

An Interview with
MILDRED GIGNAC

OH 504

Conducted by Thomas J. Misa

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Mildred Gignac Interview

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Abstract

Mildred “Millie” Gignac grew up in Carver City, Minnesota, then moved with her family to St. Paul in 1933-34. After high school, she worked briefly for the government then joined Northwest Airlines and became supervisor of the payroll department. She married a Turkish man, moved briefly to Colorado, then overseas to Syria for several years. She returned to the Twin Cities and joined Remington Rand Univac and became secretary to the director of financial control in 1956. She ascended the corporate ladder and eventually became Univac’s first female director (in 1980) with responsibility for benefits and administration. She discusses the several Univac locations where she worked, starting with the original ERA plant and the newer one on Shepard Road, both in St. Paul. After a tour of duty in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, working on information systems for employee records, she returned in 1974 to Univac’s Defense Systems division and the Eagan facility, where she continued executive positions in benefits and administration until her retirement in 1986. She offers comments on a set of *Datamation* advertisements from 1967.

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Misa: My name is Tom Misa and I'm from the University of Minnesota at the Charles Babbage Institute. It's the 5th of November, 2015, and I'm talking with Millie Gignac at her home in Eagan. Millie, we're going to have a set of discussions to try to understand this puzzle about women being attracted to computing and coming in, especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s — that's the core research question. You ended up actually entering the computer industry much earlier than that, in the 1950s, and I wonder to start with if I could get a bit of background on your childhood, your education, and any interests that you might've had in technical subjects or other subjects. Do you recall that part of your upbringing?

Gignac: I do recall my childhood but I can't remember being interested in anything technical. I grew up in a large family. My father owned a newspaper. Ten kids there were; and four of my brothers also had newspapers.

Misa: You had a newspaper family, then.

Gignac: A newspaper family, right.

Misa: And where was that while you were growing up?

Gignac: I grew up in Carver City, Minnesota, and we moved to St. Paul when my father retired, and I was 13 years old. It was in 1933 or 1934, around that time. And [I] lived in St. Paul until I married and moved to Syria.

Misa: Did people talk about women doing some kind of education or training beyond high school during those days, during the 1930s? That was of course a difficult time with the Depression and . . .

Gignac: I can't remember talking about it . . .

Misa: . . . a hard time for many things.

Gignac: . . . but I think at that time, a lot of women didn't go to college. In my family, all my brothers, all seven brothers, all went to college. The three girls didn't.

Misa: Did not.

Gignac: Did not. And we just understood that we weren't going to college. I don't know if that was the trend at that time but that was just something that I knew, I wouldn't be going to college.

Misa: Did people talk about secretarial school or some other type of training? Or was that something that people didn't seem to have a concern for?

Gignac: I can't remember that anyone talked about it. I just knew that when I graduated from high school, I was going to find a job.

Misa: And what kind of a job was that?

Gignac: I worked briefly for the government. I can't even remember the name but it was for the government. And then I worked for Northwest Airlines. I started out and very shortly became the supervisor of the payroll department at Northwest Airlines.

Misa: At Northwest Airlines, [a] big concern in the Twin Cities.

Gignac: Yes. And I worked there for I think about six years and then decided that there was a paymaster, a man, and I decided that I would never get any higher than payroll supervisor so I quit and traveled with my mother, and that's when I met my husband-to-be. He was a Turkish man. I visited my sister in El Paso, and one evening, we went to Mexico to Juarez, I guess it was, to have dinner and I met him in this bar in Mexico.

[Laughter.]

Misa: You said you had an adventurous life, that sounds like one of the chapters. Now, when was it, may I ask, when you went to Syria? You said you were in Syria for a number of years.

Gignac: He transferred to the School of Mines in Golden, Colorado. We were married in St. Paul; he came up then from El Paso, and we were married in St. Paul. As soon as we were married we moved to Golden, Colorado. We were there maybe a year or so, and

then he decided he wanted to go back to Syria, back home, and we left and went to Syria I think it was in 1950 or 1951. I've forgotten. And then I was there almost five years, then it just got to be — well, if you read my book you'll find it just got to be too much. I had a daughter born in Colorado and then another one in Syria. Disgraced the family twice. If I'd had boys I'd still be in Syria, they would never have let me take a boy out. When my second daughter was born, my husband's friends all came and offered him condolences.

