

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Betty Hickcox interview

Conducted by James Newberry

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Betty Hickcox

Born on a New Jersey farm in 1924, Elizabeth “Betty” Hickcox lived with her grandparents during the Great Depression. With the promise of factories opening in her town, Hickcox helped her grandmother manage a boardinghouse. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hickcox accepted a job with the Standard Oil Company. Not having an interest in the position, she enlisted in the navy and started basic training at Hunter College, New York in 1944. Hickcox opted to be stationed in Washington, D.C. where she worked as a navy cook. She left the military in 1945 following her marriage to a fellow service member. Hickcox moved to Georgia to be closer to her children after the death of her husband.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: Alright. Are you ready to go?

Hickcox: I'm ready.

Interviewer: Alright. Thank you for being here. This is James Newberry, and I'm here with Elizabeth “Betty” Hickcox on Friday, November 10, 2017. And we're at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. So, Ms. Hickcox, do you agree to this interview?

Hickcox: Umm, I certainly do.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much. So let's just start at the beginning. Could you please tell me your full name?

Hickcox: Elizabeth Caroline Hickcox.

Interviewer: And what's your birthday?

Hickcox: Two fourteen twenty-four.

Interviewer: Excellent. So uh, Ms. Hickcox, where were you born?

Hickcox: Uh, in New Jersey on a farm.

Interviewer: And uh, what were your parents' names?

Hickcox: My mother's name was Helen Nelling. N-E-L-L-I-N-G. And my father's name was Preston Jordan. J-O-R-D-A-N.

Interviewer: Ok. And your parents were divorced.

Hickcox: When I was two.

Interviewer: So how did that affect you in the years following?

Hickcox: It didn't bother me. I mean my...my uh... You know I lived with my, my mother, my step-father, my grandmother and grandfather. And I had a good life. So I mean, it didn't bother me particularly.

Interviewer: So after your parents divorced, you moved in with your grandparents?

Hickcox: Oh before. I mean, you know, when my mother left.

Interviewer: And where did your grandparents live?

Hickcox: In Glassboro, New Jersey.

Interviewer: What did they do for a living?

Hickcox: Well, my grandfather had been a glassblower. But then machines came in, and so he lost his job. So he went to work for RCA, which was at the time Victor Talking Machine.¹ And in maintenance, I mean, that was the only job he could get. And then the depression came along and he lost that. So--but my grandfather was a little man. He was like five-foot three. And uh, so he--most of the time he just picked fruit in the summertime. He didn't, wasn't able to get a job.

Interviewer: And what about your grandmother?

Hickcox: Well, my grandmother [coughs]...uh, worked at the college in the cafeteria. She was a cook. And a baker. And then, uh, that job kind of disappeared. And uh, the depression came along, and so she went to work in the sowing factory. So, she worked five and a half days a week in the sowing factory. And I think she made like nine dollars a week.

Interviewer: And even--, eventually she started a boardinghouse.

Hickcox: Well before that we had a chicken farm. You know my grandfather went and he lost his job with, uh, Victor Talking Machine. Uh, he decided to go into the...poultry business. And he did that for several years. And the one year, umm, the chickens all got coccidiosis, and uh...the...we were only like a half a block

¹ Headquartered in Camden, New Jersey, Victor Talking Machine produced phonographs.

from the high school.² And the agriculture teacher came and...or the head of the ag department came and checked it over, and said that, all the, all the chickens had to be destroyed. And so that ended the chicken business. [Laughs] So then after that, all the kind, only jobs he got was either...working for WPA or, uh...picking fruit in the summertime.³ He and his brother both picked fruit. And they liked them to pick fruit because they could get their ladders in the trees and get up higher than a big person could because they were tiny men.

Interviewer: And what did he do for the WPA?

Hickcox: Dig ditches. They were building a new high school, uh, half a block from our house. And so, uh, the politicians came one year around the election time, and you know, wanted to know if... And they were Republicans I remember, I was just a little girl. And they wanted to know if, you know, they could count on my grandparents to vote for them. And my grandmother said "well, why should we vote for you? And my husband wants a job and, you know, he can't get a job." And they said "well, uh, we'll give him welfare." And my grandfather stood up and said "I don't want your welfare. I want a job." So they gave him a surplus army jacket...I... Buttoned up the front, and it was khaki color and scratchy. And gave him a job digging ditches for the new high school. Put in sewer lines. And, in the meantime, uh, my uncle was the head janitor at the school... No that was later. Anyhow, my grandmother finally got a job as assistant janitor at the high school. Cause her eyes started to go bad and she couldn't sew anymore. So she did that for a while, and then... Oh, I guess it was about...1937. Uh, they announced in the local newspaper that a factory was coming to town. And they were looking for people to open up boardinghouses because they would be having--bringing a lot of--people as trainers. To train the people how to use this machinery. So my grandmother decided that this is what she was gonna do. And my one aunt had a, had a dormitory for, uh, boys at the college. Cause they only had like eight or ten boys. So the college didn't have any place for them. They just had dorms for girls. So she was across the street from the college. So she took the...in the boys. So then when they got a, a bigger clientele of boys, they opened up another dorm and she was out of business. So she kept all her beds. So my grandmother decided she was going to open up a boardinghouse. And there was a big house in town that had belonged to the doctor. And it was available. And it had...oh god...ten bedrooms. And rented for twenty-five dollars a month. So she rented it. She got the beds. She went out and bought--she borrowed money--she went out and bought new mattresses for all the beds, and got them all straightened up. And that's how we started.

