Name: Helen Edwards  
Date: April 16, 1986  
Interviewed by: Andy Varnais  
Transcribed by: Natalie Biesinger

Tape 1, Side A:

I. This is recording now.
A. I never worked on the night shift.
I. You were just a day shift person?
A. Yeah. I worked day and maybe I came in at three, but I didn't work late at night.
I. Okay, I'll just say onto the tape that this is April 16...
A. 1918, that was close to the Armistice. Today is the 16th, yeah, I had it marked on my calendar - Hagley.
I. April 16, 1968, and this an interview with Helen Edwards, 905 Alpha Road, is it, Shallcross.
A. Shall - what have they got down there? Shallcross is where I lived when I was a teen before I was married, see I've been married.
I. Okay, 905 Alpha Road.
A. Alpha Road is right.
I. In Wilmington Mrs. Edwards was a powder worker at the Brandywine Mills during the years 1917 and '18, correct? I think we - could we start out with some information on you - how old are you, your place of birth and your family and schooling - just so the people who are listening to this in the future will get an idea.
A. These silk bags, I did work on them.
I. That's picture W7012 from Hagley. You worked on those, on the silk bags.
A. They look larger, now I can't see what they're carrying them in, but you see. This was all the ballastite side, I think. These little houses had hinged roofs and there were only six girls worked in each house. There was a back door and a front door. And if there was an explosion, these roofs went off, you see. But these silk bag, there was a ring like that and there were two women sewed them, they were filled with ballastite which is inflammable explosive, it just didn't flame, and then we fitted these bags on a pole,
A. (Continued) had a ring where they were supposed to be that size. And the ones that didn't fit was discarded. I don't know if they emptied them and did them over or not, most likely. But I worked on them, I packed those, I packed them in cannisters, so many in a cannister. It was about that round and it had a top and a bottom.

I. About three inches round you would say? Yeah, about three inches?

A. About three inches, three and a half, about that, and so many of them. I don't remember how many was packed in, and then the lid was put on. It had like, you see, like a sardine can rolls, those that had a flap like that and that was taped down in the taping house. Well they dipped it, the dipping house I think they called it, I forget now - that's been a long while ago for me to remember (laughs). And after we packed them in these cans, they were put into a box and there was a roller thing, a chute that went down into this house where they dipped them. But they taped them with a black tape first, then they were dipped in tar and hung up to dry and then they went on the next stage. Each job had its own little house or little place to do. Now I worked out there during the flu epidemic.

You heard about that - people were dying off like flies. We worked outside, bitter cold weather because what we were working in, the powder had ether in it, we couldn't stay inside, and we only worked so long before they put another girl on, take us off for a while. And it was an open pavillion, and we stood in the center and this pavillion was around like some of these you see in fairs or some place like that. And there was a counter that we worked on, and it was bitter cold.

I. My goodness, now was this...

A. I've stood a lot for this Company. This was what?

I. Was this across the road, I mean across the river? This side?

A. No - yes, this side was across the river.

I. And how would you get across the river?

A. They had a bridge there.

I. Was it the Iron Bridge, an iron bridge?
A. You know that - no, I don't think it was. I also worked on the black powder side, the other side.

I. Now this was the - over across the river was the ballastite side?

A. You come into the ballastite side first. See we had free transportation out there. These trucks - we wore shoes with wooden pegs - these suits that you see these women wearing are all flame proof.

I. They're flame proof?

A. M-huh, and the shoes had wooden pegs so they wouldn't cause any sparks.

I. Would you bring these - you were issued these clothes by Du Pont and would you leave them in there at night?

A. Yeah, we'd change them there and we each had our own little locker and we'd change them there and take them off before we went home. Very interesting.

I. I just stopped the tape for a minute just to make sure that it was working. One of the things that we do, is that we use the tape recorder, we pretend the tape recorder is an audience, so when we're describing things, I'll sometimes say to you, "Oh, you mean 3"?" so that people in the future can think in their head oh, right, I see what she's saying.

A. Here you are, right here. I don't remember ever sitting outside, I did that in a house.

I. This is Photograph 71313.1, or W70-6 that we're talking about now, I have to say the numbers.

A. You see that place of taping and sealing, tin containers with jar rings - what do they call them? What's that word?

I. This says, "For 3" Stokes Trench Mortar." So this is - you remember doing that type of work?

A. Yes, yes.

I. Can you explain how this is - but you don't remember sitting outside?

A. No, no, I never sat outside. This must have been earlier than when I went there.
I. So they're packing - oh yeah, I can see you're right, the woman in the center of the photograph is taping that.

A. Yes.

I. Those are the containers you're talking about.

A. Some of them - see, she's taping too. I think they're all taping here.

I. And then these boxes filled with cannisters would be dipped?

A. Not the whole box.

I. Just the cannisters?

A. Just the cannisters.

I. I see, I see.

A. I don't think they did, I don't remember them. I know we put these boxes on this chute and the chute had rollers in it and we pulled a rope that pulled them down.

I. Into a...

A. Into the packing area - the Dipping House, what did they call that there? I think they had it. (Long pause)

I. Doesn't say on there.

A. They say that's 1918, but I never remember sitting outside doing it, maybe some did, but I don't remember it, we were in houses.

I. And that photograph number is W70-10. You don't - no recollection?

A. I don't know what they're doing.

I. Would you know where that is, that's a very - that's hard to tell I think, huh?

A. No, that's a new one on me.

I. And the next photo is W70-9, and the women - that is the ballastite site.

A. See, they're pushing a truck load, those silk bags I was telling you, I worked on the ballastite side.
A. (Continued) That's about all we did there as far as I know, because that's the only - these houses were all, I would say about 10' x 12', something like that.

