

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project, "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century"
Josephine "Jo" Willard (**JW**) interviewed by John Soltis (**I**), Winter of 1999.

I Ms. Willard or Jo, could you tell us where and when you were born, please?

JW I was born in Naples, Italy when my mother was a person who made clothes and then my father he used to walk to Paris all the time, because he had to get materials for my mother and then my brother was born at that time, my sister was born, and then I was born in Italy.

I Okay, and what year was that, early 1915, something like that?

JW I'd have to do some math, I'd have to do some work.

I Okay, it's not that important we have that information here, okay and how old were you when your family came to America, very young?

JW Very, very, young. Because my grandmother, my mother's mother took care of the three of us, my mother could not take care of us at any time.

I And did your whole family come to America, your mother, your father, your brothers?

JW And my mother's mother, grandmother, she's the one that took care of us full-time, took care of us.

I And did your family come right to Bridgeport?

JW There was a friend who arranged with them and that brought them into Bridgeport. It was arranged.

I And was the work here waiting for them?

JW Yes, for my mother.

I For your mother, in the garment industry or...?

JW In the garment industry.

I And you moved to the North End of Bridgeport?

JW Ya, I remember the end of Bridgeport, down here. I remember Grand Street and another street, we went up the hill and there was big, big, big, a

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huge place, but within three months or so they took that down and made, they made clothes.

I They made clothing there? Okay and let's see, so you grew up in Bridgeport, okay you went to what? Shelton School?

JW No, not Shelton at all.

I How about high school, did you go to Central High School?

JW High School, yeah I went to high school and I went also, once or twice, I forgot what the name was, but I did get some, I got some more information.

I Okay, let's talk about your working career in Bridgeport.
(PHONE RINGS, TAPE MACHINE GOES OFF).

(MACHINE COMES BACK ON)

I `Okay, I was asking Jo, what's the first job you remember working in Bridgeport, after high school? Because I've heard you were involved with the ladies, in the ladies garment industry.

JW Yeah, probably, my sister more than me. I used to do things that were not sewing and so forth, but the more mechanical things. I was very involved with mechanical things. I took care of my father, my father had this store, I would go home back from school when I came from, what's the name of that street, what's the name of the...

I Over by Grand Street?

JW No. It was downtown, a big street and then I had to come from Janis, Janis Street?

I Okay, the name is really not that important.

JW Yeah. I had to come back from the schools that you had to climb up the stairs. Now in Bridgeport you have to go down the stairs.

I Oh, okay by Broad Street, there.

JW By Broad Street

I Yes, that's....

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JW Yeah, so I went into that school when I'd go home. And then I remember one day --my father had a store, bicycles and so forth -- and I worked with him when I came home from school. And one day, I've gotta tell you this, one day I was coming home from school with a boy and we were holding our arms and my mother happen to be into the store and she came out and whacked me, because I hid the boy.

I Okay (chuckle).

JW I did, whatever it was, it was a terrible thing and then I hit her back and that was horrible. My father helped me afterwards to take care of that.

I I've done a little bit of research here and it says you were also employed at Casco?

JW Casco, was high..., out in the east part of...

I ...Bridgeport?

JW ...Bridgeport and I didn't like it because the high men, --working very hard and doing terrible things. And I didn't stay and I got several people not to stay. So I remember that.

I Okay, did they have a union at Casco?

JW No, no union at Casco. Yeah.

I So you weren't there for very long?

JW No, I left, I left because they were so bad.

I And did you also work at Raybestos?

JW It's a possibility.

I When did you start working at General Electric, in the 40's?

JW I don't remember.

I No, no, but I mean was that after Casco?

JW One day I was walking, working in my place and the top guys came along and said, "How're you doing?" and so on. And I said, "it's awful, it's no good." And they asked me why. I said, "Because it's not good and..."

I Okay, was this at Casco?

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JW ...at Casco, at Casco. Two men were there, [some loud squeaking in background] I'll stop in a minute (laughter). Anyway, right after that I left them. I left them.

I You left Casco?

JW I left them, because I wanted to do something that was better and it didn't work.

I Okay, and where did you go from there?

JW Yeah, I'm trying to think. I told everybody I was going down to, I was going to someplace that I was not going to.

I Uh huh.

JW Because I wanted to get away. I told them I was going to go to Florida and I knew I couldn't do it and didn't want, --but I didn't want to go and after that I don't know where I went.

