

Department of History and American Studies

University of Mary Washington

Fredericksburg, Virginia

Barbara Gillis

Rosie the Riveter and the World War II American Home Front Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by

Kendall Simonpietri

in 2012

This interview was conducted by a student in an oral history seminar in the Department of History and American Studies at the University of Mary Washington. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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00:00

Simonpietri- I'm Kendall Simonpietri here with Barbara Gillis on October 24<sup>th</sup> 2012 over the telephone. Barbara is in Scituate, Massachusetts and I am in Stafford County, Virginia. Mrs. Gillis, if you could please tell us your full name.

00:23

Gillis:

My full name is Barbara Ann Gillis

00:25

Simonpietri:

And your date of birth?

00:26

Gillis:

August 18, 1916

00:30

Simonpietri:

And where were you born?

00:31

Gillis:

Brookline, Massachusetts.

00:32

Simonpietri:

Is that where you grew up?

00:34

Gillis:

Yes

00:35

Simonpietri:

Can you tell us a little bit about your father?

00:40

Gillis:

My father also was born in Brookline and he died tragically in 1921 when I was four years old. Of an accidental burning.

00:55

Simonpietri:

Was that work related?

1:00

Gillis:

Yes, he and his brother were contractors in Watertown and somebody came, my father was in the garage, and somebody came and, I don't know what happened, if there was kerosene but a fire started and my father tried to put it out and his clothing caught fire and within 24 hours he was gone.

1:28

Simonpietri:

Wow, can you tell us his full name?

1:33

Gillis:

His name?

1:34

Simonpietri:

Yes

1:35

Gillis:

Robert Jay James McCue, M-C-C-U-E.

1:41

Simonpietri:

Ok, and can you tell us a little bit about your mother and where she's from and her name?

1:46

Gillis:

Pardon me?

1:47

Simonpietri:

Can you tell us a little about your mother, where she's from and what her name was?

1:50

Gillis:

Her name was Mary Christine Coakley, C-O-A-K-L-E-Y. And she was from Chelsea Massachusetts.

2:00

Simonpietri:

And did you have any siblings?

2:05

Gillis:

I had one brother and one sister.

2:08

Simonpietri:

And where were you in the birth order?

2:11

Gillis:

Middle.

2:12

Simonpietri:

What's the age difference between you and your brother?

2:19

Gillis:

We were all about three years apart.

2:22

Simonpietri:

Can you tell us a little bit about growing up in Brookline?

2:29

Gillis:

Well, actually after my father died a house was being built for us in Watertown where the contracting business was located. And we went there in 1921. I went to the Rosary Academy which was run by Dominican Nuns and then I went to St. Patrick's school for a short while. When we moved to Brookline in 1929 and we went to public school and Brookline High School had a wonderful reputation for scholastic. I graduated in 1934, I was 17 would've been 18 in August.

3:32

Simonpietri:

So, was that typical to graduate at 17?

3:38

Gillis:

Yes, we started actually 16 was not unusual because depending upon your date of birth we started Kindergarten at age 4 so 17 was probably the average age.

3:58

Simonpietri:

So you were about 14 when the Great Depression started, correct?

4:10

Gillis:

It started, when? 1929?

4:13

Simonpietri:

Yeah, around 1929, 1930.

4:15

Gillis:

Uh, huh.

4:17

Simonpietri:

Can you tell us, do you remember?

4:22

Gillis:

I do, actually. I think my mother enjoyed the fact that we wore our winter coats probably a little longer while we had out grown them. We had shoes resoled and re heeled. There were cobblers in those days. And then I had a younger sister who wore the things I outgrew. We never had a problem with food. The one thing I do remember is probably in the early 30s my mother saying she thought the Depression was coming to an end because she had received 50 cent dividends on one of her preferred stock shares. But because my mother was not dependent on a husband to bring in weekly wages our life was not really affected too much by the Depression. But we were very much aware of it.

5:47

Simonpietri:

So after your father's death how did that affect your family?

5:33

Gillis:

Well, of course we relocated from Brookline to Watertown and my mother was pregnant with the fourth child at the time but she miscarried so we just grew up with a single parent which was not so unusual in those days because most, many, of my mother's friends were widows their husbands having succumbed to either World War I casualties or the flu epidemic.

6:36

Simonpietri:

Can you tell me a little bit about the flu epidemic?

6:40

Gillis:

I don't remember too much about it. I know that my mother said it was the only time she was frightened because one day you would see someone and the next day you would hear that they had passed away. I really was too young. I think it was around 1918 and I would have been two.

7:08

Simonpietri:

But your family wasn't affected by it personally?

7:13

Gillis:

Not that I am aware of.

7:15

Simonpietri:

What was your favorite subject in school growing up?

7:20

Gillis:

English. English Literature

7:25

Simonpietri:

Can you tell me a little bit about what English was like?

7:28

Gillis:

Well we had two different classes. One was Literature and the other was Composition. And we had two different teachers for each. On the composition we did a lot of conjugating of verbs and punctuation, paragraphing. Learning the basics really. And the literature we were assigned some reading and then of course we had book reports on the books we had chosen to read.

8:15

Simonpietri:

Ok, what subjects did you have in grade school?

8:20

Gillis:

Grade school we had English, Math, Civics, French. In the seventh and eighth grade we had French.

8:36

Simonpietri:

Was that the only foreign language that they offered?

8:40

Gillis:

Yes, in grade school yes. In high school they had Spanish and Latin.

8:48

Simonpetri:

What about high school classes. You mentioned the foreign language classes. What other kind of classes did you take?

8:56

Gillis:

I didn't take any foreign language in high school.

9:03

Simonpietri:

Was it not a popular thing to take?

9:07

Gillis:

Well the college bound students took Latin because it was required and we did have a Spanish club, my brother belonged to that. But I don't know what they did with the French. Those were the three languages taught at Brookline High.

9:32

Simonpietri:

What other kind of classes did you take in high school?

