

Museum of History and Industry
Historical Society of Seattle and King County

Transcript

Marjorie Sotero - taped interview, April 12, 1985
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This is an interview with Marjorie Sotero, on April 12, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. How did your family get to Tacoma?

Mrs. Sotero By train. My father's invention (of an ore car, used in the open pit copper mines of Montana) gave us that money after he sold his patent.

Q. He had been working in the mines of Montana?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, not long, and then he got a job on the railroad. After he worked on the railroad, that gave him the incentive to bring his family to Tacoma after he saw what was there. He saw that Tacoma was better than what was in Montana, for his family.

Q. Did he continue to work on the railroad after you came to Tacoma?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, for awhile, and he got another job after we got here. But I couldn't tell you all the jobs he had, because I was going to school.

In the meantime, he'd take his truck and go out to find second-hand lumber to build our house. Everytime payday'd come, he'd get some lumber and bring it home and build more. He'd go out there and build a little more and build a little more, until he finally got it in shape where he could move his family in. Then we moved in and he finished it while we lived there.

Q. He was a real go-getter?

Mrs. Sotero Was he ever! You know I wish he had lived long enough that I could have done something for him.

Q. He was very protective of you and your sister...

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes and also my mother! She couldn't do a thing! It was that old style family where the women do not do anything but housework, children, and cooking. That's how we were raised - that's the way things came. We were forced to be that way.

Q. And you were quite isolated in the white community?

Mrs. Sotero Very much so... Just like you read about the covered wagon days when there would be a family with teen-age kids and there's nothing for boys but to go out hunting with their father, or for girls to cook with their

mother. This was all. But I wasn't here in the covered wagon days!

I just came along, and there was nothing for me but to do just what I could.

Q. There were no other Negro children in school with you?

Mrs. Sotero No. Well, there were some, but I didn't know them. We didn't become acquainted until I was ready to graduate from intermediate school. The more you're around people, the more you learn how to become acquainted and how to talk with people.

I was sort of a naive-talking person. I always said, "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am;" "Yes, sir," "No, sir," to everybody.

Q. You sound very shy, and very competitive, at the same time. That's an interesting combination.

Mrs. Sotero Well, I had to be, I had to be. I'm still a competitive person, and I was in my work, even before I retired.

Q. You set your sights on the University of Washington and you wanted to be a social worker. What was going through your mind? Who did you want to work with?

Mrs. Sotero I wanted to work to make things better for anybody like me. I didn't have it easy; I had it hard. I was trying to figure out what I could do to make it easier for anybody that came along like me, trying to get educated and trying to do things that you see other people doing.

I wasn't satisfied with being the low man on the totem pole - I wasn't satisfied with that.

Q. How difficult did you find it to get accepted at the University of Washington?

Mrs. Sotero It wasn't hard, if you had the money. In those days, all you had to do was have the money and credits, and go to class - that was all. They didn't pay any attention to you, you just went ahead and attended class.

Q. How long did you go to school?

Mrs. Sotero Just one quarter.

Q. Why did you decide to quit?

Mrs. Sotero Money, the Army, and the war.

Q. What kind of a job did you take?

Mrs. Sotero When I came out, working for \$30.00 a month, how much schooling could one get on that? And the job that I had consumed all my time and if I wanted to make any kind of money, I would just have to quit. Well, I decided to

just quit and get some money together, but how could you save any money on \$30.00 a month?

Q. You were working as a domestic?

Mrs. Sotero Yes. I couldn't (save much money). It was impossible, and I was just bumping my head against a wall. Thinking I could, but not doing it, was disgusting. So I just said, when the war came along, "Why should I go to school when I can do social work without going to school?" It was hard for me trying to get it in.

Q. Did you find some of the racial barriers had fallen because of the war?

Mrs. Sotero Yes.

Q. Do you think you could have gotten the kind of job you got before the war?

Mrs. Sotero No, no, no.

Q. Explain that to me.

Mrs. Sotero Well, let's see. I'll tell you one thing I did. Working for \$30.00 a month, I did make enough money to go to dancing school. Cornish, then, was only a dancing school. But I had my sights set not on the lowest things - I wanted to get as high as I could get. Cornish was supposed to be very sophisticated, and I wanted to go there.

