

Ruth A. Bull
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers

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Home of Ruth Bull
Amsterdam, New York

MR: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?

RB: Ruth Bull. Born in Rotterdam on February 7, 1920.

MR: What was your educational background just prior to the beginning of World War II?

RB: Just high school as a commercial course.

MR: Where were you and what do you remember about Pearl Harbor... When you heard about it?

RB: It was on Sunday and I was working down at GE at that time, but I was home that day and getting ready to go out for the day, but we stayed home and listened to the radio.

MR: Is that where you heard it, on the radio?

RB: Yes.

MR: What was your reaction when you heard this?

RB: Well, I just felt so sad, so bad. We didn't know what was going to happen next. That's what was so bad. Then the next day, of course, going to work on Monday...there was talk, talk, talk about what was going to happen.

MR: How long did you stay at GE?

RB: I was there from 1940-45.

MR: You did secretarial work?

RB: Yes.

MR: How did you end up with the Los Alamos Project?

RB: My brother in law was called. He was a glassblower at GE and he was personally asked to go to Los Alamos. So, he went and my sister went with him. So, I said to her, "Well, I'd like to come out...maybe I could be your maid. I'd like to see what New Mexico looks like". So, she turned my name into personnel and then they sent me an application and information about going and then I applied and my fare was paid by the government and that's how I got out there.

MR: So, your sister worked for them?

RB: No, she didn't, but he did.

MR: What kind of work did he do?

RB: He was a glassblower.

MR: What kind of work did he do at Los Alamos?

RB: The same, glass blowing.

MR: What kind of work did you do when you were out there?

RB: Secretary.

MR: Was it different than the work you did at GE or about the same?

RB: About the same.

MR: Did they give you any specific training?

RB: No, we didn't have to have any training.

MR: How about censorship? Did you have a lot of censorship?

RB: Yes, yes. You couldn't leave the Hill. They called it the Hill.

MR: Why did they call it the Hill?

RB: Because it was on the Hill. It was 2,000ft above sea level and it was like a mesa up there.

MR: Was there a lot of security around it?

RB:

Oh, yes. You couldn't get in or out without identification and you had to sign in the time you left and the time you came back.

MR: Did you live up there or were you...?

RB: We lived up there.

MR: What kind of facility did you live in?

RB: I lived in a dormitory, about 20 people in each dorm.

MR: Now, were these all women that lived in this dormitory?

RB: No, they were men and women and my sister lived in a duplex house.

MR:

Were there any special precautions you had to take with the kind of work you did at all?

RB: No, not at that time.

MR:

Why not? Could you tell us some of the stories you told us about them bringing things in that were radioactive? Did you realize that?

RB: They were contaminated? Yes. Yes, that part we knew-that you had to be careful what you handled and you had to handle it and get it out of your office fast and not handle it too much. That's all we knew.

MR: You said you had a Geiger counter?

RB: Yes, on my desk and if it flipped, well then you had something in there that was contaminated. You had to get it out of there, get it moving.

MR: Now, did you personally have to do this or did someone else?

RB: No, Someone else did that.

MR: How did you feel about your work? Did you enjoy your work there?

RB: Yes, I did. I enjoyed it. And we worked a full eight hours and sometimes more. It depended on what job had to be done.

MR: Did you have any news coming in about the war and what was going on itself?

RB: Only by radio, and nothing else. We didn't have anybody going or coming-not very often.

MR: Were your letters pretty heavily censored?

RB: Yes, they were. Not heavily though, but they were censored. You couldn't say anything about where you worked or how you worked or what you did. That wasn't much for me, but I worked in an office.

WC: Did you ever meet anybody that was directly involved with the project, like Robert Oppenheimer?

RB: Yes. Dr. [Enrico] Fermi and [Dr. Edward] Teller-they all worked in the technical area. We all worked in the same area.

WC: What were they like?

RB:

They were nice. Especially Dr. Fermi; he was my favorite. We had dances on weekends. Not every weekend, but once in a while.

MR: Why did you think he was your favorite?

RB: Because he liked to square dance with me [Laughter] and his wife did not. She didn't want to square dance, and so he picked me, but it was fun. They all danced. Everybody was very friendly. I only saw Oppenheimer a few times. Half the time he was incognito, you know, he was working all the time or somewhere. He was always on the move.

MR: Now, did they live in the facility also?

RB: Yes, homes- they were free. Originally, it was a private school. That's where Oppenheimer went to school as a child. They had a few homes that were very well built in brick. He lived in one of those not too far. All the dorms and everything were built around it and it was a very small area.

MR: Did you have a lot of military personnel coming in and out of the area too?

