

Hilda (Redmond) Wills

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Hilda (Redmond) Wills

MCGINTY: Hello. Today is June 24th, 1999. My name is John McGinty and I am a volunteer with the Midway Village and Museum Center which is participating in a statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II.

We are in the home of Hilda Wills who lives at 4220 Kenneth Avenue in Rockford, Illinois, 61101. Mrs. Wills participated in the war effort as a civilian on the home front during World War II. We are interviewing her about her experiences in that War. If you'd introduce yourself, please give us your name, where you were born and when.

WILLS: My name is Hilda Marie Wills and I was born in Bridgeport, Wisconsin. My birth date? I was born in 23rd of December, 1920.

MCGINTY: What were the names of your parents?

WILLS: My parents were Frank Redmond and Josephine Faust Redmond.

MCGINTY: Okay. The names of your brothers and sisters?

WILLS: My oldest sister—she's still living. She's Frances Clark and she lives in Forrester. I've got a sister, Opal, S(?) who lives in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. I've got a sister, Ruby Lee, who lives in Machesney Park, Illinois. I have a sister, Iola, who lives just on the other side of Beloit, and my sister, Norma Jean, she lives in Edgerton, Wisconsin, and my brother was named Franklin Redmond but he passed away two years ago. He was in the Korean War.

MCGINTY: I see. Would you want to tell anything more about your family before we start on your war time experiences?

WILLS: I lived with other families. Let's put it that way. When they said there was going to be a war I was living with a family named George

and Dorothy [inaudible] up in Wisconsin—Prairie Du Chien, Wisconsin. He worked in a garage and I worked for a lady that was bedridden and she had a little baby and I took care of the baby and took care of her.

He got up one morning and he said, "We're not even making a living here. Let's go to Rockford, Illinois." He said, "Are you game?"

I said, "I'm ready to go any time you are."

And so March 6th, 1939, we got in this old Chevy, packed everything we could get in there, tied them to the wheel on the back of the Chevy and it took us all day to get to Rockford. We had no place to live. We got here. We didn't know what we were going to do when we got here.

We hunted and hunted all over Rockford. We ended up—I don't know if you remember the Quonset huts they had down on Brooke Road. We ended up in one of the—well it was really a chicken coop! We ended up there. Then I worked for Abie [Abe] Pekarsky. I had to get a job. So I worked for Abie Pekarsky.

And from there on I started to do stuff for the government. I was single and I was available so when they found out—see, I'm ambidextrous. I could use either hand. One was as good as the other. They would pick me out of different places I worked to run a government job.

MCGINTY: Where was this?

WILLS: the first one was Abie Pekarsky. That's Abie's place on Harrison.

MCGINTY: How do you spell Pekarsky?

WILLS: P-E-K-A-R-S-K-Y.

MCGINTY: What did you do there?

WILLS: I helped his wife around the house 'cause she was going to have a baby and she couldn't do everything by herself. I worked for them and they were dear people, beautiful people. He knew I had to get another job, you

know, and so then I came clear over here on Chestnut Street and I got a one room apartment. The rooms you had to live in then is nothing like what people think they were. You didn't know if you were going to get ate up with bed bugs or whatever. All you had was a mattress. They never even gave you a cover or a sheet to put on your bed. This is the way it was years ago. The stoves were a little hot plate but you had to put a quarter in or it didn't heat up. Most of the time you didn't have the quarter to put in so you went without. I'm telling it like it was, because it was hard. I took a bus and went all the way over on 11th Street to that furniture factory because they got a government job in making cots for the... army cots. So they put me to work on that and I finished that one up.

MCGINTY: Do you know when that was?

WILLS: I can't remember. But it was right after that you know because this ended up all the way down to '45. From there I got a job down to, where you said you was, down on Cedar Street. And I started to work there.

MCGINTY: What was the name of that?

WILLS: Rockford Metal Products. I think they moved out in Loves Park or something. I started to work there and then we started to get different orders in from the government. The government men would come out and give us an order. It seemed to me—I didn't say anything but it seemed every time they got an order they picked me to run the machine. We run a riveter and I was the only one that could run that. That was an Army job.

As fast as it would come in—we needed it right away—500 pieced. Get it out as fast as you could get it out, and that's the way they had us to do it.

Then we started making carburetors for jeeps. That ended up you had to learn how to spot weld—automatic spot weld. You had to test them in grease. You had to run them through a washer and then you had to bring them back. Then you had to solder the pieces together. One

piece around—had to solder that together and then from there it went over to another table and then the two little pieces that you had made before you brazed. They call it hot welding because that's hotter material you used. You had to put them on there. You had to test them again to see that they didn't leak and that's what we started out with.