Have you ever heard of Sevilla Ford, the dancer who danced with the Catherine Dunham Troupe? Well, Sevilla Ford danced in the same school but she had a lot of backing. She had her family here, and she didn't have to do nothing else but go to school and dance. I had to work, and then go to school, and then try to dance, and then try to have the energy to do the things I wanted to do.

When she graduated from Cornish - this was before the war - Cornish was very, very prejudiced. They accepted us, but under the circumstances that we have a private teacher in private classes out of that building. But this was a Cornish teacher.

Q. You mean that the class was completely segregated?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes! Even from the building. Nowadays, if you had a private teacher, it would cost a lot of money, but what they were trying to do was to keep people from knowing that a colored person was going to Cornish School. Yet anybody that was willing to pay the money, they were willing to accept it. They gave lessons as a teacher; they gave lessons privately, and Cornish School was teaching us - how they did it, I don't know, and how much expense they had to go through. But we were the first colored to enroll at Cornish. They were so prejudiced, that's what they did for approximately one and a half years.

Then along came Sevilla Ford who had a

family here. And her family said that she was going to go to school there, and her family kept on and until, finally, she was accepted in the school.

We never got to go in the school. By that time, I was finished with dance classes. I didn't want to dance any more because I didn't have any family here - my mother didn't have a husband, and she was barely getting by. She would sew clothes for money in places to keep her a little money coming in, so that she could have something, too.

The quicker we got out of the house, the better it was for her because mother couldn't support us.

Q. Compared to Tacoma, the Seattle black community was extensive, wasn't it?

Mrs. Sotero Not that much. It was a little larger, but I could walk all day in downtown Seattle and never see a colored person.

Q. Really?

Mrs. Sotero Do you know most all of the colored people here were wartime migrants? When the war broke out, Boeing had advertisements everywhere in the South, and those that didn't have anything - not a home or anything - were the ones ready to pick up and leave. If you don't have anything, and you know you can go somewhere else and get more, you're going to go to the jobs advertised.

Q. So the prewar black community was quite small.

Mrs. Sotero Yes, very small. I could almost count the families on my hands.

Q. What kinds of jobs were black people allowed to do in Seattle in 1939? Could you be a policeman? A bus driver?

Mrs. Sotero No, you couldn't be a bus driver, you couldn't be a policeman. There weren't any buses then - there were streetcars. They didn't have any colored men driving the streetcar. They didn't have buses then, so therefore there weren't any colored bus drivers.

But there weren't enough of them to even say, "I want this job; I want that job." You took what they gave you. You were either a janitor, or doing hard labor digging ditches, you worked for the city doing the lowly jobs like digging holes, and helping with the sewers and stuff like that. But you could say, "I work for the city." [Those who had top jobs I didn't know.]

Now, the post office started opening up when the war broke out, and a lot of the men had jobs - I couldn't tell you what kind because I didn't know people that well at that time, and I don't know what kind of jobs they were doing.

I know that they saved their money and bought their homes. In order to live here, you had to save your money and buy a home because renting wasn't

anything that was popular then. You didn't have rentals. You either lived in the house you were buying then, or you didn't live in any house at all. Everytime you lived in a place, it was with the intention of buying. Nowadays, you can go anywhere and rent, but then you didn't do it as easy as you do now, unless you were a single man and you go and live in a boarding house. The lady of the house would cook for everybody that lived there and everybody lived in a room of their own, and they'd go to work and come back. It was just a place to hang their clothes, but it was her money that she made, turning her house into something like a boarding house.

Q. And there were big housing projects, weren't there, during the war?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, they came about during the war. The war and the Army built these big housing projects for armed forces families; then they found out they had to build housing for all these people that they had advertised to come up to Boeing and to Bremerton. They had to have all of these people here then to take care of ships and planes, and they had to have housing.

Q. It must have been so crowded.

Mrs. Sotero Oh, it was a jungle. Then things opened up. Everybody was working; nobody was not working. You just had to be somebody laying in the gutter with a bottle all the time to not work. And in order to get even that, you had to work. But you could get a job today, and if you were an alcoholic, buy your liquor, and get another job tomorrow. That's the way it was. It was easy to get work then.