RB: Yes, the military took care of the civilians. The civilians had preference out there. They had to take care of the civilians. There were three or four people that worked in our office and there were three or four civilians. After I got there, then there were other people that were hired civilians in our office. I know one of my best friends, she was in

the army and she had charge of radiation reports and she had to be locked in when she was doing the reports. We were all combined all the while and at the door we had about four MPs because you couldn't go in and out of the building unless you identified yourself...in every building.

MR: Did you have to wear a name tag anywhere or did you have them with you?

RB: No, had them with you.

MR:

What other social activities were there besides the dances? Were there any other social activities there?

RB: We had movies, quite a few movies-that was held in one building and then we had church there too. I have a picture of us in the church-the night before we went to the movies in the same building... it was just entertaining. I met a lot of my sister's friends. They were married people and I spent a lot of time with them. I had dinners with them and we played cards a lot. Then, after '45, after the drop of the bomb-they were more liberal and some of the GI's were able to bring their wives up on the hill.

MR: Were you able to go out and explore the area at all much?

RB: Yes, we did that quite a bit and traveled around different places in New Mexico.

MR: Now, did you have a car available?

RB:

No, a friend of my sister's took us. There were three of us in our dorm that went with him and then he took a lot of the pictures.

MR: Did you have much rationing up there?

RB: No, we were well supplied with food. We didn't have to worry about any food. They had a commissary and you were able to buy your own.

MR: Now did you have to do your own cooking or did they have mess hall facilities?

RB: Mess hall.

MR:

Do you have any memorable events that you think stand out more than others while you were there?

RB: The night before the first test of the bomb...they had several different tests down in Sandia, the southern part of New Mexico. We would hear about them being duds or being successful. The night that the big one was going to be dropped, it was sort of a funny feeling because you didn't know whether it was going to be successful or not. They were worried because they didn't know whether it was going to start a chain reaction and start the world on fire. They were pretty sure of what was going to happen, but they weren't positive. So, we stayed up all night waiting for the first test and it happened at 5:30am and it was as if it was noontime.

MR: So, it was visible from where you were?

RB: We were 250 miles away from it and it was (as if it were) noontime. Everyone that

went down to see the test, to be there, they all had to have permission to go. My boss went. They couldn't watch it anyway because they had to turn away from it and they had to wear special glasses. They couldn't look toward it at all. So, we saw more of the fire and the color and the new.

MR: Could you describe what it was like?

RB: It was just like fire and it just kept rolling and rolling. It was so bright.

MR: How about the sound? Was there sound too?

RB: It wasn't close, but you could hear the rumble 250 miles away. That was the southern part of New Mexico, Sandia, and we were in the north. So, the sound came up high.

MR: Can you tell us about this?

RB: This is called a fused Earth. This is what the bomb did. It turned the sand to glass. This is kind of crude, but some of it was beautiful. The colors in it were really nice.

MR: So how did you receive that?

RB: I had a pail of it. My boss brought up a pail from Sandia. We then had a GI that worked in the department where he could put it in plastic. He made bookends and different things like this for everybody to have a piece to take home.

MR: Now what story did you tell us about this? Why you didn't let the family look at this for a long time?

RB: Because it was contaminated.

MR: For how long?

RB: 16 years...just about. Not much...It isn't too big a piece, but it was radioactive.

MR:

How do you think working out with this project? Do you think it changed your life in any way or affected your life in any way?

RB: No, I don't think so.

MR: When did you come back from there?

RB: From there I went to Columbia University. The professor I had in our department was Dr. [Dana] Mitchell from Colombia. He was a physicist. He was the head of our department. I followed him to New York and I work at Columbia University in the government contracts office at the time. I didn't stay there very long. I ended up working in the alumni house. Then, after that I had to come home because my twin sister was supporting my mother. Well, I was too, but indirectly. So, finally I did come back home.

MR: When did you come home?

RB: In 1946.

MR: Now, what about your sister and her husband? Did they come?

RB: They went directly to Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

MR:

So he continued to work with the atomic energy? How long did he work with them?

RB: Yes, 20 years or more-until he retired.

MR: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that you worked with out there?

RB: Yes, I'm still in contact with one engineer friend that I had. He was in the army and we still write Christmas cards and another girl that moved up to Seattle-I kept in contact with her for many, many years.

MR: Could you tell us about this?

RB: We didn't have any ceremony or anything to receive this. We just received it.

MR: What is that?

RB: This is a certificate of working on the Manhattan Project and the pin was also issued to each one of us.

MR: And that was signed by the Secretary of war?

RB: Yes, Mr. [Henry] Stimson... At least we did something for the war effort.

MR: What was your reaction when you heard about the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan?

