

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Clarence Wood

Interviewer: Luke Alvey-Henderson

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[00:01]

L: Okay it is recording now, fortunately. I can see that now, so that's good.

C: Okay, good.

L: So today's date is September 5, 2012. I am talking to Clarence Wood. I am at the Moore Memorial Public Library, and we are doing a phone interview.

So where were you and what were you doing when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

C: I was at the *Texas City Sun* paper, folding some papers that were sent out to the oil companies once a week. That was on a Sunday afternoon. And I heard it on the radio.

L: And do you remember what your immediate reaction was to hearing that?

C: Yes, I remember saying, "Oh my goodness, we're in really deep trouble now," since they explained about the bombing over in Pearl Harbor, and all our ships being sunk, and all those airplanes being destroyed over there. I said, "My, they're going to invade us before long."

L: So that had to be something that was a new feeling, to actually feel apprehension that your very nation itself was in peril—

C: It was very much. Yes it was. I was really kind of scared, I guess you might say.

L: Yeah. So did you consider enlisting?

C: A lot of my friends enlisted, but since I was asthmatic—I had asthma all of my young life—I knew they wouldn't take me, so I didn't worry about being drafted or enlisting. I knew they wouldn't get me.

L: You mentioned that you had some friends who enlisted. Were you worried about them? Was that something that you thought about?

C: Yes, I remember them saying, "Oh, we got to go right now. That we've got to defeat those Japanese."

I said, "I wish I could go, but I can't. They won't take me."

L: Now, were you able to keep in contact with them and find out how they were doing throughout the conflict?

[2:02]

C: No, there was very little communications with the troops at that time, because they were afraid that the enemy would get ahold of the communications and know what to do, where the troops were.

L: So that not being able to know at all, if your friends were even alive or dead or not, was that something you thought about?

C: That's right.

L: So, were you working at this time? How old were you?

C: I was in high school. I was in the senior class, so I did not have a job per se outside a (unintelligible) job with the *Texas City Sun* paper. And my salary was fifteen cents an hour for folding these papers.

L: So you were in school, did your school do anything to help the war effort?

C: Everybody in the whole country decided to help out in any way that we could. So we saved rubber bands and paper from the newspapers and also wrappers from gum, from chewing gum.

L: So did you do any kind of junk drives where you go around looking for used tires and things like that?

C: Oh yes, I pulled my little wagon around and anybody that had a piece of junk of any kind, we'd pick it up and take it to certain places where they collected it.

L: So how about rationing, was that something that directly affected your family much?

C: It affected us much. Since my family was not wealthy or did not have much income coming in, we were kind of in a bad shape about getting food. The food was rationed and also the gasoline was rationed, so we could not go places just for fun. If you had to go somewhere, you'd save up until you had enough gasoline to do it and then that was it.

L: So what ways were you able to get around the rationing for food and make your food stretch further?

[4:31]

C: Well my family was pretty poor, so we grew chickens and we had a cow, we had milk. And we also had a little pond in the back yard where we grew bullfrogs, and we ate the bullfrog legs. And the places where you buy food like A&P grocery, they allowed us to charge food there, since we didn't have any money. My father was working for the city and instead of him getting money from the city, few taxes were being paid, they gave him a slip of paper saying, "We owe you so amount of money for working this month or months," whatever. And so, we'd take that to the grocery store and they'd say, "Okay, we'll let you charge until we get that money back for you." And sometimes I would go to the place where you cut up meat and beg for the bones off of the meat, and they would give them to me. And I'd put them in a sack. We'd take them home and make soup out of them.

L: Now did you have any way that you had to stretch clothes? If clothes got torn, did you have to mend them and things like that because of the shortages?

[6:00]

C: Well, we didn't worry too much about clothes, because we made them last for a long time.

L: Great. So another thing that was common around the time, especially in Texas City, was blackouts. Do you remember those well?

C: Oh yes, I remember them very well. All the people had to have dark shades (unintelligible) for their windows and have very few lights inside the windows. And on

the cars, they wouldn't allow them to turn on the headlights. Out in the Gulf of Mexico they might send bombs over from the Gulf. I do remember that during the war there were a lot of German submarines in the Gulf of Mexico, and every once in a while we'd find a body float up on the seashore from the Germans torpedoing the boats that went out from Houston and Galveston.

L: So you were very well aware of the literal danger with the blackouts. Did you ever worry that Texas City actually might get hit, as it was a target?