I Okay, why don't we, why don't you tell us a little about your work in General Electric? In the electric blanket?

JW The electric blanket was the last one.

I Oh, so where --you worked at other places?

JW No, right in there. I didn't want to do the blanket because I wanted to do the mechanical things. So the people can do and understand, and then they'll be able to do something valid with their hands. Whereas you go over on the bed and you push that and all that I didn't want them to do things like that, because I know now quite a bit of the things. I was tops with all kinds of things everywhere in that place.

I In GE?

JW Yeah, and I wasn't afraid and I was very happy about that [fair.] I'll never forget that. I was very happy to get out.

I What made you get involved with the union and become a chairperson, a chairman?

JW I wanted the people to learn something, I wanted them to earn some money that's really good. I was doing things that people were afraid to do and I was aware of the fact that they were afraid, and so I would help them not to be afraid. And I would say to them "If you're afraid ,I'll talk for you. I'll

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talk for you, but for God sakes talk! You talk!" And that's how it worked. And they fought after awhile. It became a very, very interesting fighting place in that area.

I What were some of the things you fought over with management?

JW Well, with management I fought. They did turn me up, they did turn me, but I don't remember what it was, --something that I didn't want to stay there anymore. I found out that I could do things that are better and make more money for the people. Never, never, did I fight for my money, I fought for their money and that was a joy. It was a joy to do that.

I So you became a, you were a steward at GE?

JW Yeah, I was a steward. I was everything. I was everything and I fought.

I Was your husband also involved with the UE?

JW Yes, he was. Yes, he was.

I And where did he work?

JW On, the...

I The Deco Records?

JW The records.

I Yeah, Columbia?

JW Columbia Records, Columbia Records, yeah, but then it started to break up. That was an awful break, Lloyd was my husband and he was the top guy in the union.

I At Columbia?

JW At Columbia, he fought. If I look anywhere I probably can find some of his things. I don't know.

I So you were a real labor family?

JW Oh, yeah, yeah, he was very, very good. He was very brilliant --brilliant man. He had no... But he didn't stay long, something happened. I don't know what happened. Something went wrong.

I At Columbia?

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JW At Columbia.

I Now, when you were involved with the UE, you know I also see here you ran for State Representative on the Communist Party Ticket. Early on when you were involved with the Communist Party and with the UE, did people have a problem with that or did that happen later?

JW There was no problem.

I The workers in GE didn't....

JW ...no they were happy, especially with Lloyd. He was very good, yeah.

I So, what happened later, I know --like the IUE came in and there were the hearings.

JW It was the Right Wing people that they were tied with the company. They were all, -- there were special men that were taking care -- stopping, trying to stop what we were doing -- Lloyd and I and all of the others. I remember that now.

Gee why are we doing this? Why are we doing this?

I realized what happened. There was a group inside the company that made ties with just a few of the men, so to knock us off.

I Okay, so it was almost like company union then was coming in?

JW Yes, yeah.

I And what did they do? --use the excuse that you're Communist or something like that to...?

JW ...that was part of it, that was part of it and the rest of it, we had a tough time afterwards. We did and I don't remember what happened after that.

I Do you remember your campaign for State Representative, in, I guess it was 1946?

JW Let me see.

I Well, the only reason I'm asking is, some of the things you were supporting then, like a state income tax for people making over \$5,000 a year, fair employment practices, decent housing for low and moderate income people...

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JW ...I did all of that.

I ...These are some of the same kind of issues that...

JW Where did you get that? [campaign literature]

I The library.

JW My God, that's wonderful!

I Yeah, yeah.

JW But they, --one year at the library somebody said "Jo Willard is a Communist" and with that it was something else beyond that. It was awful at the library.

I Really, at the Bridgeport Library?

JW ...at the Bridgeport Library. They wrote down there about Jo Willard and that she was Communist and she didn't do this and didn't do that and there was, --I didn't give a hoot. I was angry.

I Sure.

JW But there was no way to go and do anything about it. So now I realize that it's the same thing that was at that time.

I So you were a person who was fighting for the workers and fighting to get minority workers jobs?

JW Yeah, getting a good job and good pay too! I was fighting for good pay, because if they, --nobody else would talk. Every once in a while we would have a little group --women only. It was only women, even though there were some men. They didn't help the women to fight and I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it.

I Sure.