Misa: Oh dear.

Gignac: That's the way it is over there.

Misa: So when you came back from Syria, I notice that that date comes close to being...

Gignac: I came back in December of 1956.

Misa: . . . coming back and working for Univac.

Gignac: Let's see, I came back at the end of December 1955. And then I knew I had to get a job to support the girls. I stayed with my sister for a while, but then I went to downtown St. Paul to the Department of Employment or something, and they sent me to Remington Rand Univac. They were doing quite a bit of hiring at the time so that's when I started working there.

Misa: Can you tell us a bit about what you thought about Remington Rand Univac? We know from the history that that became a quite notable concern and was a big employer, but in the mid-1950s, it was relatively young and taking off.

Gignac: They were doing a lot of hiring at that time. It was over in the Midway area in St. Paul and again, in my book, I started out in the payroll department as a clerk, and it was a very boring routine. I said I can't do this; anybody could [do it]; a child could do this job, I need to do something else. So then they transferred me to a secretarial job, which is noted on that.

Misa: Let's see, it says secretary to the director of financial control, still in 1956. So that was shortly after you'd joined as a payroll clerk.

Gignac: Right. And then, as I say, I had a very promising career at Univac, and from there I went to executive secretary, and then group leader, supervisor, manager, and I was named — I've forgotten the date — I was named a director. First female at Univac to be named to a director position so I was very proud of that.

Misa: Wow. That's neat.

Gignac: All the way along, I loved the work and ended up as director of benefits and administration. I had a lot of people working for me; and I loved it. I loved the job and it

was good; the company was good to me and I put in a lot of hours. I worked long hours but I liked it.

Misa: Millie, I wonder if we could take this in three pieces and go into a bit more depth to try to understand Univac and the working environment, and who you were working with, and the supervisors that you were under, and then the people that you ended up supervising. So you were in Minnesota and then in Pennsylvania, you mentioned, then back to Minnesota. So I wonder if we could take that first Minnesota period, say from 1956 through the mid-1960s. You said that the company was good to work for, why was that the case?

Gignac: The people were friendly, all the people I worked with were very fine and I had no problems at all with anyone that I can remember. I liked the job and I liked who I was working for, and the interaction with employees was always good.

Misa: Univac built a couple of new buildings during this period, 1955-1965. Where was it that you were working, do you recall?

Gignac: I worked on Minnehaha Avenue in St. Paul, that was the first building that Univac was in.

Misa: That was the old ERA building, that was their kind of flagship, if you want to say that.

Gignac: Right. And then they built a building on Shepard Road in St. Paul, and I was in that building for a while. I was in the Defense Systems portion of Univac, the commercial side was in Roseville, and then after they built the building on Shepard Road, then they built the one in Eagan and I moved from one to the other. I think I was in Shepard Road when I went to Pennsylvania, and then when I came back I was in the building in Eagan.

Misa: Do you remember any differences? People describe the older facility on Minnehaha in colorful ways. It was a much older building. Was the move to Shepard Road plant a positive development? It must've been different at least, it was a new building.

Gignac: There was a lot of assembly, people working on computers in the one on Shepard Road. As I recall, there wasn't a lot of that in Plant Two, the one on Minnehaha. Oh, in between the one on Minnehaha and the one on Shepard Road, I also worked in the old University Avenue, the old Crank Building, and we were in there, not a lot of departments but some of us were in that building for a while. And then from there we moved to the new building on Shepard Road. And from there I went to Pennsylvania.

Misa: Did you notice any difference in peoples' ideas about work or the social climate, when you moved from Minnesota to Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, where the Univac headquarters were?

Gignac: No, I just got along fine with everybody. It was just a good place to work; I enjoyed going to work, even in Blue Bell after I got acquainted with people. And I'm still in touch with some of them, as I am with a lot of people I used to work with here. We still get together and it's been what, 25 years since I've been at Univac.

Misa: Sometimes those work relationships are really important ones so it's nice when it works that way.

Gignac: They are.

Misa: So your career at Univac that you helpfully provided me with says that in 1965 you were named group leader in personnel, and then in 1965 when you moved to Pennsylvania, as an employee information specialist. Can you explain the differences between those two jobs?

Gignac: Well, I was — let's see — the group leader was really in benefits, and when I first went to Pennsylvania, I worked on a number of things.

