

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

COBB COUNTY ORAL HISTORY SERIES

NO. 57

INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY PETTY ODOM

CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

TUESDAY, 17 AUGUST 1999

Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb County Oral History Series, No. 57
Interview with Dorothy Petty Odom
Conducted by Thomas A. Scott
Tuesday, 17 August 1999
Location: Bentley Rare Book Gallery, Sturgis Library,
Kennesaw State University

THOMAS SCOTT: Today I am interviewing Dorothy Odom who worked in personnel at the Bell Aircraft plant in Marietta during World War II. Ms. Odom, why don't we just begin with a little background information about you? First of all, are you from Georgia?

DOROTHY ODOM: Atlanta.

TS: You were born and grew up in Atlanta.

DO: That is the truth.

TS: Then what year did you go to work at the Bell Aircraft plant?

DO: I was trying to figure that out on the way here, and I'm not really sure. I think it was around '42.

TS: Well, was it after the plant was already in full production that you started?

DO: Not really, because I was in the personnel department, the employment department; and they were desperate for people. I had a couple of girlfriends, and we worked some nights till twelve and one o'clock, because they were so in need of help.

TS: So about how many workers were there at Bell when you started would you say? Just a few thousand?

DO: Yes.

TS: So this is probably 1943 then.

DO: Actually, yes, probably, that's better.

TS: Well, it's actually March before the plant was built and I think at that time they had about a thousand workers and were just starting up. It's the end of '43 before the first plane comes off the assembly line.

DO: Well, I know they were desperate for workers because we worked our ----- off! [laughter] I'd go home some nights with that ditto all over me.

TS: Well, let me ask you, before we get in too much about working at Bell, how were you hired at Bell in the first place? I

guess it was easy to hear about the plant in operation, but how did you go about getting a job?

DO: They hired an employment agency, first off, Mr. Taliaferro [pronounced "Toliver"].

TS: Mr. Toliver?

DO: Well, it's Taliaferro. But they called it Toliver.

TS: And he was...?

DO: Employment agency.

TS: Did you have a high school degree at that time?

DO: Yes, and I had some college.

TS: Where did you go to high school?

DO: Bass.

TS: And where did you go to college?

DO: Commercial and then Georgia State. Well, what used to be Georgia Evening College.

TS: Which was basically a business school at that time, wasn't it?

DO: Yes.

TS: How much college did you have?

DO: Two years.

TS: So then you go to an employment agency. Did you get called in for an interview?

DO: Yes.

TS: Where did you go for your interview?

DO: Rhodes Center.

TS: That's at Peachtree and West Peachtree?

DO: Right.

TS: Was this where Bell was headquartered at that time or was this just an employment office?

DO: It was just an employment office. I think Bell was head-

quartered up east somewhere.

TS: Headquarters were in Buffalo, New York; but, I know they had some facilities in Atlanta.

DO: Well, on Jones Avenue where the second employment office was, it was bigger than the other place. In fact, it was an old manufacturing plant, I think; and the employment office was up on the second floor. So they had more there than the other place.

TS: I see. So you were hired right away to work in personnel?

DO: Correct.

TS: So primarily your office is involved in hiring people at that time?

DO: Hiring people, yes. And making sure they had the right papers, like birth certificates and citizenship and that sort of thing. You'd be surprised that some people didn't have birth certificates.

TS: Probably pretty rare in the South at that time to have a birth certificate, wasn't it?

DO: Yes. You can't come to work with just that; you've got to have this and this and this and this. Sure enough, when they came back, they had the family Bible, a big old thing.

TS: Now, was your job as a secretary?

DO: No, I was just processing people, I guess is what you'd call it. Processing there, being sure they had the correct amount of information. But they'd fill out the application. Then I would check it to be sure they had the birth certificate information and all that good stuff.

TS: Then what did you do with that? Who actually made the decision to hire them? How was that done?

DO: Well, basically they took everybody, because they were so in need. But there toward the end, when they were getting enough people, they were a little more, shall I say, choosy.

TS: Right. One of the interviews I was showing you a little bit earlier was Ernestine Slade. She was a black woman, a domestic in Marietta; and she talks about going into Atlanta to get her job, because she was afraid they wouldn't hire her in Marietta. She was afraid they wouldn't hire away the servants of the well-to-do; so she went into Atlanta and got her job there.

DO: Very good.

TS: Ernestine Slade was African-American. Were there lots of blacks who applied for jobs where you were or was it segregated?

