

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Clyde Ussery Interview

Conducted by James Newberry

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Transcribed by Masie Hennequant

Born in 1923, Clyde Ussery grew up on a farm in Texas. During World War II she worked as a riveter building B-24 Liberator airplanes for the Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation in Fort Worth. After the war Ussery studied journalism at Texas Christian University and The University of Tennessee. She managed communications for Maryville College and later worked for the U.S. Postal Service. Today she lives in Marietta, Georgia.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: Are you good to go?

Ussery: I am good to go.

Interviewer: This is James Newberry and I'm here with Mrs. Clyde Ussery at her home in Marietta, Georgia, on Thursday, December 9th 2021, Mrs. Ussery do you agree to this interview?

Ussery: I do.

Interviewer: Thank you so much, so could you please tell me your full name?

Ussery: It's Ora O-R-A Clyde Ussery U-S-S-E-R-Y.

Interviewer: And what is your birthdate?

Ussery: My birthdate is February the 20th, 1923.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Ussery: In Meridian Texas, that's in Central Texas up above Waco. Between Waco and Ford, and I was born in my maternal grandparents' home in Meridian. That was the county seat of the county we lived in.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Ussery: My parents were Ruby and George Rice.

Interviewer: And tell me about your father's family?

Ussery: Oh, well all I know is that actually that the farm that I grew up on had belonged to my great grandfather, and that is the farthest back I know. And I've said he found the worst place in Texas, and that is quite an achievement.

Interviewer: (laughs)

Ussery: It was Johnson grass and rock and it was just a bad little farm, you know. And for some reason or another I don't know why but my father inherited it, I guess they drew lots and he lost it, I don't know that thing is really the only thing I know about my father's family.

Interviewer: And your father served during the first world war?

Ussery: Yes, the First World War, and he was in France, and that's about the only thing I know about that, but I remember when I was a kid he still had the gas mask that he used, and some other things, I guess clothes or something during that era, I remember that gas mask though.

Interviewer: So it wasn't something he really talked about?

Ussery: No.

Interviewer: Was it something you wanted to know more, did you ever ask or?

Ussery: Not really, it is something I have found out about, military people that have been in war they treat, you know they handle it in two different ways. We had a friend that he told funny stories about it, and I know that it wasn't funny to him then but that is how he handled it, he remembered funny things about his friends in service and some don't want to talk about it at all.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about your mother's family?

Ussery: My mother's family actually they were farmers at one time and lived in a Norwegian community, but my grandfather was the county road commissioner for a year, just about all the time I knew him.

Interviewer: You said Norwegian. Had your grandparents immigrated here or were they descendants of immigrants?

Ussery: I don't know how my family got mixed up with this, they were from Norway or they just lived where they were a community of them.

Interviewer: Oh wow, so how did your parents meet?

Ussery: I have no idea. I really don't know. Evidently that is something we needed to talk about.

Interviewer: (laughing) It just never came up, so what did your parents do for a living?

Ussery: Well my father farmed on this land, my great-grandfather had named this place Klondike I don't know whether that was unreasonable expectations or just a weird sense of humor, but we lived on Klondike and my dad farmed and at that particular time you just eked out a living on the farm, and he did odd jobs for other people so you know.

Interviewer: What did he grow?

Ussery: What'd he grow? Oh cotton (laughs) cotton and corn and some grains two, but it was mostly cotton

Interviewer: What about your home? What did the home look like?

Ussery: Oh it was just a normal house, I don't guess that it ever had paint on it, This front part had this porch across the front of it. Two big rooms on the front with what we call shed rooms on the back, it didn't keep out much of the north wind, it was a bad house. But during that time there were a lot of people lived in tents, my aunts' family every fall or late in the summer they would go to west Texas 'cause that's where they had big cotton farms, and they would pick cotton and stay till the frost came, and then come back and a lot of times they would live in a tent when they came back and in my Great Uncle's chicken house and one year they stayed with us, people lived where they could stay it was that kind of time. It's always said to me it's like a black and white movie and I never saw that time in color, it was just an unhappy time for everyone.