I. All of these wooden houses that you see in the photograph?

A. Yeah.

I. Now would the same operation be taking place in each house?

A. Yes, as far as I know. I was in other houses too. We had a government inspector that was Jewish and he had to do the Cantor in his church and every rainy day he used to come down and stand in our doorway and sing, to end a perfect day for us. Oh he had a marvelous voice.

I. The end of a day as a song?

A. Yeah, and it would be pouring rain (laughs).

I. What would you be doing - could you explain to me one more time what you would do in the houses, in these little houses here?

A. Well, they had a pole, I told you some of them were sewing them up by machine.

I. Right, right.

A. And then they were examined on this pole, and there was a ring where these were supposed to fit, it would look like something like a - it wasn't this long, but it looked like a billiard pole.

I. Was it about two feet long?

A. About that long.

I. M-huh, about two feet.

A. And these rings were fitted down on that at a certain space and if they came to there, they were put in one side and the others on the other, see. The good ones were separated.

I. And you would do that operation in these houses and then the carts that we see here in this photograph...

A. That was taken - that would be taken - if the others were sewing, I don't know where that went, but I
(Continued) pushed those carts. Maybe they're just the bags - did they fill them in those - maybe they were filled in one of those houses somehow.

How many people would work in the houses?

Six.

Six in each one?

U-huh.

The photograph that we see here, which is Photograph W70-11, with the women - is this inside one of those houses, do you think? They seem to be sewing with the machines.

I presume. Maybe at one time they're working. What year they got this - look at that, is that the date those films were taken?

Nineteen-eighteen, right, right. That's what they think.

I never saw them all - this is a house, you see, with the windows, they're all on hinges, even the windows went out on a hinge.

Even the windows were hinges so that they would blow out in case there was an explosion? Very interesting. And W70-8 is similar photograph.

See here they are transferring the - they maybe were silk bags to be filled. Here they are transporting the sewed bags to building for loading into tin cans, and that's what we did. They sewed them in that room where I was. There was two women sewing these, and then we were putting on the pole and separating the right - the good and the bad. And then when we got caught up, we worked on the tins. I did all that, but I didn't sew, not that I couldn't sew, but I just didn't have that job of sewing. What is this?

What's the number on that one? Just so we can...

Seventy-one.

W70-1, that's right.

Bloomer girls loading ballastite rings on trucks.

I see, so if you turn - is this the pole that you're talking about, you can see the women, can you see this pole here?
A. Yes, it's got rings on it, see there.

I. That's the pole you were talking about?

A. I can't understand, though, they've got that all marked 1918.

I. Do you think that's a wrong date on that?

A. I don't know. I worked inside on that work and they're outside. Well they came outside for the picture, or not, I don't know. That could be it.

I. That's a good point.

A. Because that's the pole, she's taking them off and putting - see you sided them off, one pole was narrow, the other was wider. So she was sliding them off of that pole.

I. It says on the back, "Bloomer girls" were you called that?

A. Yeah.

I. Because of the pants you would wear?

A. No, men didn't wear pants like they do today, in those days. Nobody wore bloomers or - well, if you - wore knickers if you played or skated or something like that, but nobody wore slacks like they do today.

I. And who called you "Bloomer Girls"?

A. Oh, we called each other Bloomer Girls.

I. And would the Du Pont's call - refer to you as Bloomer Girls or Powder Girls or...

A. That I don't know. You know what they should have done - three, six, nine, twelve, fifteen - about twenty or twenty-five people, they should have put all these names on here.

I. That is Photograph W70-3. They may not have known the names, but you're right. Do you recognize anyone in any of these photographs?

A. Even if I did, I couldn't tell you their names. Now I forget whether we had to tuck our hair up. My hair was long.

I. You can see them wearing the caps here. You had to wear the caps? Who explained, Helen, what you had
I. (Continued) to - what you had to do? Was there a foreman?

A. Well, when we was taken in to hire, wherever they had the place for us, then they explained - took you to where you was going to work and explained what you had to do. And the other women taught you that was in there.

I. Would a male take you to the job and then the other women would teach you how it was done, or did you have female foremen, too, supervisors?

A. Yes, yes.

I. They were female supervisors?

A. Yeah, I think so. See there must have been at least about ten or twelve of those houses along - I'm not sure about that, there was a number of them though, along this boardwalk that you see. See these carts run on wooden rails.

I. Oh, those are wooden - so no spark would come out?

A. Yeah.

I. And you would push the cart, but you can't remember where it would go, where the cart would go?

A. Well this went from somewhere to be packed in those tins.

I. I see, that makes sense, right.

A. Now I can't - this must have been a different group than I worked in.

I. How many do you think worked there - women - totally, do you remember, have any idea? No idea.

A. The Du Pont's used to run free transportation out - do you live in Delaware?

I. I'm from Vermont, but I'm going to school down here, so I'm not familiar with...

A. Oh - at the Du Pont - you know where the Du Pont Building is, don't you?

I. Right.

A. Well, we had to walk, where we went, or get there somehow, trolley or somehow, to the Du Pont Building and
A. (Continued) they give us free transportation on a bus, and there was a busload every morning, went out there.

I. What time would you start work?

A. About seven.

I. Seven? That would mean you'd have to get up early.

A. Oh ever, yeah.

I. What time would you get up?

A. About six, I think.

I. And you would get out to the powder yards and you would start working at about seven, and when would you end, when was your day over at the powder yards?

A. Three.

I. Seven to three. And how long for lunch?

A. I can't remember that, we had plenty of time because if we didn't take our lunch, there was a cafeteria that we could go and get food in. Now I don't - it wasn't too great, I always took my food.