Q. What kind of a job did you get?

Mrs. Sotero Working for the Army Finance Office, at Third and Union, in the office building catty corner from the five and ten cents store downtown. That was Army Finance - it occupied that whole building. That's where I worked and I had a good job.

Q. You were about to say something about women and the war, and, I'm sorry, I interrupted you...

Mrs. Sotero Women could get any kind of a job they wanted. They worked in Boeing, they worked as riveters in ship-building, they helped build a lot of ships at Bremerton.

Q. Were black women as able to get that training that would allow them to become skilled?

Mrs. Sotero They were trained on the job. Nobody came here [already trained], from the fields or from the slums. Now you hear these Southern accents everywhere. There was no way for them to get any kind of education. So

they trained on the job.

The company gave them a little job, and this is what they did all day long. You train them to put rivets in, and that's all they did all day long. [Then they got raises and learned more every day.]

Q. With your perspective, as somebody interested in social science, seeing this tremendous change, how did you think of it? Did you think this was going to be a good thing in the long run for these folks that had been recruited from Alabama and stuck here in Seattle, or what?

Mrs. Sotero I don't know what I thought. I couldn't associate with them because they couldn't associate with me at first- they didn't like me and to them, I talked funny.

Q. Was there a division within the black community between the old-timers and the new-comers? It sounds like they might not have had a lot in common...

Mrs. Sotero No, there was no division. They didn't have time for any division - there was too many good times. Everybody just finally got to know each other...

The war was bad. And everybody was frightened. If you look up on top of some buildings, you see these big round things that used to turn back and forth? They were air raid warners. You weren't here during that time, but in the middle of the day, they'd test out the warnings, and they were very loud.

People don't realize how awful World War II was.

Q. Were you frightened?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, I was frightened. But I was frightened because I was afraid the war was coming over here.

We had a map on our service club bulletin board, and we'd put pins into it. When men were shipped out, we'd take a pin and put all the different colored threads, a different color for each battalion, and we'd take the thread and tack it where they went with pins.

Sure it was scary. And I got more frightened, when I finished work and had our program set for the evening, and I would go down and help the Red Cross workers as they served coffee to the men going overseas. The men on our post were all drivers for the convoys, and the convoys used to take the men from Fort Lawton and Fort Lewis. Fort Lawton was one of the staging areas where all the men gathered, and when they'd get a battalion together, the men from our camp would take a convoy and pick up the battalion.

The convoy would pass by you for about five minutes before the end of it would come - nothing but men going overseas and that was one battalion!

The men from our camp would take the men, with all their gear - and that's when you start getting scared. You'd see grown men crying, getting on the boats, and we served them coffee and cookies and cigarettes. That would

bother me.

But the thing that bothered me the most was watching them come back. I'd go down and watch some of the boats come back after the men had served their time overseas. Some with no arms, no legs - you just can't believe it - the basket cases, where they had no arms or legs. Then we would cry.

Q. When the Japanese-Americans living along the Pacific Coast corridor were interned, it was spring of 1942, did it touch you personally through any friends?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, through my closest friend, Shigeko Tamaki, I'll never forget her, and I haven't seen her since.

(a pause)

Mrs. Sotero You'd go down there and see these guys going overseas, and see them come back... And then when the war started getting closer and closer, you'd start to get frightened. People don't know.

Q. It's because we won it that it's so easy to forget that we could have lost it.

Let me ask you how did you come to work at Camp Jordan, from the Army Finance Office?

Mrs. Sotero There was an officer who used to come up there named Captain Cohen, and he was out looking for girls that he thought would be suitable for that job. He was the Special Services officer and he didn't know anybody in Seattle.

Most of the women who were here at the time were from other places, and he wanted somebody he thought was stable enough to take his job - someone who was a permanent resident.

Q. Describe the job - what kind of job was he trying to fill?

Mrs. Sotero He found out that I wanted to go to college and to be a social worker, and couldn't get my education because working would take all day, going to school would take all day - which one did I want? which one could I do? I had to work. He said, "You can come and work for us, and we can arrange things later on after you get established if you wish to go to school, and the armed forces will see that you get some schooling for this and give you a recommendation."

Well, he kept on and kept on, and I thought to myself, "This is the first time I've ever had a job this good - I don't want to leave it. An opportunity like this never came to me before the war, and I'm going to hang on to this opportunity and make something of it."