Interviewer: And how did you help her there?

² Coccidiosis is an intestinal disease that affects birds.

³ The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a program designed to bring jobs to people affected by the Great Depression. Created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1935, the WPA employed over 8.5 million people by its termination in 1943.

Hickcox: Well, I... By this time I was in high school, and uh, I'd come home after school. We had an electric ironer, and we would wash all the sheets. And I'd put them through the mangle after school. And we'd have them back on the bed. The beds would be made before the people got home from work. And uh, my grandmother was a really good cook. A really good cook. And so she had all her boarders. And then my aunt had--she rented out two of her rooms--and the hotel was only three doors from our house. And so we got a lot of the people from the hotel would come to our house for dinner. So we were really, really busy, and we were doing well. And then, after I graduated from high school...uh, we got an opportunity to rent a house for twenty-five dollars a month that was much bigger. Much bigger dining room, much bigger kitch--, two kitchens. And uh, so she decided to move. Well my grandfather didn't want to move. So, everything was moved out of the house, and my mother was helping. And my mother got the last box of dishes. My grandfather's sitting on a stool, and she said "pop, you've got to get off that stool and get in the car because we're not here anymore." So finally he went, but he, he was very reluctant. But he did well there. And it was a nice house with an L-shaped front porch, and we had a lot of rocking chairs, and you know, typical boardinghouse. And then things got bad--and when the war came--and, you know, there weren't that many boarders. She took some welfare men, older men who had no place to go. And rather than put them in a home, she took them. And so that worked out for us. She made out all right. She, she always made out all right. But the funny part about it was my husband was an electrical engineer. And he came to visit one time, and I wasn't there. He had time off, and so it was closer to go to my grandmother's than it was for him to go home. So he went to my grandmother's, and during the day he'd walk around and he'd fix things. And he said "mom, you know, you've only got two rooms on an electric meter. The rest of the house is not on the electric meter." Cause her electric bill--now that she's got an eight bedroom house, nine bedroom house--her electric bill was five dollars. So he said "I think you ought to..." He said "I think this is a fire hazard." He said, "I think you ought to have somebody come in and redo your electricity." And she said "ok." So she did. And the bill went up to ten dollars, but still wasn't all on the meter. But uh, you know, it, it worked out. It worked out for her.

Interviewer: Well, well let's talk about where you went to school, and uh, the kind of student that you were?

Hickcox: Lousy student. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Why is that?

Hickcox: I really wasn't an... I was definitely was not an academic by any stretch of the imagination. I would've loved to have been a Home Ec teacher, but it wasn't in the cards.⁴ Either financially or brain wise. But uh, but I learned a lot in, in the courses I took even though, you know, everybody looked down on the fact that

⁴ Home Economics (Home Ec) taught students how to manage the home.

you, you, you took Home Ec and that was it. But we learned how to upholster furniture. We learned how to refinish furniture. We learned how to give a... We learned a lot of things that be--, became very useful in later life... Because my husband and I, you know, we'd reupholstered chairs. I, I, I'd fight with him cause there are rules that, you know, the grain of the fabric has to go with, in a certain way. Well, he was an engineer, and he was gonna cut that out so he got the most pieces out of it. Well, so we fought over that, but... Anyhow, uh, I bought a, I bought a sofa for a hundred dollars in Macy's bargain room. It had a, a water spot on the side of this skirt of the... Anyhow I called him up and I told him I could get it for a hundred dollars, and uh, he said "buy it." So I bought it. And I went to the fabric store, and I bought upholstery material. And I spent, I think fifty dollars on the upholstery material. And we finished the couch, and uh, we used it in our living room for a long time. And I sold it for a hundred dollars.

Interviewer: Didn't lose anything on it. Well tell me about the National Youth Administration in high school.⁵ What was that?

Hickcox: Oh, well, it was a... I don't know exactly the details of it. But anyhow, you got, you worked twenty hours, and you got paid. I don't know what you got; I don't even remember what we got paid. Was maybe five dollars for twenty hours, or something like that. So, I, my job was to help the Home Ec teacher. And the basic job I had was to see that all the kitchen towels were washed. And to set up for the next day's class. So, I took the towels home with... First I washed them there, and hung them up to dry on a rack. That, I didn't like that idea. So I took them home and threw them in the wash machine, and hung them on the line, put them through the electric mangle, took them back to school. So my class got a, an electric mixer. And my teacher was a Pennsylvania Dutch woman. And she... I don't think she knew the first thing about a mixer. So I had to teach all the classes that they used the mixer... I taught. So then we got a sewing teacher. And up to this point, you know, you made an apron or you made this, you made that. Everybody made a--alike, you know, there was no variety. Well, then we got this young gal out of the University of Delaware. And she taught in a different fashion. We were able to do whatever we wanted. Make whatever we wanted. Well, I had a girl that was my par--we all had partners. And my partner was very, very poor, and this was uh, right after the depression or during the depression. I can't tell you which. It was just rough times. And so she was given an old fake Persian lamb coat in black one, a big--some big woman's coat. And she was a little, a little gal. So the teacher said to her, "get a coat pattern, and rip the coat apart, and we'll go from there." And she did, and she made a coat, and she wore it for two years. That was the only coat she had in the winter. She lived way out in the country, so she had to wait for the bus, so it was a good, a good thing. And uh, so I made... And she, this teacher would let you make as many things as you could make. I mean, I was making, you know, I'd go home lay out a piece of material on the dining room floor, and cut out a dress and go upstairs

⁵ The National Youth Administration was a New Deal program that offered young adults and students an opportunity to earn money and receive grants in exchange for work.

and sow it, and wear it to school the next day. And uh, so, but uh, I made prom gowns, I, you know, I made my girlfriend's prom gown.

