

Interviewee: Nauman, Millie
Interviewer: Peggy Pelt
Date: June 2, 1992
Category: World War II (Wainwright Shipyard)
Status: Open
Tape location: No tape

Pelt: What was your name when you worked there?

Nauman: My name was Vickers.

Pelt: You said you worked at the shipyard your senior year in high school?

Nauman: It was between my junior and senior year that I worked there.

Pelt: In the summertime?

Nauman: Yes, sure was. I worked there for the summer of 1944 I think it was and I enjoyed it.

Pelt: What was your job there?

Nauman: Well, if you can believe it now, I was -- of all things -- a welding checker. There were hundreds and hundreds of welders out there at that time -- and my job was to go behind the welders and be sure there were no spots that had been missed and if there were, I had to circle 'em with chalk and they could go back. We would not want our ships to sink from the faulty weld.

Pelt: What kind of a shift did you have?

Nauman: I worked the day shift. As a matter of fact as teenaged girls, the ones of us that did that, were only allowed to work during the day. And we worked there the 7:00 to 3:00 shift in the daytime.

Pelt: Did you get any training for your job?

Nauman: Well, yes, as a matter of fact. We got a little bit of training. It really didn't require much training. It was just a matter of sight inspections more than anything else. And I think the thing that I really enjoyed as much as the job itself was some of the interesting people down there. I mean, this was such a small town when that war came; and all of sudden we were completely covered with people from all over the United States that had just come in here to work, specifically to work at the shipyard. And it was a strange and unusual experience for a small-town girl that had never been out of Panama City very much except just to visit relatives.

Pelt: That was one of the things I was wondering about - what was it like to the natives when these people came in?

Nauman: Well, they didn't really affect the local population too much because at that time there was just not any such thing as rental property or apartment buildings or anything like that. And they had built specifically for the people that worked out there that came in from out of town. They had built for single men and single women -- they had barracks-types buildings for them. And for family, they had built the Wainwright Shipyard -- there was a housing project out off of Michigan Avenue that they had there for married employees that had children. And then they built the Drummond Park School at the same time for the children of those people.

Pelt: They did build a school? That was one of the things I was researching.

Nauman: Well, that Drummond Park School was built specifically to take care of the influx of children that had come in here with the people that worked at the shipyard at that time. But there were thousands and thousands of people that worked out there in three shifts a day. And it was an interesting time for the people that lived in Panama city going from a population of very small, I don't even have any idea how much it was at that time of my life, it was not really that important how many there were. But was just, it really was interesting. These people, some of them were very, very well educated people and some of 'em were, couldn't read or write their names; and, all they had to do was to be able to do their jobs and that was the requirement they had. And it was an interesting experience for me -- and I think for the young girls that were in the same group that I was -- we were all from families, middle income families, that were not really poor. We were not really wealthy. But most of us that worked out there would just do it for the summer. It was a summer job, and I'd never seen so much money at one time in my life at that time.

Pelt: Do you remember what you made?

Nauman: I don't remember. All I remember is that I thought that I was really going some place.

Pelt: Was it typical for people to work in the summer then?

Nauman: Well, now I had worked for several years. I worked in one of our local shops downtown. And this was the first really job outside of our local circle that we, that I had, and, as a matter of fact, it was one of the only jobs like that. I've never had another job like that in my whole life. I was studying the commercial courses during my high school year and went out from there from high school and I've only done secretarial work since then. So this was a strange and new experience for me. But, you know, we had problems with transportation. Gasoline was rationed.

Pelt: How did you get to the shipyard?

Nauman: Well, we had to have car pools and I paid the driver of my car pool car -- I think it was

about \$2.00 a week -- to drive me to and from work. And, oh, he picked several of us up from my neighborhood; he picked us up and would drive us to work and pick us up and bring us home in the afternoon. So it was -- that way they had about at least six of us were riding in each car and it took care of some of the parking problems in addition to the gasoline problems.

Pelt: I don't know if it would have applied to you since you were just working there during the summertime. Do you remember any fringe benefits; did you earn vacation time?

Nauman: I wasn't there long enough for that. Probably some of the people that were there as full-time employees would answer those questions for you, but at that time I knew I was only gonna be there for the three months during the summer vacation and it didn't apply to the ones of us that were really classified more or less as part-time people or just summer employees. And so it didn't apply to me at all.

Pelt: The girls your age, were most of them welder checkers?

