

Interview with Elwood Simmons  
Interviewer: Bob Aylsworth  
n.d.

**Q:** Wasn't the Whirlpool plant on Highway 41 used as a defense plant?

**A:** That's right.

**Q:** They made airplanes?

**A:** P-47's

**Q:** I didn't know they built that building. They built that building just to build airplanes?

**A:** The Republic.

**Q:** What did you do?

**A:** I helped in the pipe fitters' gang.

**Q:** What, a little bit of everything?

**A:** Yeah, I got to where I was doing a little bit of everything. I melted lead, helped pour lead for joint, cut pipe...you know...brought up pipes.

**Q:** You worked on the building?

**A:** In the building and outside too, when it was started.

**Q:** Did more men than women work there?

**A:** More men.

**Q:** You quit out there and went to the shipyards?

**A:** Right.

**Q:** Did they only build one kind of ship?

**A:** Yeah, except the five last little ones.

**Q:** What kind were they?

**A:** I don't know.

**Q:** Nobody ever said. How many people worked out there?

**A:** The shipyards? Oh, at one time between thirteen and fourteen thousand.

**Q:** Where was that?

**A:** Oh, down at the end of Wabash and Ohio Street, down on the riverbank.

**Q:** Then they just rolled them off?

**A:** Skidded...had skids...skidded them right down the riverbank into the river.

**Q:** They worked how many days a week there?

**A:** Seven days a week.

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**Q:** At night too?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** They worked outside?

**A:** Oh yeah, lot of them...yeah.

**Q:** Did they have certain quotas, like they had to fill every month?

**A:** Yeah, they did, but I couldn't tell you the exact...they had dates. They supposed to have so many cut at a certain time. Had to meet the quota if they possibly could.

**Q:** They ever tell you anything, or just...?

**A:** Very little, anything that was secret.

**Q:** You just did your job?

**A:** That's right.

**Q:** Kept quiet?

**A:** That's right.

**Q:** How about security down there?

**A:** There were guards at the gate when you went in, and there were inspectors all over the place inside. A lot of them you didn't know because they were...plain clothes.

**Q:** Dressed like regular workers?

**A:** (Nodded head in agreement.)

**Q:** You got to know them after awhile?

**A:** I knew a lot of the inspectors. They would inspect these jobs and pipes, which that was what I was interested in was pipe work. There was a gang of us...but there were a lot of secret service guys, I imagine in there.

**Q:** What about women? Did they do everything that men did?

**A:** Everything but the hard labor part. They was women welder, braziers, silver soldiers, and soapers looking for leaks. They did a lot of jobs.

**Q:** Evansville is a big German town. Did they ever worry about anybody trying to blow the place up or anything like that?

**A:** Well...I can't tell you the exact number, but I can tell you it was awful close to the top during the hottest part of the war.

**Q:** Is that right?

**A:** That's right. It was a very hot spot.

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**Q:** Did they worry about it?

**A:** Yeah, that's the reason they tried to have awful good security.

**Q:** I wondered, because I'd heard...well, Evansville is (made up of) a lot of German families. They just quit publishing German newspapers after the turn of the century and all those couldn't be completely loyal. They had to have some feeling for Germany.

**A:** It was a pretty hot spot, there at the heat of the war.

**Q:** Did the guards carry guns?

**A:** No. I just couldn't say exactly...I don't remember.

**Q:** They had them where they could get them anyway.

**A:** Yeah, they probably did. There were a lot of them around.

**Q:** Guards on the outside, guards on the inside, and the inspectors too?

**A:** Oh, yeah.

**Q:** You said that they had inspectors all the way down the line out there, at the Republic?

**A:** Inspected each work...yeah.

**Q:** How about the shipyards?

**A:** Oh, yeah. There was more at the shipyards...oh, yeah.

**Q:** So, they didn't take a boat out until it was completely right?

**A:** No, when that boat left Evansville the maintenance crew, that is the regular crew, would stay on that boat. The only different one on it was a river captain that knew this river. He would go to New Orleans with them and then they would bring him back, some way, I do not know how.

**Q:** And that's all he did, came up from New Orleans and back?

**A:** That's right.

**Q:** And they floated him back down again?

**A:** That's right.

**Q:** What, they floated them from New Orleans to the Gulf, and then out, I guess?

**A:** Right. When they left Evansville, they was on there way to the fitting area...somewhere.

**Q:** Could you tell if...like D-Day, surely, they used some of those landing boats?

**A:** Oh, yeah...yeah.

**Q:** Did they speed up production, or anything before that?

**A:** Well, they was hustling everybody as fast as they could to do your work good and get them out.

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**Q:** You worked there almost three years?