I. But you could buy food, the Du Pont Company would have people there to sell food to workers who didn't want to bring their lunch?

A. I don't exactly remember too much about that - cross that out, because I never used it.

I. But you do know there was one there?

A. Yeah.

I. Isn't that a nice photograph, that one is W70-2, I think that's a wonderful photograph with the - standing out on the - what were those houses called? Did you have a name for them, the little houses?

A. Just Ballastite House, Ballastite side, that's all we talked on. (Pause) This girl here looks familiar to me, I'm not sure, I can't tell you her name.

I. The second from the right?

A. The second from the left.
I. Second from - oh right - from the left in the photograph, you're right, you're right. I love that picture, I think that is so nice. And Photograph W70-7, is that machinery familiar at all? There's an explanation on the back, I didn't know who wrote it, though, or if it was correct.

A. Well, she's filling them into the silk bag, yes, I remember that in our room.

I. You never worked on those machines though, you worked with the sewing of the bags and the measuring.

A. I didn't do any sewing, I just worked...

I. Oh, that's right.

A. After the bags were filled, I made sure that they were the right size and I packed them.

I. And then packed them, okay.

A. Each weighed, I understand...then it is sewed, after it's filled, sewed together, this ring had a little, just like a little seam left, about a quarter of an inch.

I. Can you see the substance on the windows, that was a netting. Does that look like netting, in case of an explosion, the glass wouldn't go flying out - I was just wondering, I don't know?

A. I don't remember that.

I. You don't remember that?

A. U-huh. Oh my.

I. W-70-4.

A. Day shift of somebody, rest period.

I. See, I would think that would be you in there somewhere.

A. Probably are in there somewhere, but I don't know, I can't find me. This looks like it might have been, I'm not sure - the government inspector.

I. Now he is, just for people who are listening on the tape, he is the first male on the right side in the photo.

A. Well, I don't know whether I'd quote that or not, because I'm not sure about it.
I. Okay, that's okay. Do you would remember, you would have breaks, ten-minute breaks in the morning and then in the afternoon? Who would call the breaks, were there whistles that would blow to start work and to stop work, or was it informal?

A. I don't remember.

I. It's really raining out there, isn't it?

A. We need it. Now I don't remember that. A lot has slipped my mind. You see, when I first came here, this isn't the trailer that I first came to, had a fire, wiped me out — everything totally.

I. In your trailer, a first trailer?

A. U-huh, I was only here eight months, just was getting it fixed up like I wanted it and the regulator on my propane gas tank, it was that year of the blizzard.

I. Thunder — wow!

A. And I had a counter-top range, gas then, it froze — had a diaphragm in it, you know worked when you turned the gas upside down, and it would freeze and then the sun would come out the next day and cause condensation in there, and then it would freeze up, and now this diaphragm didn't work. Well they had worked on it all week long and they finally thought they got it so it would be alright. And I had a doctor's appointment that day and I told them they had to be there by nine o'clock because I had to leave by nine-thirty, and they said they thought it would be alright and I went off, and we also did our shopping, I didn't get back until two o'clock. Now my trailer could have burned in that time, and I was cooking on just a little electric hot plate, you know, my dinners. So that night when I went to — every other night, I turned that gas off, there was a turn off down near the floor, and this night I didn't — I smelt gas see — soon as I smelled it, I turned it off. This night I didn't, I thought it was alright, I didn't smell gas, so I went to bed. And three o'clock in the morning I woke up and the smoke was already back in my bedroom floating up around the ceiling. Now the funny part of it was for about three weeks before that — have you ever had anybody call you when you were asleep, call you name?

I. Oh yes.

A. I had that — for three weeks somebody called my name — "Helen" and I would wake up.
I. You don't know who it was calling you?

A. I did not recognize the voice, I often ponder on it, but I do not, I couldn't recognize the voice. And this person, whoever called me, called me that morning. I think I would have slept right through it and I wouldn't be here today.

I. That person woke you up, whoever it was, is?

A. Yes, and I got up and come out here to see what was causing the smoke. And this kitchen was black with it, my nostrils were filled with it, and I was covered with it, it was in my hair. I tried to call the operator because I didn't have my glasses on, it was dark here, to call the fire company for me and she didn't answer. And after ringing her and hanging up and ringing the second time, I thought I'd better get out of here. Because the flames were starting to roll up over the top, so I grabbed boots and I put on a heavy robe and I scooped up some jewelry, I was hoping I got my best jewelry like my engagement ring and good watch and stuff, you know, and I did. And my purse, but I had three hundred dollars in my cedar chest that was to go into the bank the next day. And I jumped out in a snow bank - called the people next door and they took me around the back when I - it was such a shock, I've forgotten lots of things. It just seemed like my mind's a blank on some things. My sister even asked me things - I just can't remember them any more. So that - might have been some things there that I don't remember.

I. The shock from the fire, you just have forgotten some things. Well, you're doing very well - wow! You're remembering a lot.

A. Now I believe I know this girl because she was a great friend of mind, Ella Saunders.

I. She is - let's see - one, two, three, fourth women on the - if you're looking at the photo, it's on the left.

A. One, two, three, four, five - she's the sixth.

I. Oh, six, right, I counted wrong. One, two, three, four, five, six - right, okay, the sixth women, she's white, wearing a white blouse.

A. She doesn't - no, her face is sticking out beyond - this one right here.
I. This one, oh, I see, I see - right, my goodness, you're better than I am, I can't see that. I see, and you think her name was...

