

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

T.A. Atkinson – Life During WWI

By T.A. Atkinson

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Box 1 Folder 6

Oral Interview conducted by Randy Sutton

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi January 2005

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This is an Oral History. I am Randy Sutton. Today I am going to interview Thomas Atwell Atkinson. The general topic will be Idaho in World War I.

RS: Me. Atkinson, where were you born?

TA: Lyman, Idaho.

RS: How long have you lived in Idaho?

TA: All but thirteen years of my life.

RS: Which thirteen years were these?

TA: From 1922 to 1935.

RS: Where were your parents born?

TA: In Utah.

RS: And you have been a farmer ever since you were discharged from the armed services?

TA: No, I spent thirteen years in an oil refinery in California.

RS: Were you drafted into the army?

TA: No, I enlisted.

RS: Will you tell me a little about your enlistment. What the circumstances were, and why you decided to enlist?

TA: My older brother was drafted, and I wasn't old enough, see, so I enlisted so I could go with him.

RS: What was your age when you enlisted?

TA: Seventeen.

RS: How old was your brother?

TA: Nineteen.

RS: What was his name?

TA: Wendo Atkinson.

RS: So they signed you at the age of 17?

TA: Yes.

RS: Wasn't there a Constriction Law to hold the ages between 18 and 30?

TA: There was, if I remember right, but you could enlist younger.

RS: Were there many people around this (Rexburg) area that were drafted?

TA: They were all drafted that came under that age. The only way they didn't go was if they couldn't pass the physical examination. But they were all drafted, I think the age was, between the ages of 18 and 30.

RS: Were you drafted in 1917?

TA: Yes.

RS: Were thee any kids under 18 that enlisted other than yourself?

TA: I can't remember of any others from around here besides myself.

RS: Where did you go after you enlisted?

TA: Logan, Utah

RS: How long were you there?

TA: Three months. That's quite a record isn't it? But it did me a lot of good.

RS: That was just your boot camp?

TA: Yes. Then the Armistice was signed, and we were all mustared out.

RS: Everyone was discharged as soon as the war was over?

TA: Yes. We were due to be shipped over to Europe the next month, if the war hadn't been stopped.

RS: Did you go to the Logan with your brother?

TA: Yes.

RS: What were the conditions of your camp? Were they basically the same as boot camp today?

TA: I imagine it's probably the same today. I'll tell you that training is good for anybody. I never knew how to eat until I went into the army. I learned how to eat. We had to hike 15 miles carrying a 30 pound pack. They had a truck follow along behind picking up those that couldn't make it. I made it about 10 miles, and my legs got to hurting, and I ended up in the truck. I remember that it's good training, though. It helped me all through the rest of my life.

RS: Did you enlist at the beginning of the war?

TA: No it was just about over. I was only in three months when the war ended.

RS: So they drafted these men during the middle of the war?

TA: Yes, all through the war. This was the last draft.

RS: What were the conditions here in Idaho like during the war?

TA: You mean financially?

RS: Yes, financially.

TA: Well, financially there wasn't much finance anywhere at that time. Everyone as just living. There were no wealth and no poor. They were all about the same, lucky if they had a car.

RS: Were your parents farmers?

TA: Yes.

RS: Were they asked by the government to increase production as a patriotic gesture?

TA: I don't remember. I imagine they was.

RS: They say that a lot of them around were.

TA: They did whether they was asked to or not, because they were all very patriotic at that time. They were very patriotic.

RS: At boot camp, they told me that a lot of the men didn't have enough guns to go around. Some of the men just trained and did their drills and carried wooden guns. Did you have real guns or just drill with wooden guns?

TA: They were called field pieces. They were never called guns. It was a field piece. We had the best equipment of everything. The pay was good, 30 dollars a month. They kept out 10 dollars for insurance and some others, I don't remember what, but we would get 20 dollars greenback every month.

RS: It was probably a lot better pay than most people got, right?

TA: I don't remember what the pay was. It wasn't too much. It was good, but not too much. I know a lot of soldiers were getting money from home if they went to picture shows or monkeyed around any.

RS: But \$20 was enough to live on easy enough?

TA: Yes, but about three days after payday, there would be about three guys in the outfit with all the money, playing cards and shooting craps. I like to think about what they called P.E. We would have physical exercise every morning, but we called it painful exertion. I was a pretty fast runner at the time, and this old Ute would stand off 30 or 40 feet from us and take off running until someone caught him. I used to pick him up before he knew what was happening. He'd always put me clear in the back before he blew his whistle. He'd always wait till I got clear in the back, and then he would take off.

RS: How many men were stationed there at Logan?

TA: Three hundred, that's what they call a company. It takes 300 men to make a company.

RS: Your whole company was about to be shipped to Europe when the war ended?

TA: Yes, inside of a month. They was getting us ready.

RS: Were you looking forward to going to Europe?

TA: Yes, that is what I enlisted for.

RS: What were your feelings then when they signed the Armistice?

TA: I was glad to get home but disappointed I didn't get to go.

RS: Do you remember any feelings toward President Wilson?

TA: No, it was all patriotism. They teach that to you in the army. They make you patriotic if you're not already in their talks and in everything they do. They make you really patriotic. They do that now I imagine.

RS: What did your parents think about you enlisting?

TA: They wanted me to go so we would both (his brother) be together. The next draft would have got me if the war had gone on. I'd have gone the next year anyway. At that time nobody thought the war would ever be over.

RS: So it was a big surprise when the war ended?

TA: Yes, it was a big surprise.

