it wasn't. They needed help desperately here in Portland and I think it was Richland, California was where...

CP: Richmond?

BM: Richmond, uh-huh, was where the choices was that we had to go.

CP: So they would train you, but then they would not give you a job?

BM: That's right. They trained us and paid our way to Portland and would not give us the job when we got here. We had to take some type of job, because...

CP: You had no money.

BM: I had no money. \$36 was all we had.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]