Misa: If you've got some description in our book, it's perfectly fine to reference it, that's very helpful.

Gignac: Can't find it.

Misa: Just to note in the recording, Millie was kind enough to give me a copy so that will be part of our files at CBI, as well, so we can go back and forth between the recording and the book.

Gignac: At the employee information system, what I did was to coordinate. The company had purchased a division of RCA and I was asked to coordinate the employees into our employee system. Shortly after they put me in charge of this thing, I immediately hired a crew to work on it. It was a big job because it was 2500 employees and [in] their system they had their payroll and personnel records separate and ours were not at that time. So I had to combine those records into our system; and so that's what I did for quite a while, got them all going. It was a big job but it was worth it.

Misa: We might not think of that, but it was a computing job, wasn't it?

Gignac: I guess it would be, yes.

Misa: Because you were merging computer records.

Gignac: [Laughing.] I guess it would be.

Misa: So without saying it, you were also managing people who worked with computers, even if you weren't doing the programming yourself, but merging data sets and databases, that is exactly computing work.

Gignac: Right.

Misa: Do you remember what kind of people worked on that project?

Gignac: I hired temporary people to do it. It was a lot of work and so these people, these women I hired did all the work. I would direct them but they did actual work.

Misa: So you were hiring temporary workers. This was in Pennsylvania, is that right?

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: Do you recall what kinds of people you looked for, or were there special backgrounds, or how did you find this group of people?

Gignac: I don't remember. I suppose through an agency, that must've been it, but I do not remember how I got them. I just remember that it was a lot of work.

Misa: A lot of work. [Laughs.] 2500 people to essentially merge from one payroll system into the other's. And you have mostly worked on the benefits side; I understand that's not connected directly to hiring but do you remember people talking about the kind of people working for Univac? The people working particularly with computing would be my particular interest.

Gignac: No, because I hired the people who worked for me but otherwise I wasn't involved with hiring at all.

Misa: That's right.

Gignac: We had good benefits, I think.

Misa: You ended up during the Pennsylvania years, it says, 1969 you were an employee information specialist. That sounds like this RCA project. Then in 1972 you were named as supervisor of benefits research and administration; 1973, manager of benefits research and administration. Can you describe that work a bit?

Gignac: That was in Univac headquarters so it was manager of benefits for all locations. In those years I traveled a lot to all our locations because they all sort of reported to me. For instance, I started a pre-retirement group and I called everybody in from all our locations to tell them about this program. It was called AIM, it was through AARP and we bought the program.

Misa: That would be A-A-R-P?

Gignac: Yes. And we purchased the program from them, and I called all the benefits people from all locations in, gave them the program, and said go out and do it at your

locations. Later on, I came back to Minnesota because they didn't have anybody to do the program here so they asked me if I would come back and do it. I wanted to come back to Minnesota because I love Minnesota. No matter where I go, I always want to come back to Minnesota. And so I came back to do that, to run the retirement program here.

Misa: Univac by the early 1970s was a really large company.

Gignac: Oh gosh yes.

Misa: Where else did you travel? There were tens of thousands here in Minnesota.

Gignac: That was the biggest location; and California, I remember. It seems to me there was someplace else but I don't remember. That's part of getting old, my memory is gone.
[Laughs.]

Misa: Okay. We have your book, too, so we can maybe connect those two. So you ended up moving back here as manager of pre-retirement counseling, that was this special AARP program.

Gignac: Yes. It was called AIM. I don't remember what it stood for; maybe it's in my book. But it was AARP that developed the program, and it was a good one. What we did was an eight-week course, one time a week, I recall. Employees over 55 were eligible to join the class with their spouses, and we brought them all in. I did this one day a week.

Everybody really seemed to enjoy it. I brought in outsider advisors at each meeting, like a lawyer at one meeting, and all different people. It was a good program, I thought.

Misa: And then it sounds like you ended up being, it says 1975, manager in administration. Then in 1980, it mentions that you were named as a director of administration and benefits, and then in 1981, director of systems and administration. Was it common for a woman at that time to rise so high in a company's management?

Gignac: No. There were very few women managers even.

Misa: Few women managers.

Gignac: Very few.

Misa: Did you have contact with them or form any kind of informal groups, have some chance to discuss common interests?

