

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

# Willis Hansen-Experiences of WWI

By Willis Hansen

December 9, 1973

## Box 1 Folder 48

Oral Interview conducted by Karen Frandsen

Transcribed by Kurt Hunsaker      November 2004

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is Oral history. I am Karen Frandsen. Today on December 9, 1973, I'm interviewing Willis Hansen. Our general topic is World War I.

KF: Mr. Hansen, when were you born?

WH: February the 29<sup>th</sup>, 1896.

KF: And where were you born?

WH: Right here, in Goshen.

KF: In Goshen, Idaho. The first baby born in Goshen. Could you give the spelling of your first and last name so we could get this right?

WH: W-I-L-L-I-S H-A-N-S-E-N

KF: And you've lived Goshen all your life?

WH: All my life.

KF: OK. What has your occupation been?

WH: Farming and storekeeper.

KF: Ok, Mr. Hansen, what were you doing when World War I was declared?

WH: I was faming.

KF: And what was your first reaction?

WH: Well, I was just like all the rest, I volunteered and went.

KF: Could you tell us a little bit about when you went to volunteer?

WH: Well, we just went down there, and there was a bunch of us together, and 21 of us enlisted together.

KF: Where was it you went to enlist?

WH: Blackfoot.

KF: Did they have any write-up on this in the paper?

WH: Well, they did after.

KF: Could you tell us a little bit about what that said?

WH: Well, there was 21 of us enlisted together, and they never sent us off, only with a Sheriff Gazell seen us off; and then one of the boys was reporter, and he took and wrote to his dad, at Sterling, Idaho, and they put it in the paper and from then out they was there and seen the boys out.

KF: Ok. Where did you go for your basic training?

WH: Vancouver Barracks, Washington.

KF: How long were you there?

WH: About one month.

KF: Did you have any guns, or anything like this; was it fairly well-equipped?

WH: Yes, well-equipped.

KF: And then from your basic training, where did you go?

WH: Went to Camp Merritt, New Jersey, and then from there across to Hoboken or got on near the Statue of Liberty and sailed for France.

KF: Could you tell anything that happened on the boat trip over?

WH: When we was going across, it was rough and a lot of boys was seasick. And when we got within two days of France, there came an alert out, and they put us out on the deck with our bayonets and canteens. And then the sub chasers come around there and the Germans didn't come in and blast us.

KF: Ok. Then where did you land when you got there?

WH: Brest, France.

KF: From there, what are some of the things you did?

WH: We went from Brest to the old Napoleon Fort and camped there for two days and went back and done stevedore work on the harbor.

KF: Is this where you started doing building and things like that?

WH: No, we went from there to Mont Moian; and there we put in bakeries and hospitals and a big supply depot there and water tanks and an ice plant.

KF: Ok. Here could you just kind of outline some of the places you went?

WH: Well, from there we went on up to the front in Alsace Lorraine, and we was in there thirty days. Then we come out from there and went into Bussang, Germany, went to the Muse Argonne offensive. And from the Muse Argonne offensive, we went up through Stoney at the Argonne Drive; and they blowed our bridges out, and our trucks couldn't get through, so we repaired these. And we worked night and day there at Authe till we got them, and then we went back towards Verdun.

KF: You did some front line fighting here?

WH: Yes. Well, we was on the front all that time. We was right in the front, couldn't keep with the Germans at all. We could find dead front, couldn't keep with the Germans at all. We could find dead soldiers, horses, and kitchens, and all equipment all over.

KF: And the Germans just kept ahead of you all this time?

WH: Yes, we couldn't keep up with them.

KF: Is this where you mentioned before with the gas masks?

