

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

Transcript

Arline and Letcher Yarbrough - taped interview, January 26, 1985
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Side A

This is an interview with Arline and Letcher Yarbrough on the 26th of January, 1985. The interviewer is Lorraine McConaghy for the Museum of History and Industry.

Q. The Depression here in Seattle - did either of you experience that?

Mrs. Yarbrough We married during the Depression, in 1932. I graduated from Garfield High School in 1931.

Q. Was there a uniquely black experience during the Depression, or was it miserable for everybody?

Mrs. Yarbrough Well, I think it hit most people pretty much the same and, perhaps, in some respects, blacks did not feel it as much as some whites. Unfortunately, blacks had always had to live rather frugally - that is, most of them - and job opportunities were not that plentiful. It was bad to begin with, and it just got a little bit worse.

I think that the black community here in Seattle at that time was such a close-knit group that perhaps it didn't affect them emotionally and psychologically as much as it might have in the white community. They were used to having most of their entertainment in homes. I think that about the only place they entertained at that time was the Alpha Tennis Club, which was a black group. It was located on Twenty-Third Avenue and East Olive, where the YMCA is now, and it had tennis courts and a little clubhouse.

Q. So would you say that unemployment was worse by percentage among blacks than among whites during the Depression?

Mrs. Yarbrough Oh, definitely worse. Oh, yes. It's the same old story - the last to be hired, the first to be fired. Yes, it was worse, and it wasn't good before as far as employment opportunities were concerned. It just got a little bit worse.

Mr. Yarbrough I'd like to interject here that many of the blacks were in service-oriented jobs like waiters, custodians, and occupations of that nature. As a result of that type of employment, I don't believe it (the Depression) affected the blacks as much as the whites who were dependent on manufacturing jobs and store jobs.

Mrs. Yarbrough We disagree some about the Depression. I say it hit the blacks more, because those were the first people to be let go. When people had to cut back, they cut out the maids, and the extras. That meant black people out of jobs. It's true that there weren't as many black people in industry and business

to be affected, but the people who were in industry and business had to cut back on their living expenses so they let all their servants and domestic help go - babysitters, maids, housekeepers, and so on.

Q. What was the housing situation like in pre-war Seattle for blacks? Were there exclusive neighborhoods? Were there restrictive covenants?

Mr. Yarbrough There definitely were restrictive covenants, and as a result, the blacks were by and large located in two areas: around the Jackson Street area, from about Sixth or Seventh and Jackson - or, actually, you'd go over a little bit further, over to Washington - and then across Jackson Street going south to, maybe, Weller, and all the way up to about Fourteenth Avenue.

The other area was called the East Madison District, from around Nineteenth and Madison east to about Thirtieth - Washington Park as it was known at that time. From Nineteenth and Madison to Thirtieth and Madison, and from John Street to Yesler, was by and large a black neighborhood.

Of course, the closer you got to Yesler, the more you ran into the Jewish community.

Q. Did black people tend to stay in their areas? Go to church, go to restaurants, go to school in their own little communities?

Mr. Yarbrough Yes, they did.

Q. Was that imposed on them or was that their choice?

Mr. Yarbrough Well, we weren't welcome in most of the restaurants, including some of the restaurants in downtown Seattle, and including the theatres. The theatres had a very definite segregated policy and most of the better theatres, like the Metropolitan Theatre where the Olympic Hotel-Four Seasons is now. Some of the better restaurants in downtown Seattle would not serve us, as a rule, and that lasted through World War II.

Q. Was this a policy that anyone ever tried to press? This policy of the restaurants and the segregated theatres, was it just something that was known or was it actually posted? Were there signs?

Mr. Yarbrough No, there were not signs but it was known. One of the first civil rights cases - they weren't called "civil rights cases" in those days but "discrimination cases" - was the Pantages Theatre, which was located where the Post Office is at Third and University. A black attorney by the name of Clarence Anderson sued the Pantages Theatre, and won his case which involved the grand sum of \$100.00 damages.

Q. When was this?

Mr. Yarbrough That was between World War I and World War II.

Mrs. Yarbrough Probably 1925 - 1928. It seems to me I heard

about that when I first came here.

Mr. Yarbrough I don't know of any case where discrimination charges were filed against a restaurant, but at that time in the downtown restaurants, we got what we called the "silent waiting treatment." If you went in there, you would wait quite some time before you were served, and when you were served you definitely got the feeling that you weren't welcome.

