No Longer Forgotten

A History of the Korean War

Falls History Project
2007

THE FALLS HISTORY PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

How do we actively engage students in the study of history? This is the ongoing challenge that history teachers must face at the secondary level. Historian David Blight of Amherst College suggests that "all historical experience . . . must be imagined before it can be understood." One way to engage students and their imaginations more fully is to connect them to the actual process of "doing" history and relate that process to an increased understanding of their local environment. Indeed, the story of Black River Falls and the surrounding area provides a rich and diverse landscape for historical research.

OVERVIEW

As a symbolic beginning for this project in 2000, we established a permanent display at BRFHS related to Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr., a graduate who received the Medal of Honor for heroism in the Korean War. His life story offers a compelling example of the power of memory in our community. The Falls History Project research was initiated during the 2001-02 school year with the intention of connecting our students more authentically to the history of our region. From the start our hope has been that the project would involve a number of teachers and students. We introduce our students to the project through various classes within our department and much of the work involves the gathering of oral history.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY WORK

Students who are enrolled in any of our history courses will have the opportunity to become involved in oral history work. The focus of the interviews will depend on the particular aspect of local history that we are dealing with at the time. Our first efforts will be aimed at compiling research related to veterans of the Second World War and the Korean Conflict. We will be working with students on skills related to interviewing, including videotaping and transcribing.

RESEARCHING LOCAL DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Students will be introduced to the sources of history available at the "History Room" of the BRF Public Library, particularly the microfilm archives of local newspapers. In addition, students with a special interest in HoChunk history will be introduced to the archives of the Historic Preservation and Cultural Resources of the HoChunk Nation located at the Executive Building of the tribe.

INDEPENDENT STUDY OFFERING FOR SENIORS

Since 2001-02 we have had several interns who work exclusively on the project during their senior year. Interns are advanced history students who design a project related to local history and carry it out under the guidance of the FHP advisor.

INTERNSHIPS/VOLUNTEER WORK

We have spoken with Mary Lent and Mary Woods at the Public Library concerning the possibility of summer internships or volunteer work for students at the History Room. We envision this as a possibility for students who may be contemplating studying history beyond high school and have a special interest in learning more about the actual work of historians. We

will also be exploring the possibility of working with the Jackson County Historical Society as we proceed with the project.

DEVELOPING A PERMANENT ARCHIVE AT BRFHS

Beginning in 2002-03, we established a permanent archive at BRFHS related to the Falls History Project. It is located in the LMC and houses the various research that is compiled through the project.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Falls History Project offers great potential for furthering history education in our school. We believe that it provides an excellent opportunity for developing connections between the community and the school related to local history.

Paul S Rykken/ Falls History Project Advisor

FALLS HISTORY PROJECT 2006

IN OUR 2007 PROJECT WE ARE TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THE KOREAN CONFLICT AND HOW IT IMPACTED PEOPLE LOCALLY. THROUGH THE EYES OF FOUR VETERANS, BOTH STATESIDE AND ABROAD, WE WERE ABLE TO GAIN A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONFLICT. ALONG WITH THIS WORK, WE ALSO RESEARCHED THE LIFE OF ARNOLD OLSON; A BLACK RIVER FALLS MAN WHO DIED AS A PRISONER-OF-WAR.

Katie Norton was our 2006-07 intern. Katie established herself as an outstanding social studies student throughout her four years at BRFHS. She completed AP US History in her senior year and was involved in many of our electives since her sophomore year as well as the Student Senate. She will be attending UW-La Crosse in the fall of 2007.

THIS YEAR'S INTERVIEWEES

DR. JOHN NOBLE: INTERVIEWED NOVEMBER 1, 2006
MS. MARY VAN GORDEN: INTERVIEWED NOVEMBER 13, 2006
MS. MYRLE THOMPSON: INTERVIEWED NOVEMBER 27, 2006
MR. RICHARD PIETTE: INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 6, 2006

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO
OUR PROJECT!

Background Information: The Korean Conflict

The Korean War broke out in 1950 when North Korea decided to invade South Korea. The United States quickly became involved to prevent the communist north from gaining the southern support. As it came between World War II and the Vietnam War, it is often called the "Forgotten War" because it was overshadowed. A total of 33,651 people died in combat overseas or as prisoners of war. This is an alarming total as the war lasted a total of three years. In 1953, an armistice was signed to end the war, resulting in an unclear debate as the United States technically did not win the war.

Intern's Notes

When first asked to do this project about the Korean War, I admit, I was hesitant. It was something that I really knew nothing about. I told a person I was considering this project, and they said, "There was no war in Korea. Are you sure?" After that conversation, I decided that I had to do this project to increase people's awareness of so that the Korean War would no longer be known as the "Forgotten War" and that the people who died over there would not be forgotten either. This project is dedicated to those men and women, such as Arnold Olson and Mitchell RedCloud, Jr. who died for this cause. Thank you to all of the interviewees this year for sharing their amazing stories: Dr. John Noble, Mary Van Gorden, Myrle Thompson, and Richard Piette. This project has been a learning experience as I gained insight to an era that I had nearly no knowledge of. Also, I would like to thank Mr. Paul Rykken for guiding me through this project and Mary Woods at the library for helping me look through records down in the history room.

2007 Falls History Project: Dr. John Noble

Interviewers: Katie Norton, Paul Rykken

November 1, 2006

"I don't think people paid too attention to Korea. Matter of fact... I don't even think they knew there was anything going on in Korea, when I came back."

-Dr. John Noble

Norton: Can you please say your name and where you were born?

Noble: John Noble. John H. Noble and I was born in Shanghai, China.

Norton: Really?

Noble: Yep, on Christmas day too to make it worse.

Norton: How did you end up in China?

Noble: My father was a structural engineer working in China at the time.

Norton: And when did you move to Black River Falls?

Noble: At the age of, well what would that be, 1927 I believe I came back to Black River.
Norton: Okay and how old were you?

Noble: Three or four probably

Norton: So you don't remember anything from China then.

Noble: I don't remember anything from China. My older brother did, but I don't.

Norton: What was it like to grow up in Black River in the 1930s?

Noble: Well that was the depression years. It was pretty quiet. Didn't get around much in Black River at the time.

Norton: What was Black River exactly like? How does the town compare to say how it is now as far as like downtown? How was downtown?

Noble: It was probably busier then that it is now. Things were limited to Black River. I don't recall getting out of town until I was in High School in the band went to La Crosse or Eau Claire.

Norton: Describe Black River Falls when you were in high school? What was the high school like?

Noble: The high school was… in '37 or '38 they added on to the original high school which is the- what is that?

Rykken: Third Street?

Noble: This would be the Third Street School and otherwise, well the first six grades were in the old union building and then the junior high was where the administration building is now. And of course the high school, at the onset, just had a little gymnasium in the basement. They didn't build the bigger gymnasium until '37 '38 I believe. And that was the end of building. Of course they've added on quite a bit to the Third Street School since then.

Rykken: Did you say the year you were born or did I miss that? Did you say the year of your birth?

Noble: 1923.

Rykken: Alright.

Norton: When you were in high school, what did you think your career was going to be?

Noble: Well I had always planned on medicine.

Norton: What influenced you to first join the military?

Noble: What?

Norton: What influenced you to first join the military?

Noble: Well, I was in pre-med at the time in Springfield, Illinois and in order to stay in school during that year, that was 1942, November I had to enter the enlisted reserve corps. and was called to active duty in 1943 in June but that was World War Two.

Norton: What was your role in World War Two? Where were you stationed and what did you do?

Noble: Well in World War Two, I took basic training in Kansas, Fort Riley Kansas and then I entered medical school while I was in service and spent a couple of years there and was

separated out. At that time you were required twelve months of what they called “Gooden Time” and that was time not in the school and I had eleven months and twenty-one days which is nine or ten days shy. I ended up under the doctor’s draft in the Korean War which was later on of course in 1950 when it started. I was in World War Two and then the Korean War also.

Rykken: Can I just explore that a little bit. Were you overseas in World War Two?

Noble: No.

Rykken: Not at all? That was just med-school?

Noble: I spent just shy of a year in basic training and then stationed at Camp Grant and was in Kansas for a while and then the rest of the time was medical school until I was discharged.

Norton: Did you know Mitchell Red Cloud at all?

Noble: Pardon?

Norton: Mitchell Red Cloud?

Noble: Oh, yes. Mitchell Red Cloud. When we were young and in the Boy Scouts we went out and camped at his place. His father place up on, it’s on the Black River up towards Hatfield and we spent something like a week out there and he was with us. He was, I suppose, three or four years younger than I am at the time. I’m not sure exactly how young, but I knew he was a younger person at that point.

Norton: What can you tell me about him as a person? About his nature? How he was in certain situations?

Noble: How Mitchell was?

Norton: Yeah.

Noble: Well he was very young at the time when I knew him and I knew of him of course later but not at the time.

Norton: About Arnold Olson, what can you tell me about him?

Noble: He was a friend of mine and a couple of years behind me in high school. Well I saw him off and on when I was back in Black River doing school and so on but I ended up being one of the pallbearers when he was brought back from Korea.

Rykken: Can you tell us, as long as we’re on the Arnold Olson part, I want to throw a couple of questions in on that. Did you know Chris Olson? His father?

Noble: His father? More or less. He just ran the restaurant.

Rykken: Sure and were you with Arnold at all in Korea?

Noble: No.

Rykken: Not at all?

Noble: No.

Rykken: Okay.

Noble: I was there just the last six months of hostility and he killed much earlier than that.

Rykken: Okay and he had been taken prisoner of war, is that correct?

Noble: Been taken?

Rykken: Prisoner of war.

Noble: Yes, that's correct.

Rykken: And how did they learn, I looked in the newspaper and they have some details of his death, and I was just wondering how they knew that.

Noble: I imagine it was sent back down. They reported through. I understand, that the Koreans at that time, they called it a death march of course and he was on that type of thing, but that was they way they moved the troops in Korea they moved the troops down one line and back up the other way and of course the water they were drinking in all the rice paddies and all that and the Koreans could take it because they had been weaned on that type of existence but the Americans some couldn't and I understand that is what happened to Arnie that he got dysentery or something and died from it.

Rykken: Part of what I remember from the account was that the thinking was that he had starved.

Noble: Well I just think it was that he had dehydrated down from the dysentery which was of course quite common conditions. It was a regrettable thing.

Rykken: Well obviously you were here when his body was brought back.

Noble: Well that was much later.

Rykken: Much later.

Noble: That was after I had been on my tour of duty in Korea and I was there the last six months of hostilities and then for about a year afterward so that was quite a while later then I believe.

Rykken: Do you remember much about him in terms of what kind of person he was?

Noble: Oh he was likeable person, Arnie was. I forgot what he was studying in school.

Rykken: I went back in the Annual and looked here and you know you always get little clues of what a person was doing at that time and from all appearances he was a real bright person, quite bright.

Noble: I forgot what his major was in college, it was something to do with chemistry or biology or something of that type as I recall.

Rykken: Was he drafted into the service?

Noble: Was he?

Rykken: Yeah.

Noble: I assume so but I don't know. His sister was a year ahead of me in high school. Kathleen Olson.

Rykken: Is she still living? No.

Noble: No. She passed away a few years ago.

Rykken: Okay.

Norton: What was the reaction of the people in Black River Falls when they found out about Arnold being in a war prison?

Noble: Well I don't recall. I don't know exactly when Arnold was killed. It wouldn't have been as late as when I was there. It had to be before but I can't recall the reaction. See I wasn't in Black River too much at that point in time. I was gone, I didn't come back to Black River until the end of '51 or just before I went in the service.

Norton: What was your opinion of the Korean Conflict?

Noble: Well, I don't know. It seemed to me that they could've straitened it around some other way instead of war but as they say, it was a bloody war. They had approximately 36,000 killed in a three-year period. That's about 1,000 a month. It's much worse than the rate that's going in Iraq at present time.

Norton: Did you think the United States was justified to go to war in Korea? Do you think the United States had a real good reason to be there?

Noble: They were occupying the South Korea so I suppose they had to defend their men that were there. It's hard to say. I'm not particularly pro-war for any situation.

Norton: Okay, what about Harry Truman? What was your opinion of him as a president?

Noble: Harry was pretty good, I thought. Part of that thing, part of the whole Korean conflict was mixed up with when MacArthur wanted to march right on into China at the time and of course Truman was blocking that and they had the, and the China warned them that if they approached that Yalu River or that border there was, that was the point where they came under the war.

This map shows the Yalu River Border between Korea and China that MacArthur was advancing on.

Norton: Okay, What about Douglas MacArthur then? What was your opinion of him?

Noble: Well he was the one that pushed it too far at that point in time and involved the Chinese. He wanted to, I believe the rumor was that he wanted to go out and conquer China too which would have been kind of an endless job.

Rykken: I want to pick up a little bit on the MacArthur and I don't know if you had more in that direction, but do you remember how the men in Korean felt about MacArthur?

Noble: Well MacArthur of course was gone as I recall, Ridgeway was there when I first arrived in Korea and then he was replaced with Maxwell Taylor and of course Ridgeway had been under MacArthur I believe for a little bit before that point in time but I didn't hear much of anything to say or do with…

Rykken: The reason I ask is then, in doing veteran interviews people often have kind of a really think he was almost heroic or think he was just kind of an idiot. There doesn't seem to be a lot of middle ground on him.

Noble: No, I think I'd go with the latter myself [laughing].

Noble: But he was probably a good military man but I think that he messed that up in Korea on trying to go too far.

Norton: Have your attitudes changed as you look back on this even fifty years later?

Noble: Is my?

Norton: What's your opinion of the whole Korean issue? What are your attitudes on it now just fifty year after it?

Noble: Well it's pretty much the same. I don't know if they accomplished too much being there. They're still Korea quite a bit you know of course they're still in Germany from World War Two I couldn't find the troop strength that they have there now, I think it's 25-30 thousand.

Rykken: I think it's 25,000.

Noble: About 25,000 people. That's quite a few troops to be sitting over there.

Rykken: Could you show us, there's a map right off to your, could you just show us where you were?

Noble: I was stationed in Seoul practically all the time. When we first arrived we went to what they had the medical field service school for about six weeks and we did go up, at the time, at the medical field service school they took stuff to a division on the line. I've forgotten which division it was, things of that type but then most of the time I was right at Seoul at Eighth Army Headquarters.

Rykken: Did you get much chance to travel around at all?

Noble: We, after the cessation of hostilities we did go up on line to Pan Mu Jung for just a trip but I spent almost all the time in the Seoul area we landed at Incheon, took the train over but I never did get down in the south part.

Rykken: Okay, because of our culture and everything, we had the popular TV show during the seventies was M.A.S.H., I'm sure you remember it, and now it's running for eternity, were you in a M.A.S.H. unit?

Noble: No.

Rykken: No, that's an entirely different thing?

Noble: That was a different thing. I was in a dispensary at Eighth Army Headquarters and there were two of us there most of the time, but we served 20,000 troops out of the primary care and

it was a little bit of a different set-up then the M.A.S.H.'s and the others were. Incidentally it was interesting at that point in time, you know M.A.S.H. had pot and that all that type of thing, there were no drugs going around at the time when I was there. Alcohol of course.

Rykken: That was played up a little bit you think in the show.

Noble: Well I'm sure it was. It may have been that way later on I don't know but there was no drugs, as a matter of fact it was kind of interesting, because Joe McCarthy you know he was saying that the communists are poisoning our boys, and they're sending all these drugs down, and all that type of thing, well they came through and found one addict and he was somebody from New York and he, some way or another, maintained this habit, he was on heroin and was getting supplied some place there in Korea and they nailed the poor fellow there downtown or someplace that was selling it to him and then I carried him over on some morphine and he was informing of the others and then he was sent off to a place and they detoxed him and he came back and I saw him later and he straightened out along. He was real fine. But that was the only case of the drug addiction that they found on the entire peninsula at that point in time. I think that actually that Joe was talking about all that dope and stuff, people thought it was a good idea and started doing it and drug addiction became a much bigger problem after I left the area.