A. Alice Saunders.

I. Alice Saunders, she is...

A. Now I'm not sure, don't quote that, I don't want you to quote any of these names.

I. I won't, I certainly won't. And did you work with Alice Saunders?

A. No, she worked in another area. This the Ballastite center. (Pause) Yes it is, there's the little house. I can't find me. I didn't wear glasses then. Not a soul here has glasses, yeah that one there.

I. Before they had contacts, uh?

A. Huh?

I. That's before they had contact lenses too, so they did not wear them. The clothes, you say, were fire proof, and why would you wear knickers, and not slacks?

A. Skirts would be in the way.

I. I see, I see, and slacks were...

A. You know, if there was any fire, our skirts screened, you see what I mean.

I. I see, so the knickers were for safety. The caps were also for safety so your hair wouldn't catch fire?

A. I can't find myself at all. I had a dear girl friend that worked with me, Anne Crawford, she lived two doors from me, I don't see her either.

I. And you mentioned in another interview with Mrs. Wagner, Elsie Honor, do you remember Elsie?

A. Yes, she worked in the packing house down there where they taped and she come up there - our house was next door to where she worked. One time there wasn't any work, it was slow, and she always used to kid around with us. It was raining, she said, "I don't feel like going out in the rain, pull me down the chute." (Laughs) She got stuck and we had a terrible time, we had to pull her legs out, you know, back in. Oh I'll never
A. (Continued) forget that. She's long gone, and she was older than me.

I. Speaking of that, could we talk a little bit about the Bloomer Girls in general? How did you know there was work out there at the mills?

A. I think they were advertising for work, for help.

I. Now was this in the papers, too, do you think I could find some...

A. I believe it was.

I. And what were the papers - see, I'm not familiar with this area.

A. Now, I'll tell you what. This girl friend, Anne Crawford, that lived two doors from me, I worked in an office. I wasn't crazy about office work at all and, of course you not knowing Wilmington, I worked in an office, real estate office above Dockstaters Theater. Have you ever heard them talking about that - Dockstaters?

I. Dockstedes?

A. Dockstaters, or Garrick, one or the other, Garrick Theater, and there was offices up above, and I worked in one of those and I didn't like it after I went to Beacoms, took up my business course and didn't like it. And Anne came down to meet me at work one day and she said "Why don't you quit if you don't like it? Let's go out to the powder plant, they're saying there's good work out there and good money." So I said, "Okay" and we went out the next day and we got a job.

I. What was the procedure, do you remember, when you went out there? Where did you go first when you were looking for the jobs? Did you go to the foreman or to the hiring office, the central office?

A. You know - you've been out there naturally, and the entrance to the powder mill, you know those two little houses beside the gate? I think we went in one of them and they took us where to go, but I can't remember that.

I. Did they hire you on the spot?

A. Yep.

I. As soon as you went out there inquiring about a job, they said "Yes?" How much were you getting paid, do you remember. You couldn't remember on the other
I. (Continued) tape, I was wondering if you had remembered.

A. No, I can't remember that, but it was good money.

I. Did a lot of your friends work out there, or did you get to know them once you started work there?

A. Yeah, I got to know them after I worked there. Alice Clothier, she's long gone, she worked there.

I. Alice Clothier?

A. Yes, she's long gone.

I. Were - I'm trying to get a feel for what - what was it like - was it considered dangerous work at the time?

A. Oh yes. The ballastite wasn't too bad unless there was fire, but I worked on the black powder side, it was.

I. And that was the other side of the river?

A. Yeah.

I. The black powder side. And were you measuring the bags in the black powder side?

A. No, I was making pallets.

I. You were making pallets?

A. Which was very dangerous, and I was in a little house, about four by four and it had a machine in there, and there was a needle in the machine, and I had to walk across the road and get a little jill of powder, you know how big a jill is?

I. No, I'm not...

A. Very small.

I. Very small.

A. And it was like a - it was box about so big, on a pole.

I. About a foot by a foot, the box?

A. Yeah, could have been a little bit - maybe 14", and there was only one jill of powder put in there at a time.
I. In the box?

A. In the box. And when one jill got empty, I had to take that jill, put it in a box and get the other one and bring it back. And this machine compressed that powder, and the needle went down through the center for a fuse.

I. I see.

A. Very dangerous, and we had an explosion while I was there. It was in the packing house up above and one of the girls, I can't remember her name, she could have been in this crowd, brother was in it, he got killed. And there was hoses across this road and we were instructed that if there ever was a fire, grab the hose and, you know, start working on it. After I got myself together, it tore my machine up out of the floor, it was fastened to the floor, and the machine was about so high.

I. About five feet high?

A. Yeah. And I went outside and I could see all these pieces of wood and stuff from the explosion whirling around in the air and I started across to get the hose because I saw fire coming down the line towards our place.

I. Telephone line, was there?

A. Yeah. Me and another girl grabbed the hose and started working it. In the meantime, one of these pieces of four by four or two by four, was heading towards me and I had a watch on and I put my arm up to ward it off. It's a wonder it didn't break my arm, but it smithered my watch, smashed my watch. And we squirited that fire out and then the men were going around with buckets picking up flesh that quivered like this. Now Anne and I was helping there all that time. And when it was all over we shook. We went across the ballastite side. The nurse there gave us some aromatics.

I. Some what?

A. Aromatic spirts of ammonia to settle our nerves. We shook like the mischief, we couldn't stop shaking. (Noise on tape) Oh, isn't that a heavy rain!

I. It's really coming down. The explosion, was this after you were there for a little while, or was this when you first started working?
A. No, I was there for a while.

I. Can we - about the jill of powder. You would go across the road - how would you pick the powder up to put it into the jill container?