He kept on and kept on and he almost made me lose my job. So I thought, "Maybe that is a good job."

He kept showing me different pamphlets and things, about the job, saying "Read this," and finally I was convinced. I told him that I had to put in my resignation because I didn't want to leave with a bad record.

Q. There was no way of arranging a transfer? You were basically going to another branch of the same service...

Mrs. Sotero No, it wasn't that kind of job - it was severance here and start new, which I did. So I went to work out there, and we didn't have our uniforms in the beginning. We were shown where to work and where our headquarters were, and what our basic work was - entertainment for the servicemen. This was their home away from home, and this was like their living room where they could come after their day's work was done and sit down and do the things a man liked to do, sit and smoke, and write letters, and listen to music. And maybe in the evening there would be some kind of entertainment that the directors of the club would plan. And that was our job.

That is how we opened that little service club. We had shows and we would recruit entertainment from the servicemen who would volunteer. There were a lot of men coming through that were great entertainers. We really had some very good shows. That made our job easy, when we ran across the good entertainers. [I did take advantage, too, of a class for running a movie machine, and received an Army license to do this. So we could get our own movies.]

The Army gave us a jeep that we used during the day to get flowers, and we went to Beals Wholesale Flower Shop in Seattle that on Friday nights would give us the flowers that they couldn't sell. The service club was just beautiful - we had flowers everywhere! This made it nice, homelike.

We had a budget - a certain amount of money we could spend for entertainment in the service club. And if the Army said you were to spend \$500.00, you spent \$500.00, no less, and nothing more. A lot of times, I would have \$487 and something, and we would have to buy the rest in candy to make it come out even. The Army didn't redo any of their paperwork after it went out.

We would buy different things, like balloons and prizes. We would go all over town to different private clubs, like the Eagles and the Elks, and the Y, sometimes the USO's would send us some entertainment. And some of the entertainment that was going overseas to entertain servicemen - all those who could and would come and entertained our servicemen.

Q. White entertainers?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes, white and colored because they were going to be entertaining all the men.

At Fort Lewis, I'll never forget the Dunham Dancers came, and they were all colored, but since the Army wasn't integrated, they had two shows - one show for the colored, and another show for the whites. Can you imagine? That's one thing I was a little bit upset about with the

Dunham dancers - that they would allow two shows. It looked like to me they should have asked, "How come we have to do two shows?" And I wouldn't have done it, if I were them.

But, when we came to Camp Jordan, it was basically all colored. There were three cantonments: Cantonment 1 was headquarters, and Cantonment 2 was all of our camp and the service club, and Cantonment 3 was very small and it was mostly the office men who worked in the office, and they were mostly white.

Q. Where was it physically?

Mrs. Sotero Camp Jordan was on Spokane Street and First in Seattle. All of that from that Dutch Tavern on the corner, all the way back to the bridge was Camp Jordan, all the way back there. And you see all those buildings, you wouldn't think there was an army camp there. It was all an Army base.

Q. It hadn't been there before the war, had it?

Mrs. Sotero No, there was nothing there but swamp. The land belonged to the Ford Company, and the Ford Company leased the property to the Army for this camp. And so it was built. All the barracks were temporary buildings, of course, but they were built by the Army.

Q. Why was it built there?

Mrs. Sotero It had to be centrally located because of the convoys going to the boats right down here at the Port of Embarkation, and they'd go to Fort Lewis at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and pick up the servicemen. And then they'd take them all at the same time and put them on the ships.

Q. So it was a motor pool battalion?

Mrs. Sotero It was a convoy - just a trucking company.

Q. And there probably hundreds of men in it?

Mrs. Sotero Yes.

Q. Who was George Jordan?

Mrs. Sotero I didn't know, at the time, who George Jordan was myself. When we opened the camp, they told me that it was named for a colored man during World War I. I could never find a picture of him, then.

Side B

Mrs. Sotero And that's all. He was a man who had gotten a Congressional Medal of Honor for something he did, and here he is. (Mrs. Sotero shows me a Xerox with George Jordan's photo and history, and that Xerox is in this file.)

Just think, I have been away from the Army this long - and I just now found out who George Jordan was!