9:36

Gillis:

Well they had technical courses, general courses, commercial courses. The commercial courses were very popular because of course the girls were learning short hand and typing. They were looking forward to work when they graduated. The general course, I was thinking of becoming a nurse so I took classes in biology, physics and chemistry.

10:18

Simonpietri:

So were the classes divided based on gender?

10:20

Gillis:

No, they were coed.

10:24

Simonpietri:

But they were classes-

10:28

Gillis:

P.T. was divided girls and boys. Physical training. We did have on campus a pool and a separate gymnasium and after school sports.

10:45

Simonpietri:  
Did you play sports?

10:48

Gillis:

I did, I played field hockey and some class day dancing. That was, but we had class day every year just before graduation.

11:10

Simonpietri:

And what's that?

11:12

Gillis:

We had costumes. They were all made with the paper, crepe paper.

11:29

Simonpietri:

And you said that was a dancing class?

11:32

Gillis:

No, yeah (laughs). The one that I remember we were Indians and we had headbands with a feather in it as part of the costume.

11:46

Simonpietri:

And was that all girls?

11:50

Gillis:

Yes, yes it was. Oh we had basketball.

11:57

Simonpietri:

Uh Huh, and was that for girls?

12:02

Gillis:

Yes, and I was, because of my height I was taller than most of the girls I usually played side center. Up close to the net.

12:16

Simonpietri:

So, sports options for girls consisted of field hockey, basketball, and your dance class?

12:13

Gillis:

Oh and also we had track and archery.

12:27

Simonpietri:

Oh, ok. What kinds of things did you do for fun growing up?

12:34

Gillis:

Well, we didn't have a lot of equipment. We played (jack stones?) hopscotch, and (relieve-o?).

12:50

Simonpietri:

And what's that?

12:52

Gillis:

We would often go off and hide and whoever found them would relieve them and holler relieve-o. I spent a lot of time at the children's museum in Jamaica Plains. I would take my ice skates and my mother would think I was going skating but I loved to go in to the museum. They had questions so that you could go around to the various rooms in the museum and answer questions you were able to find.

13:41

Simonpietri:

Sounds like you had a good time. How old were you when you had your first job?

13:50

Gillis:

Well, actually I didn't have any.

13:53

Simonpietri:

Oh, you didn't

13:54

Gillis:

Nope.

13:57

Simonpietri:

Were your friends' families in similar economic situations as yours?

14:01

Gillis:

Yes

14:03

Simonpietri

Did you live in a neighborhood?

14:07

Gillis:

Yes

14:08

Simonpietri:

Can you talk about your neighborhood a little bit?

14:12

Gillis:

Oh, well, everybody knew everybody. If one parent as away the neighbor would act as a surrogate parent. Many times if there was illness the neighbors would probably bring a meal to the house.

14:43

Simonpietri:

So you lived in a pretty tight-knit community.

14:35

Gillis:

It was, the neighbors were wonderful. Of course if you misbehaved they would also inform your parents.

That was probably the least pleasant parts of it.

15:02

Simonpietri:

Highschool, did you have homecomings and proms like we have today?

15:08

Gillis:

No, we had, the biggest gathering was the night before Thanksgiving for the Newton? High School football game and the song we sang was take the line for Brookline to the turn of the Harvard cheer. That was about the only thing we did for sport.

15:42

Simonpietri:

What kind of options were there for social functions for you?

15:47

Gillis:

Well, there weren't that many social functions because people couldn't afford fancy dresses, you know. Dances and so forth would require dressing up and a lot of kids had jobs after school delivering papers, and from the grocery stores they used to have order boys that's o-r-d-e-r. And they would have a cart that would pull the groceries from the store to the home of the person who had ordered them. A lady might go in in the morning and leave an order of the things she wanted and then after school it would be delivered by that young boy. And girls did babysitting.

16:55

Simonpietri:

So those were the popular after school jobs for high schoolers?

17:00

Gillis:

Yes

17:03

Simonpietri:

Can you tell me a little bit about your high school graduation? What year did you say you graduated?

17:05

Gillis:

1934

17:14

Simonpietri:

And how was that?

17:15

Gillis:

We all wore white dresses; we did not use the academic gowns, and so that when we stood on the stage the hem had to be 10 inches from the floor. And long sleeves, we got in line by height. I was at the front of the girl's group and we of course were at the upper part of the stage. It was descending so that we were up back. The taller people would be up back. And then the boys, we were separated the girls were on one side and the boys on the other. The boys were limited to white shirts and ties wearing navy blue suits.

18:26

Simonpietri:

Do you know why you didn't wear the graduation gown? Was it not a popular thing to wear back then?

18:32

Gillis:

The academic gown?

18:34  
Simonpietri:  
Yes

18:35  
Gillis:  
They were unheard of. For high school.

18:43  
Simonpietri:  
So what did you do after graduation?

18:47  
Gillis:  
Well, let's see. I worked at a specialty shop. As a cashier in a restaurant and I went to school nights.

19:04  
Simonpietri:  
So, were those college classes?

19:07  
Gillis:  
Yes, at a business school.

19:13  
Simonpietri:  
And you said you were a cashier at a grocery shop?

19:16  
Gillis:  
No, at a restaurant.

19:19  
Simonpietri:  
Oh, at a restaurant. Sorry. And what was the first job you had after high school?

19:30  
Gillis:  
Well, what did I do? Oh I think I worked at a school cafeteria. At the high school. I worked there for a while.

19:48  
Simonpietri:

And how did you get that job?

19:51

Gillis:

I had studied dietician as an elective and the woman who was in charge of the lunches in all of the schools in Brookline knew me and she met me and asked me if I wanted a job and I said yes. And that was how I go to, her name was Mrs. Potter. I forgot for a while. I wasn't crazy about it.

20:33

Simonpietri:

Were you making food and serving it?

20:35

Gillis:

I made sandwiches and salads.