C: We were very worried, since they had the submarines in the Gulf of Mexico. We said, "Well, they're going to bring over other kinds of ships and shoot us." Because our city was built on oil refineries, and we knew, boy, they're going to get those oil refineries soon as they can. So we were very worried about it.

L: So how did you go about your day-to-day life having that kind of apprehension? How did you put it out of your head?

C: Since I was in high school, in the senior class, we just went to school, the ones that are still left there that didn't enlist. And we just did about our daily routine, but very well aware that anytime now we might be invaded.

L: So, with all that going on, what kind of things did you do for fun during that period? Was there places that you could go for recreation?

C: My fun was in my musical instruments. I played saxophone and I had my own little dance band for high school dances and we did also go play over there in Galveston a little bit.

[8:41]

L: Okay great, so that had to be tough with transportation, especially during—were you able to do that during the war years?

C: Well, very little. Mostly it was in town. Just every once in a while we'd get a job over in Galveston. I had a little 1931 Ford, no Chevrolet, pick-up truck that I'd carry my little group in.

L: Your brother mentioned that he went to movies quite a bit, because you were able to see them for free because of your father being—

C: (Laughs.) That's right. My father had two jobs, he was a fireman and a policeman for the city, and a lot of times they'd call him over to get some rowdy person out of the picture show. They'd allow us to go free.

L: So did you watch a lot of movies?

C: A lot. A very lot.

L: So do you remember watching the newsreels before the program?

C: Oh yeah. It was very exciting, because we got most of our news there from the theater.

L: So what was that like, watching images from so far away, but knowing that it was your nation that was in the jeopardy?

C: It was kind of scary. You were always looking over your shoulder to say, "Oh, what's going to happen next?" So we just didn't know what to do.

[10:17]

L: Do you remember if there were any specific movies or movie stars at the time that you specifically liked?

C: I liked the westerns that would come.

L: So were those—

C: Roy Rogers and those kind of movies.

L: Like the Tom Mix movies and—

C: Yeah, that was good.

L: Yeah. Well, how about the radio, was that something you did a lot at your house?

C: Yes. We used to listen to the radio quite a lot and I loved to listen to Glen Miller's big band playing. And his band went to Europe to play over there.

L: Were there any non-musical programs that you liked as well?

C: Yeah, I liked mysteries, murder mysteries, and oh, Zorro—and I can't think of some of the others now.

L: "The Shadow"?

C: "The Shadow knows," yeah. I liked that one very well.

L: So how about the presidential addresses, did your family listen to those on the radio?

C: Well, we listened to President Roosevelt. Every time he'd come up with a speech we'd listen to him.

L: So do you remember, was your family fans of Roosevelt when you listened to those Fireside Chats?

C: Oh yeah, we were for him very much, because he decided to go right to war as soon as they bombed us. That was real good of him.

L: So you mentioned looking over your shoulders. Did you know if there were any Italian or German families that had problems because of that? You know, any resentment?

C: Well, I remember one thing that we did, which was not too good. They rounded up all the Japanese in our area, and they put them in a, well I guess you might call it a concentration camp over in Alvin, Texas, not too far from Texas City.

L: Was that something that you were aware of at the time, or that you learned about later?

C: We learned it when it happened.

L: And how did you—

C: I did not like it very well.

L: Did any of the Italian or German families have any kind of similar problems?

[12:50]

C: Well I don't remember Germans or Italians being bothered with. No, I don't.

L: Because there was a German POW camp in Hitchcock, which is, of course, different. Were you aware of that? That they had—

C: No, I did not know about that one.

L: Yeah, most of the people we've talked to weren't aware of that, but there was at Camp Wallace. They had a German POW camp there, but it seems like most people weren't aware of it.

Can you think of a specific rationing that affected you personally more than others? That really, you know, got to you?

C: Well, I liked sugar a lot, and the sugar was rationed quite a bit, so I had to do without sugar for a lot of things.

L: That was a twenty-eight stamp sugar book.

C: Yeah.

L: Did you just use less sugar or did you come up with substitutes?

C: Well my mother was pretty good about fixing things so they'd taste pretty good without using sugar.

L: So when some of the major things happened like the Normandy invasion, did you watch film reels about it or see things like that on the radio?

C: Oh yes. We were very interested in everything that was happening on the war scenes, so any time we'd get any news about that we were all ears and wanted to listen to what was going on.

L: Was that stuff that you and your friends would talk about between classes and in school?

C: Well my family talked about it, because I had a cousin that was at Normandy Beach and he got killed.