Q. I'll copy this and put it in the file, if that's okay?

Mrs. Sotero Yes. Be sure I get it back. I found a friend at the Senior Citizens [Center], and this woman had some books on colored history with pictures and things that aren't - excuse me for saying this, but whites didn't write about achievements of the colored men. Therefore, there was no record made of George Jordan. This book was made by a colored man who kept pictures of different people who did different things. At the Senior Center, they asked for material for February, which was Negro History Month, to put on the board, and I put my display on the board. This woman said, "I remember Camp Jordan, but don't you have a picture of him?"

I said, "No, I don't."

And she said, "Well, I've got a little book." And I borrowed the book and made a copy.

I said, "I've got to have a copy of this to put with my display." Until then, I didn't know who George Jordan was. I went down to the main library to find out what they had on Camp Jordan. There was nothing! but a little 3 x 5 card saying that Camp Jordan existed in Seattle, not even a thing about where it was or who or anything. The newspapers were on us all the time about what we were doing - I've got more things that were in the papers because the newspapermen were always out there.

Q. Camp Jordan was basically in downtown Seattle, and had a few hundred men stationed at it. Almost entirely black. Was it intentionally segregated?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, this was before the army was integrated.

Q. Were the officers white?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes! Officers were white, but as the war went on, we got colored officers, just for the looks of things, I guess. I don't know, but I never saw a colored officer in my life until I went to Camp Jordan - now and then one would come through. Finally, we had a few stationed at our camp.

They had two or three battalions of Puerto Ricans that came through, and couldn't speak English. They came to Camp Jordan, and as they came off the boat, they'd separate them - the white-looking ones went this way and the dark ones went this way.

There was one named Jesus - I remember him - he looked just exactly like an African though he spoke English. And there was another, his brother - he introduced him, "This is my brother. We both have the same parents." And they took his brother to Fort Lawton because they put the white-looking ones there, and Camp Jordan got all the colored-looking ones.

Most of these guys didn't know how to

speak English, and the Army called this "orientation," trying to teach them that if you're white-looking, you're supposed to stay with the whites, and if you're colored-looking, you stay with the colored. This what they called "orientation."

Q. Was there much turnover at Camp Jordan?

Mrs. Sotero No, not much. It was all the same men because they were trained to do the convoy work and driving.

Q. Okay, where were they from?

Mrs. Sotero They were from everywhere. We had New Yorkers, we had Southerners - a lot of them were Southerners - because they cleaned out the South of men that were eligible for the Army. That's why a lot of the women came up here, because their men were all in the service. They just left to work in Boeing and at Bremerton, or wherever they could get war work.

Q. The service club was on the base; the USO was off the base. Did you work in a USO as well?

Mrs. Sotero That was my entertainment! We weren't, in the beginning, allowed to date any of the men on our post.

Q. Why?

Mrs. Sotero Because there would be a lot of dissension. So you weren't allowed to date any of the men on your army post. We had to be aloof.
Now if we'd go down to the USO, that was a horse of a different color. We were meeting them under different circumstances.

Q. What did you do at the USO?

Mrs. Sotero Basically, there were dances at the USO's. They could reach all men with music and dances and games. And they had cardrooms with cards.

Q. Were you a junior hostess?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, anybody who went there and didn't work there was considered a junior hostess.

Q. What were your responsibilities?

Mrs. Sotero We didn't have any. We were just some of the people at the USO. You sign up as a junior hostess, and did what a junior hostess was supposed to do - dancing with the servicemen, and entertaining servicemen.

Q. Did you wear your Army uniform, or did you go home and dress up?

Mrs. Sotero No, I'd go home and dress up. I never went with my Army uniform on. Because there wouldn't be any fun in it for the servicemen because they knew they were restricted with the directors of Army service clubs. When they saw that uniform, they respected it so I always put on my civilian clothes, so they wouldn't mind dancing with us.

The USO gave field trips also, where they would have buses and send girls to Payne Field, McChord Field, Fort Lawton, Camp Jordan, all over, and when the USO wasn't having something downtown, we'd want the girls to come out to our camp when we were having a special dance, and they would come.