Do you have anything to add to that? (to Mrs. Yarbrough)

Mrs. Yarbrough It seems to me that most of the smaller restaurants - the soda fountains in drugstores and places like that - did not practice any discrimination. This was one reason that I felt I had a very bitter experience during the war.

I was looking for a job, and I had to wait a while for the time of my appointment. I stopped in a little - oh, I think it probably could be called a sandwich shop with a counter deal, with what are now called fast foods, sandwiches and soft drinks and that sort of thing. It was a very warm day and I stopped in there for something cool to drink. I sat at the counter and eventually was told, "We don't serve you here."

I said, "What do you mean - you don't serve me?"

A man came forward and said, "We don't serve Negroes."

It came as quite shock to me because I had not experienced that in Seattle. We knew some of these bigger places where you were not going to be welcome in the first place, and we avoided them. But to stop in a little place like that - that had never happened to me.

Q. Do you think that Seattle became more racist during the war?

Mrs. Yarbrough Yes, and I think that was what was happening then. These people probably came up during the influx from the South and brought their patterns along with them.

Mr. Yarbrough Both white and black.

Mrs. Yarbrough They had set up their little restaurant, and were discriminating.

Mr. Yarbrough By and large, the black community was very home-oriented. We invited neighbors and acquaintances into our own homes for dinner, rather than go to restaurants. And the same way with our parties. None of the dance halls would allow Negroes in the downtown dance halls.

Q. You mean like the Trianon?

Mr. Yarbrough Like the Trianon and the Encore, and there was another one down in that area and I can't remember the name of it. We were not welcome down there, and as a result there was no point in going there. If you went in with a party, as a rule, they wouldn't let you in at the Trianon, and some of the other ballrooms like the Hippodrome, which was located at Fifth and University Street. However, the ice skating arena which was

across the street at Fifth and University had no discrimination. As a kid I used to go in there and ice skate. Things of that nature were more or less open.

Q. Were there black entertainers at the Trianon and such ballrooms?

Mr. Yarbrough Oh, no, as I remember.

Q. I read a story of Lena Horne appearing before segregated audiences, where she was expected to perform for the white officers and then later for the black enlisted men, and she refused to perform on that basis. It made me wonder if there had been black entertainers (appearing to white audiences.)

Mr. Yarbrough Black entertainment was around Twelfth and Jackson, and we had black nightclubs in that area. That's where most of our black entertainers came, into those places.

I don't recall black entertainers unless they came on the Pantages circuit coming into town to anyplace like the Trianon. Now there may have been, but I don't recall any black bands coming into that area.

Black entertainers would come into the Paramount Theatre, and the Fifth Avenue Theatre, and outside of the Pantages, which was the only one that really discriminated against blacks, the others never practiced any discrimination whatsoever.

As my wife said, and as you asked the question, "Did it get worse during World War II?", yes, it did, because at that time both the blacks and the whites were coming from the South and other parts of the country where discrimination was practiced very blatantly. The blacks "knew their place," so to speak, and the whites enforced it. We who lived in this area before that knew that we just weren't welcome in certain places, and we just didn't go. But we really didn't know what discrimination was all about at that time. We knew it existed, but it didn't create any hardships.

However, one thing I do remember was that the Cadillac motor agency refused to sell blacks their cars, the main reason being that the blacks who could afford those cars were usually the underworld characters like pimps and gamblers. They did not want their product known as a product used by underworld characters. If you were an underworld white, it was all right; you could buy one! (laughing)

Q. Wherever your money came from!

Mrs. Yarbrough I think, too, that one reason we didn't try to force our way into these restaurants and other places that we just didn't have the money to spend anyway. We were not an affluent community. Those who could afford it would go to minority people's businesses. There were one or two good restaurants, a hotel, Chinese restaurants and places like that. We would patronize those places, rather than try to go down to the Olympic Hotel or some of these other restaurants. Money was too scarce to spend it that way.

Q. Did the influx of blacks from the South put any strains on

your community? On the existing black community? In general, it seems to me that the people who came to Seattle for war work jobs, both white and black, were poorer, less well-educated, and certainly had different social ways than were in existence here in the prewar period. Was the black community able to absorb them into their churches and into the educational system, or was there a split in the community?