**A:** From September 28, 1945 till December 7, I mean 1942 till December 7, 1945.

**Q:** Then they worked you that hard all the way through?

**A:** Yeah, most of the gangs, but some of them didn't do too bad.

**Q:** Did you notice if they speeded up toward the last of the war, or you know, when they were getting ready for the big pushes?

**A:** Well, yeah quite a bit, but we could tell when they was beginning to slow up, because we got news you know.

**Q:** They have signs; you've seen signs in these old movies..."loose lips sink ships", and all that. Did they try to pound that into you, to keep your mouths shut about what was down there and what you saw?

**A:** Well, not really, to us the...in thing that our (boares) and supers talked to us about was to do your work the best you could and the best you knew how, and if we didn't know...why, send for an engineer.

**Q:** They didn't like for you to talk when you left though, did they?

**A:** No...no, they didn't particularly make us swear or nothing like that, to a statement of secrecy, no.

**Q:** I wondered...in a place like that, it seems like...did people take their jobs more seriously than just a regular job before the war?

**A:** I would say, the majority did, because there was a lot of young guys in there. Nobody knew when they might be called, which a lot of them were.

**Q:** So, they took the job more seriously just because they knew where it was going?

**A:** There were several younger ones taken out of our gang.

**Q:** That were drafted?

**A:** Well, I don't know whether they volunteered or were drafted. Jimmy Scales is one, Paul Braden lives over here on the edge of Illinois was one, and there was some out of Kentucky, I can't remember their names. You know, there were that many people there.

**Q:** Did you live up here when you were working down there?

**A:** Yeah, except we moved to Evansville in '45, moved back in late '46 after it was all over...yeah.

**Q:** How did you get back and forth to work?

**A:** Well, I drove to start with, part of the time...gas and tires got scarce. We pooled rides, then for most of the time. They was a bunch of us rode in an old school bus.

**Q:** Just a whole group?

**A:** Yeah, sometimes we had a small bus, there would be fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five. I drove it most of the time.

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**Q:** Was that furnished?

**A:** No!

**Q:** Did you all pitch in and buy it?

**A:** No, Rudy Gish and Penny Barnhill bought it.

**Q:** And everybody chipped in to...?

**A:** We paid so much a day to keep up the expenses on it and run it.

**Q:** And you could get gas and tires enough for that?

**A:** Yeah, it was an emergency vehicle.

**Q:** That's not bad.

**A:** I drove it a lot for Rudy.

**Q:** You were talking about the Republic awhile ago, and you said that that is why the plant was built, for defense work?

**A:** Right.

**Q:** When did they built the plant?

**A:** They started in...probably in late '41, but I went out there in May of '42. When it was practically just...well, they didn't have all the shell up yet.

**Q:** Did they turn a lot of place that made consumer goods, into war plants, or could you even buy, like toasters or anything, during the war?

**A:** Not...not too many, no.

**Q:** If something broke, you just had to get out and fix it?

**A:** Yeah, just about done without. Appliances were pretty scarce.

**Q:** Did people come from Kentucky and everywhere to work in those plants?

**A:** Right...right, my boss came out of, I believe, Oklahoma.

**Q:** Oklahoma? He transferred in from there?

**A:** They went in the oil fields and they were a lot of them were pipe fitters, a lot of them come up in here...just from everywhere.

**Q:** Here was where the jobs were?

**A:** Right. They followed the defense work.

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**Q:** Did you see much equipment float down the river from other plants up north? Seems like if you were on the river, you would see quite a lot of traffic going out.

**A:** There were quite a bit, but not as much as you would think, because they were...there was a small shipyard up in Jeffersonville, I believe, then after they started building barges in Tell City.

**Q:** Barges?

**A:** It's still going up there. They build some kind of boats.

**Q:** Do you think there were spies in Evansville?

**A:** Well, I imagine there were, but I do not know. I couldn't swear it.

**Q:** Nothing ever happened, like sabotage or anything?

**A:** No, nothing I ever knew of, seriously.

**Q:** This is my last question. When you think about that, working in plants and shipyards during the war, what's your first thought? What do you remember most?

**A:** My first thought was that I hoped it would get over soon, you know.

**Q:** Get over and win?

**A:** Yeah.

**Q:** Okay, thank you.