Rykken: Did you ever see Harry Truman in person?

Noble: Harry Truman, no.

Rykken: What about McCarthy?

Noble: No, not McCarthy.

Rykken: Okay, and you brought McCarthy up and I want to get your opinion there too what did you think of his role during this period?

Noble: Well, I didn't ever approve of any of the stuff that he was doing because he was in charge in World War Two. As a matter of fact, Mitchell Red Cloud, my mother asked Mitchell Red Cloud Jr. the one, the Medal of Honor winner, what he thought of McCarthy and he said, "not much." He was with Carlson's Raiders you know in World War Two and then he was in Korea later when he was killed.

Rykken: Now that statement from you mother, did you get that from her years later. Noble: Oh way back, years ago.

Rykken: Okay, did she know Mitchell or did she just occasionally talk to him?

Noble: Oh yes, Mitchell Sr., the father, he was at the Banner Journal, Mitchell Jr. was there when she was talking with him. Mitchell Sr. used to write "Smoke Signals."

Rykken: "Teepee Talk" or something.

Noble: It had something to do with the resettlement of the administration during the Thirties. Since she knew him well.

Rykken: Did you ever meet him?

Noble: Oh yes, when we were up on that camping trip he came down, we got a fire going and he give us stories about different things. He was an interesting person.

Rykken: He's been brought up in other history projects that we've done and he must have been and engaging character.

Noble: He was a very intelligent man. Well you know Charlie Low Cloud had his stuff and he was kind of simple, stories of his, but Mitchell Red Cloud, good newspaper articles. You can find them in the archives.

Rykken: Did you know Charlie Low Cloud?

Noble: Oh yes.

Rykken: What kind of a fellow was he?

Noble: Well, he used to come into the office where my mother was and take a little pencil and jot down his Indian news and give it to her each week.

Rykken: Interesting.

Noble: But he was around through the '30s of course and then well the end of the '40s. I was gone most of the years from 1941 until '50-'51 from Black River.

Norton: Back on the topic of Korea now, how much did you know about the conflict when you went to Korea, like as you were heading there, how much did you actually know about the conflict, not so much stuff that you found out after it was all over?

Noble: Well...

Norton: How much did the news really tell you?

Noble: Well I was there just the last six months or so. It's kind of interesting; they give you a battle star every six months and so I got one battle star because I was there the first three months, or the majority of it and the second for the last three months and then of course that was done because it was the end of the war but the thing was simmering down quite a bit although they were still killing off quite a few even at that point in time when I was at the 121 Evac. Hospital temporarily on that Medical Field Service School. They had a flap as they called it; the army likes flaps but it was on Pork Chop, on one of those hills and they had us, the ones that were in Field School go into the hospital and just empty the hospital and either send us back to duty or send us south on the train or evac. them to Japan and that hospital helped 200 people and the helicopter just kept coming in and filled that thing up in just a day or so, day or two. It was a waste actually of course that was within six months of the end of the thing. There was still, I don't know how many killed off. They always said that if you get in the hands of the medic about 2% die but there must have been a lot wounded to have a thousand a month killed. It was a bloody war.

Rykken: Were you dealing with a lot of that? A lot of the injured?

Noble: No I didn't deal many with that I was working in the hospital but they just had us go through that one time and work for a while. I did do a little work in the hospital with exchange of the sick and wounded. There was one person from Black River; he was a prisoner of war but I didn't happen to see him. There were eight of us that checked a bunch coming through and I've forgotten how many hundred there were all together, some were foreign, but it was too bad I

didn't see him that would have been a more interesting. I don't recall his name right now. I think it was a Peterson if I remember.

Norton: How do you think the news portrayed the Korean conflict itself? How did you look at it?

Noble: I'm sorry I didn't hear.

Norton: How did the news portray Korea as a war itself? Did they sensationalize anything?

Noble: Not too much. They censored a lot at the time. I recall one, while we were there, one Chicago Tribune reporter sent some article back and they hadn't cleared it through the military and just threw him off; took him off the peninsula. It wasn't like the Vietnam War where the so-called "looking glass war" when they could have television and everything else over there and getting up to date. It was censored down very closely.

Norton: What was the average day like in Korea? Working there?

Noble: Well, I was working dispensary. We had a heavy schedule. The dispensary, it ran seven days a week. The only reason you knew it was Sunday was they put Chloroquine tablets out to prevent malaria. When you saw that dish on the table in the mess hall that was always Sunday. We just spent eight hours down at the dispensary and there were a hundred a day that went through the dispensary where we were there were two of us there; two positions. It was a heavy schedule but that's a little different. It's not like being in a M.A.S.H. where they sit around and wait and all of a sudden a bunch of wounded come through or something. Did I say we covered, well 20,000 troops is a quite a bit.

Rykken: What were you doing? What did you actually do?

Noble: Well whenever they came in with sickness, quite a bit of VD about 20 a day. It was pretty standard. But pneumonia, whatever. If it was something that they needed x-rayed we sent them to the 121 Evac. Hospital. was only about ten miles off at Yongdongpo.

Rykken: Were you seeing young men that were traumatized, I don't know if traumatized is the right word, but were they struggling with their role over there?

Noble: Not too much I don't know how they ran; I have a lot of respect for the way the military ran things. If they had to (inaudible) down line, if they had too many stressed out they'd move the unit out and move another one in and rotate. And some of them would stay for several months and others would just be there a few weeks because they did follow the pattern quite a bit. At the headquarters area where I was at it wasn't too much of a problem.

Rykken: The reason I bring that up is that a lot of attention today as been given to post-traumatic stress syndrome and I'm think that veterans, anytime in history have dealt with that.

Noble: Oh it's been around all the time.

Rykken: Yeah, we don't hear about much with World War Two and Korea.

Noble: No.

Rykken: Why do you think that is?

Noble: I don't know, well it was "shell shock" of course back in World War One and then Korea, I don't know when they started post-traumatic stress, it's just been around all the time. Some pathologist they have up there, I was visiting with, he said that outside of combat deaths the sudden deaths of people, 1/3 suicide, 1/3 homicide, and 1/3 alcohol deaths, now alcohol deaths might be drinking bad alcohol because the Koreans would cut it with alcohol or the other one is that they drink so much and get sick and vomit in our sleeping bags and well…

Rykken: Choke.

Noble: Choke to death. There were quite a few of that type of thing going on. I don't know whether you consider that stress related or not, I suppose it is; the suicide would be of course. Homicide maybe they had a reason, I don't know but it was an interesting place.

Norton: What was it like to come home after leaving Korea? Did you have problems adjusting to a so-called "regular" life?

Noble: Not too much. We had a heavy schedule when I was working in Black River, the schedule still stayed heavy but at that point there was only four doctors in Black River. Norton: Oh really?

Noble: When I came back, yes.

Rykken: Now, had Dr. Krohn been in Korea also? Gene?

Noble: Gene Krohn was in Korea later yes.

Rykken: So that was after the war?

Noble: Yes, quite a ways after

Rykken: Quite a bit after. He would be, I think he graduated from high school in '52 so he would have been…

Noble: See, the war was done then.

Rykken: Why would he have been going to Korea after that?

Noble: Just like the 20-30 thousand that are there now they have medical facilities and it seems to me that's kind of a waste of personnel to have that many people tied up through the year. It's a military problem, not mine.

Norton: How does your job compare, like your job in Korea compared to job back in Black River what was different about those two things?

Noble: Well quite similar actually. It's kind of general practice of medicine. Mostly, we had some trauma but not a lot. Most of that, if somebody was injured too much we sent them back to the hospital kind of like they do here now. But we had a couple of ambulances that would send them out to the evacuation hospital near Seoul.

Rykken: But it must have been terrific training for you as a young man going to be a doctor or a doctor already to go there and just deal with everything. You must have dealt with a lot of patients, for general practice anyways.

Noble: Well of course that's what we were doing here in Black River or it had been before Black River, we'd just deal with anything that came in.

Norton: What do you think could be done to help people remember the Korean War as most people really don't know a whole lot about it?

Noble: I don't know, of course it's always been called the "Forgotten War" but it followed World War Two, you know of course, was so much of bigger a thing and so many more killed and so on; quite a change. I don't think people paid too attention to Korea. Matter of fact, coming back here, I don't even think they knew there was anything going on in Korea, when I came back.

Rykken: Do you think that was partly due to a perception that we, that I remember, even as a kid learning my first history on this in maybe the '60's, the perception that it wasn't a clear victory?

Noble: That's part of it of course. World War Two was unconditional surrender and Korea was, actually the point in time they were talking about the Russians and the Chinese were actually trying to shut that thing down of course they were wasting a lot of time, money and everything on war effort and they pushed the thing to a conclusion on the treaty they didn't sign at all. It was quite a bit different, there was no clear cut victory and of course Vietnam was the same way, probably even worse so I don't know what will happen with the current war. I suppose more of the same.

Rykken: Wasn't, from what I understand, there wasn't the controversy surrounding Korea in terms of the public perception.

Noble: There wasn't as much at all.

Rykken: It just kind of ended and that was it.

Noble: There was not nearly the problem as with the Vietnam War. I don't know why they went into Vietnam in the first place. It was kind of silly. I thought they were after the oil in the Bay of Tonkin or something but that wasn't the problem. Whether they were supporting the French. There was a statement one time that they had to pay the French was it twelve or fifteen-hundred dollars every time they injured one of their rubber trees or something; crazy.

Rykken: You know that's a question that I wanted to ask you too. Coming out of, having been in Korea, still being a pretty young man and seeing the Vietnam War develop, was there a lot of division in Black River about the Vietnam War?

Noble: I think quite a bit.

Rykken: Yeah, do you think veterans such as yourself or World War Two veterans were skeptical of it?

Noble: Oh yes, I was down at the demonstration at the canon years back.

Rykken: In town here?

Noble: Yeah, it was in Black River

Rykken: Who got that going?

Noble: I don't know who all was there. I think Charlie Campbell. He was really anti-war from his experience in Vietnam of course he was watching torn up bodies and he was giving anesthesia of course and what's her name, Joan Hoffman was there I remember and I think Gene Krohn was there too.

Rykken: Were there debates among people in town?

Noble: I bet there was. I remember when Roundhouse Thompson showed up, that was Governor Thompson at that time, not the one…

Rykken: Not Tommy.

Noble: He came down. I can't remember what Roundhouse's first name was.

Rykken: Yeah. Vernon?

Noble: Vernon, that's right. You have the history.

Rykken: Well some of it. That's interesting. I've heard about that but I hadn't heard it was by the canon.

Noble: It was by the canon downtown. Somebody had a little anti-war demonstration across the street over by the hotel that used to be there at that time I think that was before the bank was put in. But I don't know of course that was falling up pretty bad if you can call that an anti-war effort.

Rykken: Definitely did you have, to help us out here, children? I don't recall your sons. Sons or daughters?

Noble: I have two sons and a daughter.

Rykken: Okay and were they, were your sons of military age at the time of Vietnam?

Noble: I think my Jim was, well they both were. Neither one served.

Rykken: But they were facing the issue of the draft possibly?

Noble: I don't know I think they had a high enough number. Nixon diffused that whole situation when they put the draft in because they only took up to, what was it; number 151 or something like that so the others up to 365 couldn't care less I guess or whatever. Before that there was big squawking about that because they were drafting everyone and I don't know when that went into effect but you probably have that in your history too.

Rykken: Yeah that would have been, I think the draft was in affect almost immediately I don't think it ever stopped with the Korean period but it of course it became a much issue after…

Noble: But I think the number system wasn't going at first I believe that they had a kind of lottery set up where they blew the numbers out for January 1 would be number 30 or whatever. But that did cut down a lot of the pressure in the protest and the people of course. Over half had kind of [inaudible].

Rykken: Katie, why don't you keep going with whatever you got left and we'll…

Norton: Do you talk about your war experiences often or is it something you tend to keep more to yourself?

Noble: What?

Norton: Do you talk about your war experiences often?

Noble: Not very often

Norton: So you just keep it to yourself?

Noble: I don't keep it to myself either it kind of reminds me of my brother he says that everybody says they don't like to talk about it and he says his impression was it's all that anybody ever talked about [laughing]. I talk about it occasionally but I'm not trying to hold it all in to myself.

Norton: Are you still in contact with other veterans from that time period?

Noble: No, not too much, I tried to contact Jack Kevorkian but couldn't. That picture I have of Jack is with me.

In this photo, Noble (left) is pictured with the controversial Jack Kevorkian (far right). He served in Korea before becoming infamous for his opinions on death and euthanasia.

Rykken: Why don't you explain that because it's pretty interesting, Katie wouldn't understand that I don't think.

Noble: Jack Kevorkian was a very intelligent man you know; he came in to replace our medical intelligence officer. The medical intelligence officer that had been there before was Tom Chin, a Chinese fellow, a Chinese-American who spoke Chinese Mandarin but Jack Kevorkian, the wanted one with medical knowledge that could communicate with the prisoners-of-war and that type of thing so Kevorkian spoke Japanese quite well and he trained himself and I was with him one time when we went over to the Medical Service Club or something and he got into a craps game and it was just uncanny; he just couldn't lose and he came out of that game with about $3,000 stuffed in his pockets and that was a lot of money in '53 and spent some of the money and bought a dissecting microscope from over in Japan, a beautiful instrument. [inaudible] I don't know what he was doing with it, it was a binocular type it had depth. He was there and actually he took over the dispensary when I left they were facing down and cutting some of the troop strength some at that point in time. He went over and took over and was working in the dispensary where I had been. Not while I was with him but I lived right with him in the same building.

Rykken: And the reason that this is quite famous is that Kevorkian went on to become very controversial with euthanasia.

Norton: Oh, okay.

Rykken: Mercy killing.

Noble: So-called "Doctor Death", you've probably heard of him. There have been jokes about Kevorkian, I'll give you a ticket to see him and something.

Rykken: I think he was in Michigan.

Noble: Yes, he came back, he hadn't completed his residency but he went into pathology he never married. He was an artist also. You can go in online and just put his name in and it'll bring up some of his artwork. A lot of morbid stuff.

Rykken: Was there anything unusual about him?

Noble: No. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink. I was smoking at the time; I used to get his ticket. They rationed cigarettes; two cartons a week one week and one carton the next week and so I could get his two carton week and then I'd have a lot of cigarettes. The reason they rationed them is that they didn't want you selling them because they'd bring a pretty good price in the black market but he was a likeable person.

Rykken: It's a very interesting connection.

Noble: He was a pretty sharp fellow, well Ann Arbor, that's where he took his training too, residency. You know that thing on Maxwell Taylor was there. I went over and saw him a couple of times. He was the one that took over after Ridgeway. I just went over to see him one time to give him his immunization and he'd been in Anzio or a couple of those places and dropping them in, parachuting them in and pulled his arm and I was giving him immunization shots. His arm's all scarred up from it now.

Rykken: He went on to serve in Vietnam. He was big in the Kennedy Administration.

Noble: Yeah, he went up higher. He got to be a Chief of Joint.

Rykken: Right, Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs.

Noble: And a bunch of others, but I saw him on a couple occasions another time he got something in his eye or something. Little drops or another little cinder or whatever it was out of his eye.

Rykken: Did you have any other brushes with fame when you in Korea?

Noble: I went to Ambassador Briggs place on time. Somebody up in headquarters there would round you up and send you down. Ambassador Briggs [inaudible] what I saw down there just somebody with some illness or another and then they took back up to the villages where we were. Send me in a big limo and I got up there coming in real style and there wasn't a soul there to see me when I arrived. I was disappointed [laughing].

Norton: So we talked about World War Two, Korea, and then we brushed on Vietnam a little bit, so what's your general opinion of the Iraqi conflict?