20:40

Simonpietri:

Was that what they typically served for high school food?

20:49

Gillis:

Yes, the luncheons were 10 cents and you had a hot plate, a sandwich and soup. And of course they always had the little milk, half pint of milk.

21:12

Simonpietri:

So, from 1934 to the start of the war were you basically working in?

21:23

Gillis:

I was working in a specialty shop, women's clothes, kinda pricey. I got that through the people who owned it were related to the people I did babysitting for. A friend and I were lucky enough to get jobs from them and one of their sons was our classmate.

21:59

Simonpietri:

In high school?

22:00

Gillis:

Yes, high school classmate.

22:03

Simonpietri:

And what did you do in the specialty shop?

22:05

Gillis:

I did, I maintained the inventory and stock. Kind of a bookkeeping job. I received incoming merchandise, labeled it, priced it, and coded so that if someone by any chance negotiated whoever was looking at the ticket knew how much of a margin they could reduce because the original cost would be coded on the ticket. The front of the ticket would have the selling price and it was one of those situations, generally when the sale was publicized they would take a certain percentage off all gowns, all dresses.

23:15

Simonpietri:

So between high school and the start of the war you worked in a cafeteria, restaurant as a cashier and the specialty shop as the bookkeeper. Did you have any other jobs?

23:29

Gillis:

No, I think that was it.

23:34

Simonpietri:

Oh, and you mentioned you babysat.

23:37

Gillis:

Oh yeah, in-between.

23:40

Simonpietri:

Did you live in your family home?

23:43

Gillis:

Yes

23:45

Simonpietri:

And you mentioned earlier that during the Great Depression, money really wasn't an issue. Did your mother work?

23:53

Gillis:

No, she had, my mother had very little formal education. She did not have job skills. Once in a while she had a friend who was a caterer and he would help her. But because of the circumstances under which my father died there was workman's compensation and instead of taking a lump sum settlement she took, I think, a weekly benefit. And during the time we lived in

Watertown we lived rent free in one of my Uncle's houses. The house my father was having built was sold and I don't know how much money he had invested in that but I'm sure mother got the results of that sale. And then when we, my brother and I, anything we made we turned over to my mother.

25:12

Simonpietri:

Oh, ok so you helped support your mother?

25:15

Gillis:

Well, (laughs) you can hardly call it supporting. You know a dollar or two. But that's what children did in those days. If you earned something you didn't keep it.

25:33

Simonpietri:

So, when did you move out of your mother's home?

25:40

Gillis:

When I went in to service. I never really moved out.

25:45

Simonpietri:

So, I guess we'll move on to the start of the war. How did you hear about the war?

25:56

Gillis:

Well, actually the Sunday in December a friend and I were at a party and we did not know about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You know, we were dancing and playing charades and the young man's mother made sure we all had plenty to eat. And I would say that we left around nine and Norma and I got home around eleven. And the next morning was a holy day of obligation and my aunt picked me up and we went to church. And that's when I heard about Pearl Harbor. I wasn't completely sure about the significance of what it would mean and then gradually we became very much aware of that fact that we were at war.

27:02

Simonpietri:

Building up to Pearl Harbor there wasn't really any indication that we might go to war?

27:13

Gillis:

Oh, I think you could probably sense that something was about to happen. Being young, you know, you just took each day as it came.

27:28

Simonpietri:

Right, so is that, um, typical? You mentioned you were at a party. Can you tell me a little bit more about the parties you would go to or what other kind of social things you went to as a young adult?

27:43

Gillis:

Well, Norma and I had been up in New Hampshire during the summer and we had met these young men. We just happened to be having a party that Sunday; I guess it was December 7<sup>th</sup>. That was generally what we did. Young people gathered at other young people's homes and we had records, big band records. And there was dancing. Just normal gatherings of young people.

28:27

Simonpietri:

Was there a lot of dating or courting going on between your group of friends?

28:35

Gillis:

Uh, again, um, you know there wasn't a heck of a lot of money for young people. And those getting married were going to have to live with their parents. Nobody was rushing in to it. The marriage rush started when the young men were being drafted and going off. That's when the commitments started taking place.

29:14

Simonpietri:

So, after, you mentioned after Pearl Harbor that it started to become evident that the war was getting serious. How that was made evident? Like what changed?

29:34

Gillis:

Well, to begin with there were certain requirements. In the home you had to have black out curtains. We had air wardens. Some of the men not going off to war, even women were air wardens. And if they could see a glimmer of light from any window they would come up and let you know that you had to be more careful. And when somebody rang your doorbell at night you turned the light off when you answered the door so that the light would not be seen from the air. We also, there was gasoline rationing and there were A, B, C depending upon need. And the C were given stamps, I'm not quite sure how many. They were the person who had the least amount. B were probably people, my aunt was a truant officer in the public school system and I think she had a B sticker on her car. And C was for someone like doctors and people involved with war work. Also, the upper half of the headlights on an automobile was painted black to reduce the glare of light. Although I think that during the war years the crime rates were on the low side. Siphoning gasoline was one of the things that evolved. I know that my aunt had these locks for her gas cap. I understand that the 1978 when there was a gas shortage and possibly now that the price is so high they lock gasoline caps is once again popular. Also, some foods were rationed. And once again there was a stamp thing. And then it began to be very popular to write to all the military. And there was a slogan, "If you don't write, W-R-I-T-E, you are wrong." And

the outgoing mail went to the post offices FPO or APO. Those were for the service people out of the country. The incoming mail from out of the country was photo-stated. It was called V as in Victor. V-mail. And all the letters from that came from abroad were reduced. I have tons of them in my memory book from the brother and other boys that I wrote to. It was very popular to write to people that you didn't even know if somebody gave you their name.

33:47

Simonpietri:

So how many men would you write to at a time would you say?

33:52

Gillis:

Oh, I think three or four. I know two all through the war. One young man, I had some letters come back and they were marked killed in action and the officer who put the stamp on signed me and that's how I knew one of them had been killed. There was a young man from Texas, Claude Rayburn.