Mrs. Yarbrough My personal feeling was that the transition was a very orderly one for the "newcomers," and the "old-timers," as they called them. Now everyone doesn't agree with me on that, either the old-timers or the newcomers. The newcomers felt very bitter and some of them still feel very bitter about, as they say, the "reception" they got when they came here. The old-timers, in turn, have begun to feel bitter about these accusations that have been put on them, which they feel they were not guilty of.

It's very difficult to say how different people felt about it. All I know is that I was pretty excited about the fact that large numbers of blacks were coming into our community, maybe because I happened to grow up in a community where there were so few blacks that anytime I'd see some more, I thought it was great. (Mrs. Yarbrough lived in Salt Lake City as a child.)

To me, it was a pretty exciting kind of thing. I can understand why some of the old-timers felt threatened, shall we say. There were a lot of embarrassing experiences for the poor blacks who came up from the South, and who had never been off the plantations and farms they came from. They were not used to city or urban living. It was something very strange to them. It was just like going into a foreign country.

They tell just weird stories about how they didn't know how to use electrical appliances or stoves - things that were just common ordinary experiences for most of us.

Q. I find myself feeling sorry for them, not only blacks but whites, transported here on trains and put to work in shipyards, or at Boeing. "Work or fight," and function in this society brand-new to you.

Mrs. Yarbrough Yes, whites were going through the same thing, who came up out of that area. They had special housing built for them because there were so many people coming in large numbers. Bremerton's shipyard was one place where they had to have additional housing, and I remember one man telling about an experience there concerning a white family. They kept getting these complaints from them: "That stove in our apartment won't work. We just can't get it hot enough to cook anything." Finally, when they went over to investigate, they found that they were trying to build a fire down underneath the coils. They had never seen an electric range before, and they were trying to build a fire in it and cook on it! Of course, you can imagine what happened to the stove!

These were the kind of things that were happening.

Mr. Yarbrough I think the biggest problem in both the white

and the black communities, and especially noticeable in the black community, was the social life. The old-timers tended to socialize together and they did not readily accept the new blacks coming in from other parts of the country. I think that, while it was very noticeable in the black community, I do not believe it was any different as happened with an influx of white foreigners from another part of the world. Like the Irish coming in - they were not accepted on the Eastern Seaboard for quite some time. And the Italians would tend to congregate in their own little communities. And so the blacks tended to congregate in the black communities where they could find housing.

Housing was very difficult to come by for 90% of the blacks, both who lived here before and those who came, if they tried to get out of the so-called black communities. However at that same time we had blacks living, not in large numbers, but in isolated houses in the Greenlake area, in the east Madison district near Lake Washington, out in the Rainier Valley district, out in the Mt. Baker district. There were isolated blacks living in those areas who had absolutely no problems with the neighbors.

But when the large influx of blacks came in, many of whom had some money, and they tried to buy outside of the East Madison or Jackson Street areas, there is where we had quite a few confrontations with real estate agents and white people who lived in those areas. They did not want to see new blacks come in. The old blacks who lived in those areas were accepted by their neighbors; the new ones weren't. And this, as my wife said, created friction between the old blacks and the new blacks who tried to get into the white neighborhood.

They'd say, "How come you think you're better than we are, because you have a house out here? You won't go to bat for us to come in here and live." That created friction, too, between the old-timers and the newcomers.

A white person had no trouble. Even though they came from the South, they could buy or rent a house in any part of the city they wished but blacks were very much restricted in that area.

And yet, we were spotted all over the city, in various parts, even in West Seattle.

Mrs. Yarbrough Orientals were having the same problem.

Mr. Yarbrough Yes, and here again, there were a very few Orientals who lived outside of the Oriental district, which was around lower Jackson Street. Very few lived outside that area - nowhere near the percentage of blacks who lived outside their established area.

Q. About employment, were there many blacks employed in city offices as policemen, firemen, bus drivers during the war?

Mr. Yarbrough No, no bus drivers, no firemen. There was one family of blacks - actually, two families of blacks who were in the Police Department. One was the Norris family, and I believe three of the brothers were in the Police Department. There were no black firemen, and no black bus drivers. As a matter of fact, the fellow that was head of the Urban League at

that time tried to get me to quit my job and apply for a bus driver's job. And I said no. No way was I going to quit, because I had a fairly good job.