WH: Yes, here at, oh I can't think of the name of the bridge there. We guarded a big railroad bridge and a tunnel. We stayed in there a month guarded a big railroad bridge and tunnel. We stayed in there a month. Then we left there. We heard rumors that we was going home, but they didn't come to be true. Then we left there and come back down through France; and as we was coming back through France, we hit a French railroad car put across the tracks. That put us back for twelve hours. And then after we got that we come into Brest. And then we come into Brest, we marched four mile up into the Pontanezen Barracks which was nothing but a Napoleon fort when we went though the cootieizer and got some clothes, fooled around for four or five days doing sports and drills and stuff. Then we went back through the cootieizer again. And they gave us a leave to go downtown. We went downtown; and while we was downtown, we got orders to get back and load our packs and start for home. So we got on the boat, and we didn't leave till about 12 o'clock that night. We come back on the "America" or not "America," "Orizaba" rather, and landed at Newport News, Virginia, and form there we come back to Fort Douglas, Wyoming, and was mustered out.

KF: Could you explain, you mentioned a cootieizer, could you explain this?

WH: Well, when this cootieizer, that's when we was up in Germany, or up in there, we went into an old German camp, and the boys got cooties. They're what's called graybacks or cooties. This cootieizer, they took our clothes and put it through this hot steam, and they shrunk them all up and like that and that killed them all; then we had to take baths with this here disinfectant. And that what cooties was.

KF: You mentioned one time before the interview one time when you thought maybe you got them. Could you explain that to us?

WH: Well, after we come back into France to Montmoin, I hadn't got a cootie all the way through. When we come back there, there was a medic in the guard house come in and sat on my bed, and I found three, and I thought I had a million. SO I washed my clothes with gasoline and took a hot bath with disinfectant, and I never did see any more.

KF: About how far along in the war was this?

WH: It was the latter part. After the war was over, and we was coming back.

KF: Could you explain how you felt when you heard about the Armistice being signed?

WH: Well, the boys about shot all the ammunition they had, and they hoped and yelled all night long.

KF: And about what time did you start coming back?

WH: Well, we got on the boat about six o'clock, and then we didn't leave there till twelve.

KF: Did anything happen on the way back?

WH: No, nothing happened. A little rough seas was all. A few of the boys seasick.

KF: Could you explain maybe how you felt about President Wilson at this time, maybe his ideas about the League of Nations, how you felt about that?

WH: Well, we thought he done fine. We thought he done a hundred.

KF: Were you in agreement with his League of Nations?

WH: Yes.

KF: You were all for that?

WH: Yes.

KF: How did you fell about the Idaho governor, Governor Alexander, during the war?

WH: Well, we thought he was alright too, but we didn't know too much about it being over there.

KF: Did you fell a patriotic feeling from being in the war?

WH: Sure, that's natural.

KF: Could you tell us about the Liberty War Bond Drives?

WH: Well, when they had a drive there in Portland, Oregon, we was just across the river from Vancouver Barracks, and we paraded through the town, and we had a band out, and they got a good collection of bonds. Well, for us doing that, the school teacher there at Portland, they put on parties and stuff and got us a band fund. Raised quite a bit. The government hadn't issued no instruments. We took that they got for this fund and used it to buy sugar and beans and stuff like that for food rationing.

KF: Could you tell about what you found in Germany and France among the people there?

WH: Well, in France after you get out of the larger cities, they lived in the house, always rock houses, and they lived in one end and they had their cows and stuff, horses, and what they had, goats, in the other end, and then they'd put their manure outside the door; and their grain, they plowed part of the ground with cows, milk cows, and horses; and then when they thrashed they had a treading mill. If they didn't have that treading mill, they'd put it in the barn doors and thrash the grain. They flail it out like we do, and they always cut that grain with a scythe outfit. And up in Germany they was a little cleaner than they was in France, and they had about the same thing. They harvested the crops and most, they raised a lot of grapes and they had them on high side hills where they'd walk up and just put little places in and that's where they raised their vineyards. Well, then they'd go clear to the top of the mountain to put their farm, had the farm where they raised the vegetables and grain and stuff like that; and they used a two-wheel cart. They used their cows and stuff same as they did in France.

KF: Could you mention any of the things that were sent to you by people?

WH: I got one of these helmets that putt over your head with eyes and mouth out and a pair of sox and a pair of mittens. And I was in Company D 318<sup>th</sup> Engineers, 6<sup>th</sup> Division Regulars.

KF: We want to thank you very much, and this is a tape that will be placed in the Ricks College Library for use by future researchers. This has been Oral History with Karen Frandsen doing the interviewing.