The government kept coming in wanting us to do more jobs and so then they came and asked me if I would work for the government and do the jobs that they wanted. I said, "Anything to help. I don't care what it is. I'll do it."

So then they said, "All right. We're going to go to a bigger item." And I said, "Well, that's fine with me." But then they swore us in that we couldn't tell anybody. We couldn't let anybody know what we were doing or anything.

So then they said, "We'll have to get another place to do all of this," because it was too open there. So I said, "That's all right."

The week before we went to this other place, I've got to tell you this. Barbara Hale came in. so we all got to meet Barbara Hale. I thought that was pretty neat 'cause she came in. She was interested in what we were doing for the war. We got this secret place. They went from different shops and picked out certain people from each shop. Now the only two I know was myself and the lady I worked with. None other revealed their names. We just worked.

MCGINTY: Where was this place?

WILLS: You had to go downtown. You know where old Osco Drug use to be? You went down that street—Court Street?

MCGINTY: Church Street.

WILLS: You know where the old White Owl cigar place was there right up from the Post Office? Well we had to go down—I met my partner down there. We'd go down all dressed up and then we walked through the cigar store like we were going shopping, walked through

the cigar store and walked down the steps. Where we did all the work was down in the basement like. And there was—I think there was five men and there was six of us women that worked there.

Now I only know the two. The girl that I worked with, her first name was Jeanette. I don't even know what her last name was 'cause we all split afterwards. We would go in all dressed up. The men would come in dressed up. The women came in dressed up and then we'd change. And then we'd work our heads off.

But what we did then was harder work yet. We did tail pipes for airplanes and you had to weld fins in them. There was a little place near the bottom part of the tail pipe. You had to put five pins in it and weld them five times each—automatic. You had to weld on each side and then the tail pipe was about three yards long and then you welded all the way down how far it went, you know, and then you turned it over and you welded all the back down. Then you welded that piece on the bottom. Then you had to test it to make sure that there wasn't a leak in it. If there was you had to take it out and do it over again and that was hard work.

They gave us a quota to put out and if you didn't get the quota out you had to stay until you did. And that was hard. I'm telling you I thought I wasn't going to make it home some nights it was so hard. We stayed there and we worked at all of these—Every time they brought something in it seemed like—Of course I was the only one that could use both hands. They would bring it over and I would have to work some of them in between doing the other smaller jobs that they had. Boy that was hard work. They give us quotas. You know what quotas was? Twenty-eight tail pipes a day put out. And that was hard.

MCGINTY: And this was in the basement underneath the cigar store?

WILLS: Yeah. And when the trucks came in to pick it up—see they had what looked like a cigar truck...

It backed in... but it went down the chute and they pushed the stuff in and took off.

MCGINTY: This was on Church?

WILLS: Yeah. I don't know if that building is still there even. I haven't been down there for years.

MCGINTY: Is it in the same block as Osco's?

WILLS: Yeah. You just went down—just on the next— you know, across the street—you know where the old post office is? Well, just right up there on the corner was—right over here on the right hand side was the cigar store.

MCGINTY: So it was north of the post office.

WILLS: We did all of that for the Army. I mean they kept coming in and saying, "Not a word. Not a word or we're going to be bombed." They had everybody scared to death, you know. You didn't say one word.

Just a while back I talked to a man down here in the drug store and I asked him. He lived here pretty near all his life. I asked him if he knew about it. He said, "No. We didn't do that." I said, "Yeah." But when it first started, my sister, Ruby, came down here and we were walking down—I'll tell you how dangerous it was. Camp Grant was out there. They had all them boys coming and they were pretty rowdy because they didn't want to fight the war to begin with. They were pretty rowdy.

So we were walking down Kishwaukee Street and one guy jumped out of the car and he took my sister out and he walked her away. The other one jumped out and held a gun right over my heart. I stood there for I don't know how long. Finally the other kid brought my sister back and they jumped in the car and left. What it was all about, we never found out.

MCGINTY: What did they say to your sister?

WILLS: Nothing. Didn't say nothing to me and didn't say nothing to her. Why they did it, we

don't know. Well, see people don't understand what a war is all about.

MCGINTY: The War had started then?

WILLS: It wasn't—well, they hadn't bombed Japan yet, but it still it was bad. You know it was bad. Because you couldn't—If you went out you didn't know what them soldiers was going to do to you.

MCGINTY: Do you remember what year it was you were making tailpipes.

WILLS: Yeah. 1941, I started.