Interviewer: So the, the ability to teach that, that electric mixing class, was that because of your experience in the boardinghouse?

Hickcox: Yeah. Well, I mean we had a mixer, you know. I don't think anybody in town had a mixer when we got a mixer. My grandmother's favorite hobby, hobby was to go to the hardware store or to the appliance store. Well, the man that ran the appliance store was a man who had gone to school with my mother. So he was very fond of my grandmother. So if he got something new in there, he'd call my grandmother up and she'd go out and see what, all the hoots he had new. So umm, that was it, and umm, you know I...

Interviewer: Well tell me what year you graduated from high school?

Hickcox: 1941.

Interviewer: Ok. So you were graduating in May of that year.

Hickcox: June.

Interviewer: June. Ok. You said, uh, your grandmother was running the boardinghouse, you helped out a little there. Did you get other jobs at that time?

Hickcox: When I first got out of high school I was only seventeen. So the only place I could get a job was in the sowing factory. Cause nobody else would hire you...unless you were eighteen. So I worked at the sowing factory and I hated it. Oh god I hated it. My aunt sat right across from me. And she'd say "if you'd go to bed at night, you wouldn't be so sleepy." Cause I'd [laughs] get up and go put cold water on my face and try to keep awake. It was so boring. But they never fired me because I never had to rip anything out. And when she had samples that had to be made, I was the one who made the sample. Cause she could count on me. I can sow a straight line--and I didn't--I never had to rip anything out. Never.

Interviewer: And where did you go from there? From the sowing factory?

Hickcox: I went, uh, I went to Owen's. I worked there awhile. I didn't like that.

Interviewer: What's that?

Hickcox: Owen's. It was a closure plant. Made bottle caps. Ah god, I got on the third shift, and I fell off the stool, and felled a basket. Oh, I went to walk home and I sat on the curb halfway home. I mean, I couldn't, I couldn't hack that, cause I couldn't sleep during the day so, you know, that was out. Then I worked for John

Wanamaker's Department Store in Philadelphia.⁶ And I could've gone to New York--the buyer wanted me to go to New York--and, and work there for a while. But, uh, my grandmother didn't want me to so I didn't. And that job--I liked that job--but the thing is, umm, by the time I paid my carfare, and paid my board, I had nothing left. So that wasn't lucrative enough for me. So then I went to work for Standard Oil in New York.

Interviewer: Now was, uh, had the United States entered the war by now?

Hickcox: [Shakes head yes]

Interviewer: Ok, could, so tell me about your memories of the Pearl Harbor attack.

Hickcox: Oh, it was a rainy, foggy, Sunday afternoon. And uh, I guess we had the radio on is all I can think of. And uh... I don't, I don't really remember too much. I mean, you know, the next day the newspapers told it all because all you had was a radio. You, you didn't have television then. And so uh, but you know, we knew it eventually was gonna happen. I told you, the, the president and vice president of our class got called into the Sea Scouts January 1, 1941. Well before the war started.

Interviewer: What were the Sea Scouts?

Hickcox: Sea Scouts. They're part of the navy.

Interviewer: So this was, this was before you'd even graduated?

Hickcox: [Shakes head yes]

Interviewer: So they were already calling people up at that point?

Hickcox: They called them up.

Interviewer: So, at the time of the attack, were you still living at home and, and working?

Hickcox: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: At home?

Hickcox: [Mmhmm]

Interviewer: Ok. So when did you go to work for Standard Oil? Tell me about that.

Hickcox: It was in uh, I'm trying to think... I guess it was 1942.

⁶ Wanamaker's Department Store was the first department store in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and one of the first in the United States.

Interviewer: And how did you get that job?

Hickcox: Uh. Oh, they were begging for people. You know, and uh, I applied and I got the job. And I didn't have the job too long when, uh, we took this test. I told you, I think I told you that I took this test. And I finished it. It was an aptitude test, it was... Oh I swear a second grader could've passed it. Anyhow, I took the test, and I, and I got up to leave, and he said "you can't possibly be done." I said "well I am." "Well go back and look it over." Oh god, went back and look it over. I did that about four times, and finally he said "oh, you might as well go." I mean, he was disgusted with me. So, I had this outside job and it was lousy. We were out on the, on a...dock...by the river, spray painting labels on oil drums. And it's cold, and it's windy, and it's, you know, when you're by the river and it's cold, it's cold. And uh, every so often we'd go in to warm up, and uh, I went in and I laid down on the couch and I went to sleep. And a girl came in and shook me by the shoulder, and she said "Ed Covey's been looking for you all over. You better get in the office." I thought, oh god, I'm gonna get it now. So I thought, well I'll quit before he fires me. So I got in there and he says "congratulations." I thought, oh god, what's this all about? Uh, he said, "you got the highest mark of anybody on the test." I thought, oh my god. He said, "I don't know how you did it." I said "it was just common sense. I said I was done when I got up the first time." So I didn't have to qu--I didn't have to quit. Well I got the job, and it was, it was like learning your times tables. Every oil had a different velocity. Every oil had a...table for it. Well I was no more interested in this job than the man on the moon. And all I was working with were, you know, forty, and fifty, and sixty year old men. That didn't speak English. That, you know, everyday would bring me something to eat. One would bring me lasagna. One would bring me spaghetti and meatballs. You know, they were all Italian, didn't speak English. Anyhow, it was just... Oh I just hated it. And I, I complained about it at first. I complained it was hurting my voice, so they got me a microphone. Then I complained the scale was glary. So they changed the lighting. I mean, I bitched about everything. And everything I bitched about, they fixed. So I had no more, nothing to bitch about. So, I stayed home. Pretended I was sick. And I helped my grandmother with, you know... December, and so then, along came January, and I, I get a notice that I have to come back to work or... I don't know what the notice said. But I made up my mind. I had two choices. I'm either going in the service or I gotta go back to that job. And I'm not going back to that job. No way. So now I think, maybe I'll go in the Marine Corps. So on my birthday I go into Philadelphia [coughs], and I take my physical, and I'm accepted in the Marine Corps. "But you won't be able to go until September." Now this is February. I said, "I don't want to wait that long, I might change my mind." I said "is there anything else I can go in?" "Well you can go in the navy." "I'll do that." So that's how I went to go in the navy.