Interviewer: Was your house electrified?

Ussery: Oh, goodness, uh no.

Interviewer: (laughs)

Ussery: Actually we had Lyndon Johnson to thank for getting electricity in the country, but that didn't happen during my time growing up, that was a little later.

Interviewer: I see, what were your hobbies?

Ussery: I never had a hobby I don't know how, I never understood hobbies, I've always read, all the time, I just considered that life, not a hobby.

Interviewer: So were you wanting to get away, was that how you felt as a child?

Ussery: All my life yes, I knew that there's got to be a better place, you know, I guess I didn't think about it that much, but I just knew that that was just not my home.

Interviewer: Could your family live off of what you grew or did you shop for groceries?

Ussery: Shop for groceries? Some of it we grew, my mother gardened the garden and canned vegetables and fruits and that's pretty much what we lived on during the winter time were her garden in the summer and she was one of the first people to, I think, in the community to have a pressure

cooker and a can sealer, and she did that, she canned a lot of food, and if we were lucky we'd can a beef and we'd have meat to go with the vegetables

Interviewer: How long would that last?

Ussery: You mean?

Interviewer: The canned beef.

Ussery: Canned beef?

Interviewer: As long as you wanted?

Ussery: As long as you wanted, yes and I guess eventually it would not be that good but as long it is sealed up it will be ok.

Interviewer: Were you close to a town?

Ussery: Well in Texas when they say a little piece of road pack a lunch.

Interviewer: (laughs) It's miles.

Ussery: Yeah, I know not really how far it was but we were in a really small district from everybody, there were two towns were fairly close.

Interviewer: And where did you attend school?

Ussery: I started out in this community where we live and there were four grades. I would think there was no more than 30 kids in the whole thing cause the four grades. And it had seen better days I guess, the school house that is. The teacher and her husband lived in a half of it, and she taught at least four grades together. You know I don't remember when I learned to read I just always could read, and so when I started, so when she proposed that we all go on to the second grade. So that's where I was, three years in that school with the one room and four grades.

Interviewer: And where did you go from there?

Ussery: Rode the bus and went to a little village called Mosheim.¹ I think in Mosheim they called it Malsein but they called it Mosheim, and it had an elementary school and a high school were in one building and the facade looked like that *holds hand to indicate the shape of the facade* and it looked like it had bad plumbing but one good thing about that school, I had a good history teacher in high school. He was fresh out of Valor university and just lucky I guess because I can't imagine ever having that good a teacher, he was the one who taught us critical thinking, we didn't even know what critical thinking was and never heard of it but that was what he was teaching us. And that was when a lot of bad things were happening in the world in Italy and Germany and he kept us up on that and

¹ <http://www.texasescapes.com/CentralTexasTownNorth/MosheimTexas.htm>

explained what was going on, you know what was happening and I think that more than anything else contributed to the way I look at things throughout my life, but I always question everything I hope you do too.

Interviewer: Were there other ways you were learning about news of the world, newspaper, radio?

Ussery: We had a radio and we got newspapers so we knew what was going on, and on Saturday we go to the movie and they had a newsreel and we learned the news that way. And we had radio.

Interviewer: What did you think about those events going on? About world events, the war in Europe and Pacific, how did that strike you, how did it make you feel?

Ussery: Well I don't really know how it made me feel, but y'know it stayed with me and its affected the way I look at things?

Interviewer: You talked about people struggling at that time and going different places to find work and so you've talked about this a bit but the Depression in general, did you notice a change when that, even though you were quite young, but was that something that was talked about at all, the Depression and how it was hitting and effecting people?

Ussery: Well I don't really remember them just talking about it, everyone thought it was struggling and I guess looking for work.

Interviewer: How did your family feel about Roosevelt?

Ussery: How did they feel about Roosevelt? You know, I really don't know, I don't know, I know how I felt, I always *unsure of what she said*, but you see I didn't rely on my parents for the way I look at things, cause some things we didn't agree on, I don't know, I really don't know.