MCGINTY: Before Pearl Harbor?

WILLS: Yeah. And then we started making them full blast and then carburetors for jeeps. We put a lot of them out because I wrote down all the things that I did on them. I did the spot welding because I could grab a piece with this hand, grab a piece with this and put them together on the machine and go four times on it. Then throw it down here and grab two more and you had to do 500 of them a day. That was a job.

MCGINTY: Do you remember what you made?

WILLS: We started out at \$0.65 an hour. And I made, I think when I told them I can't stand to work so hard, please can I have a raise? and so this man from the Army came in. Of course, they thought they were a lot better than we were. Of course, they're not person to person. He said, "I can do better than you are." I said, "Okay. Here it is. Help yourself." So I stood back and I watched him. But he didn't watch what I did. I had slacks on I had a heavy apron on and I had a bunch of rags on my lap because the sparks flew every where. He sits down with his beautiful blue serge suit. The first plop he burned a hole in his suit. I was standing there trying to keep from laughing. He said, "You knew that was going to happen." I said, "You knew I wasn't making no money, too, but you didn't want to give me any more." I got a raise. Let's see ...

MCGINTY: Now this is where? When you say Army you mean that branch of the service. You

don't mean just military. It was just Army or Navy?

WILLS: Most of the time it was the Army that came in but it was really for the military I think, because it was the Air Force and the other two—the jeeps. I put in some of the humor that went along with this. We had a guy in the [inaudible]. He was an electrician. I filed the points and, of course, left-handed filed the points. They told me I would never make it. Well, I did. I even filed the points on my machine to do the parts. I didn't ask somebody else to do it. I did it myself. We had a guy—I don't know his last name either. We called him Buster. And while I went to the washroom he put Limburger cheese on the points of my machine and it was hot when you—and oh when you did one thing he laughed his head off. We did have a lot of humor and we kidded each other 'cause it was just like a family.

We worked together and one couldn't do something--we depended on the other. I mean we really worked together. There was nobody said, "I can do that better than you," or nothing else. And if you needed help you'd say, "Hey, Hey!" and they'd come and help you. I know I talked to a lot of people and they don't understand that when you're doing stuff like this the main thing is working together. We all worked together. We put in an awful, awful lot of work down there. My boss, his first name was Rubin. I'll never forget him either. This was way back in the war. His name was Rubin.

MCGINTY: This is the guy at the cigar store place?

WILLS: No. He worked in the one on Cedar Street.

MCGINTY: Oh, okay.

WILLS: We didn't really have a boss down at the cigar store. We didn't really have—we just knew what we had to do and we did it. We didn't really have a boss. There was no one came down there only the government once in a while would come in.

MCGINTY: How did you get paid? Did somebody hand you the check or were there ...

WILLS: Yeah. Well, they paid us through the one on Cedar Street so nobody else would know.

MCGINTY: Oh, I see.

WILLS: So we would get our pay through them.

MCGINTY: So everyone else thought you were still working for them even though you were in a different place.

WILLS: Yeah. And then I was on the safety committee. You had to go around and check everybody before you could go sit down and do your work, which I did. One lady wouldn't listen and she came in drunk and she burned her thumb off welding the pins into the airplane things. She burned it right off, her thumb!

MCGINTY: How long did you work at the place under the cigar store?

WILLS: Just until the War ended. When the War ended you didn't have no job no more. You just walked out and that was it.

MCGINTY: So you were there from '41 to '45?

WILLS: Yeah. You just walked out and that was all.

MCGINTY: Wow.

WILLS: No. See that's how the jobs—all of them—and I talked to different ones. I met one of these ladies, her aunt did that down in Tennessee, and she had the same experience as I did. When the War was over and peace was declared that was it. You had no job. You go find another one. You go back to that other shop or whatever you wanted to do.

MCGINTY: Could you tell us any more about the different kind of things you made or was it all just tail pipes?

WILLS: No, we still did the carburetors for Jeeps. Then we did parts for the army cots. I'm just telling you what I know I did. The men over there, now they did some heavy, heavy parts but they wouldn't tell us. It was so secret they wouldn't tell even anybody that's working in that shop.

MCGINTY: You worked on the same kind of part then through the whole War?

WILLS: Yeah. I had—we had to do the same thing, like I said, them airplane things for they were hard to do.

MCGINTY: Did they ever tell you what aircraft it went to—what airplane?