34:33

Simonpietri:

You said people would just give you the names of these men?

34:39

Gillis:

I think he was stationed with another young man from Brookline who also lost his life. I wrote to Claude.

34:50

Simonpietri:

How was your community affected by the war?

34:58

Gillis:

I'm sure it was, but not, you know other than finding people to do work normally done by the male members of the family that became increasingly difficult. Women had to take on many things. For example our house in Brookline had been heated by coal and we were fortunate enough to have converted to gas heat just before it became difficult. I think, as a matter of fact we were the last house to have the gas installed. But, with the coal that would have meant putting ashes in ash barrels and putting them out for collection and that would have been very difficult for my mother to do. Because my brother, he drafted very early.

36:20

Simonpietri:

What other kinds of jobs in the community did women have to step in to?

36:25

Gillis:

Well, of course you've heard of Rosie the Riveter. They did all kinds of jobs. War work.

36:41

Simonpietri:

So it was mainly war work and not jobs that had already been established?

36:48

Gillis:

No, I think they were created by the need, you know they weren't?

36:55

Simonpietri:

Did you have any friends who took on these jobs?

37:06

Gillis:

I honestly don't know what they were doing because I was in the military.

37:09

Simonpietri:

How far in to the war did you join the military?

37:15

Gillis:

I joined November 28<sup>th</sup> 1942. And the reason that date is indelibly stamped in my mind is because that is the day of the Coconut Grove fire in Boston. It was a night club and the loss of life was over 400, 426 people died. Not from burns so much but inhalation. And it was a chemical from ornamental things in the area. It started at a lower level in what they called the melody lounge and they had revolving doors and that was a big problem. It was the only exit and of course people panicked and the fumes from the I don't know what you call it.

38:37

Simonpietri:

Was it like plastic maybe?

38:40

Gillis:

Probably but I don't know how popular plastic was but it was something that was flammable and the fumes were deadly.

38:57

Simonpietri:

So you joined not too far in to the war.

39:03

Gillis:

Right.

39:04

Simonpietri:

Was it popular for women to join the military?

39:11

Gillis:

Yes, yes it was.

39:16

Simonpietri:

So from the beginning it was pretty popular.

39:19

Gillis:

My aunt was a nurse during the First World War She was with the American expeditionary forces and was wanted to put my on a nursing course. She and one of her friends plotted that I could go in to the service. Her friend said now we don't want her to go in to the WAACs but eh Navy will be coming out with some form of organization and she should join the Navy. So, the next that I knew in July the Navy came up with Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services, WAVES, and my Aunt wrote the application I filled out all the stuff and took the test and I've forgotten. . .Oh, they turned me down because I was under weight and I for weeks they gave me a month I think and I sat down and I would eat snacks and bananas and oh good Lord, it seemed as though all I did was eat. I think I gained a pound. I was accepted. They decided what they wanted to prove was that I could gain weight. And oddly enough when I was discharged I weighed exactly what I did when they turned me down, 117 pounds.

41:11

Simonpietri:

How long were you a WAVE?

41:17

Gillis:

I was discharged October third 1945, two years, ten months, and six days I believe.

41:29

Simonpietri:

Do you know why your aunts didn't want you to become a WAAC?

41:39

Gillis:

No, they thought the Navy was a better branch of the service even though they had been in the Army.

41:49

Simonpietri:

So they were just biased, no real reason behind it?

41:56

Gillis:

Not that I'm aware of.

42:01

Simonpietri:

Obviously your aunt supported you becoming a WAVE, but how did the rest of your family feel about it?

42:08

Gillis:

Oh, everybody was, you know, enthused. Everybody wanted to serve, everybody wanted to do something for the war effort.

42:23

Simonpietri:

What other ways did your family contribute to the war effort?

42:27

Gillis:

Well I'm sure they made sacrifices, they had little food to do without. Stockings were a problem. Most of the stockings were nylons or silk. Nylon had just started to come out but there was silk or rayon. That was the two popular brands. And obviously became scarce. Some of the cosmetic companies came out with a solution you could rub on your legs, flesh colored and you could go without stockings and cover your legs with that. In fact, during the summer in Florida we were allowed to go without stockings but most of us had tan legs by that time.

43:31

Simonpietri:

The point of stockings was to not make your legs look so pale?

43:38

Gillis:

Yeah. We were usually wearing stockings.

43:36

Simonpietri:

What was the process like to become a WAVE? You said you had to fill out a lot of forms and gain weight. Did you have to go to a recruiter or?

43:59

Gillis:

I went to, I suppose, it was a place in Boston. And they gave all types of aptitude tests. In fact, I had no mechanical aptitude. When I finished boot school I was sent to Naval Aviations technical training center in Norman, Oklahoma to train to become a machinist mate. A machinist mate serviced aircraft and all of the parts we worked with such as spark plugs and cylinders etcetera were all clean but when I was assigned to the naval air station in Jacksonville, Florida and expected to use my mechanical skills they discovered I was allergic to grease and oil. So, all that training went to waste. But however I became secretary to the engine overhaul division officer. And I worked with the personnel officer. It was very interesting.

45:36

Simonpietri:

What was interesting about it?

45:39

Gillis:

Well, I got to see how they promoted the programs to civilian employees, we worked with civilians and if anything went wrong we hated the civilians, we'd say it's just a civilian (laughs). Oh, it was amazing.

46:04

Simonpietri:

It sounds like you travelled around quite a bit.

46:08

Gillis:

No, I just had my boot training at the Iowa State Teaching College and about six months in Norman Oklahoma and my last assignment was at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida.

46:27

Simonpietri:

Oh, ok.

46:30

Gillis:

And then four years after I was discharged I joined the reserves and retired in 1970.

46:44

Simonpietri:

So after you were discharged after the war you joined the reserves

46:53

Gillis:

Four years after.