Interviewer: Well, how had you originally heard that women could even go into the military?

Hickcox: Oh! There were, there were signs all over. You know, there were pictures of women in uniform, and you know, they pushed it out. I don't think I have any of them.

Interviewer: What was its appeal to you?

Hickcox: Well, I had a friend that had worked with me, and she came to my house. Oh, about a month before I left to go to boot camp. And she said "let me give you some advice." She said "go and buy yourself a pair of military shoes," and she told me where to get them. She said "wear them the day you go up." Cause she said "when you get there, when, when you're accepted and you're, you're going to boot camp, she said you'll, you'll go on the train, then you'll take the ferry, and then you'll have to walk about ten blocks. And you do not want to be walking in high heels. It's cobblestone streets; you'll turn your ankle." So I did exactly what she said, and it worked out fine.

Interviewer: Well, I want to ask one quick question about Standard Oil. Do, do you have any sense of what, where that oil was going? Was this considered defense work?

Hickcox: Oh yeah, absolutely. It, that's the thing. Cause a couple times I made mistakes. And the guy down in the--there's a guy down in the hole that would stencil what I said on the barrel or the drum. And the boys went down and redid them. Covered up my mistakes for me. They, they were men in their forties. But they went down and covered up my mistakes when I made mistakes.

Interviewer: And where were you going to work? Was that in New York? Or was that closer to home in New Jersey?

Hickcox: Oh no. That was in New Jersey, but you know, when we had to get up at six o'clock in the morning, and you know, we shared a, a car. There were five of us in the car. And we paid the driver so much, uh, every week. And then when we got to the factory, the refinery, we had a mile to walk from the gate into the building where we worked.

Interviewer: Did you have any sort of identification badge?

Hickcox: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: What were your hours?

Hickcox: Uh...eight to five I think.

Interviewer: And, uh...

Hickcox: And then I... And see umm... I could work, sometimes they had me work overtime. But like Saturdays I could only work a half a day. Cause women were only allowed to work so many hours under a certain age.

Interviewer: And how much money did you get paid? Do you remember?

Hickcox: I went from, uh, about eighteen dollars a week to forty-five dollars a week.

Interviewer: After you took the test?

Hickcox: [Mumbles] I took the test.

Interviewer: And...

Hickcox: And they wanted me to join the union and I wouldn't do it.

Interviewer: Why not?

Hickcox: I don't like unions.

Interviewer: Why?

Hickcox: I just don't like them.

Interviewer: So this factory, you got in a car to go to this factory. How long was the drive?

Hickcox: Huh...forty, forty-five minutes.

Interviewer: And you said it was on the river. What river?

Hickcox: Delaware River.

Interviewer: Ok so, but this was still in New Jersey.

Hickcox: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the plant?

Hickcox: SOCONY.⁷ Standard Oil of New York. SOCONY.

Interviewer: So this place had recruited and hired a lot of people during the war?

⁷ Standard Oil of New York (SOCONY) dominated the oil refinery business. Established by John D. Rockefeller in 1870, Standard Oil dissolved into several smaller companies in 1911. It merged with Vacuum Oil Company in 1931 to form SOCONY-Vacuum, which merged with Mobil in 1966.

Hickcox: Oh, they hired a lot of people all the time. Like any refinery. I mean, you gotta have people to, you know. It's like DuPont's.⁸ DuPont's hired a lot of people. Powder plant. I mean, they made, they made cannonballs and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: I see. So you were ready to get out of that job. And you got out of that job by joining the military. And once you had decided on the navy, umm, tell me about, umm, getting in. You went through a physical. And when did you start your training?

Hickcox: Uh, the twentieth of April.

Interviewer: In forty...

Hickcox: Forty-four.

Interviewer: Forty-four. Ok. So umm, tell me about the training.

Hickcox: Well, uh, we, we marched, we marched, we marched. [Laughs] And we did exercises, and, and, uh, we had watch. I had watch one night, and from two to four. Oh, I thought I'd die. I mean, that was, that was worse punishment because than to keep awake, you know. You had to check in to different stations. Different floors. And, and then, uh, we had Captain's Inspection once a week. Now in the meantime, we're getting shots, we're getting, you know, all, all these things that you get when you get in the military. And so uh, they give you a shot glass full of paste wax to wax all the floors in your apartment. We're living in apartments. So I'm telling you, trying to stretch that wax to do those floors. When we had Captain's Inspection on Friday...uh...the inspecting officer said the only thing she could find were there were cobwebs on the fire escape. So my, our, our officer said "well, I don't allow my girls to go on the fire escape." So that took care of that. We did ok.

