

Pittsburgh Oral Histories  
Pennsylvania Department  
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



RDH  
Interviewed by Barry Chad  
Interviewed at Brentwood Library  
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Interviewer's Note

*Great stories of patriotism during World War II and of going the extra mile to learn radio code as well as taking a class in electrical engineering—to be better versed in the terminology of electrical motors. When her boss found out, he commended her and gave her a raise for her initiative. In the WAVES intercepting the radio messages of German U-boats off the Atlantic coastline and transcribing them. Eight hours a day they listened—and mostly to static!*

Interview

bc: Have you always lived in Western Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh area?

RDH: This has been my home.

bc: Where were you born?

RDH: Carrick. I was born at home. We didn't go to hospitals.

bc: Yes, in fact, one lady in Beechview, was born in the house next door to the house that was actually built by her and her husband. So her married life was spent right next door to the house in which she was born.

You say both your parents were German.

RDH: Yes. (They were Americans, but their ancestors came from Germany.)

bc: Where did you go to school?

RDH: St. Basil's in Carrick.

bc: And high school?

RDH: St. Basil's in Carrick. [She chuckles.]

St. Basil's school is gone now.

bc: You lived through the Depression, I'm guessing.

RDH: Yes. I didn't know too much because I was pretty young.

I remember hearing about the Depression: my father was hanging on to his job.

bc: What did he do?

RDH: My father, he started out as an office boy. I think he was getting twelve dollars a week from this company. (He was still in school or just out of school.) He stayed at that same company all his life and ended up Vice-President. So he went all the way from office boy to Vice-President. I was very proud of him.

bc: What was the name of the company?

RDH: C. A. Turner's Incorporated. They were around till a few years ago. I'm not so sure anymore.

bc: What did they do?

RDH: I always said "nuts and bolts" and rails. My father told me they furnished some equipment for Kennywood [Park] for their rides.... I was very proud of him. He was a great guy.

bc: What did your mother do?

RDH: In my lifetime she was a homemaker. She had worked before she got married.

She played the piano and my father played the violin. When we were kids, we used to get a little concert sometimes before we went to bed. [RDH chuckles over this memory.] My father actually played in an orchestra.

Remember G. C. Murphy's? There was one in Mount Oliver. There [used to be] three five-and-ten's in Mount Oliver. At that time people would come in to buy sheet music and she would have to play it on the piano so they would know how it sounded.

bc: One of the ladies I've interviewed, she did that for Gimbel's.

Your father had a pretty stable job during the Depression.

RDH: He really watched pennies. There was some talk about "am I going to be the next one to be laid off?" but he made it through okay.

bc: Let's talk about World War II and what led you to join the Service.

RDH: Believe it or not, people were patriotic back then. It's so different today; it's sad.

When they bombed Pearl Harbor, I was out on a group date, several couples. We heard about it just as we were leaving to go to the movies. And I remember that the movie was about Pearl Harbor—it was "Blue Hawaii." (It just happened that way.) Afterwards we went out to a Chinese place to eat. The guys were all going to down and sign up; and two of them did the next day. I was working and I just thought that I would like to do something. At that point, of course, women didn't go overseas—at least not in the Navy. I had one parent's okay. So, I approached my father and [we talked about which branch]—either the Navy or the Marines. I decided on the Navy because of their uniforms—the Marine uniforms were gorgeous, but I couldn't see me in that. My father said, Wait a year and, if you still want to go, I'll sign. And that's what happened.

bc: You'd gotten out of high school. Where were you working?

RDH: In 1941 I graduated from St. Basil's. And then I graduated from BTC—Business Training College. (Finkelhors owned it.) It is now Point Park [University] downtown. It was supposed to be a two-year business course, but because of the War, they stepped it up. So, I graduated from high school, business college, and got my first job in 1941. I had my first job before I actually graduated from business college. They sent us out on interviews. I had two jobs lined up. (I hadn't quite finished my courses, but I still graduated.)

My first job was at U. S. Motors. They're not around anymore: U. S. Electrical Motors. They made electrical motors, pumps, pump motors. When I went to

work, they were located in the Bessemer Building by the Sixth Street Bridge. Which is now a garage.

I had the most wonderful boss you could ever want—encouraging. (My father, for one thing, always said, “Don’t be first.” So that’s the way I was raised. I was a little on the backwards side.) But my boss was encouraging me.