Gignac: No, I can't even remember them. My peers were men and then at the end, the ones that reported to me were men. And I had no trouble at all with them. My daughter — and this may be beside the point — she lives in Oregon and she had a high-paying managing job for a computer company. She's a computer expert and she was moved; another company came and hired her. She had men reporting to her and it was so bad that

she finally quit. Now I never experienced that. The men were so bad to her. I never experienced any of the men working for me that ever were not nice to me.

Misa: And by bad do you mean just unreasonable?

Gignac: I don't know, exactly.

Misa: Insubordinate or disrespectful, something like that?

Gignac: Yes. I don't know exactly what it was but she would call me and she'd be almost in tears. I really worried about her until finally, with her husband's okay she finally quit that high paying job she had.

Misa: But you didn't experience anything like that for Univac.

Gignac: Not a bit.

Misa: I'm just a little intrigued because it seems wonderful and a little unusual for a woman such as yourself to be accepted and to move so high in the company. Do you have ideas why your daughter may have had some difficulties but you seemingly didn't?

Gignac: I wondered about that, whether things changed in the office world? Or have they always been that way? I don't know. the first thing I did when I got the job with these

men reporting to me I sat down with each one of them and told them, I said it's your department, you run it, if you need help come to me. Otherwise, I'm not interfering; I don't micromanage at all, I let them do their job. That may have helped, I don't know.

Misa: Did you have any mentors? I suppose they would've been men, possibly a woman, but in terms of trying to develop a management style, that's not something most people have as part of their background. Sometimes there are skills that are useful to learn.

Gignac: I probably did because of the men that were; Rudy and the vice president were all good people to work with.

Misa: Did they give you advice about how to be an effective manager?

Gignac: No.

Misa: No.

Gignac: No, when I was a supervisor, I just never had any trouble with anybody. Maybe, I don't know; you just work well together.

Misa: Maybe you're gifted.

Gignac: I don't know about that.

Misa: Lucky turn of affairs. Sometimes within companies there's a relationship where a supervisor helps manage the career of one of the people that works for them. Did you experience that? Did you help people move through the company or spot different opportunities that they may not have seen themselves?

Gignac: I don't recall any specific incident, but often the employees would come and talk to me about their job, and so on, but I can't remember any specific incident.

Misa: What kinds of concerns would people discuss with you? I mean, there's benefits concerns but were there other broader company-wide concerns, or things that were going well with work, or that might not have been going so well?

Gignac: There might've been but I just can't remember. My memory is not as good as it used to be. [Laughs.]

Misa: Mine neither.

Gignac: [Laughing] And you're not 95.

Misa: No. [Laughs.] Somewhat over half that.

Gignac: Yes, my memory is not good.

Misa: Do you remember thinking that there were any notable changes? You said that when you moved to Pennsylvania that you thought that the working environment was a supportive one, that the Univac team, the managers, the group of people that you were working with, were easy to get along with. Do you recall when you came back to Minnesota — that would've been 1974 — were there any notable changes, do you recall? Because you were at Univac earlier, then you came back; had the company changed from the 1960s to the mid-1970s?

Gignac: It'd grown larger but nothing specifically that I can recall that was different; it was just coming home. [Laughs.] Again, I worked with all the people that I knew before that I had kept in contact with.

Misa: One of the issues that we're interested in exploring is the possibility that in the 1960s and 1970s, with the women's movement, that that might have made certain opportunities open up for women in society writ large, but also within specific companies. Do you remember any discussion about that specifically in the 1970s about jobs that women might be doing, or changes that might be afoot?

Gignac: I don't recall any discussions. All the people that worked for me were women, in the benefits group — not the other departments that men that reported to me that had different departments, but the benefits department was all women. I don't know if there's any significance to that or not because the men that reported to me were like the fellow

that had all the mail room and the office supplies, and that kind of thing, which had nothing to do with benefits. The other one I can't remember now.

Misa: You were put in positions where administration, and systems in administration could cover a very wide set of activities for the company.

Gignac: I reported to the vice president of human resources, and so there were things that I did for him. And also for the general president of the company; I did all the budgets for him, when I moved into that job. And I did the budgets for the vice president of human resources, did his budgets,; and the general manager's budgets.

Misa: That must've been a quite challenging but interesting task to see how money got structured and then moved around.