Q. Was it an integrated group of junior hostesses?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, it was. The USO was integrated. But if we gave a dance on our post, before the Army was integrated - and as long as I was at Camp Jordan, the Army was not integrated - so all of the girls we got from the USO were colored girls - "Now you come on and bring your friends." And we would send a bus to a certain place to pick them all up and bring them to camp.

When we had dances after the Army was integrated, and we had girls of all nationalities, we would go down to the telephone company, and at that time, the telephone company wasn't hiring colored girls as employees, but we'd go down to the telephone company, and the girls would all meet there who would like to go out to the Army dances, and we would pick up the girls and bring them out to Fort Lawton, to our dances out there. The girls would plan on going to the dances. They'd just bring to work whatever they needed and dress and go straight from work.

Q. What was the difference, if there was any, between your service club and a USO?

Mrs. Sotero A lot of difference, because they didn't have to have entertainment every day - just be open every day. They made special plans for their entertainment. One night might be a dance, but another night was just game night. It was just a place for the fellas to go - they don't have to stay on the post and they don't have to walk the streets. It was downtown.

But if they couldn't get a pass off the post, there's where they came to us. Our service club was their home away from home, on the post. If they didn't have a pass, and couldn't go off the post, they came to the Army Service Club.

Q. Did you end up giving much advice?

Mrs. Sotero All the time. I taught many men how to write their names so they could sign the payroll. They, white and colored, would come from the South, without any education, and a lot of them didn't know how to write their names. And they were embarrassed to know that they did not know how to write. They would come to me in privacy, and I

wouldn't tell anybody that I taught him how to write his name. Many of them. Not only colored - whites, all nationalities. When they'd come from the fields at home, and they didn't have education - it just wasn't the thing down in the South. When you lived in the South and your livelihood was your place and your fields and the way you raised food, you didn't worry about books. Writing and books weren't going to give you any food there. Education wasn't in the book for them.

Q. What other kinds of problems did they bring to you?

Mrs. Sotero I really didn't do too much with heavy problems for men because they had a chaplain. If they had real bad problems, I'd send them over to the chapel because the chapel wasn't very far from the service club. The chaplain was a man who could handle a lot of things that I wasn't allowed to. We had some conscientious objectors, who wouldn't raise arms for anything, who had the army uniform on. Those were the men that the chaplain would take care of - I couldn't take care of anything like that.

Q. Did you ever hear any complaints or anger about black servicemen not being served in Seattle restaurants?

Mrs. Sotero During the war, nobody dared have a place that wouldn't serve them - not in the middle of town. They wouldn't have it very long. Servicemen were away from home - they had no wives, or girlfriends, or family here, and the only thing they had was their buddies. When they'd go to town from the Army camp, they'd usually go in a bunch - eight or nine, sometimes ten. The men would leave altogether and stick together, those that liked the same kind of things would go together, and if anything happened to one of them, it might as well have happened to all of them. So they wouldn't dare run a restaurant like that.

I do know that when my brother got out of the service, and he was at Ft. Lewis from French Indochina, where they had it bad, he came to Tacoma and he went into the Army with his white buddies, and came out of the Army with his white buddies, because they all came from the same place. They went into this restaurant in Tacoma, as they came from Fort Lewis, with their uniforms on, ready for their discharges from the Army after fighting this terrible war, and went in this little place and they refused to serve my brother. Well, they might as well have refused to serve all of them. They tore the place up. They all had to go to the guardhouse, but they didn't have to stay very long - just overnight - because they knew what had happened.

Q. There were Italian prisoners of war?

Mrs. Sotero At Fort Lawton. Don't you remember hearing about the riot? It was in all the papers. I didn't come in contact with them, though I'd seen them. They'd be laying on the grass, doing nothing, and Fort Lawton was a staging area where our men were getting ready to go overseas. They thought might not ever come back, and here these guys

(the Italian prisoners) were out lolling on the grass and laughing, and making fun of the colored because they were black. And laying out there, and they were prisoners of war? It was in the papers. After that, they took all the Italian prisoners away, and shipped all those men out of there. The prisoners were causing more trouble - that was how the riot started, and it went on and on and on and on, and there was no control. When you get a whole battalion of men out there and out of control, no officer could control them. [A real bed of hot coals.] (The service club had been built by German prisoners of war.)

Q. Were there any injuries?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes! But they keep that undercover, and they don't tell everything. You don't hear the inside story of everything that goes on inside an Army post when you're not allowed on it.