WILLS: Well, the way they were talking it went to the jets—the fast ones that was flying right over Japan. They are very secret about stuff like this—very, very, very, 'cause they're afraid you might let it slip. 'Cause they warned us—they said wherever they got that rumor that if they knew what we were doing here in Rockford, Rockford would have been bombed! And they told us that two or three times. I don't know, maybe more than that, 'cause they would come in... 'cause they were worried. The government guys were worried. You could tell how they acted and it was hard. I don't know, because you had to keep up with all that stuff to made sure it got to the government where they could—the airplane place—so they could get them airplanes out and some of them went down pretty fast—them airplanes. So that was ...

MCGINTY: Do you remember what it was like living in the Rockford community besides your work? What people talked about? What they thought about the War, or even before it happened? Did you feel like war was going to come before Pearl Harbor?

WILLS: Oh, yeah. See, we knew that before we ever moved here. George Brookner, the one I lived with there, he worked in a gas station and a guy came in and he said, "The War is going to hit pretty soon." We heard, I don't know if you heard it way back, people always said the First

World War hit in 1920. Twenty years later, we have another war, which we did. You just watch it's going to happen. I know I heard that when I was a kid. But all of this happened.

MCGINTY: Do you remember what it was like living in Rockford during the War? Did you have to--like rationing or blackouts or anything?

WILLS: Oh, yeah. We were rationed sugar and shoes. You only got one pair of shoes you could wear and, of course, I never wear shoes out so I'd give my ticket to somebody else. Your sugar and your coffee and different stuff like that and that was rationed. You had to live in such awful places. The places were so horrible that when I came to Rockford, they were so horrible to live in.

When my husband and I got married in '43 we lived in an apartment. Well, it was a little kitchen and a front room and bedroom together and you shared the bathroom with three other apartments and sometimes you got locked out. That had them stoves in there—if you didn't have a quarter you didn't get nothing cooked, 'cause you had to put the quarter in every time. Didn't seem like it run long enough to even cook a meal. Then you had to put another quarter in.

I went through that for so long. It was—one place I lived they were so full of [inaudible]—that was Noble owned it. "Old man Noble," we called him. And bedbugs. You couldn't sleep. The bed bugs [would] eat you up. So I finally got a different place. Moved in with two girls then. They were married and they each had a baby and they put too much on me. I couldn't keep going for what work I was doing so I had to find me another place.

MCGINTY: What was your husband's name?

WILLS: Leonard Wills. He was a... I got to show you what he did. That's him. He was a gunner.

MCGINTY: In the Navy?

WILLS: Yeah. In the Navy. He was a gunner, see.

MCGINTY: When did he enlist? Do you know?

WILLS: He was drafted in '43. Right after we got married, he was drafted. And then there in San Diego there was a fleet of ships and he was in that fleet of ships in San Diego. When peace was declared, he was on his way to Japan but he got as far as Hawaii. We could hear them screaming and screaming over the radio, you know, them guys. They were coming home. They didn't have to go any further.

MCGINTY: Did he know the kind of work you were doing back here?

WILLS: No. He didn't know until just a year ago. I never told him.

MCGINTY: Really?

WILLS: No, I never told him. I never told nobody. I kept it a secret. They told me I had to and I did.

MCGINTY: Yeah. I guess. What changed your mind?

WILLS: I figured it was long enough. I said I will be dead and gone pretty soon. It's about time somebody knows what went on in Rockford 'cause when we first came to Rockford, it was nothing like it is today.

Do you know there was only two black families here when I came to Rockford? We didn't have buses. We had street cars with that rod across there and it kept falling off and you'd stop in the middle of the street. See, I took the bus everywhere I went. I had nobody. I was by myself really. I just took the bus where ever I wanted to go. I know exactly... I just knew directions. I could get anywhere's in Rockford.

MCGINTY: Do you remember any other hardships during the War besides rationing?

WILLS: Oh, yeah. Because lot of times... see, you didn't make very much money. Whatever

you did, you didn't make enough money to buy your food. If you paid \$6 a week for rent you didn't have enough to buy food. I had a hamburger a day. That was about my limit.

MCGINTY: Wow.

WILLS: 'Cause that's all the money I had but I never complained. Of course, I lived such a life all my life since I was a little kid, you know. We just got in there and we all worked. I never heard any of them people I worked with and they had nothing either. I mean we were poor. You know when you work for the government, they didn't pay you enough for to keep you going. Didn't. See, when you have to take a bus back and forth all the time and buy your own food and pay for your own room and everything, you ain't got nothing left.

MCGINTY: You remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WILLS: I was—I worked so many places. I think I was working at Rockford Furniture the one that used to be over here on Fairgrounds Park. There used to be big furniture store there. I was floor lady boss over the second floor.

MCGINTY: So you were at work when you heard about it?