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: Another question that we're asking, and it may be something that you have perspective on, in terms of women coming into the computer industry there was substantial growth in the 1960s and 1970s but that growth didn't last beyond the mid-1980s. You and I were talking before the recording that this is a puzzle; there's no easy solution to that. Do you remember that anything was changing in the company or the industry in the 1980s that might bear on that puzzle?

Gignac: When they grew, of course, it was because the company was growing and expanding in the 1960s and they did a lot of hiring then. But why it dropped down in the 1980s, I can't; I just don't know. And I can't remember when they closed the plant here in Eagan. Well let's see; when did I move? 1986. And I think it wasn't too long after that when Univac; seems to me they closed; I've forgotten; it wasn't Lockheed, another company took over before Lockheed took over.

Misa: There were about three; Univac kind of got bought and sold, bought and sold, and then it ended up with Lockheed.

Gignac: Yes. Do you have a list of those?

Misa: Yes, Lora, and Paramax. The people who worked in the company that we have contact with, there were just years where they continued their work and who owned the company came and went; and then Lockheed ended up being the more durable owner, then they had a new relationship with Lockheed.

Gignac: They're building a big new thing over there where Lockheed was.

Misa: Oh, in Eagan.

Gignac: Eagan, yes.

Misa: The facility [inaudible]

Gignac: I don't know, the Univac company maybe just the business died down or something; didn't continue. And what's left is Unisys.

Misa: Unisys, right.

Gignac: And there is a building here in Eagan, and there's one in Roseville.

Misa: That was about the time that you retired. My belief is that divisions of Burroughs and Univac ended up merging to form Unisys. I think that was about 1986.

Gignac: Yes, I think it was right about 1985 I think it was. I think it was the year after I retired. No, when did I retire, 1986?

Misa: It says March 1986, retired.

Gignac: Okay, it was 1987 that Unisys came into being, because it was right after I retired. Too bad, it was a good company.

Misa: Are there any particularly memorable people that you'd like to recall, that you'd worked with? You said you're in contact with a very large number of people?

Gignac: Yes, we get together at least once a year. Most of them are people I worked with in personnel, and then of course, my boss, who was the vice president of human resources. A couple of years after I retired, his wife died right around that time I think, and so we started seeing each other for a couple years after that and were together for 18 years, I think. He was the love of my life. But he died about 10 years ago.

Misa: And his name?

Gignac: Paul Ives. He was vice president of human resources, and I got to love him dearly, and his family. He had four children and we still get together. Then there are other people; the gal who was my secretary — now I can't remember her name — I can't remember anybody's name. [Laughs.]

Misa: Maybe that's in your book; we can fill in some of the detail.

Gignac: Sue Altoff was her name. She was a dear friend and boy, I couldn't have gotten along without her. She was a great, great secretary.

Misa: In the 1950s, Millie, it was pretty common if you were looking at a Help Wanted page, there were some jobs that were aimed specifically at women and other jobs that were aimed specifically at men. That changed in the 1970s. The federal government passed laws that made it the case that people were supposed to be able to do different jobs, regardless of whether they were a man or a woman. Do you recall that?

Gignac: I don't recall, and I don't think I even looked in the paper for a job. I just went down to downtown St. Paul to whatever it's called, department of employment or something, and I just went down there and told them I needed a job. So I don't recall any discrimination like that.

Misa: It wasn't even a point of discrimination, it was just the way things were, I think. So it wasn't that somebody was trying to do something different, but I think that was just what society understood at the time, that men and women did essentially different jobs. So probably when you went to downtown St. Paul they looked up jobs that they thought would be appropriate for you as a woman. I don't know that, of course, but I think that probably would've been the case. By the 1970s, that practice of having gender specific jobs, at least formally, was done away with; whether the practices conformed instantly, or course, is another question. You said a lot of the people who worked directly for you in benefits were in fact women.

Gignac: All of them were. I can't think of anybody; all the benefits people were women.

Misa: And you became a more senior figure; but was there also a woman who managed the benefits employees? People were working in benefits, but did they have a supervisor who was also a woman?

Gignac: I don't think so; I can't recall one. I think they all reported to me.

Misa: To you directly.

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: So you were their supervisor?

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: But you had other men who reported to you also.

Gignac: They were different departments, like Warren was in charge of the mail room and the telephones, and that kind of stuff; he had his own department, which I had nothing to do with. He reported to me but his people reported to him.

Misa: He ran that department.

Gignac: He ran that department; and there was another one, too; and I can't remember what the other one was. That's probably in my book, too.