46:54

Simonpietri:

Oh, four years after you were discharged?

46:59

Gillis:

Right after World War II I went back to my job at the John Hancock Insurance Company in Boston.

47:10

Simonpietri:

You went back to John Hancock?

47:14

Gillis:

Yes, that's where, I left the Hancock to go in to service.

47:21

Simonpietri:

Oh, ok.

47:22

Gillis:

That's where I was working.

47:24

Simonpietri:

What did you do for John Hancock?

47:27

Gillis:

Secretarial work. Then I became a group insurance underwriter.

47:37

Simonpietri:

And what, um, did that entail?

47:40

Gillis:

Accepting risks, establishing rates. Uh, renewing.

47:52

Simonpietri:

Before the war did you feel like as a woman you didn't have many job opportunities?

47:57

Gillis:

No, I don't know whether that was to not being aware of discrimination or just plain acceptance. That's the way it was.

48:16

Simonpietri:

Right, but you weren't aware of it?

48:19

Gillis:

Not really.

48:21

Simonpietri:

So, moving to these different places as a WAVE did you notice if different parts of the country were experiencing the war differently than you did in Brookline?

48:41

Gillis:

Um, when I was in Florida I was definitely appalled at the housing for the what we called at that time colored people. I, as I told you I did personnel work, and when we, the employees, were assigned I had to get certain information from them and I was calling Ms. Smith, Ms. Brown and the senior civilian operator came out and said "You do not address the colored employees as Ms. Or Mrs.. You call them by their first name and if it's elderly you call her Aunt" and I said oh good heavens. So there was definitely discrimination which astonished me. Another shocker was aboard a train which stopped at the Mason Dixon line and the conductor ordered all blacks including black military personnel to another car at the rear.

49:53

Simonpietri:

Because you weren't used to that in Brookline?

49:54

Gillis:

No, and there were railroads in the south where there were sections where colored people could sit and the water fountains were designated colored. The restrooms were separated by colors. This was something that as a northerner astonished me.

50:27

Simonpietri:

Were there African Americans in your community growing up?

50:32

Gillis:

No, in high school there was one colored girl.

50:41

Simonpietri:

But she was in your classes and wasn't treated necessarily differently?

50:49

Gillis:

No, not that I'm aware of. Now she might have been more sensitive to attitudes than, you know those of us who had no idea.

51:04

Simonpietri:

But it wasn't as blatant as you saw in the South?

51:08

Gillis:

Pardon me?

51:09

Simonpietri:

But the discrimination wasn't as blatant as it was in the south?

51:14

Gillis:

Well, with one colored person, you know, what could you do?

51:22

Simonpietri:

So, did your feelings towards the war change after joining the WAVES?

51:30

Gillis:

I don't think so.

51:37

Simonpietri:

Do you remember going to movie theaters and that sort of thing for fun?

51:44

Gillis:

Excuse me?

51:45

Simonpietri:

What kind of things did you do for fun as a WAVE?

51:52

Gillis:

Oh, what did we do? We went to a lot of dances. We went to the movies. There were bowling alleys on the base and they had ice cream parlors. Um, the movies were a great source of entertainment. And in uniform you could go to the movies downtown for a dime. Towards the end of the war my friend had a convertible and there must have been seven or eight of us who went in to Jacksonville. We were going to the movies. And it was the end of the month and everyone was short of money and I was holding all the dimes and as we were getting out of the car I dropped one. And I said oh good heavens I've dropped a dime! So I was telling Helen to move the car forward and back and all of us were looking for the dime and all of a sudden I looked up and people were crowded around wondering. And I heard someone say "she lost a diamond." Oh good heavens, we didn't dare say that we had just lost a dime. But, uh, Helen finally moved the car and we picked the dime up and went in to the movies.

53:29

Simonpietri:

Do you remember any specific movies?

53:34

Gillis:

The White Cliffs of Dover and the reason I remember it is it was a tear jerker and I was with two of my roommates. Gloria and I were sobbing and the other roommate said "Would you two stop that, it's only a movie" and then we started laughing and of course the people in the theater became annoyed and hushed us.

54:00

Simonpietri:

Um, I read about how movie theaters were used to broadcast news about the war. Do you remember any of that?

54:13

Gillis:

They always had newsreels. And, uh, that was quite a wonderful thing. You could see some of the scenes that were taking place. Yeah, when you went to the movies they had a main picture as well as a B picture that was not the thing that drew you in but was always nice and they had news and they also had some sports. The one thing I remember is a sports announcer who always ended his portion of the program by saying "If you can't take part in a sport be one anyway" and I think his name was Grantland Rice. I'm not positive but I thought that was a lovely way to end a program.

55:16

Simonpietri:

So you mentioned sports. Were sports were popular during the war?

55:26

Gillis:

Yes, in fact if I'm not mistaken there was a woman pro baseball team or teams.

55:39

Simonpietri:

And did you learn about that through the movies?

55:44

Gillis:

No, I don't know how I know. Probably something I have read.

55:54

Simonpietri:

Were newspapers also a popular source? How else would you get information about the war?

56:04

Gillis:

I don't really know. Um, I know we were listening to the radio in the middle of the night for the D-Day invasion. Gloria Rogers, one of our roommates, knew that it was going to be on. How, I don't know. And we didn't understand what it was going to mean. We did have some of the sailors of the (Free French Navy?) and we also had working in the galleys some of the German POWs and we were not allowed to fraternize with them. And one day one of my coworkers and I were in the galley and they were cleaning the tables and one of them said, do you want ze pepper (uses accent). He was asking if we wanted to use the pepper and neither of us knew what to do whether to even answer him. You know he was cute and he was young so we just shook our heads no. We were afraid if we even smiled it would fraternizing with the enemy.

57:46

Simonpietri:

Did you fraternize with other male member of the US military at all?

57:56

Gillis:

Yeah, we dated. Good heavens yes. We were never without someone to accompany you to wherever you were going.