Noble: What?

Norton: The conflict in Iraq. We talked about previous wars what do you think of the current war going on right now?

Norton: Well of course I think that was a mistake all the way. But the biggest I believe but that's just paper stuff, but was disbanding their troops over there when they went in, that was foolish to do that. The military, as I said, I have a lot of respect for the military. They're well organized and it's a hard problem to move people in and out and running things and when they went in on this conflict, and disbanded the whole troops, then they had nothing. There was no to fall back on after. But the military runs it that way they keep their regular army acts as just the frame work and then they can expand on the citizen's army or what ever.

Rykken: So there were hundreds of thousands of young Iraqi men suddenly unemployed.

Noble: They were unemployed and they were bitter and they're probably as far as insurgents. I don't know of course.

Rykken: It was an amazing, an amazing moment in that war, that's for sure.

Noble: But I don't know what the outcome will be, whether it'll be like Vietnam or what. Vietnam went on and they of course they just kept fighting. They had been fighting for hundreds of years beforehand.

Rykken: Have you been active; are you active in veteran's organizations?

Noble: No.

Rykken: Is that just by choice?

Noble: No, I am a member in the VFW and the American Legion but I don't do anything with them.

Norton: Do you encourage young people to join the military?

Noble: Well, it's not a bad experience and you can learn a lot. I had a nephew that actually dropped out in high school and he went on and got a degree, a college degree and taught school after he was done with his military. Taught school for fifteen, seventeen years before he retired and it offers, there's a lot of potential, you can do quite a bit. Well I don't know, [John] Kerry just got in trouble saying something about the ones that are in the military. In a sense he may be not too wrong. Our dispensary had twenty enlisted men working there and Maxwell Taylor when he was there, stated that people want to have at least an eighth grade education and twelve of the twenty who there had not had an eight grade, not a high school, an eighth grade education. That of course was fifty years ago or better but I don't know whether it's improved much; probably.

Rykken: Do you recall being in high school with Mitchell Red Cloud?

Noble: No, not in high school. I think he was three or four years behind me at least.

Rykken: The reason I bring that up is he attended Black River High School and when we first started this history project back in 2000, we researched him to find out if he had graduated. We thought that would be interesting if he was an alumni and what we found is that he was granted a diploma by the school board later.

Noble: I see.

Rykken: And I think that was common with veterans.

Noble: They did that with quite a few I believe. I don't know. What year did he graduate? Do you know?

Rykken: Well he was in, he attended Black River in 1941.

Noble: '41?

Rykken: '41. You know, like '40, '41, '42, right in that range, but then he didn't finish school. He left at sixteen.

Noble: Well he went into the service I imagine somewhere because he was in World War Two in the South Pacific.

Rykken: Right so then later he must have received training in the military and then the school board here granted him a diploma. And this was just before he was killed.

Noble: I thought he might have been up at that Neillsville, well that would have been grade school, but that Indian school. I don't recall whether they had a high school or not.

Rykken: He attended Clay, the Clay School. Clay elementary out near Hatfield. I don't know if you remember the name Walter Blencoe.

Noble: Oh yes, surveyor.

Rykken: But Walter Blencoe was the teacher out there.

Noble: He was teaching? Walter?

Rykken: That's the research that we did and we found that out. Kind of interesting.

Noble: Clay used to be Komensky. That Komensky school that used to be.

Rykken: I'm curious for you to say a little bit more about your parents. What they were doing in China.

Noble: My father was there for fifteen years total.

Rykken: What was his work?

Noble: He was working there and he had gone to China, actually he was married twice. He had married my mother's sister and she died in childbirth in Chicago many years ago. About then in China… I don't recall the exact years about 1915 to about 1920 or so, well more than that; it must have been 1910 or 12 when they went over there because he was over with her for a while with his first wife and then my mother was there of course they were.

Rykken: And what was your mother's maiden name?

Noble: She was a Thomas girl. Harriet Thomas.

Rykken: Okay which…

Noble: That's that Thomas gang. Well Dr. Holder's mother was her sister.

Rykken: Right so what's your relation to Dr. Holder?

Noble: First cousin. His mother and my mother were sisters. In the Thomas family there were thirteen people in the family. But my father was there quite a while and he came back because my older sister was born about 1919 and she was born in China and then they were back in the states and my brother was born here in Wisconsin and then I was born in China and my younger sister was born in China. We came back in 1927; just in time for the Depression.

Rykken: Was Basil Holder born in China?

Noble: No. Neither was Dr. Holder wasn't either. Don, the oldest boy, was. His mother took a trip around the world years ago and stopped to visit my mother in China and met Dr. Holder's father. An Englishman. He was an import, export, weather expert of some type or another. I don't know what he did.

Rykken: And your father was? What was his work again?

Noble: He was a structural engineer, but I don't know exactly what he did there. He was there quite a while and the depression you know, which hit here in '29, there was a big recession going on around the world. That's why they came back in '27. Then stuff was all falling apart over there and then that came of course to this country.

Rykken: And what was your mother's first name again?

Noble: Harriet.

Rykken: Harriet.

Noble: Harriet; she was editor of the Banner Journal for years.

Rykken: For years and years. Okay, and then the house in Black River, that is now, well you know where Gene Krohn lives, but the house kitty-corner, was that the Holder house?

Noble: That was the Holder house.

Rykken: And where did you live in Black River?

Noble: I live right where I am now.

Rykken: Same house?

Noble: Same house. I moved into that house after my mother passed away. Kind of redid it a little bit.

Rykken: I'm trying to piece all that, that a lot of interesting history there of those two families.

Noble: I think a parson owned that house where Holders lived on the corner. I think it was something to do with the telephone company, because they were there for many years. I don't know who bought it when they sold. Some teacher wasn't it?

Rykken: I'm not sure about that.

Noble: One of the ones where the wife worked at the hospital.

Rykken: I guess I have one other question. I don't know if you have any others, but when you came back from Korea, did you ever have any thoughts of going somewhere else, or did you intend to be in Black River?

Noble: No, not too much. Once or twice possibly.

Rykken: It's interesting to me because there were a number of doctors at that time that had grown up in Black River and stayed in Black River and served in Black River for a long time.

Noble: Three of them. Holder; Dr. Holder, Dr. Krohn, and myself.

Rykken: Very interesting.

Noble: We grew up in Black River and stayed here and most people go somewhere else I guess.

Rykken: When did you work for the Ho-Chunk nation?

Noble: Well actually, I retired in 1990, right at the end of '90 from the clinic and then I didn't do anything for a little over a year, year and a half or so and then they approached me and I worked with them for a little over ten years.

Rykken: Did you enjoy that work?

Noble: Oh yes, I like the Ho-Chunk. I've known a lot of them for years; way back, the 1950's even. They're a good bunch, most of them; I get along with them

Rykken: And you weren't ever at the new clinic?

Noble: Yes, part time. I used to fill in. I worked steady for what was it; five or six years. Five years and then I would just come in occasionally when they were gone. But I did work in the new building, it's kind of nice. I believe that has one or two negative pressure rooms it's the only ones here. I don't think have one even in the new hospital. Negative pressure rooms are set up so when you go in the room and say you have someone with tuberculosis they're prone to spread the bugs all around them but it kind moves all that stuff out of the room. I believe there are two, one at the Ho-Chunk and there are two at the prison. I don't think they have one. Maybe they put one at the new hospital, I don't know. I doubt it.

Rykken: One other question, I've interviewed some older veterans who have said to me that they think it would be wise to have a draft in America.

Noble: It might be a little more interesting. I don't know. If they keep on the way they're going, they'll have to have one.

Rykken: I think part of what prompted that was the feeling or the sense that the Iraq war, the people, unless they had somebody in the military, there wasn't any sense of sacrifice really. You know we didn't have rationing and we didn't have these kinds of things that would have been experienced by people when they were in World War Two especially. So the war kind of goes right over the top of people's head.

Noble: Might be, I don't know. Then again if they run the draft, I don't recall how that was running at the beginning of the Vietnam War, of course they were taking everyone they would defer them, I believe, through school a little bit and then they caught them right away afterwards and that was a drawn out war, what was it? Twelve, ten or twelve years. They killed more than they did in Korea but it took them a long time to do it compared to Korea.

Rykken: What impressions of Korea do you have, well I guess another question, have you ever been back there?

Noble: No.

Rykken: Have you ever had any desire to do that?

Noble: Not too much. We took a tour of China and that was about close enough to Korea to suit me.

Rykken: What impressions do you have of the Korean people?

Noble: They're an industrious bunch; hardworking.

Rykken: Were you in contact with many of civilian population?

Noble: We had some of, the houseboy we had was kind of interesting. He'd been in Japan, the Koreans of course were under Japanese control until '45 and he was at one of the places. He claimed, I don't know whether it's true or not, but he said he was in either Nagasaki or Hiroshima, one or the other, and he said he was watching, he said he came over clicking, clicking with the airplanes, the reconnaissance planes coming over and he said that he got kind of jumpy and got out of town, according to him just in the nick of time, before they dropped the bomb. I don't know how you could just leave town, but maybe he had a way. He was a little older, of course the average age in Korea was probably about twenty-four or five. I was close to thirty when I was there because I had completed medical school and was practiced about three or four years something like that.

Rykken: Katie, do you have any other questions?

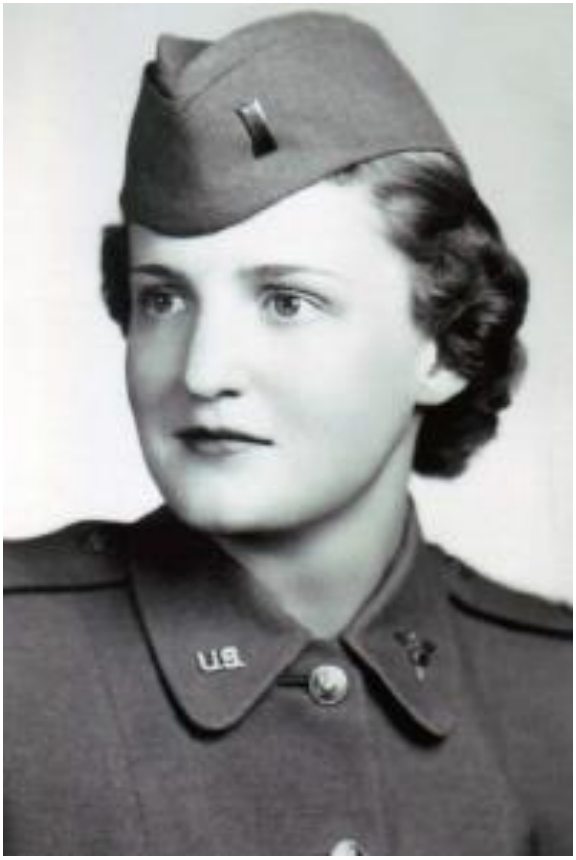
Norton: No.

Rykken: I want to get a couple pictures. We really appreciate you coming in. You're our first interview this year.

Noble: You'll probably get a whole different slant on the Korean War in the next one. It's hard to tell.

2007 Falls History Project: Mary Van Gorden

Interviewers: Katie Norton, Paul Rykken
November 13, 2006



"Many people have called it the forgotten war. It was sandwiched in between the Second World War and Vietnam."

-Mary Van Gorden

Norton: Can you please say your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

Van Gorden: My name is Mary Van Gorden; I was born on January 10th, 1930 in my house in Black River Falls. There was no hospital here then.

Norton: Okay, what year did you graduate high school?

Van Gorden: I graduated from Black River Falls High School in 1947.

Norton: Can you describe the high school back then?

Van Gorden: Very different from today. Our high school was what is now the Third Street School. It was smaller of course. It was as fine school, I think one of the major differences is

that us girls didn't have sports like you have now. Many of us were involved in music and drama, but not the sports that you have now. That's a major difference.

Norton: Anything that really stood out about school? Any favorite memories or anything that you can think of?

Van Gorden: I was extremely active in music and I played in the Blue Baronettes, which was our school dance band. I played in the marching band, I played in the orchestra, and I don't know whether any of you have heard of Bob Gritzmann, but he was our band director and most of us would have walked on hot coals for him. He was a hard taskmaster, but we liked him and we worked very hard for him. Music was a very big part of our school and particularly for girls in those days.

Norton: What was Black River like when you were growing up?

Van Gorden: Black River was not a great deal smaller; you know Black River has not grown a great deal. I remember that the population was 2,539. One of the big differences is that we walked more. We walked to school, even when we were tiny little kids and I lived several blocks away. We didn't have the school buses, we had to walk. People walked downtown, they walked home from work, the teachers walked home at noon for their lunch. So we were a much more walking society in those days; that was one very big difference. And I think life was a little slower in those days, but it was a good life.

This is an aerial view of Milwaukee-Downer College which later became Lawrence University in 1964

Norton: After you graduated high school, is that when you decided to become an occupational therapist?

Van Gorden: No, I thought I wanted to be a doctor and I went to Hamlin, I took pre-med at Hamlin for one year, and I decided while I was there that I didn't want to commit that much of my life to become a physician. My sister had a roommate in Milwaukee who was taking occupational therapy and I talked to her quite a bit and that really appealed to me so I transferred then, from Hamlin University to Milwaukee-Downer College, which was at that time had one of the finest occupational therapy departments in the world. So I stayed there for three years and was graduated in 1951. There is no Downer anymore, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee bought our campus because it was right next-door, and we became part of Lawrence University, so now I am considered a member of the alumni of Lawrence University.

Norton: How did you get involved in working with veterans?

Van Gorden: I went into the army. When I was a senior at Downer in occupational therapy, the Korean War was raging. It had started in '50, and this was 1951. The Korean War was, as I say raging at that time, and the government needed therapists and medical people of all kinds to staff their army hospitals and their navy hospitals for the armed forces. They came recruiting to all of the colleges where there were therapists and nurse and dieticians being trained, and

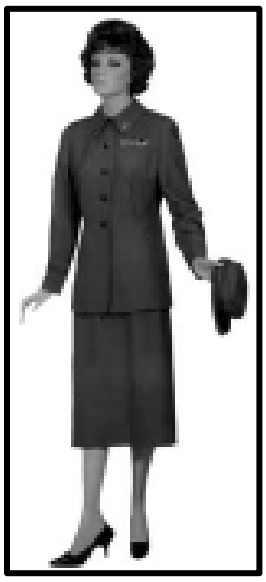
when I was a senior, recruiters came to our college and they practically begged us to please come into the service because they needed therapists so badly. So eight of us from my graduating class thought this would be a good thing to do, so we joined the army. One of the wonderful things was in those days was occupational therapy was a five year course. You went four years to your college and then you had to take a year of clinical training and that you had to pay for by yourself pretty much, you went off to various hospitals, took your clinical training, and then came back to the campus and were graduated and given your certificate of occupational therapy. The army said to all of us, if you will come into the service, we will commission you as Second Lieutenants, we will give a year of training in some of the best hospitals in the world, and then the only stipulation is that you have to stay one more year and we will commission you then as First Lieutenants, we'll promote you, and we ask only that you give one extra year of active duty. If you want to stay longer, fine, if not you're free to go. This was a wonderful opportunity, so as I said, eight of us occupational therapy students went of in I think August or September of 1951 to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas for our basic training.

Norton: Were you stationed there most of the time?