WILLS: Mm hm.

MCGINTY: What was your reaction and the people around you?

WILLS: I wasn't surprised. No, I wasn't surprised because I'm one of these that read and I'm one of these that listen to everything. I wasn't a bit surprised when they said Japan was, you know, it was bombed. I wasn't surprised. I had a friend that went over there and she was in—right by that where they bombed it, only she was back into that camp by it, and she was back there. Of course, she called home then and said, "I don't know if I want to go any further or not. "They bombed." She said, "Oh, that was awful."

MCGINTY: Do you remember where you were when you heard that the War was over?

WILLS: I was at my mother-in-law's and we lived on Short Corbin up there. I can just see the house. We were living on Short Corbin up there. We heard it over the radio and everybody was screaming and hollering. And if you know there was a tavern that used to be there, and another tavern on the other side. We lived in the back there of it. You could hear... they all ran out the door of them taverns and everything and you never heard so much screaming and singing... And, oh, they just really went wild!

MCGINTY: Is this when it ended in Europe or when it ended in Japan?

WILLS: In Japan. It ended in Japan. I can still hear them people shouting and singing and I got their picture, too. I'll just show you. Here's one that was over there. This one here, he was over there.

MCGINTY: The brother.

WILLS: No. These is all different guys. This is Bruno Paletto and this is Cockell. I forgot what his last name is. This is Joe Martini. He was over there but he got his leg shot off. He came back then afterwards, but he was in the hospital quite a while. Those are the ones that was in Japan. These are the ones that went to Vietnam. They were all over there with my husband.

MCGINTY: Was your husband wounded?

WILLS: No. They told him he'd go deaf before he died. When the torpedo ships—it's such a loud blast that they said it would affect their ears, all that was there.

MCGINTY: Do you remember what kind of ship he was on?

WILLS: Torpedo ship. They told them don't grab for a life jacket. Grab for a [inaudible] You're going to be down in the water so don't even grab for it because it ain't even going to work, because they said they'd just blow them sky high and that'd be it. But that was them ships that they had over there at that time. You can see what they are.

MCGINTY: When did he finally come home then?

WILLS: He come home—I think on one of them pictures it's '45 I think. I think it says '45 on one of them. Yeah. He came home. That's the ship he was on. He came home right after that in '45.

MCGINTY: I bet you were happy to see him?

WILLS: Well, you didn't know if they were going to make it back or what, you know.

MCGINTY: You know Camp Grant was in Rockford. Could you tell me if you had any connection with anybody out there, or people who trained or worked there or anything like that?

WILLS: Not when I worked for the government. They wouldn't let us associate with any soldiers or anything. It was so secret that they advised us against it. If we met them, we just said Hi and go on, you know, but we never stopped to talk to any of them.

MCGINTY: What do you remember that you knew about Camp Grant at the time? Did you know anything about what was going on out there?

WILLS: Oh, yeah. I knew mostly what was going on because Camp Grant was just down from when I was living at Abie Pekarsky's. There was... They would say we had to train so hard today and we had to do this. You'd hear different ones say that but you never talked to them to get all the details, 'cause I'm a very good listener and I would hear them telling about, "Boy, that was rough that we had to do!" or something like that. I guess they really did put them through an awful lot because they knew where they were going to go and they had to be pretty tough.

MCGINTY: did you know about the prisoner of war camp out there?

WILLS: Yeah. But that was secret, too. A lot of this—when you can't talk about something, you can't get too much information, because they don't want to talk to you because you can't talk back.

MCGINTY: Do you remember anything about other people's attitude toward the War? Was there people that you knew that were in favor of it? Or people that were against? Or their opinion changed as the war went on? Any kind of those kinds of memories?

WILLS: Oh, I heard—of course, you hear the older people at that time 'cause to me it was the older people that would tell, "This is a bunch of nonsense. They're getting our guys killed!" And all this and that.

A lot of them didn't put two and two together that if they had to do it, it was for our good. And a lot of them, you couldn't make them understand that. It was just that they were killing our boys. And I would try... sometimes I'd say, "Most of them will be back. You watch. They're going to come back." What else could you say? You just comforted them.

MCGINTY: Did you know the soldiers or sailors that were lost in the War?

WILLS: Oh, I did at one time. I can't think of it. I know one soldier that came back from Iwo Jima when they lifted the flag. He's still here.

MCGINTY: In Rockford. Do you know his name?

WILLS: Yeah. Matthew Bridges.

MCGINTY: He was in the Marines?

WILLS: Yeah. He helped lift the flag. He was on Iwo Jima. His name is Matt Bridges. He lives out in Machesney Park.