58:09

Simonpietri:

So it was pretty popular to date with in?

58:13

Gillis:

Yeah, I dated one young man quite a bit.

58:22

Simonpietri:

Was it looked down upon at all?

58:25

Gillis:  
Oh, no.

58:37

Simonpietri:  
So, I mean it sounds like you really enjoyed being a WAVE.

58:43

Gillis:  
I did! There were certainly bittersweet moments. You know, receiving the killed in action and hearing other losses, you know. One of the young men that worked with us was called up to the division officer's office; his name was Buddy Leadbetter and his brother was aboard the Lexington and his brother was killed and the division officer had to tell him and my roommate and I were sitting outside and of course we were crying, oh gosh. He was so young, Buddy.

59:53

Simonpietri:  
What were your favorite parts about being a WAVE?

59:57

Gillis:  
I don't know, just the joy of having the privilege to serve and being a part of something that you hoped was helping the war effort.

1:00:19

Simonpietri:  
Were you treated differently as a WAVE than you were as a civilian?

1:00:24

Gillis:  
I must say the treatment was very good. I think the men were protective of us. There was an incident where it was rumored that some officer had been caught in the women's barracks and that he had left his shoes and I was talking to some of the officers in the office and said isn't that ridiculous, why would he take his shoes off to walk around all the time without shoes on. And Mr. Burgedy said "Barbara, a gentleman never kisses a lady goodnight without removing his hat" so I had to do a little (laughs) to figure out what he was talking about but that is how they were gentlemanly. I must say we were treated very well.

1:01:34

Simonpietri:  
Even in the public?

1:01:38

Gillis:  
Yeah, I would say.

1:01:47

Simonpietri:

So you friends before you went in to the service how did they adjust to the war time conditions? Did they find?

1:01:59

Gillis:

It's funny you should mention that because when I came home many of the girls had married and relocated to where their husband's home had been and I was quite surprised. Conversely some of my brother's friends had relocated to where their wives were from so there was enough moving which in the pre war days the neighborhoods were stabilized and was very unusually to relocate but with World War II it just uprooted everybody it seemed.

1:02:46

Simonpietri:

So they were meeting people from different parts of the country or state?

1:02:50

Gillis:

Young men from California who were stationed at Fort Devins met girls and brought them back home with them.

1:03:07

Simonpietri:

Did any of your friends, women friends, join the military as well?

1:03:13

Gillis:

Uh, no, not really but I made loads of friends and the friendships were enduring. There was only one gal left and she is now, she's a former roommate and I've just learned that she has a liver cancer which is very aggressive. Jo was younger than I she is in her late eighties, she may even be ninety.

1:03:58

Simonpietri:

How did the war and being a WAVE change your life?

1:04:08

Gillis:

Oh, I think it broadened my horizons. Um, I think I came out with more confidence, self confidence, then when I went in.

1:04:24

Simonpietri:

So you were about twenty-six when you joined?

1:04:27

Gillis:  
Correct.

1:04:28

Simonpietri:  
When you came out three years later?

1:04:34

Gillis:  
Just about

1:04:36

Simonpietri:  
So you were twenty-nine when you got out? So you were-

1:04:42

Gillis:  
Pretty old

1:04:43

Simonpietri:  
Ok, um, so can you tell me a little bit about your life after the war? Do you think more opportunities were open to you?

1:04:55

Gillis:  
Absolutely. Uh during the Korean conflict the company decided if they lost men to the same extent that they did during World War II they had better groom women for the jobs held by men. And I was selected to become a, what was it, an underwriter's assistant and that was quite an honor just to have the word underwriter connected with a woman. And then from there I became an assistant underwriter and then I became an underwriter and my last job before I retired in 1970 was regional underwriting coordinator. Uh, when they decided to decentralize the underwriting team I was chosen with another underwriter to open an underwriting area in San Francisco and that was I believe 1963.

1:06:37

Simonpietri:  
So you moved to San Francisco?

1:06:39

Gillis:  
Yes

1:06:41

Simonpietri:

Wow

1:06:42

Gillis:

And then in 19, uh, 70 it was decided decentralization was very effective, uh, the Midwest had followed us and now they decided they'd decentralized the rest and I was asked to transfer back to the home office in Boston to, uh, help the remaining underwriting areas to relocate. And that's how I became the regional underwriting coordinator. And then I retired in 1972

1:07:37

Simonpietri:

Wow, sounds like you had a pretty long and fruitful career.

1:07:41

Gillis:

Thirty years.

1:07:43

Simonpietri:

And so you said that becoming an underwriter was pretty unheard of for a woman?

1:07:50

Gillis:

Yes.

1:07:54

Simonpietri:

How so?

1:07:59

Gillis:

Well, I'm not sure.

1:08:04

Simonpietri:

It was just a job that was mainly delegated for a man?

1:08:07

Gillis:

As a rule, yes. It must have been.

1:08:12

Simonpietri:

So, the war?

1:08:18

Gillis:

It was the Korean conflict that put the fear in to management. They thought that perhaps the men would be going back but obviously they did not, it didn't come about.

1:08:36

Simonpietri:

Can you tell me a little bit about your life in San Francisco? How was that?

1:08:45

Gillis:

Well, it was wonderful. For the first time I had my own apartment and my sister lived in San Francisco she had married but I was determined that I would not interfere and try and make my social life a part from hers. I had wonderful co workers and they were from, where were they from? Let's see, oh, I think the mid west. Yeah, Illinois. They were from Illinois. And we did everything and explored everywhere. We even went to one of the Rose Bowl parades down in Pasadena. We, weekends were- oh, we went to the casinos up in Nevada and there was never an idle moment but there was one time where the San Francisco national bank, we had just deposited our paychecks, and the bank closed for sale and so we did not have a lot of cash and the group of us pooled what we had and, uh, bought our food and, um, I drove to work so we wouldn't have to spend our cash for the public transportation, the MUNI it was called. And what else did we do? Oh, I can remember one of the girls was cooking and we bought one onion, it was amazing how much we stretched until the auditors came and we could withdraw some of our money and I still have somewhere movies of the lines of people waiting to get in to the bank to see what they could withdraw.

