

5. Beatrice Morales Clifton Recalls Her Experiences at a California Lockheed Airplane Factory, 1944

I'd never thought about working. My brother at that time had separated from his wife, and he had an adopted girl. . . . He brought that girl to me and says, "I'll have her stay with you and I'll give you some money every week." She was sixteen or fifteen and she wanted a job.

They had these offices everywhere in Pasadena, of aircraft. I went in there to try and get her something, but they said, ". . . She's too young." He says, "Why don't you get it?" I said, "Me?" He said, "Yeah, why don't you get the job?" I said, "Well, I don't know." But the more I kept thinking about it, the more I said, "That's a good idea." So I took the forms and when I got home and told my husband, oh! he hit the roof. He was one of those men that didn't believe in the wife ever working. . . . I said, "Well, I've made up my mind. I'm going to go to work regardless of whether you like it or not." . . .

My family and everybody was surprised—his family. I said, "Well, yeah, I'm going to work. . . . My mother didn't say nothing because I always told her, "Mother, you live your life and I live mine." We had that understanding. When I decided to go to work, I told her, "I'm going to go to work and maybe you can take care of the children." She said, "Yeah." . . .

I filled out the papers . . . and I got the job. Why I took Lockheed, I don't know. . . . Then they asked me, "Do you want to go to Burbank, to Los Angeles?" I said, "I don't know where Burbank is." I didn't know my way around. . . . I said, "Well, Los Angeles. The streetcar passes . . . close to where I live, and that drops me off in front."

To me, everything was new. They were doing the P-38s at that time. I was at Plant 2. . . . It was on the fifth floor. I went up there and saw the place, and I said, "Gee———" See, so many parts and things that you've never seen. Me, I'd never seen anything in my whole life. It was exciting and scary at the same time.

They put me way up in the back, putting little plate nuts and drilling holes. They put me with some guy—he was . . . real mean. A lot of them guys at the time

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resented women coming into jobs, and they let you know about it. He says, "Well, have you ever done any work like this?" I said, "No." I was feeling just horrible. Horrible. Because I never worked with men, to be with men alone other than my husband. So then he says "You know what you've got in your hand? That's a rivet gun." I said, "Oh." What could I answer? I was terrified. So then time went on and I made a mistake. I messed up something. . . . He got so irritable with me, he says, "You're not worth the money Lockheed pays you."

. . . When he said that, I dropped the gun and I went running downstairs to the restroom, with tears coming down. This girl from Texas saw me and she followed me. . . . She was one of these "toughies." . . . She asked me what was wrong. I told her what I had done and . . . she says, "Don't worry." She started cussing him. We came back up and she told them all off. . . .

At the end of that first day, I was so tired. I was riding the streetcar and I had to stand all the way from Los Angeles clear to Pasadena. When I got home, the kids . . . said, "Oh, Mom is here." My husband, he didn't have very much to say, 'cause he didn't approve. . . . As time went on, his attitude changed a little, but I don't think he ever really, really got used to the idea of me working. . . .

. . . They gave me a list of the stuff that I would be needing. At that time they used to sell you your tools and your toolboxes through Lockheed. So I bought a box. I bought the clothing at Sears. It was just a pair of pants and a blouse. . . . I felt kind of funny wearing pants. Then . . . I said, "Oh, what the heck." And those shoes! I wasn't used to low shoes. . . .

As time went on, I started getting a little bit better. . . . I learned my job so well that . . . they put me to the next operation. At . . . first, I just began putting little plate nuts. . . . Then afterwards I learned how to drill . . . and burr. . . . Later, . . . I learned to rivet and buck. I got to the point where I was very good.

I had a Mexican girl, . . . and she was as good a buckler as I was a riveter. She would be facing me and we'd just go right on through. We'd go one side and then we'd get up to the corner and I'd hand her the gun or the bucking bar . . . and then we'd come back. . . . We worked pretty hard all day until about 2:00. Then we would slack down.

I had a lot of friends there. . . . We'd sit in the smoking areas . . . in the aisle. Then, some of the girls—on the next corner there was a drugstore that served lunches. . . . We'd talk about our families. . . .

. . . I don't know why I got a chance to learn all the other jobs, but I learned the whole operation until I got up to the front, the last step. They used to put this little flap with a wire, with a hinge. . . . I used to go with a little hammer and a screwdriver and knock those little deals down so that it would be just right. That guy that I used to work with helped me, taught me how to do it, and I could do it just like him.

New people would come in, and they would say, "You teach them the job. You know all the jobs." Sometimes it would make me mad. . . ." But I would still show them.

Then, . . . they'd say, "Look at her now. You should have seen her a year ago when she first came in. You'd go boo and she'd start crying. . . ." I figured this is the only way you're going to survive, so I'm going to do it.

I was just a mother of four kids, that's all. But I felt proud of myself and felt good. . . . I felt good that I could do something, and being that it was war, I felt that I was doing my part.