Interviewer: Were you disagreeing with them as a young person or as a teenager?

Ussery: As a teenager, yes.

Interviewer: And how did those disagreements play out?

Ussery: Well we just agreed to disagree I guess, one of the things that I remember so much is that I never understood how the south felt about unions well my dad felt that way, he was opposed to unions, but I saw a way, and we had a lot of arguments about that and I remember that more than anything else about that.

Interviewer: Was that from reading, from class?

Ussery: Yes from reading but I will say this, I was not a good student in high school.

Ussery: I will say this, I wasn't a good student in high school, I was bored with it, and was just eager to get it over with, and it was sorta the social aspect of school I think I disliked more than anything. 'cause then when I got into college that was different you know, it was my time.

Interviewer: And did you go to college right after high school?

Ussery: No, there could have been no way I could've gotten into college back then, we barely had money to eat. I didn't go to college until after I was fired from the aircraft plant, but you know as soon as they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima the women were without a job, I mean not the next day, not the next week, we were immediately without a job.

Interviewer: How were you notified?

Ussery: Well when we got to work that morning we were just turned back to the door it was that sudden.

Interviewer: Was there a paycheck for the remaining days where you worked or?

Ussery: Oh yes we got paid for it, but they didn't want the women anymore then, we went really ahead of the story then.

Interviewer: Don't worry we will circle back. So I know you had a job before you went to work during the war, tell me about that for a minute.

Ussery: Yeah, well first working in a restaurant, of course my first job, my primary job was started when I was five years old was picking cotton. and let me tell you, when you get to five years old they expect you to take it seriously and we did, and so I worked in the fields until then I worked in a restaurant and at one point in I went to the Houston area and was a car hop, back then car hops were the big deal on Houston I think at one point we had a front page spread on *Life Magazine* of the car hops. we wore white boots and cowboy hats and little short shorts, and what we earned mostly depended on how inebriated our customers were.

Interviewer: And you did this in Houston?

Ussery: Quite often.

Interviewer: For how long?

Ussery: Oh I have no idea for how long but that's where I was on Pearl Harbor day. Pearl Harbor day was the first day I had ever gotten out of the state of Texas, and Pearl Harbor kinda ruined my day, I didn't take it lightly, but it kinda ticked my off, I had a hot date there, this just ruined everything

Interviewer: How did you hear about it? how did you hear the news?

Ussery: On the radio.

Interviewer: Were you in a car? Were you in?

Ussery: In a car

Interviewer: Where were you headed?

Ussery: We were headed over into Louisiana, I don't know what we were doing on the coast.

Interviewer: Who was the date?

Ussery: If you know your history, and didn't nod off during history at that time General Claire Chennault was very important I think, the flying tiger and all, well he had a bunch of sons, so the date was one of the Chennault boys, and you know what, I looked up their names recently and I couldn't remember which one it was.

Interviewer: So Pearl Harbor wrecked your date with the Chennault sons, so did you have to turn around or did you go back?

Ussery: No I don't think I went back, but it kinda took the edge off the day.

Interviewer: Did you leave your job at that point as a bell hop?

Ussery: No I stayed there a while and went back home up the Klondike, and while I was there I decided to take this training in sheet metal work and from there go the job at Consolidated Aircraft.² I noticed that on the list of questions it referred to it as general dynamics but I wouldn't learn general dynamics for a long time after that with the metal airline

Interviewer: what motivated you to go into the sheet metal training were you looking for, was it better pay?

Ussery: better pay, yes, getting paid at all we didn't get anything, and it was something to do, that is what we were looking for all of the time, something to do so that we could earn some money. And so that is the way I got the job

Interviewer: Did you have friends looking for these jobs too?

Ussery: Not anybody that I remember, I'm sure there were some but I don't remember anybody.

Interviewer: So tell me about getting the job at, you said Continental airlines?

Ussery: Consolidated Airlines, later became Consolidated Vultee³

Interviewer: and where was it located?