MCGINTY: Do you know other service people that were wounded that you knew of?

WILLS: Yeah. That's my brother-in-law. The one that was living in LaCrosse. He got

[inaudible]. He got wounded in the stomach over there.

MCGINTY: Over where?

WILLS: Oh. He was in Germany. He got wounded in the stomach in Germany. He just died last year. I knew different ones that came back and would tell me different stuff, but I can't remember all their names 'cause there's a lot of people I didn't know real close but you heard their names. What can you say? I try my best.

MCGINTY: Do you remember ever going through an air raid drill or a blackout or anything preparing for a possible attack here in Rockford?

WILLS: They did have an air raid drill one time that I can remember and about scared everybody to death!

MCGINTY: Do you remember what you had to do?

WILLS: You just hit the floor and put your hands over your head. You couldn't go no place.

MCGINTY: Was this in the factory?

WILLS: Yeah. You just hit the floor and then we [inaudible]. There's nothing else you could do.

MCGINTY: Did they ever have blackouts here where you couldn't turn on lights outside.

WILLS: No. They were pretty good at that. I don't remember one time that they had us to turn out all the lights. No, they were pretty good at that.

Well, they were so scared here in Rockford. I got to say that. They were scared because when you work with a bunch of people and you only know one person's name out of 10 people you work with, you have to be pretty scared. They really worked. They might not have been in the service doing—like in the Army, Navy or Marines or anything, but they did just as hard work as any of them guys. They did.

MCGINTY: So you remember what people thought about F.D.R. and has that changed over time?

WILLS: No, I don't think so. They talked pretty nice about him. The only one they didn't like is Nixon. I didn't like him either.

MCGINTY: That was a little later.

WILLS: Yeah. Then this one here—[pointing to a photograph] I'm going to tell you. Now this is my cousin. He lives in California. You can't guess what his job is.

MCGINTY: What?

WILLS: He makes these bombs.

MCGINTY: Which bombs?

WILLS: All these ones that's going off. He goes from one place to the other and he's one of them guys that works on little bitty parts and makes the bombs.

MCGINTY: You mean, this is now?

WILLS: Every so often, it's such tedious work they put him in a mental hospital for a while and then they go back to work again. Now he's done that since I don't know when.

He was here. He came here to see me. He moved to California when he was a kid. And then he was down here to Champaign for a while. Then he went to Battle Creek, Michigan, and working on them there, and then they sent him back to California. See I got from all parts of the War. I just about got them all.

Now this is Vietnam [pointing to another photograph]. There's my oldest son and that's my youngest one.

MCGINTY: I hope they got back okay.

WILLS: No. There's my youngest son up there. He had half of his head taken off.

MCGINTY: Oh, boy.

WILLS: He was in the hospital 7 ½ months. And he went to Germany, but [then] he went to Vietnam. He's got 12 medals from Vietnam.

MCGINTY: Is he still in Rockford?

WILLS: No. He lives in Durand now. But that's what I got. I didn't get the other pictures but I had a bunch of all these boys that went with my kids. All went to the service.

Everyone that used to come to my house which I had 12 here every weekend. I took all the neighborhood kids in because their parents drank and everything and I don't believe in that stuff. I took them all in, and most went. I wrote five letters a day for 2½ years. I wrote to all of them kids 'cause their parents didn't write to them, they just left them! And I wrote five letters a day.

I got to tell you a little funny story now. It wasn't all hard work. It was... You had little funny things happen to you. They put me on an ether tank. If you don't know what an ether tank is it's like an [oxygen] tank but it's got ether in it. They put me on that. It cleans off your material like your carburetors and this, you know, and cleans just as slick as a whistle and then you can do anything else with them.

So they put me on that. Well, they didn't tell me it was an ether tank. So the next thing I knew where I was at I was walking—I had Ruebin on one side and Buster on the other side--and I was walking up and down the railroad tracks. I was sound asleep from the ether tank!

MCGINTY: Oh, boy.

WILLS: You had different little things, you know. You got to remember some of the good times you had, too, because, like I said...

Now this here—When I was making these I got to tell you there was a Black lady that worked with me, and she had three sons in the war at the same time we was working down there. She worked and I mean that lady could work. If I didn't feel good she'd take one look at me, "I'll help you. I'll do most of your jobs and you'll

still get paid for it." She would work. She was—you know you don't meet too many people like, that but she helped me because like I said, I only weighed 90 pounds. I was just a little tiny old skinny thing. She would help me.