Interviewer: Where were you training?

Hickcox: At, at Hunter College in New York City.

Interviewer: So...

Hickcox: In the Bronx.

Interviewer: Were there hundreds of other women? Thousands?

Hickcox: Oh gosh, yes! Oh, yes. Two regiments. Don't ask me how many in a regiment. I don't know. But we had to go to the armory and practice, you know, for parades. And uh, if you, if you passed out during any of these things, you had to

⁸ DuPont was one of the leading manufacturers of gunpowder.

scrub the armory floor with a toothbrush. So yes you didn't, nobody passed out. [Laughs] But, uh, we did ok. I mean, it was, uh... Well they sent us to work one-we had to work part of the time. And one day they needed some extra girls. This was before we went to Cooks and Bakers School.⁹ This is when we were in basic training. They needed some extra girls in the kitchen--in the galley--to pick chicken off the bone for cream chicken on toast for breakfast. Uh. So we all had to march over there. Every place you went you marched. We marched over there. And we started picking off the chicken, and we get down to the bottom, and the last five or six chickens still had the insides in them. Yeah, yeah. So you can be sure that nobody in our group had any of that for breakfast. Believe me. So, anyhow... And then after basic we went through that, we had regimental review. And, uh...

Interviewer: What is regimental review?

Hickcox: Well, all the regiments get together, and they have a parade, and all the officers review the parade, and it's a big to do. But, I'll tell you the first day we were there...they marched us to the mess hall. And we got in line. And you got a tray. And you filled your tray. And you got a seat. And you ate and then you got up and you dumped your tray and you went out. Well, it was nineteen minutes from the time your foot hit the first step till you, till you were out the door. So the first day, nobody got anything to eat cause everyone was saying "where you from, where you from," you know, and all this. We learned a lesson. We didn't do that again. We got in there; we ate; we didn't talk. We talked later.

Interviewer: What was your like regular uniform when you were just going from place to place and...?

Hickcox: Ah, well we were wearing our regular clothes--until we got our uniforms. And the, and they came and measured us. And our uniforms came from Saks Fifth Avenue. And they gave you two hundred dollars for your uniforms. And all that included alteration. Well, I was very fortunate. I didn't have any alterations. My uniform fit perfect. So, I got fifty dollars spending money.

Interviewer: What did you do with it?

Hickcox: I can't remember, but I meant it was something... Oh I know what I did with it! I bought a white uniform because white uniforms were not required. You didn't have to have one, but I wanted one. So, I bought a white uniform.

Interviewer: Were your dress uniforms skirts or pants?

Hickcox: Skirts. Skirts and jackets.

⁹ Cooks and Bakers School taught servicemen and women how to prepare food for large numbers of troops during World War II.

Interviewer: Ok. And you, you mentioned you had to do watch. What was watch?

Hickcox: Well it, you know, it was like a night watchman. You know, you walked the halls. Made sure everything was secure.

Interviewer: And you said you were staying in a... Was it like a dormitory?

Hickcox: No, these were apartment houses they took over. And we were in apartment houses, and we had bunks, and there were ten girls in a room. Twelve girls. Six bunks, and uh, they were too high so you, you know...

Interviewer: Was there a bathroom in the room or a general bathroom?

Hickcox: A, a gen--a bathroom in the apartment. These were apartments they took over, so we all... I mean, each ten girls had a bathroom.

Interviewer: Do you remember any of those women that you were sharing the room with?

Hickcox: Oh well, my best friend, uh, went to California after the--she got out. Uh, sure I remember them.

Interviewer: Were they from all sorts of different places?

Hickcox: Oh yeah. One girl was from Loveland, Ohio. And uh, they were from Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Cory Keith was a girl from West Virginia. And uh, she looked like a real hillbilly, but we figured she'd never had shoes on before. But she made out all right. But uh...

Interviewer: Well, what was a typical day like when you were completing basic training?

Hickcox: Well, the muster bell rang at sick o'clock and you all ran out and, and that--we all had certain places we stood.¹⁰ And you counted off numbers, and, I mean you had to be there for muster. You could be in your nightclothes, but you had to be there for muster. And then there were times at night when they would have entertainment. And [coughs] uh, you might be undressed, and they'd tell you, you have to go. Well, the only thing you could do is roll up your pajamas and put on your rain coat and go. And hope to heavens nobody said take off your coat. Cause you'd be in trouble if they did.

Interviewer: What sort of entertainment did they have for you?

Hickcox: Oh, we had wonderful entertainment because we got it, you know, we got the entertainment from, umm, the theater. I mean, you know, when we get, we had Horowitz, we had... I'm trying to think who else we got.¹¹ I don't... I'm...I'm

¹⁰ Muster was a type of inspection that accounted for the number of servicemen and women in each unit.