DO: It was more or less segregated.

TS: So you really didn't see anything but whites who came through at Jones Avenue?

DO: Right.

TS: Who did you work for? Do you remember any longer who your bosses would be?

DO: No.

TS: The reason I was wondering was that I did an interview last October up in New York with a man named Bill Gisel, who was sent down here to start up the payroll department, I guess it was.

DO: No, I don't remember any of the names, I'm sorry.

TS: Do you remember if they were native Georgians or from Buffalo?

DO: No, they were from elsewhere, most of them.

TS: So these are northerners who would come down?

DO: Yes.

TS: Now, when did you go to work at the plant in Marietta? You worked at Jones Avenue for awhile, and then you came out to Marietta?

DO: Yes.

TS: Do you remember how long you were at Jones Avenue?

DO: I would say less than a year.

TS: Okay. And so by 1944 probably you had come out to Marietta?

DO: True.

TS: How did you get out to Marietta? Did you ride the trolley?

DO: [laughter] Well, I'll have to go into it a little more. The same employment agency that I went to, they had another applicant that turned out to be my maid-of-honor. Anyway, she

was from South Carolina, and she and her girlfriend came down from South Carolina to go to work at Bell. So, I don't know if you remember, but the housing was hard to get then. So, they came to live with my mother and I; and, of course, we didn't have many automobiles then. Mama and I took a taxi and carried them back to our house with their goods in the taxi. In fact, we, Graydon; Jenny and I; and the lady, I guess, was the start of car-pooling. She would come by my house and pick up the three of us. We would sleep from my house to Marietta, because they didn't have any of the freeways that they do now. It was old 41 was all it was. So we would sleep. [laughter]

TS: Whereabouts in Atlanta did you live?

DO: Northeast, over toward Piedmont Park.

TS: So you're living with your mother; you didn't have to go out and try to find housing then, at that time.

DO: No.

TS: And this is before you're married and you're name was Lee at that time?

DO: Petty.

TS: Petty, okay. So when you worked at Bell you were Dorothy Petty, and the four of you all would come out together on US 41.

DO: [laughter] Well, let's see, I think she had two more people because . . .

TS: Oh, six of you?

DO: Yes, she had a car full.

TS: I guess she got more gas in the rationing system because of that?

DO: Yes, I'm sure she did.

TS: When you say you came out US 41, 41 had just become a four-lane road to Marietta at that time; and so, in fact, everybody called it the "four-lane" around here.

DO: Yes.

TS: And so that's the way you came up was the Four-Lane?

DO: Yes.

TS: Right by where Cumberland Mall is nowadays was a boy scout camp at that time, way out in the woods, wasn't it?

DO: Probably, yes.

TS: How long did it take you to get here, from home to the plant?

DO: I slept, I don't know. It took forty-five minutes or so, or maybe longer.

TS: Was there much traffic?

DO: No, not nearly like what it is now.

TS: I guess, in a sense the War didn't change things a whole lot for you. In that, I guess, you didn't have to worry about housing and those kinds of things, where you bought your groceries, and what-have-you.

DO: I got to tell you something and Debby¹ will probably kill me. You was talking about not affecting me any; it was around Christmastime and the two of them and me were going shopping downtown. We were crossing Broad Street and about that time my unmentionables dropped to my ankles. [chuckle] That was because all the elastic had gone to War, and all my unmentionables had were buttons. Those two fools just walked off like they didn't even know me.

TS: Oh, my goodness. [laughter] Didn't want to associate with you.

DO: I picked them up and put them in my pocketbook and went on. [laughter]

TS: Well, I guess the War did affect everybody, didn't it? [laughter] How was the social life in those days?

DO: We worked so long we didn't have much.

TS: Is that right? How many hours a week did you work at Bell?

DO: Well, we worked some nights till midnight. From eight or nine in the morning till midnight.

TS: Were you on hourly wages in the way you were paid? And so you got overtime when you worked extra?

¹The reference is to Ms. Odom's daughter, Deborah Odom Witt, who arranged the interview and who was present while it was being conducted.

DO: I think so, yes.

TS: You wouldn't be salaried work, I guess.

DO: Well, I think I was salaried and then some overtime.

TS: Do you remember about what the wages were that you were making at Bell?

DO: No, I don't.

TS: Did it seem like a lot at the time?

DO: It did to me.

TS: That seems to be a universal experience of people that wages were a lot better at Bell than people had experienced before.

DO: Yes.