When you put these other ones on—you had to put them on a rack and then you'd go down and then you welded it. I looked up. I didn't have nobody putting it on the rack. She was out on the floor. She passed out. So we had to pick 'em up and take them and get them going again.

MCGINTY: She was weak from disease or hunger?

WILLS: Well, it was so hot.

MCGINTY: The heat.

WILLS: See, she was between the welder and the soldering tanks and between the two, I looked for her and she was gone and she was on the floor behind.

But she wouldn't give up. She kept on working. Now this was a little Black girl. She just started. "I'll make it," [she said]. "The rest can go to the Army and the rest can do stuff," she said. "I'll make it, too." And she did.

She stuck right in there but she didn't go to us when we went and done all them tail pipes and all them other things. She didn't go with us. They just picked a few out. Some of the other ones came from the other shops where you never met them before any way, but they never looked up at you.

I can still see them sitting there with the—we had the helmets on. You put the helmets—you know how you weld and they had to order me an extra dark one because when I was a kid I was blinded by the snow. When it was bright, then I couldn't see nothing. They would order me a special one.

Then you had to put these gloves on that had all the leather and stuff on here. Lot of times when you got through they were welded right to your

fingers. You couldn't hardly get your gloves off. That's how we welded. Think of all them years doing that stuff. It was fun though.

MCGINTY: Is there anything about your memories of World War II that you'd like people today to know or not forget about?

WILLS: Yeah. I'd like them not forget— You see, they have forgotten, because I'm one of these remember all this, because like I said, I had people in my family in every war. I had somebody in every war.

When it came to Vietnam, I had my two boys that went in the service. And then I had all these -- 12, 14 boys -- that was here every weekend. I had all of them to go—now this is in church, I have to tell you anyway. I went to church Memorial Day. I thought nobody thinks about what people went through in the service so I dressed with a white skirt on, a red blouse and a blue jacket. I walked into church. When church was about ready to leave out they never mentioned it; just like the boys didn't do nothing. Nobody worked for the government, nobody did nothing.

That got to me, so I stood up and I told them, "See how I'm dressed. This is Memorial Day. Let us remember the people that worked in the shops and did different things and all the soldiers that went in to protect our country for you, for me and for everybody else." Everybody in church was crying. They never even thought of it that way. What would you say. Ain't that right?

MCGINTY: Sure.

WILLS: I just got up. I couldn't take no more, because if I hadn't seen all this and went through all this and with these boys that went to Vietnam. Oh that was terrible. One boy that went to Vietnam, he was fighting on this side of the mountain, my son was on this side and they couldn't get together. Now don't think that wasn't heart-breaking. So I just stood up and told everybody. I said, "I want you to go home and think about it because this is terrible when

people don't realize what other people do for us."

MCGINTY: Sure.

WILLS: I don't want to get credit for all the things I did. I did it because I wanted to do it. I felt that that was my duty, my part, even if I was just—like I said, I had a hamburger a day and that was about it. I didn't starve to death. I'm still going and I'm 78 years old. So you see it didn't kill me.

MCGINTY: Would you please describe again the location of the secret basement under the cigar store?

WILLS: Yes. When we went to work down at this place where it was secret, no one else was supposed to know about it. We went down where the Osco Drug is on Court Street or Church Street and you go over a ways and there was a cigar store right there and it was right up from the post office—kitty corner.

MCGINTY: So on the corner of Church and Green Street?

WILLS: It's not right on the corner. It's over just a little ways from the corner.

MCGINTY: So it's on Church between Green and Chestnut?

WILLS: Mm hm. Because sometimes we would come out, and we would walk down the street and that big furniture [store] was down there on Main. We would walk down there and we would pretend we were going shopping in that big store, which we weren't, but we would go in and look around, you know. So we walked in, this lady I worked with.

I got to tell you this humor one, too. Walked in and she always did her hair up and she had blonde hair. She was kind of fussy how she looked. So she went out the door first. I came out later. A bird flew over and did his job right in the middle of her beautiful hair!

MCGINTY: Was this cigar store on the east or west side of Church Street?

WILLS: If you go from State Street, it's on the right hand side.

MCGINTY: Away from the river side.

WILLS: Yeah.

MCGINTY: It's on the west side. Okay. You don't remember the address, do you?

WILLS: No. There was a store—There was one of them cigar stores moved out here off of up there on West State—you know where them motels are? In that—One of them moved up there but I don't know if it's still there or not.

MCGINTY: You don't remember the name of the store?

WILLS: White Owl. No, we didn't call it White Owl. I used to order cigars all the time cause I worked for Oscos and I ordered cigars and everything and I ordered from them, but I'm not sure if that's the one that moved or not.