A. Just pick it up and pour it in the top of a funnel, the top of it.

I. I see, I see, into the machine. So the work was - working on the black powder side was considered dangerous?

A. Yes, also had TNT there.

I. And TNT, you didn't work on the TNT?

A. Oh no, I didn't want no part of that, turned your hair red.

I. It turned you hair red?

A. Yeah, it would make - no matter what color your hair was, it would turn sort of reddish.

I. Because of the chemicals that were in the...

A. I presume. That's what I thought blew up at first, waa the TNT, and I started running down that way. They never run towards the water.

I. Why is that?

A. Because the water is a conductor of the explosion.

I. The water is a conductor of the explosion and it would - so if you were in the water...

A. It would probably give you a great shock of some kind, I don't know what it would do to you, but you never run towards the water, that the explosion followed the water.

I. Very interesting. So you were working at your machine and all of a suddem - BOOM - and you machine came out of the floor.

A. Yes, halfway.

I. Halfway out, and you ran out of your building and then you saw the wood coming down. How were explosions handled after they were done, did people come around and try and calm everyone down? Did they explain what happened?
A. No, they were too busy picking up flesh, you could see flesh hanging in trees and clothing – it was terrible.

I. Did many people not want to work there because it was dangerous?

A. I imagine.

I. But it didn't bother you?

A. No, because I thought, well our boys are overseas and they're fighting and they are probably going through more danger than we are, somebody had to do it. I was young and foolish, maybe (laughs). Seventeen and eighteen.

I. That's how old you were?

A. Yeah.

I. Were a lot of the women that you worked with that age too?

A. U-huh, some of them much older, as you can see here. I must not have been there.

I. So why did you – you decided to work at the powder mills because the pay was good and jobs were available and you didn't like working in an office? Why to you think – do you have any idea why the other women were there – was it because the pay was good?

A. I imagine, because they were working or wanted to do something for their country, I don't know.

I. So there was a patriotic feeling there?

A. Yeah.

I. How would the worker – how would you – were you brought together as a group, was there a lot of camaraderie, good feelings there when you – among the women when you were working, or was it...

A. Oh yeah, yeah, we were all friends whether we knew each other's name or not.

I. Simply because you were working there and the war was on? That's good. Did you do things with one another when you weren't working there, would you go out together, as Bloomer Girls?

A. You mean on the streets?
I. After, on a Saturday, would you go out Saturday night and socialize with other Bloomer Girls?

A. If we met them uptown, yes but we usually always had our friends. Anne and I were great friends and we just stuck together. And then after a while, my sister and I, but she didn't work out there.

I. Why didn't your sister work out there?

A. She wasn't old enough, she's six years younger than me.

I. That would explain it, I see. Let me see, I had some other questions here. So you think that job openings were in the paper for this?

A. I'm not sure about that, it could have been.

I. What were the papers, what were they called at that time? So in case I wanted to go back and try and find some of these, do you remember?

A. Wilmington Star I believe.

I. The Wilmington Star.

A. I think it was, I'm not sure. Isn't that funny how I can't - I remember some things way back. I can remember seeing Halley's Comet when I was ten years old.

I. You can?

A. U-huh - it was a beautiful thing then, star about that big, sweeping tail.

I. And did you go - did you see it with your parents?

A. I was living with my grandparents. My Father was - he worked, he was a barber, and he worked on Sixth, West Sixth Street here in Wilmington, in the Kleitz Building, and barbers in those days worked until twelve o'clock at night, then he took the train down and was living in Middletown, Delaware.

I. Barbers worked until twelve at night?

A. M-huh.

I. Why is that?

A. Search me.

I. That's a very interesting point.
A. And when he came home that other nights - he never said a word about this time he come down on the train. And this night he come in and told us, he tried to tell us that the comet had a tail three box cars long - that long, taking up the whole sky (laughs). And my sister don't remember whether she saw it or not, but when he told us the comet was out there, it was just like right in front of us. And of course there was no lights, you had a grand view of it. And the room that we slept in had a window right in front of the comet, and I had two teenage aunts sleeping in the same bed with me. And we all were crowded up into the window and everybody else tried to get in the same window too. And they said, "Well, Helen is the smallest, let her get in front," so I had a good view.

I. My that's interesting.

A. It was really beautiful, really. Now I hope to live to see it again, but it's nothing. Every time they say you can see it, it's cloudy.

I. You've been interested in seeing it?

A. I've been interested in seeing it, yes, I've got a good set of binoculars all ready, yup, the comet.

I. Oh, let me think. Were some of the women who worked out there married?

A. Oh yes, plenty of them.

I. Plenty of them were married? Was it frowned on for women to be working at this time?

A. During the war, yes.

I. During the war it was okay for them to be working, but usually...

A. Well, I don't think the women worked like they do today, in those early times.

I. But there were working women - and were some of the - well I would assume some of the women's husbands were in the Service?

A. Probably.

I. Let me think here - and let's see, I had a lot of questions down that we've talked about, a lot of them here - the advertising and - do you remember a lot of explosions - was that a frequent thing?
That was the only one that I was there. After that, why, we went back to the ballastite side, did the same thing.

I. I see.

And I was there when the Armistice was signed.

What was that like in the...

Oh, that three o'clock shift come out and they came out in the bus and they said, "What are you working for, the war's over?" So we all just simply quit, we didn't even bother with hats and coats. We got on the bus, that free bus, and went in the city and it was cold, it was in November, wasn't it?

In November?

And it was partly snowing, and we didn't have any hat on, just these bloomers.

So you were walking around the streets of Wilmington with your bloomers?