When they had a staging area, where the men were getting ready to go overseas, everything was a military secret anyway - when they moved, how many men were collected. Those men on the post weren't allowed to leave, and there those guys were, laying out on the grass, laughing and giggling, and they knew they were mocking them. And that's how it all started.

Q. So essentially the Italian prisoners were better treated in some ways than the black soldiers...

Mrs. Sotero They were, they definitely were. They didn't give them any duties on the post, like cleaning up or picking up papers. Nothing. They just laid out on the grass. I'd see them because I worked at Fort Lawton.

Q. What were you doing at Fort Lawton?

Mrs. Sotero Working in the service club - the same thing - except the Army was integrated then. They did not send an Army overseas anymore that was not integrated. The United States wasn't gaining anything fighting with a battalion of this kind, and a battalion of that kind, and one of Filipinos, and one of colored, and sending each one to do a certain job. They had to do it altogether, if they were going to win.

Q. Do you think that the war really did advance people's understanding of each other?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, definitely. While I was stationed at Fort Lawton, the colonel knew that we had everything to do with the service club. He couldn't say what we could do in the service club, unless it was illegal or immoral. The service club was our baby. He washed his hands of it - he just gave us a little advice and that's all.

We were going to have a dance, and since they were getting ready for a shipment soon, we decided to have a big blowout dance. We didn't know whether this was the last weekend or not - nobody knew.

So we decided this particular weekend we would have a beautiful dance and we made it a formal - all the girls who came out had to be dressed formally. We wanted the men to act accordingly. We went downtown and spent a lot of our club money, and got balloons where you'd pull the string and all the balloons would fall, and we had a band out of this world. You could get any kind of music you wanted. We had flowers - we just went all out for that dance - punch bowl, everything.

So the colonel told me, "You know there's trouble when you start mixing the women with mixed men."

And I said, "Well, I think it will go over all right." I wasn't going to let him talk me out of it, and we gave it. I believe that was the first mixed dance they had. The colonel tried to talk you out of things he didn't like and tried to keep this separated army going.

Okay, we gave the dance and that dance was the best we ever had. And I've got pictures where the white boys are dancing with the colored girls, and the colored boys are dancing with the white girls - and it was just the most beautiful. And the guys kept coming back, two and three days later, to say, "We had a good time," and complimenting us on that dance and how nice the girls were.

The way I did it - I knew the colonel would [be furious] if anything happened, so I said I wanted an MP at every door and I didn't allow one girl to step her foot out any door, and every man who came in had to be on his best behavior and in his best uniform. I didn't want anything happening. So the girls didn't go out, and I told them that they couldn't dance all evening with one man - they could only dance two dances with one man, and that's all.

It went over good.

Q. It must have been a wonderful experience for a lot of those people, and it may have been a very new experience, too.

Mrs. Sotero The colonel didn't compliment us and didn't say anything wrong, but he just knew that something would go wrong.

Q. Was your staff integrated at the service club?

Mrs. Sotero My sister and I were the only staff.

Q. Even at Fort Lawton?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, two women to a service club.

Q. Did the Negro soldiers tend to come to your service club because you were Negroes?

Mrs. Sotero They had two service clubs. One was manned by two white girls. As it was, we didn't have degrees; my sister and I didn't have the chance to finish and get our degrees. Those two [white] women up there had degrees - that's the only thing they had on us. They went

completely by the book, and they didn't have many at their affairs.

We'd say, "Why don't you guys go on up to that other service club?"

And they'd say, "Oh, we don't like that place up there."

But they'd just come in droves to our service club.

Q. White men?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, and colored men.

Q. But the colored guys never went to the other service club?

Mrs. Sotero Oh, yes they did! Oh, there was always a certain number that would go, but when it came down to entertainment, they were at our service club. All of them would come down there.

And I used to think to myself, "Oh, I hope I can stay together tonight - we're having entertainment!"

And when a USO show would come through, that was going overseas, they would send some of their entertainment that didn't mind going out on the post so they would get their practice in on how it's going to go over when they get overseas. They'd come and rehearse on us, and we would have some of the best entertainment! You wouldn't believe!