[In the Service I didn’t want to be clerical—in the office.] I didn’t want to be a “feather merchant” they called them. [On their uniforms they used to wear two crossed feather quills.] That’s all changed. Anyway, I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to do something different.

I was riding the bus. We used to talk with the driver. I learned that the driver and two or three men who worked at KDKA taught radio code at Connelly Trade School to—they called them the V-12’s—guys who were going to go into the Service and become pilots. I thought, That sounds good. So I took radio code in a crash course. Because I was working for Electrical Motors Company, I felt I should know more of the [terminology that was involved in manufacturing electric motors]. So the various local colleges were giving all these wartime courses, short courses. I already had a background in shorthand and learned the terminology [connected with] electric motors. (It was all strange to me.) I took this course in electrical engineering. (I knew I was not going to be an electrical engineer.) I got through it. There were three ladies signed up for it. Two of us showed up the first night. And I was the only one that finished it. I was too stubborn to quit.

My boss knew nothing about this, but I told you he was a terrific guy. One of the engineers that I worked for said, Does Mr. Harris know that you’re doing this? I’m thinking, No, why should he know?

He said, I think you should tell him.

So he went in and he told the boss. That resulted in them paying for my books, which wasn’t a great deal, but...and I got a raise out of it. So that was pretty nice. I stayed with them until I went into the Service.

bc: How did you enlist? Can you talk about the whole process?

RDH: I went downtown to the recruiters, and took tests.... I passed those. And then I waited. The big thing about the Service is: you hurry up and then you wait. So, I waited and I waited. I wasn’t called till, I think, the next Spring. I went to New York and took my basic [training] at Hunter College. (The government had taken that over for the War.) Basic was...learning discipline...and...[things like] “that bed has to be so that I can bounce a quarter off of it!” (They actually did that—bouncing quarters off of made beds. You hear about that, but they actually did it.) We’d have muster in the morning—like five o’clock. We’d all go downstairs and we’d all be in our nightclothes. They’d call roll call. Then we’d go up and get ready for the day. (I don’t think all the bases were the same; but that’s how things were where I was at.) We did a lot of marching and drilling. I loved it; I really did.

bc: This is the WAVES?

RHD: Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service.

bc: What led a lot of the other women that you were serving with to join?

RHD: Most of them were patriotic. A few of them were looking for men, to be honest. Unfortunately a lot of people thought that was the reason all of us joined—but it wasn't.

I want to say this: I hear people complaining about the war—nobody likes it. Unless you have someone who's in the Service, serving, or you're directly connected like that, they don't know what the war's all about. What do they sacrifice? We had air raid drills. When I worked for U. S. Motors, the guys were salesmen—they went out on the road. We had tire rationing. (That was part of my job.) I was running all over town—tire rationing, gas rationing.... At home it was chocolate, sugar...everything was rationed. My brother was in the Service. He was a pilot. I remember, I'd come home from work and my mother would say, Here, hurry up—run up to the store [where Brentwood Square is now]; I've heard they have chocolate. And my mother sent it to my brother. Everybody participated in that War.

bc: Once you finished your basic training, where did you go?

RDH: I was very fortunate. I got what I wanted—you didn't always. It depended on where their need was at the time you went in. They posted, at the end of our training, on a bulletin board—the possibilities, the openings.... (We were all excited.) I had a choice of communications or parachute training or link trainer. [Link trainer:] every so often the pilots would have to be reprocessed to see that they were still able to do their job. Link trainers [flight simulators] were mock-ups of airplanes in a big room and the pilots would be tested there. I had the opportunity of working with that. When I saw “radio communications,” I said, Oh good! Parachuting involved packing parachutes. [bc makes a noise indicating how he understands the awesomeness of the responsibility.] Exactly! Do you know why I didn't want that job? All I could think about was: what if one of them didn't open. (You were supposed to put your name in them) I just didn't want to be responsible for that. So, I went into radio code and, as a result, I went up to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Of course I'd gone to business college and I was typing all the time. I was pretty good at typing because I did it so much. At Miami we had a man teaching us and trying to get our speed up. He wanted 100-words-a-minute. And I was doing, like, 83 or something.... He said, You can get up to 100. And I did get up to 100, but, of course, I made more mistakes. So I said to him, What's the point? But, his job was to get us “up to speed.”