I was - no, most of us was riding the bus. I was riding on the front of the bus, and I was more or less warm from the heat from the motor (laughs). But we waded through confetti a foot deep or more, it was up to our knees. My Mother cleaned confetti out for months.

So that was the signing and everyone just left their work and said - that was it?

But we went back the next day and they had the things - that quick, they just said that things had to be cleaned up, you know, ended up. So we ended the work that was there, I suppose. Because I was kept on until - that was in November - I was kept on until January.

Why is that?

I don't know why I was kept on, whether I was a good worker or the people liked me better, or what, I don't know.

How many - after that day, after the Armistice, how many - did everyone come back for a week to clean up?

We were there for longer than a week, from November until January.

You were there for - until January, just cleaning things up?
A. Weren't cleaning them up, we were finishing up the work that had started.

I. I see.

A. And I also worked on a time bomb?

I. You worked on a time bomb?

A. Yeah, that's what they said it was, it was a cylinder about so big around and about that long.

I. Three inches, yeah, and about ten, twelve inches tall? Wow.

A. And it was filled with black rice, they called the powder rice that went in it and you had to hold it up to a thing that weighed it, and then you put a little cap on it, a can with a wooden mallet and tapped it in, and it was put in a crate of some kind. It was also dipped in tar.

I. So when the...

A. Are they writing a book about all this or something? The first...

I. I don't know, I don't know.

A. I thought you said it was all going in a book.

I. This is in case people are interested in doing that, it may turn into one, I don't know. We're just trying to gather all the information now, and I'm not sure what's going to happen. But I'll let you know, though.

A. Well I - if they put it into - she said something about it, I don't know what happened after that. If I'm not living at that time, I do want my daughter to get that book.

I. That's understandable, definitely, okay, I can see that.

A. She's been interested in this work that I did there.

(End of Tape 1, Side A)
I. Walking?
A. I can't walk that much any more.

I. I think we should be back started on the other side. Right. Talking about the ending of the war, everyone understood, all the Bloomer Girls understood that they were just there for the war, working for the war?
A. Yeah.

I. And then once the war ended, their time at the Powder Yards were done - that was understood?
A. I don't know if others were kept on, but I know Hagley was closed after they finished everything. I was there until - you know I can't remember how long I was there in January, but the government inspector was still there, and every weekend one girl would bring in a - bake a cake and bring it in. And he always knew that, and he was down there for that slice of cake.

I. He liked his cake?
A. Yeah.

I. When you think back on that, was it a fun time, a happy time for you?
A. Yes, very.

I. Very. You had a lot of good friends around?
A. Yes.

I. Let me just see here - and the changing, you would change in the - in what, what were they called - where did you keep your clothes and did you shower?
A. There was - no, we didn't shower, they didn't have showers there. There was - across on the ballastite side - there was, we all had a locker to keep our clothes in, and change, a room to change them in.

I. And the men had one elsewhere in the - so all the women would change on the ballastite side, even the women who worked in the black powder side?
A. Yeah, they had to go across the bridge to change.
(Continued) I think the men had it on that ballastite side, I don't think there was anything on the black powder side, because the black powder side was - those houses were further apart on the ballastite.

I. Oh, they were?
A. Black powder, yeah.
I. So when you think back on it, what did you enjoy the most about that, about that year you spent - what sticks out in your mind?
A. Interesting work, I think.
I. It was different, wasn't it?
A. Yeah - I liked it better than office work.
I. What did you like the least about it?
A. I don't know there's anything.
I. You really enjoyed it?
A. Yeah.
I. Were you sorry that you didn't work there anymore - I mean you were glad the war was over...
A. I was sorry I wasn't there sooner, but of course our war didn't start that soon, you know. They must have some work going on, you know, to make a few things.
I. And how often did you change jobs, how often - how did you know you were going to change from the ballastite side to the black powder side, for instance?
A. I don't know why they changed that, whether they thought we were - wanted you to learn or what. The black powder side had the aerial bombs on it, and these were like a big kettle, we called them a kettle. They worked outside (lots of noise on the tape). They were about this big around and had a brass handle.
I. Five inches? And it had a handle on it?
A. Yeah, I think it was some kind of a - search me what it was (laughs). I can't - missing my mind now. This powder that we put in that, that we called "rice", it was yellow and little pieces like that.
I. It was called "rice" and that was powder?
A. U-huh. And then it went from us, it had ether in it, to some other place to be finished. Then it went to Detroit after that. There was a lot of things going on there during the war. There was a lot of bombs and a lot of explosives made there.

I. And the people that showed you your jobs were other female workers who had been there before you?

A. Yeah, they usually instructed us what to do.

I. Was the turnover rapid, I mean were there a lot of people coming and going in the work force, or did you work with the same people?

A. I worked with the same people most of the time.

I. So once people started, they liked it there, generally?

A. Yes.

I. Let's talk for a minute about discipline, how did you know when you had done wrong?

A. Just what do you mean by that?

I. If you were not working well - not you, but is someone was not working well?

A. Well, maybe someone in the house told you so that you passed a wrong powder ring or something like that. You had to be very careful because we were instructed against that, to be very careful because they had to fit perfectly. I had some of those cans for a while, couple of the cans, didn't have anything in it, just had the can.

I. Do you have one you could show me, or are they...

A. I don't have any now.

I. They're gone.

A. Gone. They were round, the top - they weren't squared off like a regular can, they were kind of round, top and bottom and lid was round too. The lid, like the lid was the one that had that flap on it that you'd unwind, do you know, it fit down over the bottom, and then that was taped tight.