RB: Terrible. Also, we had to go to a couple of lectures because of it being dropped on so many women and children. It was so bad- at first I didn't know what they meant. But, afterwards I thought about it. After you start thinking about it, think how terrible it was. It was so that we didn't feel so guilty, and we did. We had lectures afterwards saying that...Since then, though we went to the historical society. We went to give the talk about Los Alamos. This was just a few years ago. One man came up to me after we talked about how I got there. (He said) "I want to thank you for working on that atomic bomb". I said, "Oh, gee, thanks". He noticed my pin and I said "that's the first time anybody's ever said anything to me". That's when I quit feeling guilty. You can't help thinking after all these years, but he said "you saved many, many more people than that was killed with that bomb". And it's true. We were good friends with a Japanese girl after the war, but she never questioned me about the atomic bomb.

RB: These are (pictures from) before I left; they gave me a party at GE. To go away [Laughter].

WC: And whereabouts are you in that picture?

RB: In this picture?

WC: Yes.

RB: Right here...Here's my office. That's our... (Organization tree).

MR: You're just below the top there!

RB: Yes [Laughter]

MR: You're close to the top of the pile here

RB: Yes

MR: Wayne and I in our office are down here somewhere [Laughter]

RB: Now, this (photo) is going up the hill. This one is going up around the mountain we had, I went up on a bus and I sat on the outside and they just had to make a new road, you know all the way up around those mesas and cliff.

MR: Now this is. These are views from the top of it?

RB: Yes. Coming down or going up... This was the one of the original lodges. That was already up there like this... This was at a party. We had a lot of get togethers, you know.

MR:

Well, I imagine it had to be a pretty close group of people. How many people were up there total? Do you remember?

RB: I don't remember. My sister lived in a house like this, a duplex, just an ordinary little house.

This is in that big lodge.

MR:

Now, do you have any photographs of Oppenheimer and Fermi or any of the others?

RB: No. This is from the top of that mesa, that's how vast down off of the hill between Santa Fe and Los Alamos. It was forty-five miles up from Santa Fe, but you had to go up and then come back on order to get up there because it was so high. That's what we used to do. Go to different places in the pueblos. We always tried to visit all the old pueblos.

MR: Now who is this?

RB: That's me.

MR: That's you and this is you and...

RB: No, that's a friend, a gal that worked with me in the office. And that's me on the top of that mesa. This was an old abandoned pueblo. This was down in Santa Fe. This is still on top of that mesa. I think you can see the railroad, but not much. This is my sister's house right there. She had a son, so she didn't work. Her husband wouldn't let her work. So, he said she can go but she's not going to work. So she stayed home. This is my messenger in the office. He lived down near Santa Fe, down in San Ildefonso (Pueblo).

MR: Now what tribe was he? Do you remember?

RB: No, and this was inside the house. They were all furnished for the civilians... Here's the theater in our church... Wild horses.

MR: Did you ever have any USO shows come up to see you?

RB: Not up there, but we did have the big bands come up.

MR: Were there any famous ones?

RB: No. Kay Kaiser, I think. I'm not sure.

RB: This is the one I'm still in contact with. He was an engineer.

MR: What is his name?

RB: Sid Yenny.

MR: And where is he from?

RB:

Michigan. Here he is working somewhere in the building. They're crude, you know. They didn't have nice facilities-just a shed, where they worked in- every building was just like a shed.

WC: Just made out of plywood it looks like.

RB: [Laughter] Yes, that's right.

MR: It must have gotten cold there in the winters.

RB: Always beautiful. We had snow, but it would be gone by 11 o'clock and it was just enough. It never got real cold like it does here.

WC: Who's that fellow down there?

RB: This gal-she was mathematician-very brilliant. She lived in New Mexico and so she was a good friend.

WC: Now is that your brother in law?

RB: No.**MR:** No, he wasn't in the military. He was civilian.

RB: And this is what the houses looked like. Just friends...this is one of my bosses...and this is a physicist...everybody looked the same. The only one you could tell was different was Dr. Teller. I didn't like him.

MR: Why not?

RB: Oh, he was so boisterous! [Mocking mumble].Here's where I ended up-Colombia. That was my sister's son in their house. And this is... We walked and I got the biggest kick out of this picture because one of our girls worked in the office. She was Mexican, and she said "only the Indians wear shoes." And it was true, I guess. She brought the picture to me and she said, "see they're the only ones that wear shoes" they got them from the government you know. This was a physicist's wife, and they had just had a child. We walked from work. Scientists. I wish I had gotten more pictures- we went way up into Colorado one day. We were right up there.

MR: So did you have plenty of gasoline then, if you wanted it?

RB: Yes, they did. We got it from the Army. The army catered to us. Well, in fact, one week, we had to go without water, and they had to bring water up on the hill. And the army all went home. They sent them all but the civilians. That was the only time the civilians had to stay there. And so they had to bring the water up to us.This is about afterward. This is one of the civilians, when his wife and child came up on the hill after the war. This was our group in our office. I haven't seen these (pictures) in a long time.

MR: Thank you very much for your interviews.