There were blacks, however, in the Post Office department. Most government agencies, outside of the Post Office, had maybe one or two, but most who worked for the government at that time were custodians.

Q. It surprises me, with the Fair Employment Practices Commission, established at the beginning of the war because of A. Philip Randolph's march on Washington, that the government agencies and government functions were not integrated. The Urban League in the Urban League materials -

Mrs. Yarbrough And the NAACP.

Q. and the NAACP - you can see them sending their best-prepared people to apply for these jobs and still not being able to penetrate those barriers. What was it like in the Armed Forces?

Mr. Yarbrough The Armed Forces was completely segregated until the time of Truman's administration and - I want to say the Battle of the Bulge...

Q. That was 1944. (December, 1944)

Mr. Yarbrough Well, after that battle, Truman said, "Let's bring the blacks in and integrate them." Before that, throughout the history of the United States there were no blacks integrated in any white forces whatsoever. We had our own establishments. We had our own 24th and 25th Infantry and they were all black with white officers. The first [black] pilots were in the 99th Fighter Squadron. The truck companies were all black. We didn't break that until Truman's administration after that time when they lost so many troops over in Europe. He said, "Look, we're losing some manpower here, so let's get them in."

I went into a totally segregated unit in the Army. I had a very unusual experience. I was drafted, and went out to Fort Lewis for my indoctrination and when the fellow was writing it up, he put down "white" for me. I told him, "Look, I'm not white."

He said, "Well, you look white to me."

I said, "No, I'm a Negro."

So he scratched our "white" and wrote in "Negro." And I went to a Negro outfit. A lot of people could not differentiate by skin color when you were fairly light complected. If you were dark complected, they knew right off. But it was ignorance on the part of some of the non-coms who were making out the papers - quite a few Negroes went in as white. We call that "passing," when they passed for white and you knew they were black. We knew about that. As a rule, sometimes we - the black community - resented it, and other times we said, "More power to them! If they can get a good job by passing, maybe they can make it possible for us who could not pass to come into a job."

So we rationalized that pro and con, that is, the black community did. We had very few people, as my wife

mentioned, of great wealth in the black community except the gamblers. Even our doctors and lawyers were not affluent people, but respected because they were professional people. They didn't make anywhere near the money that doctors and lawyers make today, nor did they make anywhere near what the white professional people made, because their practice was more or less limited. We had two or three black dentists who practiced in downtown Seattle and, believe it or not, 90% of one dentist's trade was white. He was a good dentist. And he was not exorbitant in his charges either. Some of the black dentists downtown had a large percentage of their trade black.

Most of the Oriental professional people were located around the Jackson Street area - the doctors, the dentists, the attorneys - they were in that particular area.

Q. What were your options like when you went into the Army? Did you have any choices?

Mr. Yarbrough No! (laughing) No choices at all! I don't believe the whites had much choice either. When you were drafted, you went in where they thought you were needed. The old story was if you said you wanted to go in as a truck driver, they'd put you in as a cook - there were some weird stories.

But my experience was that blacks who were drafted went where they were sent, into segregated units and not into specialized ones.

Q. What did you end up doing?

Mr. Yarbrough I went in a truck company, and we had a few inter-racial problems there. Living in Seattle at that time, we were sent down to Fort Ord in California for our basic training, and in Fort Ord, California, we were in segregated companies. At that time, we had all white officers. The black officers were in the 24th and 25th infantry units, and later on they were officers, naturally, in the Air Force. But all of our commissioned officers were white. The black non-coms were usually older men who had come in through the Army 24th and 25th infantry. [They became our trainers. Under their training, many of the recruits became non-commissioned officers.]

Side B

After our basic training at Fort Ord, we were sent back up here as a truck company, and we operated out of Camp Murray which was adjacent to Fort Lewis. One evening, two or three of us wanted to go over to the base theatre at Fort Lewis, and we went in. I went in and sat down, along with another fellow that was with me, and pretty soon the usher came down with his little flashlight like most ushers carry in a theatre.

He said, "I'm sorry, you can't sit here."

I said, "Why, is this reserved?"

He said, "No, but it says blacks have to sit at the back of the theatre." Well, he said "Negroes." In those days, the terminology was "Negroes," so it was "Negroes have to sit at the back of the theatre."