We would have so many men in there. Every chair would be taken, and they'd be sitting all over the floor. They would be standing all over, and you would just see the mass of their uniforms.

It would get so hot in there. Our service club could have been bigger, for many of our entertainments.

But those girls up there went by the book. "Well, you can't do it that way!"

And I'd say, "I don't care about that old book. I know what people like. If you'd think, you'd know that they don't like that."

One time, we had a bunch of men come in and they were getting ready to ship overseas. This was when the Army was integrated, and some colored guys came to us, and there was a little white officer standing at the door and he was chasing the whites out, "Go on up to your own service club!"

He didn't know the service club was for all, and so some of the colored guys, who were shipping out together and they not knowing if they were coming back or not, said, "This is my buddy. This is who I'm going overseas with."

One said to me, "If my friend, who is white, can't come in here, then I'm not coming in here!"

I said, "Who said he can't come in here?"

He said, "There's an officer at your door telling them to go up there."

Well, I went out. (You see, the servicemen didn't dare to say anything derogative to any officer) And this little officer who looked to me to be about 24 or 25 years old, was using his authority, "You go up to your own service club!" And nobody could say anything to him because he was an officer. The servicemen had a name for officers like that - "ninety day wonders."

I went out, and since I knew they couldn't say anything to him, but I told that little officer off in front of all of the servicemen. His face was so red!

And I said, "And what's more, I don't want to see you down here any more! And you get in your jeep and get out of here. This is for the servicemen anyway!"

And the guys were laughing behind their hands, but I was mad! Even the colonel of the Post wouldn't do anything against the service club. He always asked me before he did anything and here this little guy was doing it on his own!

I said, "Well, I'm going to beat him to the draw. I'll call headquarters." And I called the MP stations and I said, "I want to know the name of the "officer-of-the-day," and I want you to tell him I don't want him down here anymore. He's turning servicemen away from the service club [and creating dissension.]

I did this because I knew he was going to go up there and tell a lie. I got my bit in first. One of the servicemen came down a week later, and said, "They shipped that guy overseas the next day."

I bet that man was mad at me.

Q. I bet he was.

Q. What was the access to training like for black servicemen and minority servicemen. You've said that this was a motor pool. In the Navy, most Negroes were confined to the stewards, was there more mobility in the Army?

Mrs. Sotero Yes, there was. They could do more things. There's more room out there. In a ship, they're confined more.

There's more to work with in the Army. With vehicles, there were a lot of colored mechanics - good mechanics! - who knew the inside and outside of a motor. How are you going to keep a man down like that when you've got all these trucks - why, sure! we're going to let that man take care of the vehicles! He can do it! He knows more than we do about it!

Of course, they learned the army way of driving, but they learned how to drive the trucks, and they had to pass a test. They had a test, but then most of them knew how to drive anyway. Most of them were hard-working men who knew how to drive a truck.

Q. Well, in that case, would you say that Army training helped Negroes and other racial minorities to move up in jobs afterward?

Mrs. Sotero In every way, in every way. It

helped people to get a new outlook, both white and colored. Every nationality learned something about the other that we didn't know before the war, and we never would have known before.

The whites learned something; the colored learned something. All of us learned something. The war taught us something. That's the only thing you can say about a war - it does make you more broad-minded, make you learn a lot of things that you never would have learned. Things there's no way in the world you would have learned, war can teach you.

Q. That may be the only good thing to say for war.

Mrs. Sotero Yes, that's the one thing that you can say good of it. They would recruit men into the service before they found out that they were able to do Army duty. They were in. That's the only way they could get the Army - to recruit first and then weed out those that really couldn't do it.

We had one man that was recruited into the service who had been an embalmer down in the South somewhere, where they didn't have any protection at all. This man was like this (all hunched up) and his eyes were wild - you could see there was something wrong with him. He was practically embalmed on down his throat, all the way down to here (his upper chest). They had to give him an honorable discharge.

Q. You mean he was chemically burned?

Mrs. Sotero Well, in embalming, you breathe all those fumes, you know. He came from the South.

During the War, men were recruited first, since they were needing as many as there were for the Army. Then if found to be 4-F or not capable of remaining in the Service, then he would be discharged. That's why World War II was the worst war for the U.S.A. - all homefronts were affected. Seattle, Washington was no different from any other place.