Van Gorden: I was stationed there during my basic training. We took our basic training with the doctors and with the nurses and with the physical therapists and with the dieticians. I was in what they called the Women's Medical Specialists Corps and that corps was comprised of occupational therapists, physical therapists, and dieticians. At that time it was for women only, now it's called simply the Medical Specialists Corps because they take men also. We were there for a month and then I was sent to Fitzsimmons Army Hospital for 3 months of tuberculosis training. That was in Colorado and that was a marvelous experience because Fitzsimmons was the tuberculosis capitol of the world at that time! In those days we still had a lot of tuberculosis. Nowadays because of drugs they pretty much eradicated it although there still is some tuberculosis. But I was there for three months and sent back to Brooke Army Hospital. I was still in my training then and I worked in the psychiatric department there for a couple of months and there I was dealing with soldiers, both men and women, who had become mentally ill. Many of them were people who were in combat that had broke down some of them were people who could not take the regimentation of army life and they broke down, but we had some very serious psychiatric problems. Then I went on to what was probably my most alarming experience and that was I was put on the burn-unit. Brooke Army Hospital was the "burn capitol" of the armed forces and all of the soldiers and other armed forces people, who were burned, like in combat or airplane accidents, were sent back to Brooke Army Hospital. We therapists, our job was to help them maintain as much motion as possible. Many of them were burned over their entire body, so it was quite an alarming experience for me. And then, after that, my year was up of training, I spent some time in orthopedics also, and then I had one year left to serve, and we were given a choice of place we could go around the country, such was Walter Reed Army Hospital, which you hear so much about. Madigan Army Hospital was in the state of Washington and I had never been out there, and I had been with these seven other classmates all this time and we were very close and I thought I wonder whether I could get along on my own, so I waited to see where they signed up and then I went somewhere different. I signed up for Madigan Army Hospital which is at Ft. Louis in Tacoma, Washington and I went out there by myself. I was just 21 years of age, I drove out there and spent a year working at Madigan Army Hospital, where again, they were bringing back a lot of men from the battlefield, and of course there were a lot of training accidents that we dealt with and I was there for one year. I was asked to stay on, some of my classmates continued on and they spent another

twenty years and they retired as majors and colonels. I chose to leave, I enjoyed my two years, I would not trade them for anything for anything in the world, but I wasn't real good at military life.

Rykken: Can you talk about your experience in basic training a little bit? Was it similar to any other type basic training or was it geared toward medical?



Above is an example of a Hattie Carnegie uniform that officers wore in the 1950's.

Van Gorden: Well it was geared; it wasn't the kind of basic training that the soldiers got on the field. We had to learn to shoot, we had to learn to used rifles, we had to learn to use gas masks, we stood in formation every Friday morning in the hot sun of San Antonio. It was the hottest summer they ever had I think, and we had wool uniforms on and because many of us were going to be transferring out of there, it was very rigid. We learned discipline like I had never had it before and it was good for us. I remember one day we were standing for inspection on a Friday morning and it was so hot and we had these Hattie Carnegie designer women's uniforms; they were beautiful but they buttoned up to the neck and we were so hot and my good friend Nancy, who had gone to school with me at Downer, dropped at by side; she fainted. I reached down to pick her up and the sergeant; my goodness! He read the riot-act to me. We were disciplined, but we didn't have the rigorous training. Many of the people that we were training with though, particularly the doctors and the nurses, were sent to then to battlefield, to Korea, so they had to be trained, we were over trained, because most of us therapists were not going to go the battlefield.

Rykken: I'm backing up to a response, when you got into that difficult situation in working with the burn victims had you had any preparation for that or was it just a shock?

Van Gorden: It was a shock.

Rykken: Were there people that were not able to function? I'm talking about the therapists.

Van Gorden: I don't know of any. I think that they trained us in gradually, but I will always remember, this was San Antonio, in the heat of the summer and the hospitals were not air conditioned in those days and these men, most of them were men, had been on the battlefield and they were horribly burned and they were on striker frames if you know what that is. They could not turn over, because much of their bodies were burned. Sometimes their ears were burned off, their noses, their eyelids, they were wrapped, portions of them anyway, but they had to be put on their backs and their stomachs so they were put between two cushions and they flipped them over like this every few hours they were on what we call striker frames. But I remember the day that I stepped off; it was on the third floor of the hospital and I stepped off the elevator and I had never smelled human flesh before. If you have ever smelled human flesh you will know what I'm talking about. It's a terrible stench and it just permeated the whole ward and I thought, am I going to be able to do this? Well, somehow you do. You rise up and you're able to do it and they kind of eased us in; they didn't let us stay too long the first few days. But we got to know some wonderful people and they were doing a lot of experimental things for burn at that time. They were doing skin grafting, and you know a lot of good things come out of war,

especially from the medical point of view. Many of the experimental things that they did we're using now out in civilian life or we were able to use later on.

Norton: Any examples of this?

Van Gorden: Yes, an example of that was they were experimenting with diet for burn patients; they were experimenting skin grafting and in order to skin graft you have to have a little machine called a dermatome; it shaves off. If you were burned on your chest, but had good leg down here, they would take the dermatome and they would take your skin off and put it here. Unfortunately, the donor site hurt just as bad as the burn, so these men were in double pain, but some of these people were burned so badly, they had no donor site left. The army was experimenting with using other donors. And I so well remember when I was there; in fact this was written up Life Magazine, one of our patients had a twin brother still in Korea. He was an identical twin and they sent for him and brought him and used his skin and it worked. They were trying all kinds, they tried using pig skin for instance to put on the donor site. They accomplished a great deal. A lot of those experimental things carried over into civilian life then.

Rykken: Back into when you were working with mental patients; had you had training in that?

Van Gorden: Yes, I had had a fair amount of training.

Rykken: What would you do with them? What would be your typical approach?

Van Gorden: Many of these people were depressed; they were catatonic if you know what I mean by that. They were withdrawn. Withdrawal was one of the biggest problems we had and our job as therapist was to try to reactivate them, to get them interested in something, to get them moving again, to get their minds off of themselves, to give them something to live for.

Norton: Was there a lot of post-traumatic stress disorder that you saw? Any flashbacks?

Van Gorden: We didn't call it that in those days, but it was that. One of the things that I did and this was because I had good music training in Black River Falls at the high school and grade school. I was very interested in music and my supervisor asked me to start a rhythm band. When I was in second grade, my teacher, Mrs. Johnson had us play rhythm band instruments in the old school and it sounds very simple but it worked beautifully. This was music therapy. We got a lot of rhythm band instruments and we would put them in the hand of some of these people and we would get songs like "Jimmy cracks corn and I don't care" going and it was amazing how we activated some of these withdrawn depressed patients and with music. We got them singing; in fact, we did so well that we put on a concert and the commanding general of Brooke Army Hospital came to our concert and applauded our department. Anything we could to do give them something to get up for and activate them, get them going again, it was sometimes tough.

Norton: What was your general opinion of the Korean War conflict?

Van Gorden: It was a terrible war. As you know, many people have called it the forgotten war. It was sandwiched in between the Second World War and Vietnam. I had many friends who went; some of them never came back, one very dear friend never came back. It was a terrible war, as you know it was one of the very first events of the Cold War. It really didn't accomplish a great deal; it was a draw. Nobody really won, everybody lost and of course the cold war went on then for another four decades, but it was a terrible war. There were some awful battles.

Rykken: When you were at that age, you were a young woman, late teens-early twenties, was there a lot of discussions about the war and the causes of it? Was this part of your conversation or were people just sort of accepting that this was happening?

Van Gorden: I would say half and half. We didn't dwell on it a lot. We were doing our job. I think we were too young to understand the politics of all of this. I can appreciate it much more now in my seventies then I did then. It was just something that we had to do, but we did discuss it somewhat.

Rykken: For example, just to throw a couple of history angles in here, what was your opinion of President Truman? Do you remember or recall?

Van Gorden: He was our leader. He was our president. I think we all, at least my friends and I, had a pretty positive attitude. MacArthur was somebody different.

Norton: What did you think of him?

Van Gorden: We had some pretty mixed feelings. He was a very ostentatious person, big ego, and I think that we were much less enthused about him then we were Truman. But we really didn't dwell much on the politics of the war.

Rykken: Do you remember the firing of MacArthur?

Van Gorden: Yes.

Rykken: Do you remember how you reacted to that?

Van Gorden: I think we were happy. We were happy over that.

Rykken: So what was the perception of him? Was it that he was dangerous in what he was doing in trying to extend the war?

Norton: Do you think he had too much power?

Van Gorden: Too much power, yes. And he was almost superseding the president you know. He had such a big ego.

Norton: So the patients that you worked with, what did they have to say about the whole Korean War, what was their opinion of why they were there?

Van Gorden: You know, Katie, I don't think we talked too much about that. I even had some close relationships and developed some good friendships with some of our patients. It was kind of like it was a job and we had to do it, we didn't talk too much about it.

Norton: As it is a forgotten war, what do you think can be done to help people remember it?

Van Gorden: I think that some of the memorials that we're building are great. I have not been to Washington yet to see the Korean. Have you seen that one?

Rykken: I have.

Van Gorden: I want to see that. And of course I have recently donated to the High Ground, because over at Neillsville they're in the process of building a Korean monument over there and I think this will help and I think programs like tonight [there was a program on the Korean War

that was televised the night of this interview] will help. I am anxious to see that one at 8:00 on TV. We lost thousands of men and women in that war. What was it? Five-hundred and some thousand?

Rykken: I think it was certainly to the level of Vietnam. The American people in general, as you mentioned earlier, because of where it was located historically, it kind of gets lost; shuffled.

Van Gorden: They say that some of the, I had a very good friend who was sent over who did not come back and I got letters from him occasionally, it was one of the fiercest wars we have ever fought and in some of the worst conditions that we ever had to go through.

Rykken: Who was the friend who didn't come back?

Van Gorden: I'll tell you about that. He was a corporal and he was in my department. He was an aide in our occupational therapy department at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital. His name was Vince Coserta. He was from Ohio and women officers were not supposed to date enlisted men, or vice versa, but I didn't pay too much about that; I wasn't very GI. So we went out quite a bit and one night we were at the airport having dinner in Denver and my major saw us there and the next morning she called him in and read him the riot act and put him on the surplus list and he was sent to Korea. To my knowledge, he never came back. I was not reprimanded which I always felt was wrong. Some of the regimentation of the army is not right. Some of it's good, but some of it is not fair. There are people who get a lot power, sometimes it's the sergeants. And they exercise it without much fairness, but that was a very sad event in my life.

Norton: How did you deal with the fact that he never came back?

Van Gorden: Well I guess you just move on. He was in one of the Battles of Pork Chop Hill. Was it Pork Chop Hill?

Rykken: Very terrible [battle]. They say fierce fighting and terrible conditions.

Van Gorden: And I think that they didn't always feel that people at home weren't supporting them and that must be hard. That must be terrible when you're over there in harm's way and every morning you get up and wonder if you'll live through the day and nobody cares back home. That's too bad.

Norton: I'm going to move on the subject of Arnold Olson. How did you know him?

Van Gorden: Pardon me?

Norton: How did you know him? Did you know him fairly well? We know he was your neighbor.

Rykken: We're talking about Arnie Olson.

Van Gorden: Oh, Arnie. Arnie Olson. His backyard and our backyard backed up to each other when we were growing up. I knew him, yes, but he was enough older than me that I did not know him well. My older sister knew him better but he was a fine young man. He was just a very, very fine young man. He came from a good family and it's a tragedy…

Rykken: What year did you say that you graduated?

Van Gorden: I was graduated in 1947.

Rykken: Okay, and I think he graduated in

Van Gorden: '43.

Rykken: '43?

Van Gorden: Somewhere in there

Norton: So there was a significant amount of time there.

Van Gorden: Yeah there was quite a bit of difference

Rykken: We looked him up in the Annual and I don't know if we talked about this, but he comes across in the pages of the Annual as someone who is quite bright and a very bright future kind of thing, and apparently kind of a math-science whiz in high school. That type of thing.

Van Gorden: I didn't know that.

Rykken: This is just bits and pieces that we kind of got out of the Annual

Van Gorden: He was a nice looking impressive young man, boy. He was the kind that you would of have liked to have had for a boyfriend, you know if you were his age. You were glad when he talked to you, we little kids, smaller kids. He was very nice, very friendly, very alert, probably had a wonderful future ahead of him, undoubtedly, and he had parents who would have backed it up. He had a sister, Kathleen, who was a fine musician. I know they did every thing for her. She went to St. Olaf.

Norton: Really? My uncle went to St. Olaf.

Van Gorden: Pardon me?

Norton: My uncle went to St. Olaf.

Van Gorden: Did he? I'm sure that Kathleen was, and she played the violin or the viola in our orchestra. Arnie had a family to back him up. He would have gone a long way in someway.

Norton: Do you know sort of motivated him to go into the armed forces?

Van Gorden: I have no idea. That I cannot tell you.

Norton: What did people in Black River think of him as being a POW? What was the reaction in Black River?

Van Gorden: I was so young, I don't really remember. I'm sure that people were alarmed. When any of our young people were in harm's way, this is a small town, it was even smaller then, we all became very concerned and I'm sure there was a great deal of concern about Arnie.

Norton: How do you think he'd like to be remembered, considering that you knew him fairly well as his neighbor?

Van Gorden: Oh I don't think he would want to be remembered as a hero. I would think Arnie would want to be remembered as somebody who did what he thought was right and that he served his country and served it well.

Rykken: Do you remember the response? Do you recall his funeral or when his body was returned?

Van Gorden: No.

Rykken: We spoke to John Noble. I think John had been a pallbearer and think it must have been a fairly large funeral.

Van Gorden: Do you know the year Paul, do you know the year?

Rykken: I'd have to look that up.

Van Gorden: '40, '45 or '46

Rykken: No it would have been '50 because it would have been after '53.

Van Gorden: Oh okay, alright, yes, I see, I was gone from Black River then and I don't remember his funeral, no.

Norton: When did you return to Black River then?

Van Gorden: I came back when I was discharged in the summer of '53 and I was waiting to go to grad school. I went to New York University to get a masters and I stayed with my mother and father for three months and I was asked to come down to the Tomah VA Hospital to work because they needed occupational therapists so badly, and I said well I'll come down for three months. So I went down there and I had just had some pretty horrible experiences in the army and I went down there and worked for three months and had some more horrible experiences because in those days the Tomah VA Hospital was pretty much psychiatric and I was put on the back ward and the locked ward where I worked with a couple of aides and I had a number of veterans in my clinic who had been on the Bataan Death March and been on Corregidor. They were catatonic. They were worse than I had seen when I was in the army. They were more badly damaged psychologically. So I was there for three months and saw some of the horrors of the Second World War that never did get taken care of really. They died there eventually.

Rykken: Can you tell us, this is again going back; can you tell us a little bit about your parents?

Van Gorden: About my parents?

Rykken: Just did they come from Black River? Did they move here?

Van Gorden: My mother and dad were both from Alma Center and my mother was a graduate of what was then the Eau Claire Teacher's College and was a teacher and taught me a great deal of what I know as a supplement to what I was learning in school. It was wonderful to have a mother who was a teacher and knew grammar like nobody else ever knew grammar. She knew algebra; she had taught algebra and geometry so she aided us girls at home a great deal. She was a wonderful teacher and a wonderful mother. My father was a businessman. He owned numerous businesses in Black River. He had the feed and seed elevator, he had the home oil company, he had the Buick-Chevy garage, and he was a born business man. They were wonderful parents and they said to the three of us girls, I have two sisters, we will back you in whatever you want to do and they did. All the way.

Rykken: How did they feel about your military service?

Van Gorden: I think they had some mixed feelings about it. You know, to some extent there is a little bit of a stigma with going into the army. Especially for women, you know you're gonna be a WAAC. Which can be very fine.

Rykken: Sure

Van Gorden: But there is a little bit of a stigma but I think once they saw what I was doing, and wherever I was stationed, they came to visit me. They came to San Antonio, they came to Denver, they came a couple times to Washington. They followed me around and they were very proud of what I did. Very, very proud.

Norton: What about your sisters? What did they go on to do?