I said, "This is the Army theatre, isn't it?"

He said, "Yes."
And I said, "Well, I'm not moving."
He said, "Well, we'll have to call an M.P.
and put you out."

I said, "Go ahead and call the M.P. I'm not moving."

The M.P. came down, and I said, "You're going to have to arrest me, if you want me to move. You better check with your N.C.O. if that's the way you want to go."

Well, he took my name, rank, and serial number and I still didn't move.

Two days later, one of the post chaplains, who was black, came over to my commanding officer, who was white. He told the commanding officer what had happened, and I was called in. The captain of my company told the chaplain, "You know, I'm from Missouri, but I don't believe in discrimination. However, if the post commander says we can't go there and sit with the rest of them, then I'll pass the word on to my troops."

In front of the chaplain, I said, "If I'm going to lose my stripe," - I was a sergeant - "I'd just as soon lose it over something like this rather than losing it for going AWOL or something like that."

Well, my officer said, "You won't lose your stripes," but he called us all in to a meeting one morning at reveille, first thing in the morning. And he told us then that this was something he did not believe in, but that he had to obey orders from the Post Commander, so he told us in no uncertain terms, "If you go over there, I can't help you. Why don't you just quit going over to the theatre altogether, and that way, you won't be subjected to the embarrassment."

So we did. We didn't go to the theatre.

I used to drive over to Seattle almost every night to visit with my wife, and take two or three fellows with me in my car. One evening on the way over, we stopped at a restaurant about a mile out of the post and they refused to serve us, so we tore up the place. I mean, we tore it up! Stools, dishes, and everything else! Nothing was ever said about it that we heard of. We told the guy we would be back the next night, and he'd better serve us. We went back in the next night, and he served us.

These were the things that we had to do then.

When we went overseas, on the ship, there was no segregation whatsoever. The bunks were about three high and there was no segregation on the ships going over whatsoever. Then I came back on a leave of absence from the Aleutian Islands, and coming back on the ship, there was no segregation. They loaded us in the trucks at the dockside, at Pier 91 as we came off the ship.

Then we got up to Fort Lawton, up to the gates at Fort Lawton, and before we went in through the gates, the M.P.'s came through and ordered all the blacks out of the trucks, and all the whites out of the last three trucks. They put the whites up in our spots, and put us down in the last three trucks. Then they took us in to the post there and we had separate barracks.

I never forgot that. It griped me, and that's one of the reasons I got into the civil rights movement

had happened. And he said, "I knew something was wrong."

So evidently it showed. But anyway he did hire me. And I worked with the Alaska Travel Control three years and had some very interesting experiences while I was there.

After I had been there a while, I was promoted to the teletype office. They installed teletype service to the Aleutians. Our job, in this Alaska Travel Control, was to screen everyone who traveled into Alaska. They all had to be screened; they were being very, very careful. So this was the reason for this big department - Alaska Travel Control.

Q. Do you mean screened for intelligence risks?

Mrs. Yarbrough Yes, because of the war, and because it was close to Japan, too.

Anyway, they finally installed this wire service up in the Aleutians where Letcher was stationed, and he watched them put up the wires and so on in the installation. And he was the first one to make a call out of the Aleutians, from Amchitka. Fortunately, I was on duty when the call came through, and I took that message from my husband direct on the teletype. Well, my goodness, that really caused a furor! It was a lot of fun! (laughing)

Mr. Yarbrough And there wasn't anything illegal about it! (laughing)

Mrs. Yarbrough That was one of the nice things that happened.

It was amazing, though, how difficult it was to get a job, even during the war.

Q. Were employers very frank with you about their racism, about their reasons for turning you down, or did you just get the silent treatment?

Mrs. Yarbrough Well, most of the time, I was really qualified because I had taken the Civil Service examination. But I think it was one of those things that most employers had the opportunity to select between two or three applicants.

Mr. Yarbrough They could take any one of the top three without being accused of discrimination.

Mrs. Yarbrough They never actually had to say why. You just wouldn't hear from them. They just didn't call you to come to work. So, I wouldn't get a call to come to work, and I'd go back to the referral office and get another bunch of referrals and off I'd go. It wasn't an easy thing to do, and sometimes I'd have to just lay off for a few days, just to kind of get myself together and have enough courage to start out again. But I persisted, and I finally did it, and that's how my career in office work started.