TS: Well, tell me, once you came out to the plant, you were in the B-2 building, the administration building. I was over there just a week or so ago, and it hadn't changed that much, I don't think, since then. It's a relatively small building, the administration part, compared to that huge plant. But did you run into the big shots while you were over there, the Jimmie Carmichaels and so on? Did you ever run into them in the halls or anything?

DO: If I did, I didn't know it.

TS: So you just went to your office and did your job.

DO: Yes.

TS: So you say you worked till midnight; what time did you start each day?

DO: Nine.

TS: You started at nine and you often worked to midnight.

DO: And some people have made the comment about the cafeteria. Well, evidently, the people that I associated with didn't have such high regard as some of the others. So one of the guys that worked in my department would gather up a carload, and we would go to Marietta to the Elks Club for lunch.

TS: Where was that located?

DO: Just in Marietta. He had two great old big dogs; he let them out at noon and loaded us up and would take us to lunch in it.

TS: So you weren't impressed with the cafeteria.

DO: No.

TS: The food wasn't very good?

DO: No.

TS: They had to feed a lot of people there; the photos look like it was very crowded in those cafeterias.

DO: That may be the reason we didn't like it, because we only had a certain amount of time, you know, to eat; and I'm a slow-poke eater.

TS: When you went into Marietta to eat was it right downtown on the Square? Oh no, you said the Elks Club. Did you ever go down to the Square in Marietta?

DO: I think we went somewhere else for lunch sometimes, but Elks Club was mostly it. It wasn't too bad.

TS: Did you do any shopping in Marietta?

DO: No.

TS: So you just worked at the plant and then went home.

DO: That's right.

TS: And, in fact, if you were working from nine in the morning till twelve at night, I don't guess you had too much time to sleep, did you?

DO: No.

TS: Well, how would you describe your experience at Bell? Was it the experience of a lifetime or a relatively unimportant part of your life? Was it real exciting to be there during World War II?

DO: Yes, it was. I don't think we, that worked like I did, were as glamorous as Rosie the Riveter; but we did our part. I felt like I was doing something; so I felt pretty good about it.

TS: When you came out to the plant in Marietta, were you still looking at people's birth certificates and that kind of job or had the job description changed when you came out here?

DO: No, it was the same thing.

TS: You're still hiring people.

DO: Yes.

TS: So they're coming to apply for jobs, and you're obviously meeting a lot of people. You're saying very few people had birth certificates. What percentage, would you say, could really read and write of the people coming to work at Bell? Was it a high rate of literacy or did you run into a lot of people who had a third grade education?

DO: Yes, something like that. They were medium. I mean, some of them you would have to explain some of the things on the forms to them, and not all of them were black. There were some white people.

TS: Who couldn't read the form?

DO: Yes, I don't remember exactly what positions they got, but I'm sure it wasn't secretary. I was telling Deb the other day when we were talking about this--I said I can remember hiring midgets to work in the nose cone of the plane.

TS: Oh, really?

DO: Yes. Because big people wouldn't fit in the nose cone, you know, and I don't know if they prefer midgets or dwarfs or whatever, but little people. [chuckle]

TS: Right, right. So you're actually placing people in jobs then, when they come through you're . . .

DO: I think, in my opinion, when they came out of there that they had more job skills, let's say, than they did when they came in, because they were building the plane actually and had to know one screw from another. So, in my opinion, I think they had a better education for getting a job than they did when they came in there.

TS: Well, weren't there training schools in the plant?

DO: Yes.

TS: And so, I guess, if you're actually hiring somebody to be a riveter, you really send them to school first, don't you?

DO: Yes. Because how many riveters were there normally?

TS: So are you assigning them to go to a class when you hire them?

DO: Well, they would advise us ahead of time that this department needs so many and this department needs so many, and you would

send them to that department head.

TS: I know that it's a segregated plant at Bell, but I've also got a few pictures where it looks like blacks and whites are working together in at least a few situations. How did you handle that? If there were black workers did you assign them to different buildings or whatever than where the whites were?

DO: No, we were briefed, basically, this requires so and so and this requires so and so. When they sent us, "We need so many in this department, so many in that department," it didn't matter; color didn't matter.

TS: So blacks and whites are actually working together.

DO: Yes.

TS: Okay. I do have a few pictures where it looks exactly like that, and so, I'm not exactly sure how segregation worked at the plant. I've also heard of blacks being in separate buildings working from whites.

DO: I haven't heard that.