Van Gorden: My younger sister became a home-economics teacher. She went to Stout, and taught home-economics, and then got married, and still lives in Viroqua. My older sister, Joanne Dougherty lives here in Black River. She went to Laten Art School in Milwaukee for four years and became an interior designer and then married and came back to Black River and when her husband was employed by my father they came back to Black River so she's still here. And we're all, our whole family, is extremely interested in history. My mother was deeply involved with the history of Alma Center, writing the history, and we've been very genealogy and history oriented in our family.

Rykken: Speaking of that, and since you have that interesting genealogy, I assume you know when your first ancestor arrived from Europe?

Van Gorden: Yes

Rykken: Who was that?

Van Gorden: Well my first, on my father's side, was 1650 and we were Dutch. Our name Van Gorden is Dutch. And he came with those original Dutchmen who founded and ran New York State until 1664 when the English came in and conquered it. I went out there last year on a special trip where descendents of the Dutch founders of New York were together so they came very early. My mother is a direct descendent of the Pilgrim Steven Hawkins and we are members of the Mayflower Society of America and to come into Jackson County my mother's people came in here, some of them from England, one from Nova Scotia; they came into the Alma Center area before the Civil War. They came in, in the 1850's and my father's people came into the Hixton area in the 1870's. We've been here a long time. We have deep roots. Deep roots.

Rykken: I wanted to ask you that because I knew that you had that kind of deep roots as you said in the past here. I guess one other area we didn't get into that we should have is touch base on a little bit about Mitchell Red Cloud.

Norton: Did you know Mitchell Red Cloud?

Van Gorden: No, I didn't.

Norton: You didn't?

Van Gorden: No, I didn't. I did not know him. All I know is what I read in the papers and I know nothing more about him, no.

Rykken: Were there other young women from Black River that went into the army? Do you recall?

Van Gorden: Oh, yes. Well not with me.

Rykken: I mean contemporaries of yours?

Van Gorden: No, I don't know of any right off the top of my head, no. There have been a number of women here from our community who have served in the armed forces, navy, army, air force.

Rykken: Are involved with veteran's organizations?

Van Gorden: No. Nope I'm not.

Rykken: Have you ever, did you ever keep up with those that you served with? As far as, did you ever have reunions?

Van Gorden: Oh yes, some of get together occasionally. A number of them are deceased now because we're all in our middle seventies heading toward eighty very fast and one thing that I might mention and this is not your question, but is how much I value my experience in the army. I would not trade those…

Norton: That was my last question--

Van Gorden: You were going to ask me that?

Norton: That was my last question [laughing].

Van Gorden: I would not trade that for anything. It was a marvelous experience and you know this from your son Paul. When you go into the service, of course he had it worse than I did, you learn discipline. Even if you're a woman and even if you're in the medical specialists corps. We learned discipline. You learn you're not the only pebble on the beach. You learn teamwork. We train in some of the finest medical facilities in the world. We were exposed to that. We were exposed to many diagnoses that I would not otherwise have known like the burn unit for instance and we met wonderful people and you have a chance to travel. I lived in three different places, was paid well, and was given GI Bill. I did not go for that reason but when I was leaving they said, would you like to go to graduate school and I said sure. So I went to school on the GI Bill. I personally feel that every man and woman in this country should have to give a year or two of some kind of service to this country of ours either in the armed services or some civilian corps of some kind. I think it would be good for us.

Rykken: That's an interesting comment because we've heard that from other veterans that we've interviewed. Not in this project so much but in the project we did on World War II, that's a very common theme. It's interesting. I've never interviewed a veteran that said they regretted their service. It's kind of interesting.

Van Gorden: I think another commentary on war and I saw the horrors of war, and I was never in harm's way. I was never on the front, but I saw what came from the front. But good things can come from war too. It's not any reason we should have wars but many of the medical advances we have in our country. You know they had crash programs during the war, the Manhattan Projects, etc. That brought us many things. Now my field is rehabilitation and my

whole field was given a great deal of impetus during the Second World War when they had airplanes that could bring people home. In the earlier wars, if you had your leg shot off in Germany, you were left there. You died there. But once they got the kind of airplanes that could bring people home, then we had to have rehabilitation and we had crash programs. "How do we fit these people with prosthesis? And how do we teach the blind to see again?" We had a lot of crash programs that helped. I was benefited greatly. Not only did I go to school on the GI Bill, but I did not work as an occupational therapist very long. I found I liked administration when I was in the service. The service, the armed forces are highly organized and they have to be. You learn organization, you learn management so I went into administration and most of my working career was spent in Duluth where I was executive director of the medical rehabilitation center and the skills that I learned in organization and management in the army were just vital. They were so important to me. So important.

Rykken: Very practical.

Van Gorden: Very practical, yes.

Rykken: Any thing else?

Norton: Nope, that's it.

Rykken: That's an excellent story that you have. The whole thing is really quite a story. So interesting.

Van Gorden: Well you know, I don't even think of it very much.

Rykken: No?

Van Gorden: You know it's just like you said, it's just something I did.

Rykken: Sure.

Van Gorden: And I would encourage anybody to try to do the same thing.

Rykken: Have you written down much of this? Were you someone that wrote of your experiences? Did you keep a diary? A journal?

Van Gorden: No. No, I didn't.

Rykken: Were there a lot of letters exchanged between you and family members?

Van Gorden: None of those were kept. No. I have as you know I have done a lot of genealogy, and my little story is in there. Most of my story is in that veteran's book that Bob Teeples did. It's in there but no, I haven't elucidated on that in other books.

Rykken: Well Mary we thank you very much.

Van Gorden: You're very welcome.

Rykken: Excellent, excellent story.

Van Gorden: This has been my honor, and it's nice to meet you Katie.

Norton: Thanks.

Rykken: Very good.

Van Gorden: I appreciate your inviting me.

2007 Falls History Project: Myrle Thompson

Interviewers: Katie Norton, Paul Rykken
November 27, 2006

"I've seen it [the Korean conflict] with messages coming through. I didn't like it."

- Myrle Thompson

Norton: Can you please state you name and your date and place of birth?

Norton: Can you please say your name?

Thompson: Myrle Thompson.

Norton: And where were you born?

Thompson: Out in Iowa.

Norton: Alright, and when were you born?

Thompson: 1929.

Norton: Can you describe your childhood? Growing up for you, your childhood?

Thompson: My childhood?

Norton: Yes, how would you describe it?

Thompson: I was little when we moved to Wisconsin. About three and a half years old. I don't remember of course.

Rykken: Where did you move in Wisconsin?

Thompson: To Neillsville.

Rykken: Neillsville, so you've been there…

Thompson: I was there since three, when I was like three and a half years old.

Norton: Okay, and what were your parents like?

Thompson: My parents?

Norton: Yeah.

Thompson: They were nice.

Norton: Any memories you have of them, like what did they do?

Thompson: My father was a hunter, fisherman; did fishing on the Mississippi. He worked on Grandfather's Bluff in La Crosse. He was a demolitions man. It was later on they moved here.

Norton: What about your mom?

Thompson: Oh, my mother was just a mom. Housewife.

Rykken: What was her name?

Thompson: Nora Red Horn.

Rykken: Red Horn. How about your father's name?

Thompson: John Thompson.

Rykken: John Thompson, okay.

Norton: Alright, what was school like for you?

Thompson: What was school?

Norton: Yes, what was school like?

Thompson: I went to the Indian school in Neillsville because they were all working and it was easier to board us there. We were boarders.

Norton: Oh.

Thompson: Yeah, we worked for our room and board.

Norton: How many people attended that school?

Thompson: I went there as a little girl and my brothers got lonely so they were coming home, they chose to come home and they had one of the girls pack my stuff, my things because they were going to bring me home too. So they packed all my things in their suitcase and they carried me away. And as we were coming by the Indian school from across the river this lady, "Myrle, come back, come back!" she said. I couldn't come back because I was being carried away [laughing]. And later that evening John Winneshiek came for us, but my father wouldn't let me go, he said, "No, I'm keeping her," and so my brothers were taken back to the Indian school. We weren't the only ones that ran away.

Rykken: Myrle, was the school harsh?

Thompson: Excuse me?

Rykken: Was the school harsh? Were they strict at the school?

Thompson: I had no problems. I more or less kind of ignored things.

Rykken: Did they allow you, at the school, to speak your language?

Thompson: No, they didn't, but we still did.

Above is the Neillsville Indian School that Thompson attended.

Rykken: But you did anyway?

Thompson: Yeah because the superintendent was very fluent in Ho-Chunk and his brother was the janitor and he usually spent time with us and he spoke Indian too. His whole family spoke Ho-Chunk.

Rykken: Do you remember the superintendent's name?

Thompson: Yes, Benjamin Stucki.

Rykken: Stucki.

Thompson: He had two brothers- Jacob and Henry Stucki and their sister Marie. She was Mrs. Dresser, but they all spoke Ho-Chunk. Henry Stucki and their sister Marie.

Norton: Okay, so the school was pretty much ran in English, but you were still speaking your Ho-Chunk language, were the classes taught in English?

Thompson: Oh yes, most of the children couldn't speak English until they arrived at the school. Just like the Amish don't allow their kids to speak English till they enter school.

Norton: Did you know Mitchell Red Cloud?

Thompson: Excuse me?

Norton: Mitchell Red Cloud?

Thompson: Oh yes, I'm related to him.

Norton: Are you? Okay.

Rykken: Mitchell Sr. then.

Thompson: Mitchell Jr's aunt; the Ho-Chunk way.

Rykken: Mitchell Sr. has been described to me as a very interesting man, very smart man.

Thompson: Yes.

Rykken: And do you remember him quite well?

Thompson: Yeah, as a young girl, as a little kid. He was real nice.

Rykken: I've heard that from so many people about him that he was quite a wonderful man.

Thompson: He used to go on tours around the countryside, putting on a show and different things; we used to go with him.

Rykken: What kind of show?

Thompson: Like pow-wow's and just pow-wows and different little things. We did the Snake Dance in Winona. I was on the tail end. I was busy looking. Next thing I knew I was in a police car. I guess I got lost and so they picked me up and took me back [laughing].

Rykken: Took you back to the place.

Thompson: Yeah because they were scattered.

Rykken: So how old was Mitchell, were you roughly the same age as each other?

Thompson: No, he was older than I.

Rykken: He was older.

Norton: Mitchell Jr.?

Rykken: Yeah.

Norton: So do you remember much about Mitchell Jr.?

Thompson: No, not really. He spent more time with my brothers; playing or whatever they were doing.

Rykken: Do you remember when he was killed? I mean do you remember that event and I mean I'm sure you remember it.

Thompson: I was in the funeral parade.

Norton: What was the general reaction of the community?

Thompson: What was?

Norton: Sorry about that. What was the general reaction of the community to his death?

Thompson: I can't answer for people.

Rykken: He was viewed very much as a hero, but maybe that was something that has happened more later. Do you think?

Thompson: I think so.

Rykken: I mean that was partly because he was given that honor.

Thompson: Congressional Medal of Honor, yes.

Rykken: We have a little display related to him in the school because that was an important thing, I think, in the community.

Thompson: Mm-hmm. To me, these are heroes [pointing to picture]. Very, very wonderful people. Smart people.

Norton: Switching subjects now, how did you first get involved with the Korean War?

Thompson: Well I enlisted.

Rykken: What year was that?

Thompson: 1951.

Norton: And what was your reason to enlist?

Thompson: I didn't mind.

Rykken: You were an adventurer.

Thompson: And I did see and go where all my brothers were for training and where they traveled.

Norton: So your brothers were in the military too?

Thompson: There were only twenty-one of us in my family.

Rykken: Twenty-one?

Thompson: That covers all areas and all branches.

Rykken: Myrle, had your father been in the military?

Thompson: No, but his younger brother went to France in the First World War. He got killed over there. Some of the Winnebago went there and he was supposed to go, but I was born and then they had an accident so he couldn't go. So he stayed to take care of his family.

Norton: What kind of training did you undergo?

Thompson: I'd like to suggest you join and find out. [laughing]

Norton: But would you mind sharing you're your experience then, just for training.

Thompson: We had basic training just like the boys did.

Rykken: Where did you start out? Where were you?

Thompson: Kelly Air Force Base and for the job I was picked, we had special survival courses there. I know how to make a bomb [laughing].

Rykken: So you learned to handle a weapon?

Thompson: No. I was in communications.

Rykken: Right away?

Thompson: All the way from the beginning.

Rykken: How did you get picked for that? Do you remember?

Thompson: I was picked even before I was in, because of my ability to speak, read, write and understand my Ho-Chunk fluently. There went to school with fifteen other girls, out of the 15 there were only two that couldn't speak anything except English. Everyone was bilingual. When I went to school at Scott Air Force Base, there were fifty-six denominations of languages there.

Norton: Wow.

Rykken: Were you with other Ho-Chunk women?

Thompson: No, as far as I know, I am the only Ho-Chunk codes-man.

Rykken: Isn't that interesting.

Thompson: These guys said it was really nice to meet a women codes-man because they said I was the first Native American codes-woman they ever met.

Rykken: So there weren't Navajo women doing this?

Thompson: I don't know. I don't think so; no, because they said I was the first Native American because everyone was Caucasian when I was in.

Rykken: This might seem like a silly question Myrle, but how did they know this about you, that you were bilingual? Was this just through interviews when you were going in?

Thompson: No, in 1952 I applied for security clearance and it was ordered to me and I have a complete background investigation so my kids don't have problems with clearance of security.

Rykken: Okay, that's interesting.

Thompson: I was given second highest security clearance in the nation at that time.

Rykken: And that's because you could be dealing with classified information?

Thompson: All of it was classified.

Rykken: We better get into that because that's an interesting part of the story.

Norton: How important were the messages that you were…

Thompson: How important? We were responsible for national security. Speaking of confidential, what they say now is confidential, is a laugh and these guys did too. They couldn't

say anything so they were all declassified a few years ago and I too was declassified in 1993 I believe.

Rykken: So where were you actually working?

Thompson: I went to school at Kelly Air Force Base for basic in Lackland in San Antonio. And I went to school up in Cheyenne, Wyoming. And from there I went to Scott Air Force Base by Belleville; Belleville, Illinois. That's where we had technical communications. It wasn't oral. Everything was technically mechanical. I've seen all kinds of keyboards and sorts of stuff.

Norton: So were most these messages sent in Ho-Chunk or was it Navajo or what was the language?

Thompson: English.

Norton: But there was the code.

Thompson: Yes we worked with a code everyday. A different code everyday and we had to break the messages.

Rykken: So this was complicated work that you were doing.

Thompson: I would think so.

Norton: So what were some of the codes like? Was it numbers or symbols?

Thompson: Letters.

Norton: Letters, just rearranged letters.

Thompson: There is no word you can not abbreviate in English except "A".

Rykken: [Laughing] That one's short enough already. This is very interesting to me and I'm curious as to what, when you would go to your work, would they bring you information that you needed to decode?

Thompson: It all came over teletype. It came over teletype all coded so we took it into our codes so nobody could go in there; just the people that were cleared to go in there. Even our base commander couldn't come in there and he was a general. Only the people that were cleared could come in there.

Rykken: And then once you had done the decoding…

Thompson: Well, it was like this thing [showing paper] in English.

Rykken: And you would give it to…

Thompson: Give it to whoever it was routed to. And we'd have to log all the messages every day. We had a hotline from Korea. That was one thing we broke. Took care of that message everyday it would be like 12 pages once we were done breaking it and typing it up. We didn't deliver it or anything we just logged it.

Rykken: Did the information mean anything to you?

Thompson: Of course it did. It was all about the war.

Rykken: What would be an example? Just something so we can kind of get an idea of what. Troop movements?

Thompson: We moved some troops one time from England. We had to move them all the way around the world from England and see how fast it could be done. And here I got a message, I had to go and break it and it was from a general in Maine. He said to order the planes back from Colorado; they were over Colorado. They needed to refuel but they couldn't land, because it's federal offense. They had two women on there, stowaways, but they couldn't land anywhere but he said all planes had to come back. There were seven planes so they all had to come back to Rome, New York and he came down the next day and was he mad. I feel sorry for those boys because they were court marshaled and whatever. I think those two women landed in prison.