¹¹ Vladimir Horowitz was a Russian pianist and composer.

hitting a blank and I shouldn't because we had a lot of, a lot of--from different shows would come. Now, we used to get, umm, invitations. They would post invitations on the bulletin board of things you could do when you had Saturday off. And uh, the one Saturday, uh, there was this invitation for uh, two for one club for lunch. So, this girl I didn't know said to me "would you like to go with me?" I said "sure." So we went. And it was at the Edison Hotel in the green room. And we were there, and all of a sudden, umm, Victor Mature came in.¹² And Victor Mature was a movie star. And we had a conga line, and we had a... we did all sorts...musical chairs. And next thing I know Victor Mature is sitting on my lap. [Laughs] But uh, you know, we had a lot of opportunities that we wouldn't have gotten otherwise. And I mean, I hadn't, I had been going to shows in Philadelphia. So I had a taste of some of the things some of these girls--country girls--really didn't have a taste of. Like my roommate got all excited one day and I asked her "what," you know, "what's the big deal?" And she said "oh, my folks just got a bathroom." They had never had a bathroom before. You know, this was the kind of...these were hardworking girls that, you know, got an opportunity that they never would've had before. So I said to the girls--everybody kept saying--"oh you're..."you know, "the worst thing you can do is get stuck in Washington. You don't want to get stuck in Washington." I said to my gir...my roommate, "Gladys, we're going to Washington." She, "what do you mean?" I said, "I'll tell you what. It's good place to be." I said, "they're gonna do better by you there than anyplace else because it's a place where all the dignitaries are." I said, "I don't want to be stuck out in the middle of no man's land." She said "ok." So, Gladys and I signed up for Washington, and a couple of others signed up for Washington. And we got there. And we stayed in the motel overnight, and then we...or a hotel I guess it was. And then we went out to the Anacostia Receiving Station.¹³ And we got out there, and "oh, we didn't know you were coming." We had, we had to be out there seven o'clock in the morning. We stayed, and we stayed, and we sat there, oh. Finally around--I guess it was one o'clock--they hand us each a bag with a sandwich in it. And, that was it. She said "there's water over there if you want a drink." And then finally about four o'clock, they put us in a car, and they took us to West Potomac Park. Which was-- our barracks was right in walking distance of the Lincoln Memorial. We were between the Lincoln Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial. Anyhow. We got there, and the woman, the officer said "we didn't know you were coming." So this one girl steps up and she said "I want to tell you something. Every six weeks you're gonna get six girls. So don't tell them you don't know they're coming. Cause you--I'm telling you now, they're coming." So that was it, and uh...

Interviewer: Well let me ask. How long had that training at Hunter College lasted?

¹² Victor Mature was a movie star who was well known for his post-World War II films. He served in the Coast Guard during the war.

¹³ The Anacostia Receiving Station was a United States naval base during World War II.

Hickcox: Well the one was--the basic--was six weeks, and then ten weeks Cooks and Bakers School.

Interviewer: And was that also at Hunter College?

Hickcox: [Shakes head yes]

Interviewer: Ok. So how did you come to Cooks and Bakers School? Tell me about that process.

Hickcox: Well, that's what I wanted to do. First I wanted to be a butcher. But then one of the girls got her hand caught in the meat grinder and I said "well I guess I don't want to do that." And then I thought, well, I'd like to be a baker. And then the one of the girls got her fingers caught in the bread machine and the end of her fingers taken off. And I thought "oh lordy mercy, I don't want to do that." So I guess I'll just be a cook. So, that's where I ended up. The first day I went to work in Washington--oh my god, it's Thanksgiving Day I had to work. First day we're allowed to work. We got there--but I had to go to work at two o'clock in the morning and put all these turkeys in the oven. And the ovens were four high. I'm on a step ladder. You know, two turkeys to a pan.

Interviewer: Well was this, so that was your very first cooking experience?

Hickcox: Well...

Interviewer: Was Thanksgiving...

Hickcox: Yeah, the very first day. We had worked. We knew that, I mean they, they had us work as what they call scullery maids. And...they didn't let us work in the kitchen until... Well, we got there September, and this was Thanksgiving. So Thanksgiving was the first time we got to work. Really work...

Interviewer: What sort of training had you done in, you know, to become a cook in the military?

Hickcox: Well they, they sent us to Cooks and Bakers School.

Interviewer: And, and, what, tell me about that. Like how, how long did you train? How many hours a day? What were you doing?

Hickcox: Oh, well anything they told us to do. You know, I mean, uh like my event-- Well the thing is, umm, you spent so many hours doing each phase of the thing. You spent so many hours in the bakery. So many hours on, on ovens and grills. So many hours on, in the scullery, and the spud locker. They had this, what they called a spud locker, and that's where they kept all the vegetables and fruit and

nuts, and all that kind of stuff. And so, you know, you just--wherever they stuck you that's what you did.

Interviewer: So once you, you got to Washington and you started doing this fairly regularly, how did you feel about the work?

Hickcox: Oh, it's alright. They gave us all the dirty jobs. I mean, you know, the men didn't want to go to sea. And then, and then officer in charge did not recognize our school. So he would make--and we could, we could not be rated until somebody went to sea. So they weren't gonna... In other words, if you were a, a seamen third--cook third class--you either have to be promoted to second class or be shipped out to sea before I can be a third class cook. Well, they weren't moving any of these guys. They were all guys who had already been to sea, and they weren't going anywhere. So we weren't going anywhere. So I, you know, I was on the day job for a while. And I was, you know, I made mayonnaise and I did all kinds of, of things. I also got myself in trouble one time, but I weaseled out of it.

Interviewer: And tell me about that.

Hickcox: Well...When I was on the night shift, uh, the, the day shift would leave things for me to do. And one night I was told to, uh, finish filling the apples. They were having baked apples for breakfast. I was finish to...putting the sugar and cinnamon in the rest of the apples. So, I used the pan of sugar and cinnamon that he left me. And I was generous. So I thought, well I'm going to make some more. So, I made some more. And I filled the rest of the pans. And, the next morning...