Misa: We were talking before we turned the tape on, about the puzzle why since the 1980s, just as computing becomes such an important part of our society and culture and

economy, that the proportion of women working in the industry has dropped dramatically from almost 40 percent to maybe 15 percent. It's very puzzling.

Gignac: It certainly is to me, too. I would think it would be the opposite of that. What are the women doing now?

Misa: [Laughs.] Well, that's a very good question. Some of them — I'm just thinking about what their options were — in the 1970s and 1980s it was very difficult for women to get into law school, or medical school, or some other kinds of professional work.

Gignac: Why?

Misa: Law schools didn't admit women; medical schools just did not admit women. And so the suggestion is that for some reason, computing as a profession, both in terms of the undergraduate degrees, but also the workforce itself was maybe not perfect for women but better than law school or medical school. Engineering for years was a place where many women felt uncomfortable. In the classroom they felt uncomfortable and in the workforce they felt uncomfortable. And the computing industry was different, [in] 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s women felt more comfortable there in the computing industry than they did in some of the other places they might've gone. Computing was a place where thousands and thousands of women found good education and satisfying work. Any thoughts or observations you might have on that, Millie, would be appreciated.

Gignac: I just can't; I'm really puzzled by the decline. I just don't understand that at all.

Misa: No, it makes no sense; no logical sense. I can show you statistics that are just astonishing.

Gignac: Computers are here to stay, and they've so much in everyone's life these days, you know that never used to be. Back when I started working, who had a computer in their house? Nobody. Now everybody's got a computer. It just baffles me; I just don't understand it at all. Unless computer companies aren't doing much hiring.

Misa: Oh, they're hiring a lot; they're hiring men.

Gignac: Oh they are?

Misa: They're hiring men, or they hire women and women leave. That's another very common pattern.

Gignac: That's strange.

Misa: Some people have looked at this very carefully. Up to half of women who are entering the computer industry stay 10 years and then leave. They go do something else entirely. So they don't stay there for their careers, which is a bit of a pity. It may be they're in the first decade or so, and then for reasons that I don't think are really clearly

understood, they leave too. So that's another puzzle; not only are women not going into computing, they're not staying in computing.

Gignac: I just don't understand it at all.

Misa: You mentioned, Millie, that everybody works with computers today. Do you remember when the benefits work was made into computing work? Today, people would be working on computers; this is what almost all of us do. But in the 1950s, people didn't have computers at their desks. Do you remember that shift in the people that you were supervising? When they became essentially computer workers?

Gignac: You know I had a computer in my office back then, which I hardly ever used, but I used it to contact Blue Bell and I don't remember using it very much even.

Misa: We would call it some form of e-mail today, but was there a company network that you communicated across?

Gignac: It must've been that, I don't know, I don't remember it much, but I do remember I had a computer in my office and I used it not very often, occasionally. [Laughs.]

Misa: Now, would that've been when you came back in the 1970s in your office in Minnesota?

Gignac: Yes. I didn't have one in Pennsylvania.

Misa: Didn't have one.

Gignac: It's kind of strange when you think of working for a computer company and not having a computer. [Laughs.] We didn't use them that much back in those days. I suppose there were certain departments that maybe used them a lot.

Misa: When you first started working, can you think about the working environment in payroll? That probably was done with paper: punch cards or paper sheets.

Gignac: Punch cards. That's what we had, even when I worked at Northwest Airlines back in the 1940s. When I was supervisor of the payroll department, we had punch cards that came in from every location. We had red cloth bags and the cards came in to our department from all locations in those red bags, and those red bags were priority one on every flight.

Misa: People's pay.

Gignac: They brought cards in and my gals in my other department figured them out and everything, and we sent them up to be made into checks, I guess. And then the checks went back in these same red bags, and everybody knew that they had priority on every airplane.

Misa: So the payroll cards for Northwest Airlines were essentially a process; so these bags then had thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of payroll checks in them, and then they went out and were distributed to employees.

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: That was a very important job to do exactly right.

[Laughter.]

Gignac: As I say, the pilots all knew those red bags were important.

Misa: Yes, keeps thousands of employees able to buy groceries at the end of the week and keep their housing. The punch cards themselves would be processed on machines, punch card tabulating machines. Did you work on that at all, or were you more on the administrative side?