TS: What about where you're working? Were there any blacks at all that were working as secretaries or doing personnel work?

DO: Yes, I think so. And they were pretty good too.

TS: Okay. So in your office there were black workers.

DO: Yes.

TS: And they're pulling their own weight.

DO: Of course, yes.

TS: You had mentioned earlier when we looked at a picture of the ditto machine that you used to . . . could you say a word or two about what it was like to be an office worker and what kind of equipment that you had to work with, in those days?

DO: I hated those things, I hated them!

TS: Because they got ink all over your hands?

DO: Yes! I need my hands!

TS: And ink on everything else?

DO: Yes.

TS: So you did have ditto machines that you had to work with. What kind of typewriters did you have?

DO: Manual.

TS: That's the only thing there was at that time, wasn't it?

DO: Yes.

TS: Any other equipment that you can think of that would have been standard then and that nobody would use nowadays?

DO: That's about the only piece of equipment was a ditto machine. I mean, a typewriter, and most of it was done with pen, pencil.

TS: Filling out the forms was really with pen and pencil?

DO: Yes, because that was the majority of it. Basically what we used the ditto machine for was to make copies of forms that they had brought in. Some of it was real old and precious to them, and they didn't want to give them up.

TS: I see. So if they bring in a birth certificate you make a copy of it.

DO: A copy, yes.

TS: This is not exactly like putting it on the xerox machine and making a copy.

DO: [laughter]

TS: How did you make a copy with a ditto machine?

DO: Put this purple stuff in there.

TS: You put the purple stuff in the machine and then what do you do with the document?

DO: You roll it.

TS: Yes, okay. But this is making originals, isn't it? You were talking about people bringing in something that was precious. So what you're saying is you actually type it over again?

DO: No. It would have like a, what am I trying to say, a drum thing and you put it on and roll it through.

TS: Okay. What would you do with the original then?

DO: You put it on the drum this way and roll it through.

TS: And that doesn't destroy the original to do that?

DO: No.

TS: Well, you're teaching me something. [laughter]

DO: You don't want to know. [chuckle]

TS: I don't want to know any more about it, okay. [chuckle] Could you say just a little bit more about the people at Bell? Would you say that most workers were people who were really excited like you were that they're doing their patriotic duty?

DO: Well, the two I mentioned before, of course, were my closest friends. They worked side by side with me, and I met some others while we were working there that were very nice. I didn't meet any ugly people; so they were all very nice and friendly.

TS: What would you say the impact of Bell was, first of all, on you? Did it teach you some skills that helped you later on?

DO: Not really. I mean, because I basically already knew what I was doing, and I didn't do anything else.

TS: Now, Ms. Odom, you worked from '43 to the end of the War at Bell? Did you stay till the plant closed?

DO: No, I could see the handwriting on the wall, I guess, for lack of a better expression, and I left before it closed. Because I could see that it was closing, you know, and they were getting rid of people in my department. So I left before they closed.

TS: It looks to me from the figures that the peak of employment was in February of 1945. Then, of course, the dropping of the A-bomb was in August of '45. Actually Victory in Europe doesn't even take place until May, but still it looks like February is about when it peaked. I guess it was pretty obvious by that time that we were well on our way to victory in World War II, and they're beginning to cut back a little bit. So would it have been some time after VE Day that you quit?

DO: That was '46, wasn't it?

TS: No, May of '45 is Victory in Europe and then August of '45 in Japan, in Asia. Would it have been probably in that period after Hitler had been defeated that you would have quit, do you think?

DO: I think somewhere in there. I'm not real sure of the date.

I wish I could remember better, but I can't.

TS: When you left, they still had pretty large employment; but, I guess, really in a place like personnel you...

DO: They were toning it down.

TS: You really could be cutting back, because they didn't need any more employees. Apparently, they laid off just about everybody within just a few weeks after the Japanese surrendered. Is that right?

DO: I don't know. [chuckle]

TS: Of course, you were gone by then, I guess. Did you go to work at other places after you left Bell?

DO: Oh, yes. That's another story. I saw an ad in the paper for a secretary. That was what I was I suppose, really, and I answered it. It was down in . . . you don't know about the Bona Allen building downtown?

TS: The what building?

DO: Bona Allen. Well, anyway, I got a job for two bosses. Neither of them needed a full-time secretary, so I worked for one half-time and the other one half-time. It worked out pretty good. Then they decided to split up. The one of them was a manufacturer's representative, and he built his own office. I didn't know what they were going to do with me, so I think they cut cards or something to see who I would go with. But anyway, I went with the one that opened the office, so it was kind of nice, new office and so forth.