Cameraman: Quick question. Do you care about clothes noise?

Interviewer: Clothes?

Cameraman: Like you can hear her...

Interviewer: No, it's fine.

Cameraman: I just wanted to check.

Interviewer: Go ahead.

Hickcox: The next morning, the mate shakes me and says "boy you're in deep trouble. All those apples were filled with salt." I said "not the apples I did. I only did two pans." I fibbed. I made him believe he put the salt in. So I got out of that. So. Well, I got a job in Ship's Service. I mean, I was working nights, and I was only working... I'd go to work at four, I was off at nine. It was not hard. I only had two hundred people come over from communications. So I thought, oh, they need

people in Ship's Service, I'll go work over there. So I got paid for that. So I, I got my regular pay and they only paid twenty-five cents an hour, but...

Interviewer: So that was, umm... You'd, you'd work your regular shift and then how much time was that other shift?

Hickcox: Oh, well I could work whatever I wanted. I mean, I can say "I, I'll work two hours. Or I'll work three hours depending. Or what do you need?"

Interviewer: And Ship's Services, what was that?

Hickcox: Well that was like, the, the store. I mean, it was where they bought clothe--like it was where they could buy shirts or, uh, you bought cigarettes. Anything you needed, that was the store. It was called Ship's Service.

Interviewer: So, when you were cooking on your regular shift, I mean, uh, who were you feeding primarily? Was it men or women?

Hickcox: Well, we had two hundred men that came from the navy department--officers at noon. That was our biggest meal. And, and then the rest were just the workers. You know, maybe, maybe another five hundred people of...people of different jobs. They would come for lunch.

Interviewer: And who was your boss?

Hickcox: Well...we had a chief that was over us. Uh, and then we had, umm, a full lieutenant who was the supply officer. He was really over us. He had, he had a big office.

Interviewer: So you only had male bosses?

Hickcox: Yeah. No women.

Interviewer: What about when you were training at Hunter College? Who was training you?

Hickcox: Oh, we had women. Mostly women. Yeah.

Interviewer: So how did the, umm, male soldiers in the navy sort of treat the women soldiers in the navy?

Hickcox: Well, they, you know. I mean I can understand their point. See, in order for us to get a rating, one of them had to go to sea. Well most of them had already been to sea. You know, they'd been in a lot longer than we had. And so, they didn't want to go back to sea. So you know, the, the chief and the supply officer were both sympathetic to the men. And that was it. So, you know, they didn't do it. I mean, I got, I got out of Cooks and Bakers School; I was qualified to be a third

class petty officer. But, you had to fill a compliment. And, you know, there was never a space.

Interviewer: So was there any negative attitude from the men?

Hickcox: Sometimes. They'd give us dirty jobs. You know, we had one guy--and I mean, he was lousy. He would, you know--if we were standing in around--if we had five minute break, he'd take the hose and wet the floor and say "swab the deck." And I had on the bottom of my feet, that big, callouses on the ball of my foot. On both feet. And I, I went and got callous plasters, and I put them on my feet. And I took a shower. And I took another shower. And I didn't change them; I didn't touch them. When I took them off, about a sixteenth of an inch circle came off my foot. It was never sore. And never grew back.

Interviewer: Wow. So umm, was there any free time for you? Like, what would you do for entertainment?

Hickcox: Oh. Well, if we didn't have any money we'd go to the Pepsi Cola Canteen. Cause that was downtown, and we could walk or take the bus. And uh, you go in there and you could play cards or listen to music and... Umm. Pepsi Cola Canteen... I don't know if it was Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola, but it...it must've been Coca Cola. Anyhow, it was the, the coke was free. And uh, you want a hotdog and it was a nickel. And Sunday night you could go over to thirteen-twenty G-Street. They have a dance. Well, that didn't work out very well for us because the, the fellas over there were mostly military and they didn't want to dance with military women. They wanted to dance with civilian women. So, that left us out in the cold.

Interviewer: What would you wear to those dances?

Hickcox: Oh! We had to wear a uniform.

Interviewer: So you wore your uniform everywhere?

Hickcox: Oh, absolutely. Every place you went.

Interviewer: What was the reaction of just civilians on the streets of D.C.?

Hickcox: Nothing.

Interviewer: Did you get any sort of...I mean, how did you feel wearing that uniform?

Hickcox: Proud.

Interviewer: Did you wear a hat too?

Hickcox: Yeah. Oh yeah, I had to wear a hat. Towards the end we got overseas caps, and they were great because otherwise we had to wear, you know, a regular hat. And uh... It was ok.

Interviewer: Who put the dances on?

Hickcox: Well, I don't, I don't really know who put the dances on at thirteen-twenty G-street. I think it was probably the navy.

Interviewer: So it wasn't like the USO?¹⁴

Hickcox: No. No. No.

Interviewer: So, you were in, in the Capital a good while. I mean, for the, for the period of your service.

Hickcox: Yeah, I was in, oh, fifteen months I guess. In Washington.

Interviewer: Did you keep up with news of the war?

Hickcox: Oh sure.

Interviewer: How did you do that?

Hickcox: Well I... We just knew. I don't know. We had newspapers, you know, and people who worked in communications would come and tell us things. And uh, there wasn't any television. It was radio, radio. But uh, we were so busy working and, and doing other things, you know. We were just hoping it was gonna be over soon.

Interviewer: Well, now I know you were in Washington at the time of President Roosevelt's death. Can you, can you tell me your memories of that?

Hickcox: Yeah, I'm right in front of the White House, and my husband's shooting off firecrackers.