Rykken: And so this work that did went on for about two years?

Thompson: I was there three years. We had basic communications, radio, and Ajax; that was a real small machine; it was machine with like a little stick that you could code. It was all technical and some of the things that I've seen in computers are obsolete for me.

Rykken: It was very advanced for that time period. I'm still trying to get the hang of what you were actually doing. It's new to me.

Thompson: It's new to everyone.

Rykken: I'm interested. I've read a little bit about the code talkers, the Navajo code talkers.

Thompson: But theirs is oral. Mine wasn't.

Rykken: For example, would the government intercept something from the Koreans?

Thompson: They did all the time.

Rykken: Okay and then they would give that to you?

Thompson: Yes, I've seen a lot.

Rykken: Or, were you being used to send messages so they couldn't decipher?

Thompson: Here, you didn't read this [handing over piece of paper].

Rykken: Well, I didn't get a chance to.

Thompson: On the military on the bottom.

Rykken: So you were coding and decoding; both. But it had nothing to do with you having the ability to understand Korean?

Thompson: No. Everything was done in English except we'd code it and nobody could break the code.

Rykken: Okay, so there we go. That was the link I was kind of trying to figure out.

Thompson: Unless you were trained to break. Now and then a message would come in and we would get thrown. A twenty-five letter group came in and we couldn't break it. We all tried. There were three of us in there and we all tried so finally I just gave it up and I took a walk, came back, sat down, and wrote the message.

Rykken: Okay. You had a talent for this apparently.

Thompson: Oh, I liked it.

Rykken: You must have been good at it to be able to do it that long.

Thompson: Well I talked to a man back from Japan. It was his fourth time around in crypto and they didn't know what to do with him so they brought him back from Japan, I was his mandatory study hall teacher that summer; oh boy did I become good! After we were done, three days later he was shipped back to Japan then.

Rykken: Could you tell anybody that you were doing this?

Thompson: No.

Rykken: So did your family even know?

Thompson: Yes.

Rykken: They did. They could know.

Thompson: But they were the only ones.

Rykken: So that must have been kind of a funny feeling to be doing that and not be able to tell anybody.

Thompson: No. We were just like these guys said, do you watch the news now I said no. We don't either they said because we've seen all of it. And by some of the things that are being made public, if you or I were in uniform at that time, we couldn't even talk about it.

Rykken: So times have changed a lot as far as what information would be made available.
Thompson: Even so a lot of that stuff going on shouldn't be made public.

Rykken: Why do you think that's changed?

Thompson: Security.

Rykken: Security is weaker?

Thompson: And the president.

Rykken: It's so interesting. Were you ever in Korea?

Thompson: No, but I am a legal Korean veteran.

Rykken: Sure, but you were working out of…

Thompson: Rome, New York. Griffiss Air Force Base. And with Washington.

Rykken: When you got out of the military, it would've been about 1954?

Thompson: '55.

Rykken: '55. Were you involved right away with veterans organizations?

Thompson: I was one of the first people on the first charter for the Andrew Blackhawk Legion Post.

Rykken: Very good. Are you still a member of that?

Thompson: I still am a member but no longer with the Andrew Blackhawk. I quit in, I forgot in what year, I went with the state for two years and then from the state they transferred me to Neillsville, Post 73 so I belong to Post 73. And I tease them, I said I'm the only real American [laughing].

Rykken: The true American. Do you want to ask her any questions about the Korean War?

Norton: Yeah I have some Korean War questions.

Rykken: We've been asking each of the people we've interviewed, we've asked some general questions about the war just for their opinion. If you don't mind.

Norton: Just in general, what was your opinion of the whole Korean War? The conflict itself, what was being done over there?

Thompson: I've seen it with messages coming through. I didn't like it.

Norton: Did you think the United States had a good reason to be over there?

Thompson: I don't think they should be in any war.

Norton: As far as the Native American community went, what were, I guess I asked you a question like this before, but what were the typical reactions about the war? What was it viewed as from a Native American standpoint?

Thompson: Excuse me?

Norton: From a Native American standpoint, like the Native American community, what was their thoughts on the war and veterans?

Thompson: Oh, they have a high respect for their veterans.

Rykken: Myrle, I want to ask you this, because interviewed quite a number of people, veterans in particular, would Native American people, and you're the first Native American woman that I've interviewed involved in military service, which is kind of interesting, but do you think that Native American people, men in particular, join? Is it from patriotism for America or is it more a part of their tradition?

Thompson: Tradition.

Rykken: Okay. I've always wondered about that. I can see where it's both and I know that, I'm a good friend of Randy Blackdeer, for example and I always sense with him high patriotism for America, but I always wonder if it has more to do with the tradition of his people. The warrior tradition. Do you think it's more of the warrior tradition?

Thompson: No, it's a traditional thing. Honor.

Rykken: It's a very honorable.

Thompson: Like my father said, if you go in your brothers' footsteps, that's an honor.

Rykken: Do you remember the situation that occurred with MacArthur in Korea? Do you have an opinion on that, when he was fired by Harry Truman?

Thompson: When he was fired?

Rykken: Yeah. Do you remember that?

Thompson: I don't think he should've been.

Norton: Really?

Thompson: And just like Powell, they were two small men. They were afraid of them I think. Because they were right.

Rykken: Did you say just like Powell?

Thompson: Powell.

Rykken: Colin Powell?

Thompson: Really smart men and as general people, even now, people don't like very educated people because they can't push them around.

Rykken: That's a good point. That's one of the great things about education. Try to tell our kids that. If you're educated, you can't be tricked.

Thompson: You can't be pushed around if you don't want to be pushed around.

Rykken: Just a little bit more about Mitchell Red Cloud, you said that you were involved with his funeral, when he came back to Black River Falls.

Thompson: Yeah, I carried the flag.

Rykken: I've been to his, I've been to the cemetery there, where he was laid to rest. We'll look at all that too when we get to this here. Do you remember Mitchell Whiterabbit?

Thompson: He was my uncle. I should remember him.

Rykken: I read, I did quite a bit of research on the funeral and I read, I have a copy of his sermon that he gave there, which is quite interesting. I don't know if you'd like that. I could get that out for you. That must have been a very interesting event to be at. There was a lot of people there from the community.

Thompson: When I was a little girl, they were at the Indian School before I went there. I remember them coming to our house because their family lived too far away so we were their home base. Uncle Mitchell and Murray used to come and their sister, Ruby. She became, she was a nurse so she was an officer in the army and I don't remember seeing her after World War Two. There were quite a few women in service before I came along.

Rykken: You showed us this picture if I can just have you look at this picture a little bit here again, do you remember a lot of those folks?

Thompson: A lot of these?

Rykken: Yeah. Do they stand out in your memory at all or did you make friends with any of them?

Thompson: Oh, all of them. I knew all of them.

Rykken: Did you ever keep up with them after?

Thompson: Oh yes. Especially when I got my calendar. I mailed them out to different ex-Air Force people about 47. That was nice. I got

Thompson's class from Air Force training school. She is seated fourth from the right.

Rykken: Everybody there?

Thompson: Except two. Let's see. Peggy on the end here and this blonde. They didn't go in. In fact, they got out.

Rykken: Is that because they were unable to do it or they just chose not to do it?

Thompson: Unadaptable. I guess they got a discharge. She writes, this Joan Caster. Her and I were buddies. We used to have fun they called us Al Capone. Beverly Shute, she was down in South Carolina and Starkey. Yeah a lot of these girls. She also went to, she's a Cuban, an American and she's Negro; Afro and American.

Rykken: So you were meeting people from all over the country?

Thompson: Oh yes.

Rykken: When you came back, were you did you ever try to inspire other Ho-Chunk women, young women, to go into the military? Or was that something you didn't feel the need to do?

Thompson: Well, each of us had a choice. We each have a choice. I tell the young people, join another branch. Join the Air Force or the Navy because they really push for education. It's not so easy to be in either.

Rykken: DO you feel like you were accepted when you came back or were you viewed as being really different that you had done this?

Thompson: I'm the one that changed. Even now, all the people are the same when I left.

Rykken: But you had experienced something very different.

Thompson: Oh yes.

Rykken: And that's kind of neat. I mean you've really seen something quite unique.

Thompson: Especially being a codes-man. We saw more than the average American did.

Rykken: Why do you think the code-talkers have not received very much attention until recently? Do you think it's because they were Native?

Thompson: Because they just finally got declassified just like I. We couldn't say anything. Now see here, I have autographs from some of these men.

Rykken: This is a neat picture. So you were able to meet talkers from World War Two also. Some of the Navajo.

Thompson: Yes, they are Navajo.

Rykken: Okay, were they all Navajo in World War Two?

Thompson: The code-talkers yes. Let's see, oh here I have all the words and the things they had to put into code.

Rykken: Oh my goodness. So this is kind of a part of history that we're just learning more about I guess. That's why I feel really pleased about being able to get you in for an interview.

Thompson: In World War Two when these guys were stationed at Pendleton, they resembled the eastern nations, Japanese, Chinese, and at the time they had camps in California and these guys were in the foxhole as part of their training and one of them got jumped because they thought he was an escaped refugee from one of those camps. So from then on they were all assigned body guards.

Rykken: I believe I've heard that before. There was a movie that came out…

Thompson: It's nothing like the book.

Rykken: I was kind of disappointed in the movie because it doesn't seem like it did very much with the code-talkers really.

Thompson: No, it didn't.

Rykken: It just kind of left me a little empty.

Thompson: Now this is a real nice copy of the High Ground magazine. I was surprised when they sent me this magazine?

Rykken: Have you been involved with the High Ground quite a bit?

Thompson: Oh yes. Very much so.

Rykken: There you are.

Thompson: They sent that to me.

Rykken: Nice picture. Yeah that's a neat…

Thompson: That's where we were watching the Blue Angels come. The parachutes.

Rykken: That's a very neat place.

Thompson: And I knew one of the ex-commanders of the code-talkers but I think he died two years ago. He died two years ago and they've invited me to come out there too.

Rykken: Did you ever have reunions with the code-talkers that you worked with?

Thompson: No, but I still, like I said, I still hear from some of those women now but being Native American, I think it differed in the way they felt about it because my friend was stationed in Germany and Italy and she said it was boring. But then see we had direct connection with the Korean conflict where we were.

Rykken: You were able to follow it very closely in a way that other people couldn't.

Thompson: Yeah.

Rykken: You had information that other people weren't given.

Thompson: Just like those atomic ships, the one that was captured, that shouldn't happen and it did. We knew about that.

Rykken: *The Pueblo.*

Thompson: Mm-hmm. There were three atomic ships.

Rykken: What you're saying is that it shouldn't have happened because they shouldn't have known. That information shouldn't have…

Thompson: No it shouldn't. But we were taught to destroy everything. It wasn't ever supposed to be captured. I think that commander got court marshaled and I don't know what else happened to him.

Rykken: What's that plaque that you have in your hand there? I looked at that earlier.

Thompson: That's when I went to meet the code-talkers.

Rykken: That's really nice isn't it? Stabilizing [inaudible]. Now are you involved, or have you been involved at all in Ho-Chunk language teaching?

Thompson: I taught in Head-Start.

Rykken: How recently have you done that?

Thompson: I quit in 1997.

Rykken: Ten years. Do you think, in your opinion, will the Ho-Chunk language survive?

Thompson: As long as I live with my little dog [laughing]. He understands Ho-Chunk.

Rykken: But will it be passed on do you think? Is this something that can be accomplished?

Thompson: No, not really because all these things should begin in the home, discipline, tradition, and your language, that should be in the home. I speak Ho-Chunk to my three. This is my niece. They awarded me a star quilt because I helped a Winnebago pow-wow in Nebraska with the women veterans list and she accepted that for me. I'm going to mount this on something else. It got caught in the rain.

Rykken: Yeah that's kind of a neat piece there.

Thompson: Yeah my daughter painted that.

Rykken: I'm going to try to take a picture of that if I can.

Thompson: Oh and this should be interesting. I'm waiting to hear from…

Rykken: Sure, this is what you were telling us. This is to kind of clear up, or to receive an award that you didn't receive.

Thompson: Yeah. The Good Conduct Medal [passes out a pin].

Norton: Thank you.

Thompson: These were given to me. This symbolizes the National Guard family.

Rykken: Are you giving these to us?

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

Rykken: Are you giving this to me?

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

Rykken: Well, thank you very much.

Norton: Thank you.

Rykken: I appreciate that. That's from the National Guard?

Thompson: Yeah it's the, oh how did they put that, it's the heart of the family. The National Guard. So I'll be getting a new discharge paper and my award will be on there.

2007 Falls History Project: Richard Piette

Interviewer: Paul Rykken
December 6, 2006

"We always kept troops there. That's why it's a forgotten war. We're still at war."

- Richard Piette

Rykken: So could you state your full name?

Piette: Richard Leroy Piette.

Rykken: Where and when were you born?

Piette: I was born at Hinckley, Minnesota; July the 28th, 1924.

Rykken: Okay, and then how long have you lived in Black River Falls?

Piette: Since 1963.

Rykken: Okay, so you spent your growing up years in Hinckley.

Piette: No, actually I only spent about six months in Hinckley.

Rykken: Okay, where did you grow up then?

Piette: Then we moved to Brule, Wisconsin.

Rykken: Okay.

Piette: My dad was a railroad agent for Northern Pacific.

Rykken: Okay, whereabouts is Brule?

Piette: Brule is due north of here. You take 27 out of here and it ends up at Brule on the lakeshore.

Rykken: Okay, so small town.

Piette: Oh big town! A hundred and five population.

Rykken: Okay [laughing]. So you kind of grew up in rural Wisconsin. Normal childhood and your father worked on the railroad. How about your mother?

Piette: My mother, Elsie Piette, they were married in Rust City, Minnesota. My mother, when my dad met her, she was a millinery in St. Paul and my mother was actually six years older than my dad. She was born in '91; dad was born in '96. Five years older. Basically her job was to raise us kids.

Rykken: How many kids?

Piette: Five boys and one girl.

Rykken: Okay, big family. And your father worked for the railroad?

Piette: Yeah, he was the railroad agent.

Rykken: Okay, what does that mean?

Piette: He was in charge of the vehicle and so forth. At Brule, it's a small town, but Calvin Coolidge, he was president at that time. His summer home was on Pine Island; just out of Brule and that's where the summer White House was at. So it was quite a job just for telegraphs because telegraphs was one of the most important things you had in those days and so it was quite an important job my dad had just for telegraphy besides being an agent, passenger agent, freight agent and everything it had there.

Rykken: Now did your dad meet Coolidge?

Piette: Oh sure, I met him, well I didn't meet him, I saw him.

Rykken: You saw him?

Piette: He came in town to church one time.

Rykken: And you remember that?

Piette: Oh, way back, just barely.

Rykken: I was going to ask you what your first political memory was. Maybe that's it.

Piette: That'd be it.

Rykken: That's interesting I remember reading about Coolidge coming into Northern Wisconsin. I didn't know it was Brule

Piette: He had quite a place up there. He had actually a trout hatchery.

Rykken: Right, he was a real fisherman.

Piette: Can you imagine places for you boat, I mean canoes having adorned frogs to tie up a boat with? That's what he had.

Rykken: What was it like to grow up in the 1930's in Wisconsin?

Piette: 1930's was quite tough although my dad was one of the very few salary people in Brule. Before I forget, one of the things that happened to my mother was very cognisive of the poor families. Almost every Sunday meal that we had there was a stranger at our table. Almost always. We ate venison year round.

Rykken: You did a lot of hunting?

An example of an Atwater Kent radio similar to one that Piette would've heard FDR on.