² <https://pbycatalina.com/consolidated-aircraft-corporation/>

³ <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004665336/>

Ussery: In Fort Worth.

Interviewer: And you were doing the sheet metal training, how did it lead to that job?

Ussery: Evident with this training group they worked with the consolidated, so when we finished we just went on and got a job there.

Interviewer: And what job did you get?

Ussery: Riveting, you know we talk about Rosie the Riveter well all the Rosies were not riveters but I was. I did not work on the assembly line I worked over at the side 'cause, you know what a B24 Liberator Bomber looks like?

Interviewer: I've seen a picture yeah.

Ussery: With the side stabilizers, well I did riveting on the control areas of the wings and the stabilizers and I didn't work on the assembly line, worked over at the side.

Interviewer: How big was the factory

Ussery: Well we were told it was a mile long the longest assembly line in the world.

Interviewer: And how did you get to work everyday.

Ussery: With some of the work there I don't know how we got in touch, but several people would ride together.

Interviewer: And where were you living?

Ussery: Well I was living in what's a museum now in Thistle Hill, and older man had built this big mansion for his daughter when she married, and this was some years before that so it had passed its glory days by this time, and it was used for housing for women who were working at Consolidated and like I said it had seen better days but it was beautiful, I thought it was beautiful. But the girls we were stashed in there you didn't have very much privacy much and the girls even painted over this beautiful wooden paneling but it had a double staircase, a circular staircase. So afterwards I haven't seen it since it was made into a museum and they redid the whole thing on the inside and I was glad about.

Interviewer: Did the company pay for it? Like pay for you to live there.

Ussery: No we paid our own way, and you know I had no idea what we were paid or anything, but a dollar then is different than a dollar now.

Interviewer: And were you able to save a lot or did you spend it.

Ussery: I was able to save some in fact I gave my family some and yeah I saved. We bought war bonds with our savings.

Interviewer: Did the company encourage you to do that, did you see posters telling you to do that, why did you do that.

Ussery: I guess, you know I really don't remember. You know the best advice I ever got was from my high school English teacher that told me to keep up a journal, I did not do that, now I wish I had, that is why I encourage my granddaughter to keep a journal now because this is a different era.

Interviewer: Do you remember who trained you to rivet, who were you trained by?

Ussery: I don't remember I just went in and someone showed us what to do I just guess I really don't remember, I remember at first things were kinda slow for some reason I don't remember if we didn't have the materials or equipment or what. One of the hardest things was looking busy when you were really not busy at all, but I don't know.

Interviewer: Were there more men or women there working?

Ussery: Oh women, all the men were in the military, or they weren't in the military.

Interviewer: How did you get along with the women you were working with?

Ussery: ok, y'know we became friends.

Interviewer: What about the men?

Ussery: It was just a job and there were men and there were women y'know. There was this cute Baptist preacher who was from South Carolina but he come here to go to South Western Theological Seminary he could not get in the military cause he had a Football knee and he would whistle at me when he went down the aisle, when he went to work there he was an inspector, so I would see him going up and down the aisle, that is how I met my husband

Interviewer: Your husband? What was his name?

Ussery: His name was Bill Ussery

Interviewer: And he was a little bit older than you?

Ussery: Oh twelve years.

Interviewer: I mean did you start dating immediately?

Ussery: No, I think he was dating another girl that I knew at that time but sometime I don't know how that came to pass anyway, that's the way we met.

Interviewer: Well I want to continue on with that in just a bit but before we wrap up with the factory, you talked about how you weren't on the assembly line, you were on another area, was there another group of people working with you.

Ussery: Oh yeah, the assembly line ran right down through the center the building and the sides where I worked. I didn't work on the assembly line

Interviewer: What did you wear?

Ussery: real tacky coveralls, these light blue coveralls and a cap that had snood, you know what a snood is?

Interviewer: The hair?

Ussery: Get the hair, put the hair in there and keep it from getting caught in the drill, but then we got sick of that and we changed the pants and shirts, most of us did.