Gignac: I think I had 13 girls — women — working for me. And they processed these cards, and I can't remember now what they did but all the cards came to them and I think they must've figured how many hours and totaled them or something; and then they were sent upstairs to the computing department I guess it would've been. They did something with the cards and made the checks. But the gals in the payroll department, they got the

cards first and I don't remember what they did but they must've added up the hours or something. They must have processed them somehow.

Misa: So there was one card per person or one card per check, then.

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: So 10 cards would come in and that would be 10 checks going back.

Gignac: That's right.

Misa: That's an immense amount of information flowing back and forth and pretty soon, an immense amount of money that Northwest was moving back and forth.

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: Do you recall — this is maybe a bit of a stretch — but was there any similar system when you came to work for Univac? Do you recall how they did payroll?

Gignac: We didn't have time cards that I recall. I don't know how we got our information to payroll; whether it was just on a sheet; I don't recall.

Misa: We sometimes don't remember that the punch card, the cards themselves, was how people did computations. Of course, the idea of punching a card to keep track of your hours, or weekly work, whatever it is, that's a form of computing that in time would get shifted into what we now would see as digital computing, and put into spreadsheets, and things like that. But that work that you were doing for Northwest would be a form of computation. If it's understood correctly, that was computing work, right?

Gignac: I guess, early stages of it, right?

Misa: It was moving a mountain of money every payroll cycle.

Gignac: I don't know if there's anything in here on that; back in the 1940s. It's just what I've told you; we did the payroll for all locations. We got the time cards in, in red canvas bags, and the paychecks left in the same bags. That was in the 1940s. I had eight women working for me.

Misa: At Northwest.

Gignac: At Northwest in 1945. I think I left there in about 1949. Think that was nice we got passes to ride on the airplanes. So that was kind of good; I used several of those.

Misa: So you started work there in 1945; that was just after the second world war.

Gignac: It was in the 1940s; let's see, April 19, 1943.

Misa: So during the war.

Gignac: Yes. And I left there at the end of the year in 1948.

Misa: Were you hired to be the payroll manager?

Gignac: Let's see; I was hired as a payroll clerk. I made \$1,200 a year. [Laughs.] In 1945 I was made supervisor of the payroll department with eight women working for me; and I left there in 1948.

Misa: And the work, so far as you recall, was still the punch cards? The tabulating, that same cycle was pretty constant during that time?

Gignac: Yes.

Misa: When you were working for Univac, you said that you didn't get computers on your desk; people didn't have computers [pause]

Gignac: No. I had an office . . .

Misa: Computers cost a million dollars.

Gignac: . . . which I rarely used. I communicated with Blue Bell, but the people that worked for me didn't have computers.

Misa: How did they move information?

Gignac: I don't remember.

Misa: Must've been files on all the employees, somehow, right?

Gignac: Oh, huge files!

Misa: Paper files.

Gignac: Someplace I've got a picture they took of me standing by the files. The files were so huge, when we moved to that building in St. Paul on Shepard Road, they moved the files in through the roof. They couldn't get them in the door. Huge banks of files.

Misa: So they dropped them in.

Gignac: Some way, yes.

Misa: [Laughing] Couldn't get through the front door; had to drop them.

Gignac: They were just huge, and all paper files.

Misa: Wow. And that'd be the personnel records and, of course, benefits connects to what kinds of jobs people are doing.

Gignac: Yes, I was supervisor of the personnel records, and they were all on paper.

[pause] I guess I don't; I thought I had something in my files but I don't.

Misa: But all those paper records were in part what computer companies like Univac were trying to help the federal government, universities, other companies deal with. And it's a whole complicated process because it's not easy to take, as you're pointing out, this whole body of paper-based material, and turn it into punch cards, or magnetic tape, or some other type of computer data, essentially, that tracks today paychecks and peoples' personnel records, and then ultimately their benefits, as well. So through the 1980s, when you were working there, you said that your computing really was a communications tool, you weren't using computing to manage individual peoples' benefits or their personnel records.

Gignac: Not in the 1980s, I'd say more in the 1970s, that we just did everything on paper, didn't have computers.

Misa: It's a kind of special question, but you see the significance because essentially during your career, how many companies dealt with personnel records changed pretty dramatically.

Gignac: Oh, yes, because it all used to be on paper in a file cabinet.