1:11:29

Simonpietri:

And why did they close?

01:11:31

Gillis:

I've forgotten what the failure was. I'm not sure but it was kind of a hair raising experience at the time but we had a lot of fun with it. We learned how pooling your resources can make survival very easy and fun.

01:12:01

Simonpietri:

Um, was it unusual for a young woman to have her own apartment?

01:12:10

Gillis:

Not at that time, most of the people had shared expenses. The girls that I was friendly with, there were two or three who shared the cost of the apartment.

01:12:33

Simonpietri:

And then after you moved back to-

01:12:40

Gillis:

Boston

01:12:40

Simonpietri:

Mhm, what was your life like after your retirement? What did you do?

01:12:47

Gillis:

Oh, well I got married. I married Ray

01:12:51

Simonpietri:

Oh, ok, can you tell me a little bit about that?

01:12:55

Gillis:

Uh, well, Norma was my dearest friend, Ray's first wife and, uh, we had done just about everything together from the time we were young. And I was god mother to both boys and, um, it's funny after some of your friends marry your social life changes and, uh, Ray was always, he always played cards with the men on Saturday nights and so I would be down here with Norma and we would play Scrabble and Canasta and uh all through the years we remained very good friends. And the year I was transferred back to Boston my mother died the day my furniture came and that December Norma died very suddenly and I thought why did I ever accept a transfer back here? And, oh, my heart was broken. Well it seems Norma left me her greatest treasures, her husband and her family. Jay was only ten when she died and a wonderful child and I knew what she would want for him and if anybody had every told me I would have been married to Ray I never would have believed it. And so, uh, Sandy had married before. She was married and living on the west coast as a matter of fact. She was in Santa Maria while I was in San Francisco. But, uh, life changed radically. And then at Christmas of seventy-one I asked Ray what'd he like for Christmas and he said I'd like for you to retire and so I had turned fifty-five and had thirty years in January with eighty-five points it was possible to retire so I requested from the board of directors a retirement and it was approved so I retired in January of 1972. And then, uh, I tackled the role of wife and mother.

1:16:27

Simonpietri:

So after you retired you mostly stayed home and took care of the family?

1:16:31

Gillis:

Well we did a lot of travelling. Good heavens, I couldn't tell you where we've been. One of the trips we went to Caracas, Venezuela. We took Jay with us on that one. Where else did we go? We took a bunch of cruises, went to the west coast a few times a year because Ray was retired too an, um.

1:17:09

Simonpietri:

He was in the military during World War II as well, right?

1:17:13

Gillis:

Yes he was he was in the Air Force. He was in the North African campaign and in England for a while. But he had a great sense of humor and loads of fun to be with.

01:17:31

Simonpietri:

You said your brother was drafted early on in the war.

01:17:36

Gillis:

Mine was, yes.

01:17:37

Simonpietri:

How long was he in, was he in for the whole war?

01:17:43

Gillis:

Yes he was, in fact he arrived home after I did.

01:17:51

Simonpietri:

What did your younger sister do during the war?

01:17:53

Gillis:

Pardon me?

01:17:54

Simonpietri:

What did your younger sister do during the war?

01:17:59

Gillis:

My sister did MIT in the radiation lab and after the war she worked with the atomic energy commissioned and they transferred to university of Chicago and, uh, they became concerned about. They had to wear litmus paper, they became concerned about the air or something and all but the academics were transferred to Oakridge, Tennessee. So she went from Chicago to Tennessee and then from Tennessee she quit and moved to the west coast, met her husband and married. She lived in San Francisco until she died.

01:18:58

Simonpietri:

How do you remember the war ending?

01:19:03

Gillis:

Oh, I can remember, I have in my scrapbook telegrams announcing that President Roosevelt had died and then it seemed as though the end emerged rather quickly. Truman took over and the next thing we knew Japan had been bombed we called it He-ro-shema in those days, now its pronounced Her-o-shema. And it seems to me there was another bomb that went off.

01:19:55

Simonpietri:

Mhm, Nagasaki.

01:19:56

Gillis:

And, I can remember that suddenly it was over and, uh, I was in the barracks and I could hear people yelling and screaming and then we didn't have to go to work. I can remember we went to the beach a lot. Uh, I mean, we were just wondering what would happen and how quickly we could be back in civilian life. It was sad all the breaking up because we had bonded so closely with the people that we worked with and spent, they became our family our friends.

01:20:57

Simonpietri:

Were, so were you looking forward to going back to civilian life or?

01:21:05

Gillis:

Mixed emotions but I certainly didn't give any thought to making a career.

01:21:17

Simonpietri:

When you were in the service did you have opportunities to go back home?

01:21:21

Gillis:

Oh, yes. We had leave and when we went we were given food stamps so that our families would not have to sacrifice on things that were hard to come by and that required food stamps.

01:21:49

Simonpietri:

Do you, did you, during the war did you hear about Japanese internment and that sort of thing?

01:21:58

Gillis:

I think so, um, there was a priest that I knew from Brookline who had been in Manchuria, of course it became Manchukuo or something, but he was a missionary and I read an article in one of the papers about him being at Lake Tahoe and I wrote to him and we corresponded during the war and of course there was no censorship of his letters and, um, but he was there with the Japanese that were interned.

01:22:55

Simonpietri:

Do you remember if he, um, wrote about their conditions?

01:23:00

Gillis:

I truly do not and I don't know whether in my scrapbook whether I kept any of his letters. The letters I think I kept most of were photographs and things from the war zones.

01:23:21

Simonpietri:

And you mentioned, already mentioned, about race relations in the South and segregation, um, well, that's all the questions that I have for you. Is there anything you'd like to add or I didn't touch on that you'd like to talk about?