MCGINTY: When you entered this basement, did you go into the store first and then down or was there a door outside that you went straight?

WILLS: I don't know how the men and the other women went in 'cause we all went in at different times. Two went in at a time; I don't know how they went in 'cause the men were always there when we got there, so how they got in, I don't know. They never did tell us.

When we went in, we would meet down there by Oscos and we'd say where shall we shop today like we were really going shopping and so then we would walk down the street and we would walk in the front door of the cigar store.

MCGINTY: Of the cigar store?

WILLS: But they knew who we were. So we'd look around. If there was somebody in the store, then we would pretend we were shopping. If

there was nobody in the store then we went on down to our work.

MCGINTY: So there was a door in the store that took you to the basement.

WILLS: Mm hm.

MCGINTY: Could you see that from the front of the store or was it hidden somewhere?

WILLS: Oh yeah. It was like it wasn't secret. It was just like that was their storage bin. And that's what they pretended it was, I guess. We would walk in but we had to look around to make sure there was nobody in the store at the time and then we could go down.

MCGINTY: So the owners of the store knew what was going on in the basement.

WILLS: One guy. He was always there when everybody was there.

MCGINTY: He knew what was going on in the basement.

WILLS: Mm hm. He had to.

MCGINTY: And where were these deliveries and pick ups made? Was there an alley behind the store?

WILLS: No. It was on Main Street right up from the Post Office. When the truck went in it went... You see, some of these trucks how they go down and sloped into the building?

MCGINTY: What do you mean? It went into the building?

WILLS: Yeah. It went right down to the inside.

MCGINTY: Kind of a driveway?

WILLS: And went right in ...

MCGINTY: Was that off of Green Street or off of Church Street?

WILLS: Where the Post Office is. It was right off of where the Post Office is. They would come up this street and turn in here because they could go down that driveway right into the place.

MCGINTY: Okay.

WILLS: That's where they picked it up.

MCGINTY: So the truck was actually down at the basement level when it was loaded and unloaded.

WILLS: Mm hmm.

MCGINTY: And it looked like a cigar truck?

WILLS: As far as I could tell because they wouldn't let us out to see too much of what went on. The pick ups and deliveries was in the middle of the night; it never was during the day.

MCGINTY: So you never saw ...

WILLS: No. I just— They told us how they did it, and we seen the driveway down in there, you know, how they went down in there and they said, We can't have anybody coming in during the day or anything because we don't want anybody to see it." That's how secret it was.

MCGINTY: Sure. So who'd you tell first when you decided...?

WILLS: Charlie. Charlie down at the drug store. Him and I talked because he knew I worked in a drug store, and I could talk about things, and he'd ask me different things about the drug store because I worked in Oscos over seven years.

He would ask me different things. We used to kid about. I don't know why, all of a sudden one day I asked him if he knew about that. He said, "Why don't you call up the newspaper and call up everybody?" he said, "So people know how much Rockford did for the Army?" I said, "All they ever say is there was Camp Grant. If you notice, that's all they say." Now Rockford Standard Furniture over there, they made cots

for the Army, but they only would come in and give them an order and then they'd do it and they never told you what you were doing. And they'd send that one out.

Then I was working down here to Washburn's and that was after the war. The Army needed—I don't know what it was. They didn't tell me either. It was a thing that you had to rivet together. They took me off—I was making flour sifters 'cause we made kitchen utensils—took me off my job and run 500 pieces of that. That was for the Army, too, and you made 65 cents an hour!

MCGINTY: You don't remember what it was?

WILLS: No they never told me what it was. They just said we need this. The Army needs it.

MCGINTY: What did it look like?

WILLS: It was a thing about that long, about that wide and about that thick of metal. Then it had a canvas that you had to put over it but you had to rivet through the canvas, through that little hole in the top and then you pulled it back like this. I still don't know what it was.

MCGINTY: So it was a piece of metal with canvas riveted to it?

WILLS: Mm hmm.

MCGINTY: Did it have sort of a pocket in it that you could put something in it?

WILLS: No. That's all it was. I still don't know what it was for because they never did tell me. You see, things that you do for the Army is not what you do for other people. Some things you know a little about. Other things you don't know beans about.

MCGINTY: What is Washburn's? Is that a company?

WILLS: That was, but that's not there no more either. It used to be down here—kitchen utensils they used to make. The baskets, you know, they

used to make fry baskets and all this stuff. Oh
yeah. I worked there for a long time, too. I like
all kinds of jobs.

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This tape ended here.

Hilda Wills died April 21, 2001 in Rockford.