Nauman: That was what most of us did. Yeah, we sure did. But I can remember it was so hot there I thought some days it was -- if you can imagine in the middle of July working on that metal, those steel things that hadn't been welded. The sun was awful! It was really not a very good summer. It was hot as it could be. I think that's the one thing about the job, the discomfort of the job, that I remember more than anything else. Your feet would even be hot through your shoes because you had walk on that hot sun beaten metal. And the only place you had to go to get any kind of shelter or any kind of comfort at all was under the material that you were working on. They had these things up on platforms that they were welding, and the only shade in the whole place was under the sides of the ships that they were putting together on top of, above you.

Pelt: You were standing under metal.

Nauman: It was at least under shade and they was, sometimes a breeze going under there which it was not very, the breezes on the top of the metal were a lot hotter than the breezes below the metal.

Pelt: I know that they did a lot of welding where they did a kind of prefab types of things into sheets and then assembled that. Were you checking the welding before it was being attached to the ship?

Nauman: Yes. They had these things on platforms out on the shipyard itself. They were just almost like out in a field out there where they were putting them together. They were assembling them with the welders in one area; then they would carry 'em by crane to where the ship was being assembled, and they would put 'em on the part of the ship that they were being done for.

Pelt: How did they hold them up to weld them?

Nauman: With beams.

Pelt: Those wooden beams held them up?

Nauman: They sure did. They only had the main welds that they had to put in there for that. They did all of the little welds down on the ground, and then they would put 'em up. They would take 'em up with these huge big -- they had a crane out there that was, it must have been three stories high -- that would lift those things up and put 'em in place, and they would hold, the men would hold 'em in place until they could get 'em welded in any spot, or they could get 'em braced enough that they could get 'em on. But it was an interesting summer.

Nauman: It's funny, when you're 17-18 years old, you look at everything from a different aspect than you do now. And I can, even better than watching a beam put together, I was privileged to be one of the people that helped to watch 'em dismantle them after the war was over, and they tore 'em down out here at the same place that they put 'em together. They finally dismantled those things out there and from that day, from, when they did that, they sold everything from the hatch covers to the silverware off the ships at that point and, so they completely dismantled 'em here in Panama City, too. So, it was interesting to watch that and to watch the interest of the people that had helped build them buy the parts to take home with them to make everything from coffee tables to picture frames with them. And, it was interesting there.

Pelt: Did you buy anything?

Nauman: No, I didn't buy anything. At the time they were really tearing them apart, it was at a time that I was pretty much stressed personally with my life and I just, I didn't have anyone to help me put it together first of all. My children were all in college and I was a widow; so, it would just, it would have been impossible for me to refinish some of this stuff that was there. I wish I had though. I wish I had bought it and just kept it in the same condition it was in until the time that I could afford to have it done.

Pelt: I wonder if a lot of the hatch cover tables at Captain Andersons [a local restaurant] came from that.

Nauman: They probably did. As a matter of fact, I venture to say that they probably, most of 'em came from there. I have several friends who have 'em that have made lovely tables of one kind or another. They're just beautiful.

Pelt: Well, do you remember the women welders working at Wainwright?

Nauman: Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I don't remember any of their names, but they were, they were from every walk of life. We had some of 'em that were college graduates, teachers, and then we had some of 'em that had, couldn't write a word of English or read a book. And, it was, it was an interesting experience for a young girl as I was then. And I wonder now if it were in the same

situation, would I have the courage to do it.

Pelt: Did a lot of the girls do that?

Nauman: We sure did. We had a lot of the high school students that worked out there. I mean it was a job that could be handled by high school students and they were so short of labor at that time that they were glad to have us there. We performed a job that needed to be done and it was not very well paid for, and most of the people that had come down here were family people that had to have more money than we did, for example. This was just a summer job for us, and it was not anything that was grand and glorious, but I always wondered, if a ship ever split open, would I feel responsible for it.

Pelt: What were the better paying jobs?

Nauman: I don't even know, well, the welders probably, well I don't know, some of the fitter and everything. They had every skill that you can imagine out there. And I would imagine that any of them would probably make the same salary, as comparable salary, because they were all important jobs. But, it was, they had young people out there doing everything from time-keeping to checking welding to any of the jobs that we could do that would take. The more difficult jobs and the ones that required professional skills, they gave to the older people. You know, they just hired the high school students to fill in for the summer and that was it. But it was an interesting summer.

Pelt: What was the reaction of women? I know there was some trepidation about women in non-traditional roles.