Misa: That's right; in hundreds of file cabinets or some other way of storing very, very large volumes of paper; like vertical files, right? The manila folders was a common way of doing that. Can I show you a set of advertisements, just to ask what you see? These are from the 1960s and I think there's five of them. So the first one is from Bell on this side here.

Gignac: And this is the 1960s?

Misa: 1967. Say any responses about how a man or a woman might've viewed that. That one is on the left side.

Gignac: It says we need people but it doesn't say male or female.

Misa: It says Bellcom has immediate openings for work on computer systems, data processing, advanced manned missions. Computer specialist is the [pause]

Gignac: Yes. So a man would respond to that more than a woman, I think.

Misa: Yes. There's a little sign there that says it's like the moon; then there's kind of symbol for a man and for a woman on the left side. So it's almost like they kind of try to key in on people; that you said they were interested in people, it's not specifically aimed at men.

Gignac: But in the 1960s I don't think women would be qualified to answer that.

Misa: Well some did.

Gignac: Not a lot, though.

Misa: Take a look at that one. That's from Lockheed in 1967.

Gignac: 1967.

Misa: Yes, I think these are all about 1967. I got these from *Datamation*, one of the trade journals that many people read.

Gignac: Well, again, in the 1960s, I don't think there were a lot of women qualified to answer this. It all has to do with computers and I don't think there were that many women qualified in computers at that time.

Misa: See across the top, there's that paper tape?

Gignac: Work at Mangold.

Misa: Yes. Not so much different from that first one, isn't it?

Gignac: Yes. Although this one does say "Advance Manned Missions."

Misa: Like space missions. It's 'manned' missions, right? I don't know how we would refer to that today. Third one, from RCA.

Gignac: Yes, with "you're our kind of man." Right there, it states, you know.

Misa: Here's one from TRW.

Gignac: They have a woman in the thing; programmer analyst. That would interest women, I think, just because of using a woman in the ad.

Misa: Sends a different message, doesn't it?

Gignac: Yes it does.

Misa: It says "TRW is Tom Vickers and Linda Howard analyzing a mission to Mars."

Gignac: Right.

Misa: So that actually seems pretty attractive to both men and women. It's an important job, and it's a way of saying that men can be doing this but women can be doing this as well. It's still 1967 — we haven't changed the date — but it's just that some of these ads seem to be more exclusive towards men [pause]

Gignac: Here it says “we need men and women.”

Misa: Men and women. That's right. So I think TRW was interested in hiring men and women, and it's not quite so clear that the other people are. And the fifth one there is Cornell Aeronautic Lab.

Gignac: Again, men are wanted. Men with a yen for exploring the computer sciences.

Misa: Yes, doesn't say anything about women, does it. Hard to know what to think but there's certainly some choices that some companies were making to be either more exclusively targeting men, or for some, being attractive seemingly intentionally to both men and women.

Gignac: I think back at that time if I had seen this, computer sciences only want men. That would be what I would think.

Misa: That last one, the Cornell Aeronautics Lab.

Gignac: Yes, that one does say “men.”

Misa: “Men with a yen,” that’s just like some advertising line.

Gignac: “You’re our kind of man” that does definitely say [pause]

Misa: And this was all 1967, so there were some companies, some organizations that were seemingly open and interested in hiring men and women. And I think that bears on the number of women, then, who were coming into the industry, coming into computing, coming into computer science as an undergraduate major. Those figures also start pretty low, 15 percent, but by the 1980s they grow to not quite 40 percent. That’s almost half, and so these kinds of ads, it’s hard to know how people took them and how serious anybody takes ads. But I think there’s some different choices that the advertisers are making and they probably had some consequences, so kind of interesting. This is really a striking one because it’s like ‘Interesting work men and women can be doing.’

Gignac: [Laughing.] Yes.

Misa: Any other questions I might’ve asked you, or that you might like to respond to today?

Gignac: Oh gosh, I can't think of any right now. Maybe when you read my book you might have some questions.

Misa: Sounds like you had a good career in the computer industry.

Gignac: I did.

Misa: You worked for the same company, Univac, for a very long time.

Gignac: Yes I did. I had a great career and the way that I advanced in jobs was done by hard work and getting along with people, I think. I'm proud of my time at Univac; it was good.

Misa: Yes, a company that had a lot of impact on the economy, and the state, and lots of people, lots of families. So it was really nice to have a chance to talk with you this morning.