JW I didn't care if I had to get out. I wanted to do what was right and I knew who the top people were. I knew who they were and I just remember it now, how I was fighting all the time. We had to do the fight. There was no other way. But the other way that was awful was the company would catch into some men and bring 'em in so as to tell the people "don't go in, don't go in." There was the no and the yes.

I So they were looking to the divide workers?

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JW To divide the workers, yeah. That's the, that's what went on and at some point, I just remember, I don't know, I said to 'em, "I'm leaving to go to Florida and I'm," --and it was not that at all. But I went somewhere else and for a long time, even up to today, I try to remember what did I do? What did I stop? Where did I go?

I After you left GE?

JW After I left, I told them all of them I was gonna go to Florida and instead that wasn't it at all.

I Do you remember much about testifying before the Committee, the House Committee on un-American Activities is that in New Haven?

JW We had to go to New Haven, yeah. We were frightened.

I Sure.

JW We were frightened.

I Sure. I remember reading there were --you, you took the Fifth Amendment?

JW Yeah. Yeah, I remember that.

I Do you remember why you did that, why you wouldn't answer their questions?

JW I said, "Aw fuck, fuck you!"

I (laughter)

JW I did --nice and quiet though.

I Yeah, I noticed though, there were several people there that took that same kind of tact. They also used, --there were two FBI informers, I hear, there --a Harold Kent and a Rowena...

JW Rowena.

I Paulmi or something. P A U L M I, she was hairdresser. They were testifying against you and your friends, do you recall that?

JW No.

I Okay, you say you were frightened to go before the Committee and there was also a Sam Richter.

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JW That's a good man.

I Tell us about Sam?

JW Oh gee, he was just wonderful. Oh, I wonder where he is. All of this is just incredible, I had put it all away, to clean up (chuckle), get cleaned up (chuckle), oh boy.

I What do you remember about Sam?

JW Nothing now. Nothing, I don't know about him.

I Just that he was a good man?

JW He was a good man.

I 'Cause I read a little bit about him from the newspaper articles from back then.

JW You know, were you able to get him?

I No, I haven't tried to contact him, but I...

JW No.

I The "Bridgeport Post" had some articles about him, back in, I guess it was 1956. And also with you in them.

JW Jesus.

I And Jack Goldring, or Jake Goldring.

JW Jack Goldring, Jake was the top guy. Jake was a true, what do you call it now? He wanted to be a Communist. He wanted to be a Communist, I didn't. I didn't want to, but I stayed with them for a while. We became very good friends, we were close. I don't remember who else. Jake, Jake was the top man.

I Really?

JW Yeah, he didn't do much within the inside, but he did outside. He helped a lot.

I What was he like, the organizer?

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JW He was an organizer.

I For the Party?

JW Yeah, for the Party, yeah.

I And you said, at first you didn't want to be a member?

JW Well, I don't really remember, it may be that I was frightened and I wanted to stop something. There was something of that there, that I left, but then after awhile, I don't know I fought, I fought right away. I remember that.

I With the workers.

JW With the worker, be with the workers. The last thing, as I told you, one day I decided to go away and I said, I told them I'm going to go to Florida and I took my thing and I went to Florida, I didn't go to Florida. I went. I don't remember where I went, somewhere else.

I Later on then, let's leave all that for a minute.

JW Okay.

I I'm told you had a radio show on WPKN?

JW Yeah.

I And you worked with a natural foods and nutrition and that kind of thing?

JW Yes, yes.

I What got you involved with that, you were just interested in that or?

JW It was very interesting because I wanted people to become clean and clear and don't buy the crap that is in place. I did everything that I could.

I And did you form a company or something, I remember seeing something here that you were the President of the Natural Hygiene, Incorporated or something?

JW I probably did.

I Yeah, there was a mention of you on "Essence Magazine." (chuckle) Yeah, in 1994.

JW Really, oh gee. (Talking to a pet) Come here Sweetsie, sit down, sit down.

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I One other thing I found, I don't mean to jump back and forth, but I read in the newspaper about a rally or a speech you were going to see by Gerhard Eisler back in 1947 and apparently there were a lot of "Goons", let's say out there who broke up the speech and it couldn't happen and your husband wrote a letter.

JW Oh my.

I Yeah, I don't know if you wanted to take a look at that, if it would refresh your memory about, it sounds like you had a terrible experience there. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that?

JW (Silence).