I continued on from there. That's all I ever did - office work and secretarial work and that kind of thing.

Mr. Yarbrough With our present system against discrimination, it almost seems unbelievable now the amount of discrimination that was very open toward blacks applying for work, even government work.

We didn't have any teeth in the law to start with. It was something that was most common with blacks, and also in many cases applied to the Orientals, and the Hispanics, and anyone of a dark skin. Or noticeable racial features. Either way, one way or the other.

When you look back on it now, you say how insensitive a good 75% of the whites were in their attitude toward the blacks in anything whatsoever. Employment, accomodations, all of this. It was very, very noticeable, and while we unwillingly accepted it, we had no choice.

Mrs. Yarbrough There was so little motivation. They didn't have counselors in high schools as they have them now. You'd have your teachers, and there usually was a boys' advisor and a girls' advisor. I can remember the girls' advisor saying to me, "You should take more home economics courses, so that when you graduate, you can get a job."

And I said, "Where?"

"In somebody's home, " she was saying to me, "So prepare yourself to be a domestic servant. Drop all this typing and shorthand and stuff that you're fooling with."

Mr. Yarbrough "Because you're not going to get the job." And the same way with the boys' advisor in high school.

Mrs. Yarbrough It was the same thing: "Be an auto mechanic."

Mr. Yarbrough When you'd say, "Well, I want to go to college," they'd discourage you [by suggesting] so many jobs other than professional jobs.

They'd say, "You're not going to become an engineer. You can study, but you're not going to get a job because nobody's going to hire you." This was commonplace, and nothing unusual at all. You had very few blacks in college that were taking professional jobs other than attorneys and doctors, because they'd say you were wasting your time.

Mrs. Yarbrough We didn't even have any black school teachers, and the few girls who graduated from high school and wanted to continue on in college and be a teacher had to go somewhere else out of state, down South or East - somewhere to a black college to get their training. And most of them stayed and taught there until way late, after the war, when some came back and taught here.

Q. Do you think the war had an affect, positive or negative, on race relations in the city of Seattle?

Mr. Yarbrough I think it was a beginning because so many employers found that blacks were capable of taking a job and going forward with it, as opposed to the stereotype of Steppin Fetchit and some entertainers and black-face comedians. They found out that blacks, given the proper training, made good

employees.

The war was an impetus here, and so many blacks came out of the war with some kind of a trade - mechanics, and cooks, too, but telegraph operators, and Signal Corps linemen. It was a beginning.

Mrs. Yarbrough It provided the job experiences that we needed, even in my own case. The first time I'd ever had the chance to prove that I could be a good clerical worker was when I got a job during the war. From then on, I had experience, and I could move forward.

Q. Do you think the shortage of employment gave you that opportunity? Do you think it would have been denied to you five years earlier?

Mrs. Yarbrough Oh, definitely. There was such a demand for workers. Like I said, I could go down to that Referral Office any day of the week and they could refer me to half a dozen different openings. As many as I could cover in one day usually would be three, and I'd go back the next day and it would be the same thing - they'd have just that many more openings and demands for jobs. But I went through that for I don't know how many weeks before I finally found an employer who would give me a chance.

And even then, very often when I'd go for these interviews, they'd sit me down at a typewriter and tell me to type a letter or type this. They still weren't willing to believe that I could do it, and I'd passed a Civil Service examination. And I'd passed it - I could do it, and I still would not get the job because they were just determined they were not going to hire blacks.

Mr. Yarbrough As a rule, most advancements in job opportunities for blacks were through the government, either federal, state, county, or city governments. The county was, I think, about the last one to really start in hiring blacks other than in custodial or menial labor.

The federal government was the first start, and then it came on down into the states. I think I have a placard downstairs now where Governor Langlie signed the first state Fair Employment Practice law program for this state. I forget what year that was now.

Mrs. Yarbrough That came quite a few years after the war. You mentioned FEPC during the war - I don't think during the war, we had it. Even nationally, didn't it come a little bit later?

Q. No, it was at the beginning of the war that A. Philip Randolph led the march on Washington that made it that defense contractors could not hire with discrimination, but it was confined to shipyards and Boeing and so on.