Nauman: Well, I tell you. Now I really didn't notice, I didn't. I wasn't with them socially. When the day's work was over, I went to my home and they went to theirs. It was not as if we intermingled after the hours. I wasn't old enough to party with 'em or to sit down and have a beer with them or anything of that kind. So I don't know how they reacted among each other. The women welders were treated there with as much respect as any of the men welders were. As a matter of fact, they had one woman out there that was a, she was a welder, she's a minister in Panama City -- Fannie Hutchison! She sure was. I was trying to think of her name. But she was as good a welder as anybody they had out there and here she turned out to be a preacher. I think that it was just, everybody was helping out the war effort and they were doing it as much for patriotic reasons as they were for any other reason. I know that's the reason I worked there. I had dated several men who were in the service at that time, and, oh, I was ready to go out and wave a flag anywhere could. So it was an unusual time for us.

Pelt: Were your parents supportive of you going out there?

Nauman: Well, they had a little trepidation in the beginning. But, I think after they found out that it was not going to do anything to my personality or to my morals or anything else, then they

settled in with it and realized it was an experience that I'd probably never, ever would have had the benefit of other than that. So they enjoyed it as much as I did, I think, 'cause I would come home with some of the tall tales that I would tell 'em and it was an experience that we, my whole family, enjoyed.

Pelt: With you working there in 1944 probably the shock of women going into non-traditional roles had worn off by then, because they had gone in there almost as soon as the shipyard had opened up in '42, so by '44, most probably accepted it.

Nauman: They did. As a matter of fact, I have a sister-in-law who is the same age as I, and she was from Texas, and she worked in an aircraft factory. So, the reason they hired her, strangely enough, for the same reason they hired people like me, was that we did not demand the highest wage scales; we were there just for the summer. She was a small, tiny little thing, and one of her jobs was to crawl inside where they had put it together and check the welding on the insides of 'em where nobody else could get. And, so they had to have a person for everything. Everything was not mechanized the way it is now. It had to be done by hand -- it had to be done eye-to-eye contact with these things and it was an unusual time in all of our lives.

Pelt: I have had something mentioned and I can't find any data about it. I heard they were trying to put some blacks in some supervisory positions and it created some unrest. Do you remember anything about that?

Nauman: No. I don't remember anything about that. I really don't. Now I'm not saying it didn't happen. It might have. But, where I was working, there were black people there working with the same, you know, in the same area that I was, but I don't remember there ever being any kind of dissention among any of them. It could have happened either before I started there or after I started there, and I don't remember hearing anything about that at all.

Pelt: What about minority groups? Were blacks segregated or did they pretty much integrate at that point?

Nauman: Well, I can remember them working around and among us. Now I don't remember what their jobs were, but I can remember there were black people there. It didn't make a great impression on me or I would have remembered it more. So I think that it was probably just as a customary, ordinary and not unusual thing or I probably would have remembered it being an impressionable young girl that I was. Well, you know, during that particular time span, that was not anything to write home about or to even to take special note of. It was just a normal thing and we lived where we lived and they lived where they lived and there was not anything unusual about it. I can remember during that same time span when it started, I can remember when the integration began. When I was a girl, you know, you'd walk down Harrison Avenue and if a black family approached you, they automatically stepped aside and you kept on going. But as time went on, I moved and they moved over and we'd pass side by side and there was nothing unusual about it and it was just a common thing to happen and nobody made any, or at least my family, never

made any kind of a big deal about it and it was just a normal thing that was happening. Of course, sort of an evolution type thing really is all it was. But I don't remember any particular time in my life when the integration or~segregation got to be a big problem with me or with any of my family.

Pelt: With this labor shortage did they hire non-traditional workers like older persons and handicapped people?

Nauman: Yes, they had some older people there.

Pelt: Do you remember any handicapped people working there?

Nauman: I don't remember any handicapped people doing what I did. First of all, there was too much climbing. Now they might have had them on staff in the offices and in the timekeeper shops and in the small "sit down" repair-type things of that nature, but that was not anything I ever came in contact with. All the people that I was in contact with were very healthy and very energetic and capable of doing anything. And if you couldn't do it, then you were not suitable for the job.

Pelt: What was the funniest or the thing that you remember happening -- the thing that just sticks out in your mind?

Nauman: Well, I don't have any, I think probably the thing that sticks out in my mind is really not too funny. There really was not that much comedy going on out there at that time. It was just a really, it was a hard work; it was a hard job. But I can remember being cooped up in, you've been aboard ships, you know that most of the rooms inside those things (I don't know if they call them rooms or what they call 'em anymore), but they're not very big. They're just so small. And here you get cooped up in there. Here I'm a little ol' 17 year-old girl cooped up inside one of those little hulls with huge, big husky welders with the smell of perspiration and me with my flashlight trying to see what they've been doing, and I can remember that. That's one of the things I remember is that I -- when I first started working there, I was a little bit apprehensive about being in those little tight, confining spaces, because all of my life I'd heard about, "just be careful, be careful," you know, and here I was put into a situation that I was totally unprepared for and it was, it was an interesting experience.