I. When you were working there, people felt that you were carrying out a duty for the country, even thought it
I. (Continued) was dangerous work, it was something that needed to be done?
A. Yes, yes, somebody had to do it.
I. Did that - did your working in a job, in an industrial work like that, did that change you in any way do you think?
A. No.
I. No. What did you do - can I ask you - when you were finished at the Hagley Yards, what was your next job?
A. I didn't work for a while. I took it easy for a while and then I was out to my aunt's, she lived in Mt. Cuba on a farm, which I spent most of my life there anyway, and then my Father called and I was in bed with the grippe, which they call a virus or a flu or something today, and he said that I was called in, I put my application in at Marcus Hook silk mill, and he said that I had been called in to come in. Well, I got up out of the bed with grippe, and my uncle took me in, horse and carriage, he had no car in those days. And I went up to Marcus Hook and they took me right away and I was there for I think five or six years. They paid good money too.
I. They did.
A. And that's where I met my husband and we were married, and I didn't work any more.
I. So once you were married you had no desire to work?
A. I worked for a little while, because we had bought a house, to get some of the furniture and that's all, I didn't work after that.
I. My goodness, that was a long time ago, wasn't it?
A. Yep, 1926 I was married. But from the time the powder plant closed, it was only a few months, maybe a couple months or so, I went to Visco's.
I. Getting out and back to the powder plants, was the transportation was free, Du Pont ran a bus out there you say - would you have taken the job if the transportation was not free?
A. I don't suppose I would because I wouldn't have had any way to get there. The trolleys run out there to - we had quite a distance to walk from - I don't know what
A. (Continued) they called that, the Henry Clay Creek was there, you know, went through it, somewhere, it would have been quite a distance to walk. And I thought, no, that wouldn't do because you'd have to walk through all kinds of weather.

I. And everyone would gather at the Du Pont Building in the mornings, and they would leave you off there, and then you would get your way home.

A. Yeah – get the trolley home. I lived out the West side.

I. So it would – you'd see everybody gathered there in the morning and get to know – you'd probably get pretty close to one another, working every day like that. Did you only work five days a week?

A. M-huh.

I. With Saturday and Sunday off?

A. U-huh. As far as I can remember, I don't remember working on a Saturday because my girl friend and I had money to spend and we went into town and we shopped (laughs).

I. Did you save a lot of the money that you made from...

A. I saved some, yes. And I still can't remember whether I had some in a bank that's no longer there – Federal's Bank, and I'm not sure I didn't leave some money there, but they never contacted me, so I don't care about it. Money don't mean anything to me.

I. No?

A. I'm a giver.

I. You're a giver.

A. If I had lots of money, I don't think I'd have much left 'cause I'd give it away.

I. Well, this has been wonderful. I can't think of any more questions right now that I would have to ask. If I think of some, can I call you again and come back out, would you mind that?

A. No.

I. If I think of some – is there anything you would like to say about that time?
A. I don't know anything more, only that we did have lots of fun. We found one time when we were - it wasn't time to go to work yet, we got there early, and we'd scout around the woods if we had the time. We'd watch our watches, and we found a black walnut tree, so we started gathering black walnuts and putting them outside the back door, and we were gonna have a black walnut cake. But the squirrels beat us to it (laughs). We had gathered all these walnuts, you know, and every time anybody had any time, they'd chop the outside off you know to the walnuts, and the squirrels found them. And one day I looked out the back door and I said, "There goes a squirrel with one of our walnuts up the hill." We looked out the door and they were all almost all gone. Yeah, we had fun there.

I. You don't remember seeing any of the du Ponts do you - Lammot, who was in charge of those things, no. The government inspector you remember - and he'd be there every day?

A. No, not every day, every few days he'd be there. He liked our cabin.

I. Why is that?

A. I don't know, a lot of fun in it I guess.

I. What an interesting time.

A. I wish I could remember his name, but I can't remember it, it was a Jewish name, but then he was getting married and he was marrying a Catholic girl, giving up his religion for her. And after the war was over, he said he was having his wedding. So I suppose sometime after they closed down he got married.

I. When did they - once the war was over, the Hagley Yards closed - everything closed down after January?

A. As far as I know, I'm not sure, but then that's when one are tore down. I think some of the black powder, you know where they made the black powder was down in, and they had chutes - did you see the pictures of that? The chutes come up, and they said if there's an explosion, lay flat. But I never went down that way, we had to go that way if we had, if we missed the bus or something.

I. That was further down?

A. M-huh, further down on the creek.
I. And everyone was afraid of explosions all the time?
A. That was in our mind all the time.
I. Do you remember your first day at all, the first day of working there?
A. We were in fear my girl friend and I wouldn't get, you know, working in the same place, but we did.
I. Did you request that you work in the same place?
A. No, we came in together, I guess they just put us together, had space for us.
I. And when did you start there, do you remember?
A. In the summer, seventeen. When did they declare the First World War, do you remember that?
I. The United States entered in August of '17.
A. It must have been shortly after that, because the weather was still warm.
I. It must have been cold working in the winter, was it? Out there? How did these cabins, how were they heated?
A. I think they were central heated, I don't really remember that.
I. I'd like to get some pictures of you, would you mind that, or not like that?
A. Well, it doesn't make any different.
I. It's completely up to you, because it would be nice for people- do you know when you hear a voice, you like to know what the person looks like, and I would just like to get, just sitting right here, if you wouldn't mind, so that when years from now, people listen to the tape, they can ...
A. They wouldn't know me.
I. But it's nice to be able to put a voice to a face, you know, so they can say, that's Helen Edwards, she's the one who made this tape. Would you mind if I took some shots?
A. No.
I. I'll have to assemble this camera here. I just thought it would be nice to have the things together.
Because I had - I had blonde hair which they called cornsilk blonde, and I didn't wear glasses. I had some pictures of me when I was younger, but I lost them in the fire.