01:23:46

Gillis:

I truly think that you have covered most, most of the things. Um, the medical facilities, the shots.

01:24:02

Simonpietri:

Oh, let's hear about those.

01:24:04

Gillis:

Well, of course we were given all types of immunization shots when we went in and periodically we would require boosters and one time my roommate and I were both last name M, and we were called alphabetically to get booster shots and when we went we had to have slips to show, you know, that we were going to the dispensary, and on the slip they put departure time and say they put 0900 and the return time was listed ASAP so my roommate and I went over for shots and there was a line of sailors and one of them said "oh oh, look at the two girls, watch this",

well before they took us he's the one who passed out when he got his shots. But as we were going back to work we wondered if we could take time at the exchange to get a cup of coffee and a donut. But we couldn't figure out what this military symbol was A-S-A-P, I had never seen it. You know what it is, don't you?

01:25:50

Simonpietri:

As soon as possible?

01:25:53

Gillis:

Yeah, but we didn't have a clue. So, that was an experience with military code. We had military inspections. The, we were also supposed to go out for physical training and a lot of us were not inclined, let's put it that way, to do so and we found an empty barracks that had a ton of musical instruments so we were in there tooting and beeping and what have you. Well it seems as though there was an inspection and he said what is that? And someone to cover up said that's the WAVES band. "He said oh I didn't know we had a WAVES band, well they'll have a command performance at inspection this Saturday." Well none of us, I couldn't even read music but the music director, she was a genius. She had us reading and everything. I was assigned the alto trumpet I think. It had three buttons and she did the numbers for me for each thing. And to this day I can remember toot toot toot toot to ta to to to to to to to , well we got the band together and left the barracks and lead the way to the parade grounds. When we got there we stood and played the one piece that we knew we passed in revue and played the one piece that we knew. We left the drill field and played the one piece that we knew. We got away with it but after that they did organize a real good WAVES band and we also had a choral group. I joined that, at the time I loved to sing, I didn't have a good voice but I loved singing. And we went over to the University at Norman Oklahoma and did a concert. There were lots of opportunities to do things that were pleasurable. Well I guess that about sums it up.

01:29:07

Simonpietri:

Do you remember getting, not necessarily yourself, but other friends or members getting in trouble?

01:29:20

Gillis:

No, we didn't but we certainly did have them. I remember doing shore patrol. I don't know what the problem was the girl I was guarding, I don't know what she had done, and, um, but, uh, I had an SP on my left arm and of course I had the night club and I think that I was going to take her to her galley for the noon meal and then as we left the barracks she started to run and I almost died. She was under my care and I'm screaming stop her, stop her. Oh good Lord, I don't know how that ended up but at least I didn't get in to trouble. I guess someone restrained her. But I almost died thinking here I am supposed to be guarding her and she's escaping.

01:30:37

Simonpietri:

Right, I can imagine.

01:30:39

Gillis:

But, as I say, I did not know what her problem was. Now in those days if a young lady became pregnant she was honorably discharged. Today they have maternity leave and post maternity exercises, it's apparently accepted in today's military. But as soon as anybody became pregnant with or without benefit of clergy they were discharged.

1:31:20

Simonpietri:

Do you remember if that happened often or?

1:31:25

Gillis:

Tragically I know of one girl. In those days a young lady who became pregnant without the benefit of marriage was in disgrace. She gave them up to a family who adopted them. She was discharged from the Navy. She did, as I say, find out who adopted the twins but she later married and she adopted two girls. And she named the first one for me. In those days when a member of a family was serving in the military there was a flag in the window with a blue star and, uh, if there were two you'd have two blue stars. The number of stars showed how many were in the service.

1:34:00

Simonpietri:

So was she the only case of, so was it a member of the military that she got in trouble with?

1:34:12

Gillis:

It was, he was married and, um, she wanted to divorce his wife and he said I'm quoting my friend now, "I will not give him a divorce and marry the father of his bastards." So that was that, but, you know a terrible thing. Poor girl.

1:34:46

Simonpietri:

Was that the only case of pregnancy that you really encountered?

1:34:50

Gillis:

Pardon me?

1:34:52

Simonpietri:

Was that the only case of someone getting pregnant and getting discharged that you encountered?

1:35:01

Gillis:

Yeah but she was discharged as normal evidently because of the protection of the adoptive family that was going to adopt the children, the babies. There was something that had been worked out special for her under the circumstances. The adoptive family paid her medical and delivery fees and through social services arranged housing until she gave birth. Yeah, I knew, there was a girl who married a chief who was pregnant but married. There were other girls that I knew.

1:35:38

Simonpietri:

So most of them were-

1:35:40

Gillis:

Married, yeah.

1:35:42

Simonpietri:

Ok, um, is there anything else?

1:35:50

Gillis:

No, I think that's pretty much takes care of it, don't you?

1:35:54

Simonpietri:

Yes. Oh, one more question. You brought up Rosie the Riveter earlier in class, er, the discussion. Did you consider yourself to be a Rosie?

1:36:10

Gillis:

Did I consider myself what?

1:36:12

Simonpietri:

To be a Rosie.

1:36:15

Gillis:

Rosie?

1:36:17

Simonpietri:

Yes, as in Rosie the Riveter.

1:36:20

Gillis:

Oh, I was not over joyed at the prospect of being a mechanic.

1:36:30

Simonpietri:

Mhm, ok.

1:36:32

Gillis:

I had no choice, that as the choice that they made for me. I was surprised when they told me I had no mechanical aptitude, I had flunked that, but because of my other scores they figured I would learn quickly so they gave me one bad opinion, you know the flunking of this thing, and they tried to boost my morale by telling me I was smart enough to learn. Oh dear.

1:37:14

Simonpietri:

Ok, well thank you for your time and a great interview.

1:37:17

Gillis:

Oh, I'll be looking forward to seeing you.