Interviewer: Was it clothes you bought yourself or did they provide it?

Ussery: Yeah we bought it

Interviewer: Did you have some sort of card to get into the factory, some name badge?

Ussery: Oh yes.

Interviewer: So security was high? And what about any accidents was there any danger on the factory floor

Ussery: I'm sure there were accidents, I can't remember any, but back when there were they were very cautious about getting cut with an aluminum, and there was a nurses' station and anytime we got a scratch we were supposed to get that taken care of.

Interviewer: Were there Black people or Latino people working there?

Ussery: No.

Interviewer: Was there a cafeteria?

Ussery: No we took our lunch in a bag.

Interviewer: And then did you have breaks at all during the day?

Ussery: We did, we did have a break, we had a break for lunch, I really don't know, I think we had a 15 minute break somewhere in there.

Interviewer: And for you was it enough money to live at the time?

Ussery: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: How long did you work there all together, do you know?

Ussery: No

Interviewer: How many years, was it years?

Ussery: Yeah, it was years, I guess I was 18 when I went there and I- I don't know, I really don't know how many years but it was about four years I guess maybe like that.

Interviewer: And with Bill Ussery, your future husband, did you become boyfriend and girlfriend while you were there?

Ussery: Yes we married while we were still both working there.

Interviewer: Ok so when the bomb was dropped in Japan and you say you lost your job immediately what about him?

Ussery: He stayed

Interviewer: I see.

Ussery: And he at that time was working on a new plane the B-32 I believe, and they continued to work on that and I guess that, no more B-24 bombers were working on that site, but there was a place where they built the B-24 Liberators, but we built the most of them there, I think in all there were over 18,000 built and we did 11,000 of those.

Interviewer: Do you know where those were going? I guess most of them were going to Europe

Ussery: We didn't know at the time we just knew that they just keep rolling up the back door, seven days a week.

Interviewer: Did they fly them there, or did they take off somewhere else, how did they?

Ussery: Oh yes they were riding next to us, next to a military base and we would see them flying up their way there.

Interviewer: What did you do for fun, what was the entertainment provided?

Ussery: Well let me tell you about that, all the headlines of the day came to war and I always worked swing shift, so they would have something for the swing shift you know, two performances regular time and the middle of the night, so we had good entertainment. They would even have Rodeos at Will Rogers Coliseum at one o'clock in the morning for the swing shift.

Interviewer: So it happened while you were working? Or did you leave your shift to watch?

Ussery: No it was after work.

Interviewer: And was it on the site there at the factory?

Ussery: No not at all in downtown Fort Worth theater usually.

Interviewer: Did you see a lot of service people around?

Ussery: Well that was the good thing about living where I did, cause we had a lot of soldiers come in on the weekend, cause it was slim pickings for us at the Consolidated.

Interviewer: All mostly older guys there?

Ussery: Yeah, they were older people there.

Interviewer: Was there any USO around?

Ussery: Hadn't known anything about that

Interviewer: Did you go dancing ever?

Ussery: Don't remember that, but we had fun, maybe some dancing yeah.

Interviewer: Well let's move on to post factory uhm you have lost your job, Mr. Ussery is still there, what happens next?

Ussery: Well in a short period of time when I lost my job there I was an usher at a theater for a while but it was nearly time to go back to school in the Fall and as soon as school started TCU is Christian, he was still working, I was still going to school, and then later when he was not working there we went back to his school I went with him, and stayed until he graduated, and then he went to his first church in Ranger Texas down at Houston, and then I went to the University of Texas.

Interviewer: Did you complete an undergraduate degree there?

Ussery: No, see this is the thing I went to all these different schools 'cause it was a World War you know, and my working career, it was the same way, I did what was available where we were, not necessarily what I wanted to do that is how I got into teaching second grade.

Interviewer: So you took classes when you could.

Ussery: Yes

Interviewer: And what were you taking?