That's too bad.

Everything I lost, I lost them in the fire.

I'm going to put a flash on this, will that bother you? Just to - I want to make sure we get some good ones. It's fairly light in here, so I think we'll be okay.

Let me see for a moment, I've got some pictures my aunt brought me down, but I don't think there's any - I had pictures of my bloomers when I worked there in the bloomers one time.

Oh, that would be wonderful if you could find those.

I don't think I have any - that's my uncle, let's see what I've got. This is my daughter when she was a baby.

Oh - and when was this?

She was about seven months old. That's my grandchild. Here she is when she was three. Now here - could you find me in that?

My goodness, could I find you in this?

See it's find yourself in a huge crowd.

I'm afraid I couldn't.

No, you couldn't.

Can you find you in here?

I think I can.

Can I just get some pictures of you while we're doing this. You just go right ahead and you can do whatever you want. Actually I'll take one this way, sideways first, so the flash doesn't hurt you - that's okay, you can just look at your pictures. Now I'll get one so that the flash doesn't hurt your eyes.

It won't anyway.

It won't anyway - okay, well we'll just see how these things turn out here.
A. To tell you the truth, I think I took this picture (laughs).

I. Then it would be hard to find you (laughs).

A. No, I don't think I have any that would interest you. No, don't have any.

I. That's too bad. Yeah, just get one. Just get close, now are you sure this flash won't hurt your eyes? That's great. Oh, who's that? Is this your husband?

A. No, this is that man.

I. Your uncle, a-ha.

A. My uncle. This is my daughter too, up at my uncle's place then. Can you find me there?

I. Goodness gracious – what is this, this is from where?

A. That is my aunt, that is my uncle – that is me.

I. That's you, okay, I see. And who's this?

A. That is this girl's husband. This is my grandson, top of his head above everybody. I don't know what he's hiding back there. This is my granddaughter, this is my daughter, this is J. J.

I. J. J.? Oh, that's wonderful.

A. James Joseph. He couldn't say James Joseph, so he called himself James Joefish. Well, here's four generations.

I. Oh, look at that.

A. That was taken down at a place where my aunt had a birthday party.

I. That's a wonderful photograph, wow.

A. My grandfather and my mother, myself and Carol.

I. Which one is you? Here – there – oh yes, that's nice. I'll get just a couple more here, you don't mind, do you? These are wonderful.

A. No.

I. Ah, that's a good shot, I'll just get a couple more from here, I want to make sure we have them.
A. Here I am, here I am - there, and that's my husband in back.

I. Now that is nice.

A. There's a magnifying glass over there on the - I have to keep one because I can't read small stuff.

I. That is nice. And what happened to your husband?

A. He had cancer of the bladder.

I. Oh dear - that was...

A. Eight grueling years of suffering he had.

I. Oh, that must have been hard.

A. Boy, I was a nervous wreck after that was over, I'm telling you, I don't want to go through that again.

I. And you had to pick up the pieces and continue on with your life.

A. Yeah, I owned a property out in Boothwyn and I couldn't take care of that any longer so I had to dispose of that.

I. And the last shot - oh, that's a nice shot. I can give you some copies of these if you'd like. That's wonderful. Well, I thank you very much, I'm sorry to take up your time.

A. Well, I don't do a whole lot, I can't work steady any more. I have to do a lot of resting. If I vacuum the floor in the hall and the bedroom, I'm done for a little while.

I. Yeah. Are you going somewhere today - no. It's not a good day to go out today.

A. No, it's good for ducks.

I. That's right. Well, thank you for everything, I really appreciate.

A. I hope you can get something out of it, can remember, was it all on tape?

I. Yeah, and the tape is still going now, just in case we remember something. Would you happen to know where any other of the Bloomer Girls are, are there any others around?
I don't know, she had a few left, but all the friends that I do are gone now.

But the woman who interviewed you before said she remembered that she had a couple of names?

That she had more, yes, she had been to more and interviewed them. I don't know if I was the oldest one or what.

Well, I'll have to talk to her. It would be nice to put all the remembrances together, you know, the memories and all. Well, I promise you, if anything comes out of this, I'll send - if I'm still around, I'll send some to your daughter or to you. I'm not sure - what I'm doing, as I said - this is just for a paper.

Did you have a steady job?

Yes, yes I teach kids in high school when I'm not doing this - that's what I do. Just fold that up, there, wonderful, turn that around. Well, the interview is over and I'm in my car now - thought I'd just put down a few thoughts about this.

No. 1 - don't ever drink too much coffee before you go on an interview because you never know where the bathroom is.

No. 2 - Don't underestimate how tiring it is, it's very fatiguing - I'm exhausted.

Helen Edwards is a wonderful woman and I would not hesitate sending someone else out to interview her, someone, perhaps, who knew a little bit more about what they were talking about than I do at this point.

I'm trying to track down other people. The specifics are going to be hard to find. Any type of philosophical ideas regarding working women, women in war industry, etc., etc. are going to have to be put together from all these things. It's pretty clear to me that from this that it was a very interesting experience for the women who worked out there. She enjoyed it immensely, she's still very sharp and more people should be sent out to get this information.

(End of Tape 1, Side 2)
I, Helen C. Edwards, do hereby give the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation for such scholarly and educational uses as they shall determine the following tape recorded interview(s) with me held on 4/14/86 as an unrestricted gift and transfer to them legal title and all literary rights including copyright. This gift does not preclude any use which I may want to make of the information in the recordings myself.

This agreement may be revised or mended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Signed

Helen C. Edwards

Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation
Representative

Date

April 16, 1986