L: So when Germany surrendered do you remember hearing about it and how you heard about it?

C: Well, let me tell you this. I was 4-F, as I said before, and they got real desperate for people and they called in the 4-Fs to be examined. So I went to Houston to be examined and that particular day I was completely clear of any asthma, so they did not believe that I was asthmatic so they said, "You're in. You've just been putting on an air."

But I wasn't, so I didn't even get to go home after being drafted. They put me on a train to Corpus Christi and I was in charge of five other guys. They said, "You make sure that those five other guys go with you," so I did.

[15:55]

L: And when was this?

C: That was at 1943.

L: Okay, so after you were drafted, you say you were, where did you do your training?

C: I never did have any asthma, while the whole time I was in the service. I was in the service three-and-a-half years and over to Hawaii for my duty.

L: So how was training, what was that like?

C: We had boot camp at Corpus Christi and the first thing I remember was they gave us a haircut. I had some nice hair, since I was a musician. And they asked me, "How would you like your hair?"

And I said, "Well, cut a little bit off the edges, but leave it good on top." And first thing I know, this haircutter went zoom (laughs) right over the top of my head and everything was gone. (Laughs.) And it was hot out there and I got sunburned around my head from losing my hair, marching out there in that hot sun. But we had our boot camp there in Corpus Christi, and then I was shipped to Norman, Oklahoma, to aviation ordnance school.

L: And so what was aviation ordnance training?

C: Took care of guns and ammunition, torpedoes, bombs, bomb racks, and gunsights on airplanes. And I was sent from there to Norman, Ok—to Oakland, California. And I spent about two or three weeks there and then I was shipped down to San Diego and over to Hawaii.

L: So that's what you did, is looked at ordnance and bombs and heavy guns—

C: Yeah, we loaded the ammunition on the airplane wings and bombs on the bottom of the airplanes and torpedoes on the bombs on the bottom of the airplanes, and also the gunsights on the front of the airplane where they could see how to shoot ahead of time, because on the airplanes you had to shoot ahead of what you're aiming at, so by the time the bullet got there it'd be in the same place as the enemy.

[18:35]

L: So loading bombs and ammunition, that sounds like dangerous work. How did you keep your concentration up?

C: Well you watch out what you're doing real careful, because one time in Hawaii some other guys were loading some torpedoes on a battleship and they accidentally dropped a torpedo and it exploded and killed about twenty or thirty of them.

L: Wow. Yeah, because I've always read about those kind of things happening, and they still happen today, so I've always wondered what it would be like, how someone could do a job like that. Did you just put the danger out of your mind or did you focus—

C: No it was always there, because the battleship Midway came back and it had been hit by those kamikaze bombers, that just dive right into the ship, and it was just burned up something terrible. So they had to rebuild it there in Hawaii.

L: So did you serve in Hawaii throughout the three years you were in service?

C: Yes I was there the whole time till the war was over.

L: So that had to be something that was in your mind, that you might be hit again at any moment?

C: Yeah, well, our outfit was so big, because what our outfit was supposed to do when the Marines would go over and take over an island, we'd go in there and set up an airstrip. And set up our bomb equipment stuff and the ammunition for the airplanes off of the aircraft carriers to land on those islands and refurbish their bombs and guns and ammunition and so forth and go on out and shoot again. It was so big a group that they left some of us behind to keep the supplies going to wherever they may be needed.

L: Yeah. So it was in May of 1945 that Germany surrendered. Do you remember how the word got down to you guys about that?

C: (Laughs.) We had a ball. We all got drunk. (Laughs.) We were working out of Barber's Point was the place we were stationed, a big supply place, and everybody got together and we just celebrated and drank beer.

[21:10]

L: Did you hear it from a fellow soldier or an officer or did they just announce it over a— how did you hear about it?

C: They announced it over the radio and we all just celebrated.

L: So that was probably a pretty big celebration. How about, it was only a few months later in August, of course, with VJ Day August 15th. Do you remember where you were when you heard about that?

C: Yeah I was, well I don't remember real good about that one. I did remember real good about the Germans surrendering. But on coming back from Hawaii, after the war was over, I came back on the battleship Missouri. I think that was the ship they surrendered on.

L: Wow.

C: I'm not positive. But I was on the second turret, underneath the second turret, with the carpenters of the battleship going back—it was really nice. Going over to Hawaii I was on a troop carrier ship and we had bunks. Not bunks, hammocks hung between poles up inside and they were about ten high and they'd get sick on top and it'd run down on you. (Laughs.) It was really terrible.