Piette: Oh yeah, did a lot of hunting; fishing, we only lived a half a mile from the Brule River.

Rykken: You weren't doing that just for sport, you were doing it for…

Piette: For food.

Rykken: When you say your father was salary, you mean that he was a government employee?

Piette: No, a railroad employee.

Rykken: A railroad employee which meant that kept going through the depression.

Piette: Oh yeah.

Rykken: Do you remember a lot of people losing or being out of work?

Piette: Oh yeah that was during the time of the PWA and everything else.

Rykken: So do you remember Franklin Roosevelt and do you remember the first time you would have aware of him?

Piette: Oh sure.

Rykken: Do you remember hearing him on the radio?

Piette: Oh sure, oh yeah. Radio was our main supply.

Rykken: Did you always remember having a radio in your house?

Piette: Oh yeah, our radio, our original radio was an Atwater Kent. We didn't have electricity and it was run by dry cell batteries.

Rykken: I've heard of that; I haven't seen one of those.

Piette: One time I seen them in the past few years, a dry cell was one of them that went in the flash light, the big one.

Rykken: Where did you go to school?

Piette: My schools would be Brule, Aiken Minnesota. Brule was a three room school house and in Aiken Minnesota, when we went to Aiken we went into comfort. It was the first time we went into a house that had a furnace, that had a bathroom, that had a telephone.

Rykken: When did you move to Aiken?

Piette: About 1935.

Rykken: So you were about 10, 11 years old?

Piette: Something like that. 1935, 1936 right in that area. And from there we, we were only there about a year, year and a half we went to Grantsburg, Wisconsin and we were there for quite a few years and then finally ended up in Moose Lake, Minnesota.

Rykken: Way up north. Now was your dad moving for jobs?

Piette: No, we kept moving with the company.

Rykken: Always with the railroad. So when did you graduate from high school?

Piette: 1943.

Rykken: And that was from Moose Lake?

Piette: Yeah. Moose Lake; that was my senior year.

Rykken: Was Moose Lake a big town?

Piette: It's about 12-1400. Right in that area. Not big.

Rykken: What was your impression of FDR?

Piette: FDR? As far as I'm concerned he was a terrific president.

Rykken: And why would you say that?

Piette: Because he brought the country back to life. He had all these projects and everything else to put people to work.

Rykken: I guess I was going to ask you too, I'm trying to put together you years here, do you remember where you were when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Piette: Oh yeah.

Rykken: Do you remember that moment?

Piette: Just about then, in 1941, December yeah, I think I was at school. School was across the street from my house.

Rykken: Do you remember people being kind of stunned?

Piette: Very stunned, very stunned.

Rykken: Did you have any idea at that time, you would've been 15, 16, did you have any idea that you were going to go into the military?

Piette: No, but during those years, that'd be '41, '42, no okay the summer of '41 that I was on the oar boats for a little bit. I was only on there for about a month. But the summer of 1942, I spent all summer there on the oar boats.

Rykken: What were the oar boats?

Piette: The oar boats were the ones that brought the tack from Duluth and Superior mines all the way to Ohio; Gary, Indiana.

Rykken: So you were getting the feel of being on a boat.

Piette: But I wasn't on an oar boat. I was a grain carrier. We carried grain from Duluth and Superior and at the time Port Arthur, Fort Worth, Canada. It's now a different name to Buffalo, New York.

Rykken: And this was like a summer job?

Piette: Mm-hmm.

Rykken: Okay, wow. That must have been kind of exciting for a kid.

Piette: It was.

Rykken: It really differs from working at McDonald's. What motivated you to go into the military?

Piette: I was already in the merchant marine so to speak but all my friend at Moose Lake, every single one of them that I had were all in the military so I made a decision and I told my dad about it and he said go ahead. Well I already had tow brothers in the army and so I admitted I was going to go in the Navy because I was a merchant marine at that time and then I came back to Moose Lake, Minnesota and went to the Twin Cities and I enlisted in the Navy.

Rykken: Do you think you did it because there was a war going on?

Piette: More than likely, but I knew at that point that I wanted to make it a career.

Rykken: You already had that set?

Piette: I already did.

Rykken: Had your father been a military man?

Piette: Yeah my dad was a, oh I'll tell you a real good one. My dad was in the signal corps. If you go to, you might be able to find it on the net, if you go to Moose Lake and you look at their local paper, you'll find a front page. The front page shows my dad with a telegram, they called it in the Army, the called it a signal, that he gave to "Black Jack" Pershing telling the end of the war.

Rykken: Oh my goodness. That's kind of historic.

Rykken: It's very unusual.

Piette: There's a whole front page write-up in the paper on that.

Rykken: Had he been in Europe in the war?

Piette: Oh yeah, he was in Paris.

Rykken: He was. Okay, so you grew up hearing about that or not?

Piette: Yeah, I knew that my dad was. He didn't say much.

Rykken: Well that's interesting. Can you describe, I understand that you went to Idaho for basic training. What was that like?

Piette: Farragut, Idaho.

Rykken: Yeah.

Piette: It was basic training. Basic training is basic training. It was tough, although the commander was, I don't know if you've seen a couple of movies where they were tough on them, well they were tough on us. He was tougher than most of the people. I'm not kidding. He put us in shape. We went through running and everything else at least three times a day. The rest of them only did it once. We went through the gauntlet at least three times a day. He had us in good shape.

Rykken: He tried to whip you in shape. How long did basic training last?

Piette: About six weeks. Six weeks and then I was going to go to school from basic training to signalman school and I was also company commander up there but I stayed in the barracks until school could come out and I ended up in the hospital with scarlet fever and then I was delayed going to school so I didn't get to go to school with any of the people I had in boot camp. I went separate.

Rykken: Now what does it mean that you were a signalman and a quarter master?

Piette: Okay, a signalman is visual communications. That's very easy and a quartermaster is navigation. The reason I was a signalman and a quartermaster because when I went to school, I went to signal school during the daytime. Me and another kid from Minneapolis by the name of Nelson, we didn't have nothing to do in the evening so quartermaster school of navigation was during the evening so we went to that.

Rykken: You had a busy day.

Piette: It was a full day.

Rykken: So visual communication would be like, flags?

Piette: Flags, flashing light, semaphore, and also when you're at sea, the flags that you hold down for communications really, they tell you when, say like in the task force, you have your course and speed all set up there on flags, and when you execute, the whole group executes.

Rykken: Was it hard to learn?

Piette: Not really.

Rykken: It just took a lot of repetition?

Piette: It's just repetition.

Rykken: You saw duty in, let's talk about World War Two before we get to the Korea part here, New Guinea, Admiralty Islands, Philippines. Can you describe what you were doing there?

Piette: I was amphibious at that point. I was on the landing force. We landed usually it was on the second wave. You know there has to be somebody on the beach to get communications back to the ships and we had both visual and radio people and that's what we did. We made our landing and we were right there amongst all what was happening and then we communicated back to the ships.

Rykken: Were you in any particular situation that was extremely dangerous?

Piette: Oh yes, I lost my best buddy at the Philippines on the my last run, Tacloban. I was in line four. We made the landing at Tacloban and line six, the next unit to come out, because we were way down the strength, and so line six was to take over for us and we weren't there but a week I'd say something like that and we were about to leave, but on the second day, D plus two, we were in the foxhole at night and my buddy Zeke was right here and the next morning when I woke up, he had a knife in him. I was not touched. I don't think he saw me.

Rykken: Have you seen the movie "Flags of Our Fathers?"

Piette: That's the new one, I haven't seen that one yet.

Rykken: You know I took my dad to that and I would really recommend it. He was in the European Theater but this is about Iwo Jima of course and it's quite a story. I really think you'd like. You'd get a lot out of it.

Piette: I made the, during the Korean War, [inaudible] we made the anniversary landing at Iwo Jima. We reenacted it.

Rykken: Who were you doing that with?

Piette: LCU squadron. Landed marine tanks.

Rykken: What was your opinion of the bombing of Hiroshima?

Piette: I'm glad it happened. You know why, my brother Don, he was the fourth one of us to go into the military. He was at sea ready to make the landing for Japan. We were very happy it happened.

Rykken: And then he didn't have to basically. Where were you when that happened? Do you remember?

Piette: Admiralty Islands.

Rykken: Okay, were aware of it? Or did you just hear about it after?

Piette: We heard it after it happened. We weren't aware of it when it was.

Rykken: Do you remember, I know some of this is probably hard to remember, but do you remember people talking about this different weapon, this atomic bomb, did you have an understanding of what that was?

Piette: Not at that time.

Rykken: Did you think it was just another bomb?

Piette: Oh, we knew it was a big bomb because we knew about the tests at White Sands.

Rykken: Do you feel like the people you were with, everybody was pretty much in favor of what it did.

Piette: In favor, very much in favor.

Rykken: It ended the war.

Piette: Because we could see how many people would be killed. The Japanese are a favorite of tunnels. Burial and so forth and they're hard to get out. Iwo Jima will tell you that.

Rykken: And you've seen some of that and you knew what that was going to be like. Now in between the wars, just a couple quick things there, you were involved with training of reserves?

Piette: On the Great Lakes.

Rykken: On the Great Lakes, okay.

Piette: I was stationed in Duluth at first, and we would have a PC, actually during the whole summer months, we'd be out for two weeks and come in for a week and then go out for two weeks and come in for a week, all summer long and we'd take reserves out for two weeks and train them and of course I'd have to train them all in the bridge and I'd have to train them in radio, visual communications, and as far as navigation and quartermaster.

Rykken: Now, in some of the background stuff that I read, it indicated that you did six tours to Korea and Japan during the Korean War. What did that really involve? What would be a typical thing that you were doing?

Piette: Well there we so many of them. Inchon landing, also from the Inchon landing, we'd take three Marine tanks. We wouldn't take our full company six. We'd take three Marine tanks and make jaunts up the coast. We'd land the tanks in different spots. They would go in there; we'd land them just at sunrise. They go in and spend all day in their jaunts, whatever they did, and we'd have to go in and pick them up before nightfall. And then they'd come out and the reason basically is just so they could rest, eat, and go do the same thing the next day.

Rykken: And Inchon was a very dangerous landing.

Piette: Very dangerous. Well the reason it's so dangerous is you have to remember there was a tide of twenty-two feet. You go in there, now I was skipper of an LCU, and I always kept my three forward tanks full of water so I could never be caught on the beach so, in other words, if I had to, I could pump those tanks out and get them off the beach.

Rykken: And LCU is Landing Craft…

Piette: Utility.

Rykken: Utility. Okay, what was your opinion of Harry Truman? What did you think of Truman?

Piette: Oh we thought he was quite great. Because he was more realistic as a president and he spoke the word.

Rykken: He seemed like a real person. How about MacArthur? What was your opinion of MacArthur? Do you remember?

Piette: Actually, he was a great general until near the end, when he started doing things on his own. He thought he was too big for anybody to do anything and of course Truman knew better. He just relieved him.

Rykken: So when that happened, do you remember, did you agree with it?

Piette: Yeah, we agreed with it.

Rykken: Okay, you felt that was the right thing. Had you ever seen him?

Piette: MacArthur? No.

Rykken: He would have been, of course he was at Inchon but it would've been very unlikely that you would've seen him.

Piette: No I wouldn't have seen him at all.

Rykken: Well let's get to the H-bomb. What role in the military were you playing at the time of that test?

Piette: That test, okay at first there's two entrances Eniwetok. Oh you said Inchon you mean, or Eniwetok?

Rykken: No, I was talking about the H-bomb.

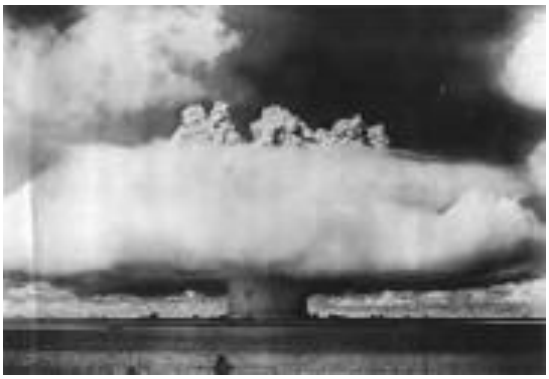
Piette: Yeah, H-bomb okay.

Rykken: Now that's the island where it takes place.

Piette: It's not an island.

Rykken: Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

Piette: It's a volcano. It's several islands. I'll get to that a little later on. I'll tell you a little something on it. It's a batch of islands the whole way around it and there's two entrances. Okay, when we first got there, we had to right away lay hydrophones in both entrances so they knew that nothing could sneak in. They didn't want anything coming into that lagoon. Then, we started, me and my buddy George, he had the 667, I had 1273 and we made a decision that he was going to take the upper lagoon and I was going to take the lower lagoon. I started out every day in the lower lagoon with my LCU. First I went to the main island and I picked up, everything was in trailers so it could get on and off in a quick hurry; always in rubber trailers. And then we were actually a service bring goods, people, material, between all the islands. We'd make a trip all the way on up and come all the way back and anchor at night. Six days a week that was our main source and George was the other one. He went all way from the upper lagoon all the way down to lower lagoon and then back up.



The H-bomb test took place in the Marshall Islands at Eniwetok.

Rykken: And this was basically to protect the site?

Piette: No, this was just hauling freight and everything you can think of because we had such a big deck that we can haul an awful lot of stuff and then when we get to each beach or wherever we made our landing at, we put down our ramp and they'd have a rubber-tired tractor come and pull off whatever was supposed to come off there and bring in empties or whatever they had going back down through the other lagoon. So we'd just travel, that's all we did. Except, when it got near the time for the H-bomb test, then I had another, I was the only U that had that. I was singled out and we had three LCUs. The other U took over my duties as far as that and I had the AE, Atomic Energy, scientists then and we went up and we planted core samples all through the whole upper lagoon. Some of them on land, most of them weren't on land, most of them were in the water and different areas.

Rykken: What were these for?

Piette: To take the test from them. How far things happened, so forth. How far radiation goes, everything, how deep it goes and all that. That's what was my job. Then, after the tests, that's when we had to go and pick them up. Now we're in bad water. It was about three or four days after the tests and we not only had the scientists, we also had so-called police from the atomic energy commission. They were measuring for radiation all the time and we had to go up and pick up all the samples. We had most of the samples picked up when they said stop, you've had your limit. We wore all kinds of badges and dosimeters, lead badges, just stacks of them and…

Rykken: To protect yourself?

Piette: To protect, I don't know how much radiation we had. And then the scientist said, "Well turn the damn thing off" and we finished and we picked up the rest of the samples and we came back down to the lower lagoon, the main part. That was the end of us. We had our limit, we had everything, and the next day they called in an LSD, Landing Ship Dock, to take me and my U to Pearl Harbor. They took us to Pearl Harbor, and we could not stay on the U then while we were in transit, and we went to Pearl Harbor and they put us in dry dock and we couldn't live on the U, we had to live ashore and they sandblasted the whole bottom and they took off all our diesel engines, took off all our mufflers, took everything that water traveled through. They even went into and redone our fresh water tanks and they got that all done, it took about two weeks and then we went back on the D and went back to Japan and Korea.

Rykken: Was this all classified?

Piette: Naturally.

Rykken: So you couldn't say anything about it.

Piette: There's one thing I have at the house. I didn't bring it. I do have a shell that came from the island, excuse me, absence of an island because the island was blown up.

Rykken: Yeah, the island was gone. I guess some of questions might seem kind of silly, but how close were you, how far away, how many miles away or whatever were you?

Piette: Well this was a tower, the tower that this was on because it was over 100, I think it was 140 feet tall, something like that and we could just see the tip of it so they had to put us about at least a dozen, fourteen, fifteen miles away on the lee side. We were out there with the flag ship it was a little closer than we were.

Rykken: Did you actually get to see the…

Piette: Oh we saw the bomb, yeah. We saw the bomb, we felt the wave, and everything.