TS: Let's see, you're not married yet at this time, are you or had you already. . . ?

DO: No. I was working for Mr. Parker. That's the guy I went to work for for quite some time. In fact, he didn't want me to get married; and when I told him I was expecting, he said, "I'll fix you a nursery here in the back and you can bring the baby to work with you." I was working for him, Debby, when you were born.

TS: So you continued working, didn't let marriage stand in the way of continuing to work then.

DO: Oh, yes.

TS: So you worked all your life?

DO: Yes.

TS: Okay. I think I'm just about at the end of the questions that I have that had to do with Bell Aircraft; but I thought I'd give you an opportunity, if you wanted, to talk about any of your experiences there, of anything that I didn't ask.

DO: No. I worked for Mr. Parker ten years.

TS: So this would be like '45 to '55 or something like that?

DO: Yes.

TS: Where else did you work after that?

DO: After that I went to work for Irvindale Dairies.

TS: Irvindale Dairies?

DO: There's sort of an odd story about that. When I first started to work for Mr. McGinty, he was treasurer of the company. I went to work for him there, and he had an office on Spring Street. Then I got pregnant again, and I left and got another job. Then Mr. McGinty called the house and talked to my husband and wanted me to come back to work for him. So on a Saturday--I told him I was already working; but I'd have to give notice; I didn't know if I wanted to go back to work for him or not--but anyway, I went for an interview with him on a Saturday afternoon. Monday morning I gave my notice at the other job, because he was a love of a man.

TS: I guess there's one other thing that's confusing to me; you showed me the badge that you had a little bit earlier for the Bell plant. It's listed Dorothy P. Lee, but you say your maiden name was Petty.

DO: I was married before.

TS: But you weren't married when you were working at Bell?

DO: No.

TS: That makes sense. Well, I wanted to ask you one more thing about those badges too. I've heard stories that different badges allowed you to go into different parts of the plant depending on whether it had a black circle around it or such as that. Do you remember anything about that?

DO: Well, as far as I remember, I had no restrictions.

TS: So your badge allowed you to go anywhere.

DO: I really didn't want to.

TS: On your badge, there was a number that was attached to it, it seems like.

DO: The department number.

TS: Department number. So that 27 is your department number. And the badge itself looks like it's laminated something. Did you say you think that's leather?

DO: No, I thought you meant this part.

TS: The back part's leather, isn't it, with the little plastic clip. And the front part maybe . . .

DO: What happened to that lady? [chuckle]

TS: I can't remember what kind of, I mean, I'm not really sure; but it looks like it's kind of laminated hard at any rate. It's not plastic.

DO: I was trying to see if there's any date on them anywhere, but there's not.

TS: But it's got your picture and then has your name on it and what's it say? At the top, it says: The Bell Aircraft Corporation, Georgia Division; and a number, let's see, 06361 was your number; and then department number below it. And so you had to wear this everywhere when you were in the plant.

DO: True.

TS: Well, that's great that you've hung onto it all these years. I believe I'm out of questions, but I sure do appreciate you coming today and letting me talk to you.

DO: Well, I hope I have helped some.

TS: It helped a great deal. Thank you very much.

INDEX

Bass High School, Atlanta, 2
Bell Aircraft Corporation
 before plant opened, 1
 Jones Avenue office, 3
 how workers documented date of birth, 3
 race relations, 4, 10
 cafeteria, 8
 illiteracy among workers, 9
 hiring midgets, 9
 training schools, 9
 reduction of work force, 12-13
Bona Allen building, 13

Georgia Evening College (Georgia State University), 2

Irvindale Dairies, 14

McGinty, Mr., 14

Odom, Dorothy Petty
 starts to work at Bell, 1
 education, 2
 finds job through employment agency, 2
 personnel work for Bell in Atlanta, 3
 carpooling to Marietta, 4-6
 long work days, 6-7
 lunch at Elks Club, 7-8
 excitement of working at Bell, 8
 personnel work at Marietta plant, 8-9
 old ditto machines and manual typewriters, 10-12
 leaves plant before it closes, 12
 works as secretary after the war, 13
 still has badge from plant, 14-15

Parker, Mr., 13-14

Rhodes Center, 2

Taliaferro Employment Agency, 2

U.S. 41 Highway, 5

Witt, Deborah Odom, 6, 9, 13