And another thing I did—I can't imagine how I even did it, thinking back—we had to build a radio—just a little set—kind of like a ham radio—we had to do that—I don't know why, but we had to do that.... We were then sent down to Washington, D. C. to where there was a weather station. We were there for a very brief time. Not very long. Then we got our assignments: finally; active duty. They sent me up to Massachusetts, Cape Cod. They had a radio station up there. And I was there until the Germans surrendered. Then they sent us out to Bainbridge Island, off of Seattle, to learn Japanese. We were never allowed to tell that, but, I think, now it's okay. [RDH laughs.]

bc: Did you receive messages?

RDH: We listened for U-boats. I learned that they actually had seen U-boats up by Cape Cod.

We reported to the radio station. And you weren't allowed in there unless you were cleared. (I always thought this was funny: we had our WAVE barracks and they sent a Captain to be in charge of the WAVE barracks. She came down to the radio station and wanted to get in. The Commander of the station wouldn't let her in. She was so upset. He said, You haven't been cleared. And she said, I have to see what conditions my girls are working under. He says, No.)

Eight hours we sat and listened. And mostly static, mostly static. The first time I went to the radio station, I walked in and I saw all these rifles lined up. And that's when they told me that they had spotted U-boats.

bc: Did you ever intercept a communication from a sub?

RDH: Yes, I did.

It was mostly in code and we would get the code and then it would be forwarded down to Washington, D. C. for decoding. I imagine there were other stations but we weren't privy to all that.

bc: Was it [bc raps in rhythm on the desktop]?

RDH: Yes, dit dot dit—the Morse code.

bc: It was never spoken words?

RDH: No, [but only once it wasn't coded], and I can't understand this. I can't understand why. I was working my station one day and all of a sudden [I'm typing and I'm transcribing English!] Wow! And it was Hitler's communication to his U-boats to surrender. And I said, Chief, come here! come here! That was really exciting.

bc: What were you all looking at?

RDH: I was typing this. (That's why we had to have that speed course.) You typed what you heard. [In this instance] it was in English and it was not coded. They did not explain all that to us. We got a unit commendation because of that.

bc: So the War in Europe ended and you went to Seattle.

RDH: To Bainbridge Island. To a school.

bc: All you had to do was record the dots and the dashes. It was obviously in some kind of Japanese code.

RDH: That's why we were sent there [Bainbridge Island]. We were supposed to start school there. When they shipped us out, it was all top secret. "Tomorrow we're leaving, so go downtown, get your boxes, send everything home...."

bc: "Loose lips sink ships."

RDH: So then they put us on [railroad cars]—we called them "boxcars"—they were made for military use—with bunk beds. We were not allowed off till we got to Seattle. The Red Cross or the Salvation Army (probably both) would come down when the military was leaving and they'd bring donuts and coffee. [These relief agencies] weren't allowed on [the train] so whoever was in charge had to go and bring the stuff onto the train. Three days we were on that "boxcar." (And, of course, we didn't see a thing.) We get out there and, like I said, you hurry up and wait. We get out there after this rush rush and the school wasn't ready for us.

They said, Do you want to sit around for a week or ten days till this is ready? Or do you want to be busy? Well, we wanted to be busy. So, they put us down in the kitchen and that was really an experience. [They had huge pots where they cooked potatoes.] We peeled potatoes. We talked the cook into making

strawberry shortcake. Sacks of potatoes: women weren't allowed to lift them; we had to get one of the guys. They were too heavy.

bc: The War didn't last much longer.

RDH: No, we never got to learn the code.

Do you know what a "ship's service" is?

This is Seattle. This particular one...the end of the bar...they had three percent beer out there at that time. One end they sold beer; the other end they sold ice cream sodas. [RDH laughs.] I worked there and I was working there when word came in that the Japanese had surrendered.

They tried to ship as close to home as they could. I ended up in Philadelphia. I was still in the Service. I wasn't discharged. They put us up at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel. (They had taken over so many floors of the Benjamin Franklin.)

I was in Philadelphia and I decided to get married. Back then, when you got married, you were gone: you weren't allowed to stay in the service...the women.

bc: Really.

RDH: Really. They didn't want married women. No children. Nothing like that. The gentleman I married had just been discharged and he had a job waiting for him with an airplane factory up in Connecticut. And this company that I told you I had worked for, their factory was up in Connecticut. So I got in touch with them and my boss—I told you he was so great—at this point he was Vice President up there. "By any chance is there a job?"