Mr. Yarbrough I applied at Boeing, and they told me all they had was a custodial job, and they had no openings. They said, "You can work at a custodial job." Now, it's second nature to see blacks in all positions at Boeing, but at the

beginning... And this was when Boeing had defense contracts! They didn't say, "We won't give you a job" - they just said, "This is what we have for you."

Q. Were these policies of discriminatory hiring and repression and institutionalized rudeness - were they up to individuals to apply or were they institutionalized within an organization? If you had applied at the Bon to become a clerk, I don't believe you would have been hired in the early forties - was that Bon policy, or was that up to the individual personnel person?

Mrs. Yarbrough Both.

Mr. Yarbrough But it was a more or less unwritten company policy that was practiced by the hiring authority. And there were so many ways of getting around such [anti-] discriminatory laws as we had, which were not that well enforced or have any bite to them, any enforcement power. It was not too subtle, but very well practiced all around. [A very common reason was that whites would not accept us on the job.]

There were cases where somebody who was very light-skinned would have been hired because they weren't standing out as a black. That was a way of getting in, so to speak. As a rule, you wouldn't have gotten a job, no, except as a maid in the ladies' room.

Mrs. Yarbrough And then, too, in the first years after FEPC was passed in this state, I think the law read something like, "equal opportunities for non-whites." So they would hire one Japanese, or one Chinese, or one of anything except a Negro, and they would be complying with the law. So even that had to be broken down. They'd say, "Oh, we don't discriminate! We've got the nicest little Japanese girl working in our office."

Mr. Yarbrough One thing that so many blacks resented in that area was that we felt because they had a country to fall back on - in other words, the Japanese Consul, the Chinese Consul, the Philippine Consul - they had a little bit of an edge, not much, but an edge over the blacks.

Q. I never thought of that.

Mr. Yarbrough Well, it was very evident! We had nobody we could fall back on, except our own government, and our own government was discriminating!

Mrs. Yarbrough Plus that fact that we were the trouble makers. The Japanese and the Chinese did absolutely nothing to help get that law passed. They didn't stick their neck out one bit, and they were the first ones to benefit by it.

Mr. Yarbrough Then, on the other hand, we had a lot of help from the Jewish communities, a lot of help. They served on some of our committees against discrimination. They tried to get us jobs, as far as they could, in their own organizations. But there again, they were limited to some extent, too, but at least they were right alongside of us in the fight, from the very beginning.

on their car - and for them to beat up on him right there in the street.

Or, if there were too many people around, take them down to the police station, stop the elevator between floors and beat up on them.

Q. What period of time are you talking about?

Mr. Yarbrough Oh, forty-five to about fifty-five.

And we had very few black policemen one of which was on the motorcycle patrol, one was in the Sheriff's department, and two were in the Seattle Police Department. The first one that went into the Seattle Police Department was carried on the roll as Indian, and everybody knew he was black. But he was carried on the roll as an Indian, and he might have been the first actual black in the Seattle Police Department.

Q. One of the things that's noticeable reading the newspapers during the war, the Seattle Star, the P-I, and the Times, is that if the race of someone arrested for or suspected of a crime is other than white, that race is always the first word in the story or the headline.

Mrs. Yarbrough Invariably.

Mr. Yarbrough That took us a long time to convince newspapers to stop that, and it ended up that the NAACP did that as a result of its work in the area here.

Now they don't do that. Seldom do you know what the race was, unless there's a picture. And you have to give the newspapers credit now - they don't necessarily put a picture in there to let people know. It comes in as a news event without any real effort to say, "This was a black person who was arrested and charged with a crime."

We've made a lot of [progress]

Mrs. Yarbrough Then, too, a lot of good newspaper people - and a lot of them were Jewish people - actually could point out that that was not good newspaper reporting. That was really not good journalism to identify a person by their race when it didn't mean anything. They were not looking for the person; they didn't need it for identity purposes. The story wasn't about blacks, it was a story about a crime that had been committed and it a crime regardless of who committed it and what color he was.

I think these were the kinds of things that made newspaper people stop and think, and look at these things in a more intelligent light, and stop trying to be strictly sensational.

I think that was part of what needed correcting, and it's not very often now that you see that.

as much as I did. These are the things that happened in the Army. When we were in the Aleutians, we were in segregated camps, too.

Q. How were you able to sustain... Well, what kind of patriotic feeling did you end up having for the country at war that was practicing this kind of discrimination in its own fighting ranks?