Pelt: You said your job was checking welding. Did you find many misplaced?

Nauman: Well, you were to circle anything that even was suspicious. And, so, you did a lot of circling. But you never really knew. I don't know what they did about them. All I know is that if I had any suspicion that there might be even a bubble or anything there, then I circled it. And, I don't know what they did with it after my job was done. They would take them back and unweld 'em and reweld them. So they would have to get that weld out and put a new one in.

Pelt: What kind of training -

Nauman: Well, they showed us what a good weld looked like and what a bad weld looked like or what we were to circle and what we were not to circle. And the things that we needed to be suspicious of, even if it didn't look like it was a bad weld. Sometimes just a little lump or bubble or whatever it would be in there would make a difference. It would have been subject to stress of one kind or another. And it might have given way on the side of a ship when it was in the middle of the ocean, you know. So it was not worth taking a chance on the people that were on board those ships and the cargos that they were carrying to take a chance on even the smallest imagination that there might be something wrong with that particular spot.

Pelt: That would take maybe a day or two?

Nauman: I don't think it would even take that long. They would just -- it would be a matter of just burning out the one that they had there. They had burners there -- the men that had the -- are you familiar with what a burner is? Well, it's a -- they used some kind of gas in that thing and they'd turn it on a high powered blue flame that can just literally melt the metal right out of those welds, and they would take that section and if I had drawn a circle around it, they would take the burners and they would burn that particular spot out and then they'd reweld it almost on the spot.

Pelt: It's nice to talk to people to find out what on earth is a burner!

Nauman: I would probably never have known what all these jobs are if I hadn't worked. It was an experience that I really am glad that I had. I really thought that I was the most patriotic creature that ever walked in Bay County at that time, too. I was doing my part.

Pelt: Well, did any of the ships, at the time you were working on them, they probably didn't have names. Did you have a ship that you felt like you worked on?

Nauman: No, because I worked wherever they had the hulls. That's where I worked. They had six of 'em going at one time that you knew, but most of the time they had the hulls of those things separated so that it was easiest to get it right down to the ship. So most of them were done in a line if it was in the first one, then people working on the first shift worked on the first ship until it was finished. And then they worked on the second one or the third one. They had that many crews working and so they had six crews going at one time with six ships at one time. They might all be in different states of completion, but they were, most of them were always being worked on at one time.

Pelt: Okay. Is there anything else you can think of about your time?

Nauman: No, except that I am just, I think that what the City of Panama City has done with our shipyard has been a beautiful thing, and for the benefit of all the people of Panama City with me being a city employee, I can't help but stress that. With our Port Authority being there and with

some of the industries that have been brought in there to replace our shipyard. I think it's been a great exchange.

Pelt: One of the things I want to include as the ending of this paper is what that area has been used for since then. I think every educational institution in town started out there.

Nauman: They did. I think they did, too.

Pelt: Were those the administration buildings? Those buildings that are still standing?

Nauman: Yes. Some of those, well, when you went into the shipyard -- when it was the shipyard -- the first place that you went, well you know that tall two-story building that is right there, well, they might even have torn that one down since I was there the last time, but that's where the offices of the Employment Office and all of the people that worked on, the engineers worked in there. They had offices and all of their staff in those big buildings there -- the two-story buildings --and that's where they had the adult vocational schools and things of this kind after the shipyard closed up. As a matter of fact, it has been used for many purposes.

Pelt: What happened to the barracks and the dorms? Were they moved?

Nauman: Some of them they moved. As a matter of fact, my sister has some property up on one of the inland lakes. And, one the people that had some property next door to theirs moved one of those buildings where they had the married employees. They had six apartments each one of those things. Four to six apartments in each one of them with one and two and three bedrooms, depending on where they were. Any what they did after the war was over is they took all of those buildings and sorta sliced 'em up. They would cut between the apartments and they would sell just a two-bedroom apartment to me, for example, if I wanted one, and I would take it and put it on my lake side property, completely remodel it and use it for my lake house. And so you'll find up in the Sandhills here in Panama City and Bay County a lot of these houses that had been taken up there by house movers and re-done and refurbished and rebuilt to use for recreational homes and for summer homes for different families. I know that there are at least two or three of 'em up there on the lake where we go that have been done that way. They sometimes would buy two of them and put them together and make a larger place that would be almost a barracks-type thing for them and their children. And so, they were put to good purposes, I think. And then they took a lot of them and turned them into small residential homes, too.

Pelt: Well thank you so much. I appreciate this interview.