Ussery: Well I was a journalism major, the thing that I really wanted to teach was Greek, Greek language because I started that in a seminary and it was New Testament Greek and all the new language, then I did it at the University of Texas I took a classical Greek course, but I never got to teach that cause we never got to be where they needed someone to teach Greek.

Interviewer: So after teaching, you said what grade did you teach?

Ussery: 2nd

Interviewer: And at a certain point you went to Maryville College?

Ussery: No I went to the University of Tennessee, and that is where I finished up my undergraduate work and later graduate work, I later worked in communications, as a writer in communications working on television excellent, at the university of Tennessee, it was later on I became a director of communications at Maryville College.⁴

Interviewer: What kind of television work?

Ussery: Well we just did programs that were broadcast on the commercial networks.

Interviewer: And that was through the university?

Ussery Yyes it was, we were television department

Interviewer: So did your husband encourage you going into these degree programs and working?

Ussery: Oh yes, he did indeed.

Interviewer: You were a pastor's wife, were there ever any places where the expectations were different for you? That thought why is she working?

Ussery: I don't think that that ever came up but it's a difficult thing you know, and I did ok.

Interviewer: And you had children, what are your children's names?

Ussery: My oldest daughter who is Bryn's mother is Sherry, then I had another daughter, seventeen months later and Jill, then in about nine years or so I had a son, I had a smart...

Interviewer: And you spent most of your adult life in Tennessee is that right?

Ussery: Well actually yes, most of it, the last 50 years of my life before I came here I was in Tennessee.

Interviewer: And you worked for the postal service?

⁴ <https://www.maryvillecollege.edu/>

Ussery: Maybe longer than that, maybe 60, nearly 60 years.

Interviewer: Ok and didn't you work for the postal service for a time?

Ussery: Yeah, after I retired, no after I left Maryville College and for a while I worked some other thing I worked rigorously, but actually when I had a small fund I started working for the postal service of Ruletaberry.⁵

Interviewer: Did you just like working, did you need to work?

Ussery: Well it is just a thing you do I think, I have just always have done that since I was five years old, so it just is one of those things.

Interviewer: Well I just wanted to talk a little bit about the political campaigns you were involved in.

Ussery: Well after I retired, you know if you work for the postal service or anything government, you don't get involved in politics. You could vote but you don't talk about it with the people under you, but you see this is where I found my home after I retired, and that was up on the Edwards Plateau in Carlsville, and that was my home, I finally found my home and the reason I think is cause I could do the things I wanted to do then, I could write what I wanted to write and I could work in politics and I just that is what I wanted to do at that time in my life, and in my 70s that was my high energy times, and I left them behind, that's what I did

Interviewer: What specific campaigns were you involved in?

Ussery: Sell I wasn't so much involved in the campaigns as I just worked in the party and I wrote, I wrote for two different publications in a paper I had a column in a local paper and a little local magazine that I did two columns for that. And those were all politically focused.

Interviewer: Current events and did you ever get any push back?

Ussery: Y'know that always bothered my husband because he fought that would bother me, but if I didn't get any push back it would feel like I wasn't doing my job, so that all made up

Interviewer: Well is there anything else you would like to share?

Ussery: Well I'm not sure if what I have shared will have enlightened anybody, but there is one thing I would like to say that, I think that over the years we have not understood education I would like to say anyone that is going to college, it is not just about memorizing all these facts out of a book you know, if you can go four years and can never get challenged or never get offended, then you better ask for your money back, cause that's what it's all about, it is learning critical thinking and helping you thinking, not just seeing things cause that's the way that's the way your family saw it, that might

⁵ This is in Crossville, TN, on the Cumberland Plateau according to Ussery's friend Carol Kemp, 2/22/2023

be the way you'll see it, but you should do it your own way you know, be sure this is what you believe after your way out back.

Interviewer: Well thank you so much I appreciate you sitting down with us.

Ussery: Well I'm not sure what you needed at all but it's been fun, and that's another thing, always keep laughing, see the funny side,

Interviewer: Well I appreciate it Mrs. Ussery, and we will end there.