I Okay, the letter reads "Sunday evening, November 16, 1947, the United States of America. I a World War II veteran, allowed my wife to go to a public lecture alone. I was certain that in the country I had just served for three years, the country in which her brother had given his life, she was free and safe to go wherever she pleased. I have since then checked her story of what occurred with the story of several eye witnesses."

JW This is Lloyd.

I Yeah. This is Lloyd speaking. "The result is a sordid tale of a Veterans Council which violated the sacred Constitution of the United States." I can't make that out but,....

JW My brother got killed. I think that's where it was, but I know he did.

I It talks about, the "rule by mob, substituted rule by mob for rules by court of law. It is the story of two policeman who turned away in the face of a howling pack of yellow curs and allowed the bunch of cowardly 'women beaters' to follow my wife for five blocks, continually striking and insulting her. Continually threatening her life and constantly spewing a stream of anti-Semitic, anti-Negro and other un-American invective. She was saved from more serious harm only by the intervention of an honest unaffiliated veteran who drove his car over the sidewalk, into the mob and rescued her. His car was extensively damaged by the weapons of the vicious rats who surrounded her. These rats may or may not have been members of your Council." The Veterans Council....

JW I remember this.

I You remember this? "They

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JW They were in the car. All torn up and I finally don't remember all of it, but that was a terrible, terrible thing.

I So they basically attacked you because you wanted to attend this speech.

JW I wanted to, yes. Yeah. The issue of the community, not community, but it was the issue of the...

I I think it was Eisler that was speaking. I may be mispronouncing his name.

JW I don't remember.

I Yeah, they said "they were dressed in army and marine uniforms. Many wore the cap of the Catholic War Veterans." Lloyd says "those men were a disgrace to my country and to the uniform I wore. They were by their intolerant remarks an un-American, --"they by their intolerant remarks and un-American actions brought shame on all veterans groups, except for one. Apparently only group, the Jewish War Veterans, kept their hands and their honor clean by refusing to participate." So these Veterans Councils minus the Jewish war veterans were really.

JW Yeah. I remember that. I remember, I don't remember who they were, the men, of what value is this is to you?

I Well, I think it's of a historical value in that if it tells us.

JW You have to do it right, because sometimes its all just a little bit of this, little of that, you've got to, well, you know what to do about it or else you wouldn't have been here.

I Did these veterans councils, were they, what is it except they felt you were all Communist and that this was something terrible?

JW Yeah, that's what they thought, yeah. It wasn't at all, it wasn't that at all and I didn't stay with the communism people. I took off and that's when I went away and I don't remember where I went.

I I guess, lastly is there, as I said this tape and this transcript is going to be at the library forever. Is there any message or any words of wisdom you'd like to share with us?

JW I would like, the only thing that bothers me, was that one year ago or two years ago or three, four, five years ago, I don't know, my name was called in from the library and that I wasn't this and wasn't that and so forth and it was terrible. It was put in a way that, that was just awful and there was nothing that I could do about it. I was angry. So I don't know now what, it

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seems to me that you know more about this and can put things together. A lot more than whoever did it before.

I Now, correct me if I'm wrong. The research I've done, I see Jo Willard who, yes, was a member of the Communist Party.

JW Of what value is that...!

I But was not a subversive or anything else, was working for the betterment of the workers?

JW Yes.

I And that people, much as today, the Right Wing tries to use any excuse they can to keep the workers down and they'll use any tactic, just as they used with the IUE to try to break the UE, and I see you as one of the people that fought against this.

JW Oh, yes. I even helped with Lloyd at his place, 'cause he was the President and I went in there too.

I In Columbia?

JW In Columbia, yeah. I use to stay at the outside sometimes for staying up and back and going inside sometimes too.

I And what would you do, leaflet or something?

JW Well, yeah, I had the leaflets. I wanted the men to understand, because some of them were wonderful and some of them were not. That was a tough thing, but Lloyd, Lloyd didn't last long, you know, here? He died so fast, it was terrible.

I Oh, he did? I'm sorry.

JW Yeah, so fast! I'm alone, and I don't like it, I don't know what to do, I just don't know what to do. I don't have nice people here, by nice I mean..... I gotta tell you that.

I Well, I think this might be enough, but I'm gonna go over the tape and I'll show it to Mary at work who's in charge of all this, and maybe I'll be back if it's alright with you?

JW Oh, yeah! I'd be very, very happy!

Josephine Willard

I Okay.

JW Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW