I always wanted to go to college. It never dawned on me that I wouldn’t be able to, in spite of the fact that we were Depression people. We were always drastically poor. We lost our service station for taxes and my father went over to my aunt’s place to help run her orange orchard. Her husband had been injured working on the street cars in Los Angeles. My mother, father, and brother raised and sold chickens to help support us during the Depression.

I got a loan from the Daughters of the American Revolution and some money from my sister and brother-in-law to go to college. I graduated in nineteen thirty-four from UCLA with a bachelor’s in education. I was not a brilliant student and almost didn’t graduate. That was awful, because my family had sacrificed so much to send me to college. Always in the back of my mind was that I should make something of myself. My mother had instilled that in me.

But I never was a good teacher. I wasn’t well organized. I didn’t plan my lessons well. It didn’t matter a whole lot in nineteen thirty-four because there were no jobs. This was the Depression. We were the best-educated service-station operators, dishwashers, and waitresses. It was really terrible. My folks were on relief. I finally got a playground job through what they called the National Youth Administration. It was a govern-
ment job. They had been forced to act. There were marches on Washington, D.C. The government had to do something, just like they’re going to have to do very soon. You know, people aren’t going to sit back and let them kill ‘em with hunger and starvation.

Anyhow, with the NYA job I got twenty-seven dollars a month. That is what my mother, father, and I lived on. We rented this little house for ten dollars a month. On that twenty-seven dollars a month we never paid [were able to pay] one dime of rent, but the house was not vandalized while we lived there, so the owners let us stay. At the time, radishes, onions, beets, carrots, turnips—all those root vegetables were a penny a bunch. Frequently we did not have the penny. Sometimes we got food boxes through relief, and that’s how we survived.

I got married in nineteen thirty-seven and we headed up to Oregon. On the way we stopped off and topped onions for twenty cents an hour. In Oregon, Lew and his dad cut wood to make a living. Our oldest daughter was born there. We raised hay, grain, and cattle and had a big garden. We sold butter and cream for cash to live on. The cream checks were two to four dollars a week. Six of us lived on that.

Finally we sold some cows for beef and went back to California. I was gonna try and get a job teaching, and Lew was gonna go to school to become a boilermaker. It didn’t work out. The schools wouldn’t hire married teachers, and then on top of that I got pregnant again. I miscarried, but got pregnant again not too long afterwards, so I never did get to do the teaching.

Just before World War Two, Lew got a carpentry job on defense work. We still lived pretty much a hand-to-mouth existence because we had such a backlog of poverty. I used to go into dime stores, where you could buy just about everything. Sheets were fifty cents. Well I would have fifty cents, but there would be so many things I needed to spend that fifty cents for, I
Irene Hull, shipwright/bindery worker

couldn't make a decision. Sometimes I would just go out and not buy anything.

Lew worked in a number of the defense plants—Paso Robles, Bradley, and then Los Angeles, where I had my third daughter, and from there to Sacramento. We just followed the defense plants. While in Sacramento we left our oldest two daughters with relatives, because I had quite a difficult birth with Marjorie and needed a lot of rest. When we left Sacramento for Medford, we took all three kids with us. From there we went to Idaho and finally down into Vancouver, Washington, where I went back to work as a nursery-school teacher.

I think I made about eighty or ninety cents an hour, so my husband and father-in-law said, “This is terrible. You should get a job at the shipyards, because there you can make a dollar twenty an hour.” So then I got my job at the shipyards as a carpenter and joiner on a permit. Being on a permit meant I was not allowed to join the union. I was born thirty years too soon. The permit workers were all women.

It was a fun job. You'd go in there with your tape measure and your cutting knife and cut the insulation to size. I was always proud of the fact that I did a very good job. I measured to the sixteenth of an inch and seldom had problems. I put insulation on the bulkheads and deckheads and, because I was small, usually got sent up into places that were difficult to get into. I worked on the outfitting dock. You see, after the ship was built and went down the ways and had the bottle smashed on it, then it came over to the outfitting dock. That's where they put all the equipment in. And before they put the equipment in, wherever possible, we would put the insulation in. Sometimes we had to tuck the insulation around the equipment, and once we had to work in a hot boiler room while the boiler was on. We could only stay in there for a minute, minute and a half, and had to come out. We took turns going in there and getting this job
done. We'd go in and take a measurement and rush out and cut. I don't remember all the details, but I know it was insufferably hot.

In the winter we stood on corrugated cardboard or the insulation itself to keep our feet from getting chilblains. And in the summers those metal decks were blistering hot. There were many times when we just worked steady, steady, steady, and times when we had to wait while another guy does his job. If they weren't ready for you, you'd just sit on a box somewheres and hide out. That's the way the job was organized.

The insulation crews were almost all women because the carpenters wouldn't do that stinkin' work. It was scratchy, itchy stuff and it made you itch all over. My husband used to complain that I took it to bed with me.

Of course, we always had men foremen. One time a directive came down from on high: "You're spending too much time in the restrooms." The restroom was a couple blocks away so it took a few minutes to go there. But the poor foremen had to give us the word, and then take our flak. "Oh," we'd say, "Jimmy, I've got my pants unbuttoned. Can I go now?" "Jimmy, can we use your hat?" Well, that directive didn't last too long.

We made lots of good friendships. One woman I've been friends with to this day. Another I was friends with until she died.

I had begun to get political by this time. My father-in-law educated me, really. He corrected a lot of the miseducation that I got in college. From him I learned that women did have rights and about the fallacies of religion. A lot of the political struggles in the shipyards were won before I came in in nineteen forty-two. One of them was the Fair Employment Practices Act, which said they had to hire blacks. The whites said they wouldn't work with the blacks, so the company told them, "All right. Do you want your check now or later?" So the whites worked and they never quit.
Irene Hull, shipwright/bindery worker

What I did get involved in was the Democratic Party elections. We were struggling to get people out to vote. We weren’t telling them how to vote, but the Democratic Party put out flags and we put ’em on our hats. Then the order came down, “Take those flags off.” I think that’s very significant, considering the fact that the Moral Majority uses the flag so consistently now, but at that time it was unpatriotic to urge people to vote. But we won that one. We kept on wearing flags on our hard hats.

Oh, my goodness, I almost forgot to tell you about the nursery schools. Lew worked graveyard and I worked swing, so I’d take the kids to nursery school in the morning and he’d get them at night. The nursery schools were open twenty-four hours a day. Once in awhile if we wanted to go out, we’d take them back and they’d stay all night. In nineteen forty-two, as part of the war effort, the Lanham Act was passed by Congress. The federal government paid most of the total cost to keep a child in the school. The parents paid only fifty cents a day per child to keep them there. And those were good nursery schools. They taught the kids.

Anyhow, in nineteen forty-four things began to wind down. They weren’t building so many ships. I got laid off. There were a lot of layoffs and no organized struggle about seniority for permit workers. The permit workers, who were all women, went first, of course, and so did the blacks. Last hired, first fired—always. We were terribly un-class-conscious and unaware, disgracefully so in some ways. I wish now I had put up a struggle. I never thought of it. I never dreamed of seniority being a right that I should have had. I don’t know if I would have wanted to stay being a carpenter or not.

One of our daughters was hard of hearing, so when I got laid off we moved up here to Seattle so she could go to a school for the deaf that was here. Lew got another shipyard job and I went back to nursery-school teaching. I think I made a dollar an hour then. This is probably a good time to tell the story of how they
closed those Lanham Act nursery schools. It's kind of a sad story. In nineteen forty-five, Fleming, the superintendent of public instruction, came down with an edict, "We're going to close the nursery schools October thirty-first." Well, I'd never heard about having a meeting to protest anything. Even though I had gotten involved in some struggles, I hadn't gotten that far yet. Well, a friend of mine and some of her friends knew about having meetings and called a meeting of the parents to protest the closure. The men hadn't come back from the war yet, and a lot of the wives still had full responsibility for children.

I got elected secretary of the organization that we called the Citizens' Child Care Committee. We arranged to have someone go and meet with the school board at their next meeting. Well it turns out the school board was real clever. They changed the time and date of the meeting, but somebody found out and went. So then we made arrangements to go to the second meeting and had a hundred fifty people there. So the school board went out of town and said they didn't have anything to meet about. So there was a third meeting and we had as many, maybe more people there. And the school board said they had to have a private meeting first. Well most of those nursery schools closed at five-thirty, and when the meeting dragged on, Fleming came out and said, "This private meeting is going to take so long that the Board sent me out to give you the message that they won't have time to talk to you." So all these people started gathering up their books to leave. I happened to have my kids in one that closed at six P.M., so I could stay longer.

"Could I just ask one question, Mr. Fleming," I asked. "Would the school board refuse to meet with us who could stay?"

He swelled up seven feet tall and said, "Certainly the school board would never refuse to meet with anybody." And he stomped into the little room, and they all stomped out and threw their books on the table and rustled their papers and passed the resolution that we asked for, which was a simple
Irene Hull, shipwright/bindery worker

little request for Congress to continue the Lanham Act funds. As a result they kept those child-care centers open for three more years. They kept closing one here and one there by a divide-and-conquer strategy. Of course, when the nurseries were closed, I was out of a job.

I think it was in forty-six or forty-seven when I got on in the printing department of Lynden Chickens. Well, I thought I was an apprentice printer, but actually I was an apprentice bindery worker. At the time I didn’t know enough about the printing industry to know about the divisions in the industry. The ones in bindery do everything to the paper after it’s printed. And that’s the part I was learning first. I ran the cutter. It wasn’t electric. It was just one of those hand-pulled cutters and very sharp. I also did collating and embossing. Then I was learning to run some of the machinery before I had to quit because of family problems. I always regretted that.

Finally I got a job in a laundry and that is a terrible place to work. They put me in the shakers, which is where people shake the sheets after they came out of the dryer and folded them. It was terribly hot. People were passing out from the heat. I’d put cold water on my wrists, back of my neck, on my forehead, and I was all right as far as survival was concerned. Shakers made something like eighty cents an hour.

I decided shaking was going to make me old before my time, so a friend told me all about what she had to do to be a pantry worker. So armed with that knowledge, I talked myself into a job at one of the grandest hotels. When I got onto the job, the workers kept saying to me, “Where did you say you had worked?” You can fool the boss, but you can never fool the workers. They know when you’re ignorant, dumb. But I held that job for five months and worked in other restaurants for several years.

I was working in one when I was named by the Velde Committee in nineteen fifty-four. The Velde Committee was part of
the House Internal Security Committee. It was the anti-Communist witch-hunt committee. The head of it in Seattle was named Velde. Barbara Hartl was a Communist Party member who had gone to jail during the Smith Act trials, and then they brought her back here as a stool pigeon. I don't know how many people she named. Anyhow she said I was expelled from the party as a Trotskyite. Well, the reason I've always thought I was expelled was I disagreed with some of the leadership. I was called anti-leadership and a few things like that, which I never was. But when Barbara Hartl named me as a Trotskyite, all I could think was, "Why can't they say some of the good things I did?" I didn't want to be labeled a Trotskyite.

After I was named, one of the business agents from my union said to me, "Well, what about your husband, Irene? Is he one of them thar Commies, too?"

And I said to him, "You know better than to ask anybody a question like that in this day and age." See, this was in fifty-three or fifty-four and the McCarran Act was already on the books. The McCarran Act silenced the unions. If you questioned, you were a Communist. If you didn't agree, you had to be a Communist. And Hubert Humphrey, the great liberal, who wanted to prove that he was no longer the tail of labor, helped pass it. It destroyed a lot of good union people. Folks clammed up. Young people refused to support their parents morally and to be known as their parents' children, sometimes. Many were deported. I joined a committee here in Seattle called the Washington Committee for the Protection of the Foreign-Born in the nineteen-fifties, and we managed to prevent any deportations here, although several attempts were made.

That union business agent made it his business to go over to the restaurant I was working in and told the guy that hired me that I was named by the Velde Committee. The guy called me in and said, "You're a nice girl, Irene, but we don't want you here
Irene Hull, shipwright/bindery worker

any more.” That’s all the explanation he would give me, but I knew what had happened. I was just devastated. Six weeks later I went back to get some uniforms of mine which had been in the laundry. The boss was gone and the chef hired me back part time. The chef was a good guy. Before I knew it, I was working seven days a week. It was too much. I still had three kids at home.

A friend that worked in a printing shop sent me to the business agent of the Bindery Workers Union, who gave me the names of some shops to go to. It was in fifty-five that I started looking, but it wasn’t until fifty-six that I got a job. The day I got the job, I started out at one end of town and walked the whole length of the town before happening into a place that had a big job. That’s one thing about bindery work, it’s feast or famine. There are long periods of just go, go, go, go and you get a lot of overtime, and periods of nothing to do. Well this place was really busy and the man said, “I been trying to talk them into hiring an apprentice. Are you sure you want it?” I said I was, but every so often for months he’d keep saying, “Are you sure you want to do bindery work?” I completed a three-year apprenticeship, and when I quit bindery work in nineteen-seventy-nine the wages were seven dollars and twenty-two cents an hour. I served on the executive board of the Graphic Arts Union and ran for business agent, and came within seventeen votes of beating the guy. After that I never got another job. See, we have a union hiring hall. But I feel that I made some contributions to my local. One of the contributions that I got, because Lew was an alcoholic, was alcoholism as part of our treatment in health and welfare. I feel really good about that.

I’ve tried to be class conscious all of my life. I have tried to avoid a feminist attitude because, as I always say, “We have to work together—men and women.” When they started the struggle for the ERA, I opposed it, because I said, “We have got to have
equal rights for all workers and not lose the protections that women have got." I felt the professional women were short-sighted. They wanted to work ten and twelve and eighteen hours [a day] so they could advance and get status. They weren't thinking about health. I know. I've worked in the shipyards.