Interviewer: That's your memory? [Laughs] Well did you go there because you had heard and you wanted to...

Hickcox: [Laughs] No, I...uh. I don't know why we were there to be honest with you. I don't, I don't remember why we were there.

Interviewer: Did you see his funeral?

Hickcox: [Shakes head no]

¹⁴ The United Services Organization (USO) provided entertainment to the United States military and their families.

Interviewer: Ok. Well how did you feel about Roosevelt?

Hickcox: Well, I, I think he was the right person at the right time. I mean, he was there. And I think he did everything he could do. What are you gonna do? Somebody bombs you, you're gonna retaliate. So...

Interviewer: What do you remember of the end of the war and victory celebrations?

Hickcox: [Laughs] Well, uh...It was a lot of excitement. I didn't... We went downtown. We walked downtown. We were restricted when the, uh, war was over with Europe. But when the war was over with Japan, we were allowed out. And uh...we walked downtown. I know that. But the, you know, the, there was just gobs of people and everybody shouting. And...you know, it was just an exciting time. I mean, we, and uh, we were grateful that it was over.

Interviewer: And how much longer did your work continue past that time?

Hickcox: Well, I got out in December.

Interviewer: Of uh, forty...forty-five?

Hickcox: [Shakes head yes]

Interviewer: So fairly quickly?

Hickcox: Well, you got out on points. You got points. And I got married the first of December. And that gave me... And we got points for being married. And so that I got out the twentieth of December.

Interviewer: So tell me about meeting your husband?

Hickcox: [Laughs] Was--it was my night off. And uh, the girls said "let's go out. You haven't been out in a long time, let's go out." And I said "ok." So...this was, I said "I'll go out tomorrow night. Ok?" They said "yeah." Tomorrow night came and they said, "oh, the guys from, uh...the army called and want us to go out. And uh...they've got a date for you." I said, "I don't want to go." "Come on." I said "ok." So we get in the taxi and we pull up, and I, I recognize the fellas that they were gonna be with. And I saw my husband, and I said, "I'm not getting out of this cab." I said..."he hasn't any chin, he probably hasn't any character. I'm not going." They said "oh you can't do that. He's already seen you." I said "ok." That was it.

Interviewer: [Laughs] What did you do that night?

Hickcox: I don't rememb-- We went, we must've gone to some club I guess. Oh, I know where we went. We went to Ding How.¹⁵ And on the way... These guys were in the Signal Corps...and they had firecrackers.¹⁶ And there's a guy with a garbage can on his head, and they throw a firecracker that landed right behind him. And the garbage can went one way and he went another. They were terrible. They were terrible. And I said, "I don't know why you wanted me to go out with this bunch of hyenas."

Interviewer: And where, where was he from?

Hickcox: Well he was in the, the Signal Corps. And at the time he was over at Fort Belvoir--in Virginia. They were doing a show, an army show. But he was stationed, uh... I don't know where his perm--permanent station was at the time. I think Camp Crowder...Missouri.

Interviewer: And why did you agree to marry him?

Hickcox: That's a crazy question to ask. Well he, you know, as we got better acquainted and we had a lot of fun together, and uh, I met his parents and he met mine. And it just came from there. That's all. Like any other...

Interviewer: Well tell me where you umm, you know, you got married. And, and where did you move after the war?

Hickcox: Well, I went to... I got out on the twentieth of December. And I went to Schenectady, and he was still in the army. And then...he got stationed in Delaware. So we moved to Delaware. We were in Delaware about a month when he got moved to New Jersey. So we moved in with my grandmother, and we stayed there until he got out of the army. He got out of the army, and he went to Schenectady; got a job with General Electric. We stayed with his parents until we could get an apartment. And the rest is history.

Interviewer: And you, you lived most of your adult life in Schenectady.

Hickcox: Well, the area. Not in Schenectady. Clifton Park. We lived most of our married life in Clifton Park.

Interviewer: And you worked in the home?

Hickcox: Yeah.

Interviewer: How many children did you have?

¹⁵ Ding How was a popular Chinese restaurant in Washington D.C. during the 1940s. It promoted itself as an expensive uptown restaurant.

¹⁶ The Army Signal Corps provided immediate and accurate communication networks to the combined armed forces.

Hickcox: Four.

Interviewer: Ok. So to, to sort of wrap up, I'll ask you a final question. How did you end up in Georgia?

Hickcox: My son was here. And uh, I, I, I was living with my high school boyfriend. And uh...

Interviewer: This was after your husband's death.

Hickcox: Yeah. And uh, when I went back to my, my fiftieth high school reunion. We got together, and uh, my husband had already died. His wife had already died. And he was living in filth. And I got in there. And I got two cleaning women, and I cleaned that place out, and dyed the rug. His wife had both her legs off, and she was blind. She was a diabetic. So, anyhow... Uh, he died and uh, I could've stayed there. The boys said to me, "you know you're perfectly welcome to stay there as long as you want." And I didn't want to stay there. So uh, my daughter was living... One was living in Savannah. And one was living in Boston. And my son--my other son--was in Minneapolis. So I didn't want to go to Savannah. That was too hot. And I didn't want to go to Minneapolis. That was too cold. And Boston was too cold. So I, my oldest son was here, so I thought I'd move here. So I moved here, and that was it.

Interviewer: Well thank you so much for sharing your time with me today.

Hickcox: I'm sure you got a mess. I don't know if you'll want to use it.

Interviewer: Ok. We'll conclude there.