L: Yeah, that is not the way to travel.

C: Nope.

L: So when you returned back what was the first thing you did?

C: Well I landed in Mojave Desert. They kept me there for about two weeks before they let me go, but in the meantime, I was just free to do whatever I wanted to. I couldn't leave the base or anything, but I was there and watching what they were doing. They were experimenting with jet planes. At that time they had not had jet planes before that. But one time I remember standing somewhere talking to somebody and this airplane came at me and it went on by and first thing you know boom, the sonic boom happened. And I said, "Good night, that airplane got here before even the sound." So I said, "Boy, they're really getting fast on airplanes."

[23:35]

L: So after you were discharged completely did you go back to Texas City?

C: I went back to Alvin and got out there at the base. Then I went back home. Got my job back. I was working right after I graduated from high school. Worked for the railroad company as a supply depot.

L: And so how long did you stay in Texas City?

C: I stayed one more year and my friend who was in my high school dance band convinced me to go to North Texas to go to school, so I quit my job and went to school, because we had the GI Bill and the government was paying for my schooling, college schooling.

L: And that was University of North Texas in Denton?

C: Well at that time it was called North Texas State Teachers' College, but it's gone through several different names since then.

L: That's right, that's right, it was back then. So when you were done with college did you come back to Texas City or head out elsewhere?

C: Yes, my roommate at college and I decided to open a music store. And we opened a music store back in my hometown in Texas City.

L: Okay, what was that called?

C: Called the Music Staff.

L: What did you sell?

C: We sold all band instruments and supplies and records and hi-fi equipment and pianos and I had a teaching studio in there also. I had two or three teachers that'd come and teach different instruments.

L: That's great. Do you remember where it was located roughly?

C: It was locate—the first one was located on Texas Avenue. After a year it got better and we moved to 6th Street.

L: Okay, great. And how long did you have that music store?

[26:00]

C: I had it ten years.

L: Wow. And after that what did you decide to do?

C: Well my wife had sinus trouble real bad moving to Texas City, because of the humidity there being ninety percent above almost all the time. So she was having an operation every two or three months on her nose, so we decided just to move. So I sold out my music store, just sold everything out, and moved to Shreveport, Louisiana. And I took my musical instrument repair tools up there and went to work for Johnny Williams, Williams Music Company.

L: So have you had a chance to return to Texas City much in the interim? Do you come often or is it seldom?

C: My brother, Dan, was still living in League City, so we'd come back to see him quite often, but I don't miss being away from Texas City. I think those fumes from the oil refineries and the other refineries there affected my breathing.

L: Well, that's always possible. Like you said, you didn't have any asthma problems in the Army.

C: No.

L: Well, so that gets most of our questions out of the way. I'm just going to look over the list I have on the side here that I always keep to make sure I didn't miss anything I can jump in with real quick. Oh yes, of course, I forgot to ask that question. So, how did you deal with homesickness while you were away? What did you do to combat that when you were at war?

C: Surprisingly, I did not have any trouble being homesick. I was just doing my job.

L: And did you ever face any anti-war sentiment? I'd be surprised since you were in Honolulu, but—

C: No, never. Never ran into any of that. Now I do know that the guys from Vietnam had a lot of problems.

L: Well we ask that question, because we're talking to a lot of people and a lot of overseas there was problems here or there. But usually we're not finding many problems with—

C: I never did have any problems of that kind.

[28:40]

L: So if you were to say anything about how Texas City changed after the war, did you notice a change about it when you came back or did it seem pretty much the same?

C: Well you know Texas City had that monstrous explosion on the waterfront in 1947 and my father had his fire truck right beside the ship and they did not find him or his fire truck at all.

L: Oh, I'm so sorry—

C: He was just disintegrated. So we went back for the fiftieth anniversary for that big celebration they had there or anniversary you might call it, and the building of that memorial way off to the north side of town. Since then I haven't been back much, no.

L: Yeah. I can certainly understand. It was absolutely a horrific tragedy. Well, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything about Texas City or about that period that you'd like to add that I didn't get to?

C: Well, I'd like to say that all the people in Texas City were about the best you could find anywhere.

L: Alright, and thank you so much for your time and I will send in the mail your agreement form for this—

C: Okay.

L: And unless there's anything else you want to add that concludes our interview.

C: Alrighty.

L: Thank you so much.

[30:13]