Mr. Yarbrough Well, as odd as it may sound, I think 99% of the blacks were very patriotic, and because most of us had been subjected to discrimination all of our lives at that point, it wasn't that big a deal except when incidents like the truck thing came up. Then we felt it. But I don't believe we had any problems being patriotic or fighting in the war or doing what we were doing in the war.

Mrs. Yarbrough Plus the fact that it was home. You had family and relatives at home that you felt you were fighting for. You knew, you had a cause to fight for other than just the white man's country. There were a lot of things at stake.

Mr. Yarbrough It was our country, too.

Q. While he was away, what were you doing? (to Mrs. Yarbrough)

Mrs. Yarbrough I was looking for a job and being discriminated against in restaurants! (chuckling) No, that was the only restaurant.

But, really, it was an interesting experience. In high school, I had taken a commercial course, but I had never been able to get a job in any kind of any office doing anything. Now there were ads in the paper; there were articles in the paper - they were recruiting people from every walk of life to fill some of these jobs, particularly clerical work. I thought, well, I should be doing something.

So I went out, and I answered ads, and I took the Civil Service examination. They had set up a special office for interviewing and referrals, and I'd go down there and they'd send me out on jobs - maybe two or three different ones each time I'd go. Nothing would ever come of it. I'd go back to the referral office, and they'd send me out again.

And that's what I was doing this particular day I stopped in this little restaurant. So finally, one of the referrals that I was to go to - and I had to wait for the appointment - was in the Exchange Building in Seattle, and I'll never forget it. It was with the Alaska Travel Control. I had had this experience in this restaurant just before time for me to go for my interview. I went in and, of course, by this time, I couldn't go in hopefully, and yet I didn't want to go in feeling defeated.

So this turned out to be my lucky day after all because the supervisor, William Vanderbilt, was a man with a great deal of insight. He noticed a lot of things. He told me later, "When you came in the office that day, I sensed that there was something very wrong. Were you discouraged about looking for work?"

Well, we got to talking, and I told him what

Q. What organizations existed during the war to help stop discrimination? The Urban League was in existence then...

Mr. Yarbrough Well, the NAACP was foremost. It emphasized legal methods of doing it while the Urban League's main forte was to try to assist or show individual employers that the right thing to do was to employ blacks. The NAACP was the one who fought the cases through the lower courts all the way up to the Supreme Court, and one of the justices of the Supreme Court now, Thurgood Marshall, the only black on the Supreme Court, was at one time, the chief legal advisor for the NAACP. He won so many cases, when his name came up, he was appointed to the Supreme Court. He won an enormous number of cases pertaining to discrimination prior to becoming a judge. He was a smart man - not just because he won the cases - he was a very learned attorney.

Mrs. Yarbrough And a hard working man who worked most of his life for practically nothing. NAACP couldn't afford to pay their lawyers like big companies did. And it was not unusual for the NAACP to send people right to the frontlines where black servicemen were having trouble. That was not unusual at all. In fact, the only friend the black serviceman had during the war was the NAACP.

Mr. Yarbrough We fought some bitter battles. Legal battles, I'm talking about. As well as some others, too! (chuckling)

Q. Were they an active presence here in Seattle then? The NAACP?

Mrs. Yarbrough Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it was while Letcher was in the service that I became active in the NAACP and was on the board and served as secretary of the local branch. When Letcher was discharged, he became very active in it, and he served four years as president and for a long time after that as chairman of the Veterans Committee working with black veterans and helping them with their problems.

We have put in a lot of time, many, many years of late hours and of midnight hours working with the NAACP.

Mr. Yarbrough One of our biggest problems here in Seattle was the Police Department and their harassment of the blacks. It was not unusual at all for a black to walk down Jackson Street with a white woman and they - I mean the policemen who always went in pairs on Jackson Street at that time - would chase the white woman off and beat up on the black for being in her presence. Of course, their rationalization 90% of the time was that the white woman was a prostitute and the black was her pimp. That was their rationalization. But even blacks walking down the street with their wives, who were not black - why, they would beat up on the black. In some cases, if they found out the white woman was married to the black, beat up on her, too.

And it was not an unusual thing at all for blacks to be detained for minor offenses - I'm talking about minor offenses like running a red light, or the lights being out