Rykken: Did you have to…

Piette: We had glasses on.

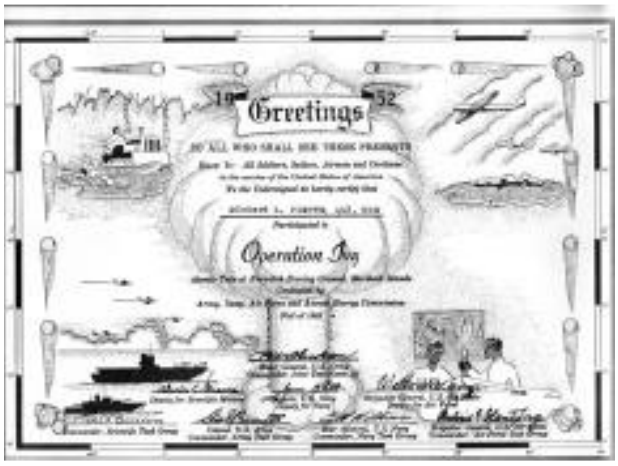
Rykken: Oh my goodness, I've seen footage of that but it's hard to... Were you afraid of being exposed to the radiation?

Piette: No.

Rykken: You didn't think about it much. It was just a part of what you were doing.

Piette: It was just what we were doing, that's all. No we weren't afraid of anything like that.

Rykken: What about the wave? What was that? Was that just a huge wave that was produced? Do you remember?



Above is the certificate given to Piette after participating in Operation Ivy, the testing of the H-bomb.

Piette: More wind than wave. It was more choppy sea more than a big wave. It was more choppy, but the wind was quite strong. They told us to not wear our caps since they'd be gone.

Rykken: Were you told explicitly at that point then that you couldn't speak about this or talk about it or how did they control that?

Piette: Well, they may have but we were out of the states anyway so…

Rykken: It didn't matter.

Piette: It didn't matter much.

Rykken: What an interesting experience. After the Korean War, and in the fifties, what was going on with you then?

Piette: Well after 1956, when I left the LCU squadron, from 1950 to 1956, is when I was in the LCU squadrons and I left there and came back to Great Lakes, came to Great Lakes and I was

Piette: Well the Murray was, most people don't recognize or know, that the cold war, we had a task force off the east coast and the west coast. All the time and a submarine and we were always looking for Russian submarines or Russian crawlers. Every time we had one, they were followed. Some destroyer or somebody was following them at all times. They were always kept under coordinates and that's what we did. One day, we were going out for our normal two weeks tour, out there, and as soon as we got out to sea, we turned south immediately to Jacksonville, Florida. Came to port immediately at Jacksonville, Florida and they put a whole new bunch of radio gear on our bridge. All highly secret radio gear and it was all locked up and they put that on there and then we left there and we went to Tortuga. Tortuga in the Caribbean is a shallow spot. There's no land there. It's a shallow spot. So we anchored there for a little bit, got everything together and we painted over all the numbers of the ship, the name of the ship, and took canvas and put it around the stack boxes and painted it gray so they didn't show, even the life preservers, turned them inside out so you couldn't see the ship. Everybody on board wore a t-shirt and denims. No caps, no insignia tell nobody. We did carry a flag. You couldn't see it. So we first went towards Nicaragua wherever this was all coming from you know, we went and we escorted that whole landing force.

Rykken: That was going to Cuba?

Piette: To Cuba, to Bay of Pigs. And we brought them over there and they made the landing. Now, the Bay of Pigs was done under Eisenhower's campaign but it wasn't executed until Kennedy took office. Kennedy had instructions what to do from Eisenhower and he never carried them out.

Rykken: Particularly no air strikes.

Piette: We made a certain amount of air strikes but to their runways to disable their… but the final air strike was not made. Number one. Number two, there was supposed to be a radio station down there to broadcast to all the Cuban people to up rise. It was not done. These are just some of the very simple things. There was a lot of other stuff that hadn't been done because there was a lot of other stuff that was supposed to be done inside Cuba by the other people.

Rykken: It was a terrible embarrassment.

Piette: Very terrible, and now when Castro came with his tank force and everything else, came all the way to the beach there at the Bay of Pigs, excuse me, just got to come back here a little bit. One of the other reasons why the invasion went down they had everything in one basket, so to speak. They had all their spare gasoline, fuel, bombs, ammunition and everything else in one ship and that was the only aircraft that got through and put a bomb on that ship. They were done. Now, the concept of the Cuban invasion was a lot different than what people think. They think we were supposed to go in and invade Cuba and go take it over. That wasn't the concept. The concept was to take this one area that was basically all they had was one road into it, it had a big air strip and the concept was to take this and hold it and then we are the Cuban people, come help us.

Rykken: Because they were using Cuban exiles and people that wanted to protest.

Piette: Everything else; that's what they wanted. But see that was the real concept of it and then the Americans and everybody else was supposed to come in and help. Now, during the

Bay of Pigs and so forth, if you looked up in the sky, you swore there that was just a thousand, a thousand ants up there. All air crafts; ready to do anything anybody yelled, but of course it was never given.

Rykken: Isn't that something? Well, and what about, let's go from that to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Piette: Okay, the Cuban Missile Crisis we were in port at Norfolk and we were a brand new ship, excuse me, that's not on the Murray now, I left the Murray and went to New York ship building at Camden, New Jersey for, I was there at that time forced, to work with the ship yard and so forth on the bridges of all these ships to know what we wanted, besides all the normal shipbuilding to bring them up to date with the other things we wanted on the board and that's what my job was and that was when they were building six DDGs there at that time. One through six.

Rykken: What's a DDG?

Piette: Guided Missile Destroyer. Brand new concept and then as I got on, it was almost a year and I decided that that's enough of this stuff. There was too much politic. So I chose Guided Missile Number 4, the Lawrence, to ship out on and commission, so I'm a plank-holder in that ship and then I left there and we took our maiden cruise and everything and then went to Norfolk, we weren't there very long, and then the Cuban Missile Crisis came. Then we were hauled out of there immediately, that was when that ship was coming, they were following it though Gibraltar and so forth, I don't know if you followed that…

Rykken: A little bit.

Piette: Okay, there was one Russian ship that had these missiles on their deck. We were told to get there and halt that ship. Well, when we took the plates, they're in the safe, they can't be used for normal work, took those plates out and put them in the boilers. Now we could travel 45 knots, for a big ship, that's fast at that time. By the time we got to where this ship was at, we didn't quite make there to them when the Russians told them to turn and go back but we were out of oil so we had to call for a tanker, come on out and they finally made it out there and they loaded us back up and we were stationed off of Cuba. The reason that we were chosen again was because I knew all the flag markings for all the different ships and consequently that's what we did. We steamed back and forth and get all the ships that were coming and going and I would take all the flag markings.

Rykken: And this was the blockade? So you spanned a lot of years there and a lot of different events.

Piette: Twenty years.

Rykken: My goodness. From World War Two up until the missile crisis. And then in 1963 is when you…

Piette: May of 1963 I retired.

Rykken: And that's when you came to Black River. I have about three more questions for you here. Do you talk about your experiences as a veteran very much?

Piette: Only with some of my buddies. Now my, I don't know if you know Guy Hagen?

Rykken: Sure.

Piette: Okay.

Rykken: Guy kind of put me on to interviewing you because he kind of shied away from it [laughing] so part of the reason you're here…

Piette: Well Guy has got some awful good stuff because he was in the Battle of the Bulge you know and so forth.

Rykken: I know he does and I couldn't quite get him.

Piette: But we talk a lot between, well we retired both in the same month in 1963.

Rykken: And was he from here too?

Piette: Hixton.

Rykken: Yeah he was from here. Why do you think the Korean War is, it's often referred to as the "forgotten war", why do you think that is? Why do you think it gets so little attention compared to World War Two and Vietnam?

Piette: Because we always kept troops there. That's why it's a forgotten war. We're still at war.

Rykken: We're still at war, technically.

Piette: Technically we're almost still at war there.

Rykken: You know, my son was there last summer. He was at the DMT with some of his training that he was doing and we talked about this and why, and I just think it's interesting even in doing this project we've kind of had trouble even getting people to kind of come forward on the Korean War.

Piette: I thought of an incident that happened here just a few years ago. They had the anniversary of the Inchon Landing and they have a little park here Foodoo, Frank Wood was his name. Foodoo was another skipper of another LCU in the same squadron as we were, although he left during the Korean War and he left and went on to a landing ship dock. But anyway, he went back there. Foodoo went back there and he was in the Inchon Landing and so forth and went through the park and he was with a group of Americans and so forth. Generals and everything and he went through the park and there was no mention in that park of anything about that landing. So he went to the Korean general and he asked the Korean general, "who put you ashore so you could fight this?" "Well the amphibs did." "Where is it?" "Oh!" he said, "We forgot all about that." So later on they had a big plaque put in there about the landing and so forth and he sent pictures to Foodoo and so forth. I got one someplace. I don't know where it's at of the amphibs that landed there and took them ashore.

Rykken: In other words, they don't get much attention, but nothing would've really happened if they hadn't been able to do what they were doing.

Piette: Well people don't think much of the amphibious force. You saw the landings and so forth of Omaha Beach and so forth. Where did those ships come from? All those landing crafts? The amphibs.

Rykken: One of the really gripping parts of that movie [Saving Private Ryan] for me when I first saw it, you've seen like the first 45 minutes of that movie, but it's the part where some of the troops were getting off too soon. You know they were drowning. The packs were taking them right down and they were caught. It's very dangerous.

Piette: I'll give you another good instance of what can happen, what did happen. Camp Pendleton, you know where that's at don't you. We made an awful lot of practice landings with the Marines at Camp Pendleton. So one day some of the big wigs got together and they wanted a landing that was all fog, bad ocean, bad weather, a real bad weather landing. Well what had happened was that the weather was so bad that it was causing havoc on the beach because the surf was running parallel to the beach and when surf was running parallel to the beach, it has a habit of taking the sand and so forth from that beach and building a blockade out here. You don't see it but it's there. So when you come and land and hit that thing and here's the beach way over here. How do you get there? Well, we know how to get there. I know how to get there. All you do is, we were a three propeller ship, all we do is we run our middle propeller as hard, fast as we can and take the two outside propellers and run them a turn and wash it, wash it right out and then go, but had happened, it wasn't my U, I can't remember whose U it was, hit that and thought he was on the beach, dropped, the ramp, tank went off, three men dead.

Rykken: Pretty deep water.

Piette: Three men gone. That was the first thing happened. It wasn't an hour or two later that they were taking a tank out of a hole that one transports and even the chaplin was there with them down in the hole, there were Marines that were taking it on out and one of the chalks let loose and started swinging that tank and the chaplin was killed. I guess you know what happened, everything was cancelled.

Rykken: Now, I have one other question, having served in East Asia, and being familiar with the situation there, what was your opinion of what happened in Vietnam? I know that's a big question. Did you feel supportive, did you think it was the right thing when we were doing it or did you think it was just being done wrong?

Piette: I am a veteran of Vietnam because it started when I was still in the military so I'm still a Vietnam veteran.

Rykken: Now that was in the very early stages…

Piette: Although I was never there, but I'm still a veteran of that era, but it's a difficult one but from the very beginning, you got to remember the French moved out of there. It was too much for them, they couldn't handle it and they should've gotten out of there just like we are today in Iraq and they should've gotten out of there a lot sooner than what they did because it was a none win situation.

Rykken: They're caught in civil war.

Piette: It's a civil war, it's just a clot in civil war again. And we're in the same thing again right now. Just one other thing I forgot. During the Korean War, two things, the first one was prisoner exchange. My U was on that. The prisoners in the Korean War were held in an island way off the coast. The island was big enough to handle this. It's kind of mountainous and it was a different way we handled the Korean prisoners. Basically all we held was a little area and

the Korean prisoners had to govern and do everything themselves. All we did was bring in food and more prisoners and this and that into this one area and it was handed out. It was a different concept. They killed a lot of their own people. Number two, the other one I was on, Kymori Shey Shem off the coast of China. I carry two, I carry a badge and a ribbon on that one.

Rykken: These were islands that China was paying great attention to.

Piette: Bombarding from the coast, firing cannons on and we had to take the people. Now these were Taishan people. Taishan, China. These people were of the old descent the old grace of where the women still wound their feet and everything and when we got there, basically they were living in caves to stay away from the bombarding and then we had to evacuate them off. We started at Kymori first, that was the one that was advertised, Kymori. Never heard about Taishan. Taishan was closer than Kymori. What we did was put a air craft carrier and some destroyers and everything in between there and China. Better not shoot, you know what's going to happen to you [laughing].

Rykken: I read about this you know.

Piette: You better not shoot, so we evacuated it all and of course everyone left.

Rykken: It was a show-down.

Piette: Well, I don't have any other questions unless you want to ask anything. I got the highlights. There's a lot there; you've got quite the story. I thank you for coming in.

Arnold Olson

1926-1951

Arnold Olson was a young man from Black River Falls with a bright future. The annual from the year he graduated, 1943, depicted him as a bright student with a hopeful future. He entered the Naval Air Corps soon after graduation and was relieved of active duty in 1947. He received his bachelor degree in 1950 from the University of Wisconsin in biological chemistry. While working towards another degree, he was called back into service as the Korean War was starting. In 1951 he was sent to Korea where his plane was shot down and he was marched to a camp at Chang Song, North Korea and died of malnutrition on October 25, 1951. He was listed as missing in action in July of 1951 and his death was finally confirmed by a fellow squadron member in 1953. His remains were brought back to Black River Falls for a memorial service on April 30, 1955 at Evangelical Lutheran Church.

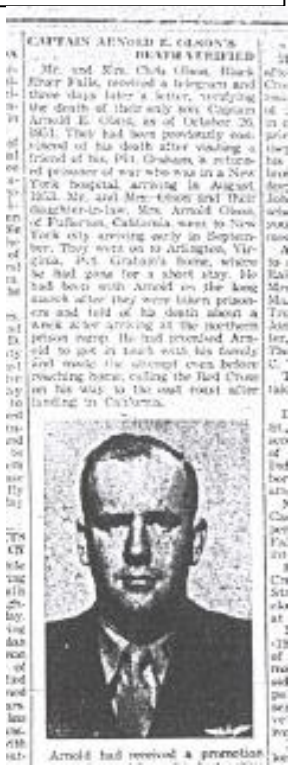
About Arnold Olson:

"Oh he was likeable person, Arnie was… He was a friend of mine and a couple of years behind me in high school. Well I saw him off and on when I was back in Black River doing school and so on but I ended up being one of the pallbearers when he was brought back from Korea."

-Dr. John Noble

"His backyard and our backyard backed up to each other when we were growing up… He was a nice looking impressive young man, boy. He was the kind that you would of have liked to have had for a boyfriend, you know if you were his age. He was very nice, very friendly, very alert, probably had a wonderful future ahead of him, undoubtedly, and he had parents who would have backed it up... He came from a good family and it's a tragedy."

-Mary Van Gorden



CAPTAIN ARNOLD E. OLSON'S DEATH VERIFIED

Mr. and Mrs. Chris Olson, Black River Falls, received a telegram and three days later a letter, verifying the death of their only son, Captain Arnold E. Olson, as of October 25, 1951. They had been previously informed of his death after visiting a friend of his, Pfc. Graham, a returned prisoner of war who was in a New York hospital, arriving in August. Mr. and Mrs. Olson and their daughter-in-law, Mrs. Arnold Olson, of Fullerton, California went to New York city arriving early in September. They went on to Arlington, Virginia, Pfc. Graham's home, where he had gone for a short stay. He had been with Arnold on the long march after they were taken prisoners and told of his death about a week after arriving at the northern prison camp. He had promised Arnold to get in touch with his family and made the attempt even before reaching home, calling the Red Cross on his way to the east coast after landing in California.

Arnold had received a promotion