"Oh sure. You come on."

So we went up to Connecticut.

I remember in the morning my husband would get a bus that went this way to his place and I'd get a bus that went that way to my place. 'Cause all these factories were outside of town. We didn't stay too long and we came back to Pittsburgh.

I was a homemaker for twelve years.

Then I went back to work part-time—and guess what—U. S. Motors! The girl that was there and helped to hire me, she called me and she said, How do you feel about coming back part-time. (My kids were all in school.) And part-time evolved into full-time. I was at U. S. Motors for about five years. Then I went to work for Proctor & Gamble in Brentwood. (They had a sales office there.)

I got to thinking, I've got all this time in the Service: maybe I'll go with the government. So that's what I did. I ended up in the Department of Justice, and I worked for the Marshall's Office. Very exciting. I did everything there. When female prisoners [were transferred] from Pittsburgh down to Morgantown [West Virginia], our deputies wanted a woman along for their protection so that these women couldn't say anything happened to them. So I would go along.

Howard Turner was, I think, the first Black Marshall in this area while I was working there. And that was during the Jonestown, Guyana incident. Howard Turner had to go over there with other deputies. When he came back, they wanted him to make a report and he dictated all that to me.

I then decided to go with the U. S. Attorney's Office. The division I was with was with the mining industry.... And that's where I retired from.

bc: Are you active in Veterans' organizations?

RDH: Yes. I try. Well, there's the WAVES, the American Legion.... The American Legion post I'm in now there are several women members.

We have meetings. On Veterans Day I put flags on South Side cemetery on the Veterans' graves. The one post I was with they go to the different churches in the area. They lay wreaths.

This year, my post, as a memorial outside of Slater's Funeral Home: my brother's name is on there and my name is on there. They had a service there on Memorial Day. I participated in that. They said to me, Do you want to carry a flag (one of these big flags)? I said, I never did that.... If the wind was blowing, I could just see that.... And they just said, Here. And they stuck this big, heavy flag in my hands.... [RDH laughs.] I was glad to do it. I just didn't want to mess up for them.

bc: Aside from your involvement with Veterans' groups, you volunteer....

RDH: Meals on Wheels. I've done everything but the cooking there. I delivered and I drove and I supervised. They needed a new treasurer; so I became the treasurer. (I end up treasurer everywhere I go.) [She chuckles.] So, at this point, I only volunteer occasionally with Meals on Wheels, but I'm a substitute.

bc: In your lifetime, how has Pittsburgh changed? And for the better or for the worse?

RDH: Are you serious? For the worse.

bc: Do you get into the city much?

RDH: Not any more.

bc: There's no reason for you to go into the city.

RDH: My mother used to take us downtown. There used to be five, six department stores down there. That's where she bought our clothes. We'd go to Horne's, Kauffman's: we'd go to one or the other. (She might see something she liked, but she thought she might do better [at the other store] and we'd walk all the way down to the other store.) We'd stop maybe at Rosenbaum's. (Then she'd decide that she [preferred] the first place and we'd walk back up. There was Donahoe's and McCann's. Oh we loved going in there! My Dad used to meet us occasionally. McCann's had a dining room upstairs. We'd meet him at McCann's and he'd treat us to dinner. We'd go in Donahoe's and they had the pickle barrels. It was nice. I'm glad I grew up when I did.

bc: Did you all dress up when you went Downtown?

RDH: Sure.

When I went for job interviews, I was told, Wear a hat and gloves. To go to a job interview. Otherwise they wouldn't even look at you. It's really changed.

I used to go down to Kauffman's till a couple of years ago. The lady I told you helped me get my first job, we kept in touch over the years. We used to meet down Kauffman's once or twice a year for lunch.

I used to belong to Oasis down there too....

bc: Yes, I'm familiar with Oasis.

RDH: I don't belong right now; I'm not active with it. I took a lot of programs down there.

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

bc: In a sense you live in the suburbs. Is it convenient to live out here?

RDH: I drive so everything's fairly convenient to me.

Where I live we have one bus, the Spencer bus. And it's mainly there for commuters. (It didn't run at all on Sundays.) Now I don't know if we're even going to have it....

I do just want to say one thing—that, in talking about all these wonderful things that happened, and, of course there were bad things that happened too but, I just want to say that one of the wonderful things that happened was having my four children. I'm proud of them.