RS: Was it a big surprise when the war started?

TA: I don't remember how long the war was going on when I enlisted.

RS: It began May of 1917.

TA: No it was before that. We were only in the war a year then? No I'm sure that's wrong. I know a lot of fellows overseas for 8 and 9 months. I think anyway that there were guys in Europe for 2 years at least. How could you find out? I thought the guys had two year in Europe in the army, I'm sure. For heaven's sake, it was over a year.

RS: You were discharged in December?

TA: December, 1918. It was 1918 when I was in the army. I thought it was '17 but it was '18.

RS: (Reading the discharge slip) You enlisted into the army the 21st of October, 1918 and was discharged the 21st of December 1918. So you did serve just exactly three months.

TA: I got the same discharge as them fellows that was overseas, and I belonged to the American Legion. While I was in, all of the soldiers thought a lot of the Salvation Army. They helped us out a lot. You could always hear the fellows talk good things about the Savation Army.

Mrs. Atkinson read from a World Book, "World War I erupted in 1914."

RS: When did the United States declare war?

TA: I know it was over a year, because Wallace Clark was in there three years. Of course, he might have been in after it was over for occupational reasons or something, but I couldn't say for sure.

Mrs. Atkinson read from her book, "The United States declared war on April 6, 1917."

TA: April 6, that would make it about a year and a half. These fellows that were in for so long were held over on the occupational deal.

RS: So you don't remember what life was like around here during the war time then?

TA: It was good times, I think, financially. I can't remember any hardships I was trying to think if there was any what you call rationing at that time, but I can't remember if there was or not. There probably was but I can't remember.

Mrs. Atkinson (Millie Lake): "I remember when the Armistice was signed. They built a big bonfire in the middle of Main Street in Rexburg, and everybody was out dancing around the fire."

TA: We had quite a few killed from around here. I know George Briggs' boy died and Fickstead boy from out at Cedar's Point.

Mrs. Atkinson: I had a cousin that was over in Germany that was gassed real bad, and they shot his whole pack off from his back while he was laying in a trench, and he was gassed real bad.

RS: Was he from around here?

Mrs. Atkinson: He was from Teton Basin.

TA: I imagine that was a lot different than any since, because they used horses and mules in that first war. Wallace Clark was in what they called the cavalry. I've heard him tell me he was harnessing a bunch mules in a shed, and one of these shells hit knocking the shed all to pieces and killing some mules, but not hurting him a bit. So it would be a lot different in the army than now days. Think of an army with horses or mules today. They wouldn't go very far. You can't realize what we had at that time.

RS: When you got discharged, did you come home on the railroad?

TA: Yes.

RS: How long did that trip take you, any idea?

TA: We laid over where we had to spend the night and had to wait till the next morning to get a train out.

RS: Were railroads the principle transportation at the time?

TA: Yes. We had to catch some trains from Logan to take us over to Tremonton, I think, and over in that country we got on a train. There was no railroad in Logan. We went down in a chain-drive car called a Metz that drives by chain drive. I remember the chain came off down around Pocatello, and we had to get out and put the chain back on. Uncle Jess Shurtleff took I and Wondo and a lawyer from Rexburg, I think his name was Thuron (Dick Smith's wife's brother). He was a lawyer, and he was drafted. Jess took three of us down in that chain-drive Metz. This lawyer had a funny habit of spitting. He would say a few words and spit, say a few words and spit. He washed dishes for about a week. They had him on K.P. trying to break him from that habit. He couldn't stop spitting.

RS: Were the men at your camp from Idaho and Utah mainly?

TA: They was all from Idaho and Utah, that's right. They was from Teton Basin. St. Anthony, Sugar City, Rexburg, and all over this area.

RS: Do you remember when you were home your parents buying any War Bonds or Liberty Loan?

TA: No, I don't remember, if they did at that time or not.

Millie said her dad bought some. "Most people did buy some if they had the money. If they had the money, they bought them."

RS: What kind of a set-up was that? Just about like buying savings bonds today?

TA: Probably. I can't remember that. I couldn't have bought some.

RS: Didn't have enough money.

TA: Yes. I'll tell you everybody was sure hating the Kaiser. All the songs said something about him. They talked about him like they do about Nixon. He wasn't much good.

RS: Did the attitude of the people seem to change after we got out of the war or did the patriotism still remain?

TA: Oh yes. They were still patriotic. They've always been. In the next war, they were patriotic, too. This here Vietnam War was the only one that wasn't patriotic. Of course, that was never declared war, so it wasn't was. I don't know what they call it, though. It cost us more money and more money lives than any of the others, but it wasn't war.

RS: So did the U.S. declaring war make a difference?

TA: Yes.

RS: Did you ever hear of any stories of battles overseas?

TA: No, I heard a big story about a prisoner of war for four years, but that wasn't true. Not many stories. It wasn't long enough to get much history of it. Like you say, it only lasted a year and six months. And it's so long ago.

RS: Word probably didn't travel fast at that time.

TA: They was training me to be a radio operator. I could sent and receive messages on the Morris code. Radio operator. That was something new. It was just coming out. I could send and receive code messages. That's what they was training me for.

RS: Were most of the men just being training for the front line battle?

TA: No, most of them were being training for specialties like me-flagman and signalmen.

RS: When you went to camp, was it much like you expected it would be?

TA: Oh, pretty much. We was treated good. When we went in, the Wyoming boys was just going out and being shipped to Europe. We come in and took their place. Our cots was on the Jim Smart Gymnasium there. Have you ever been there? At the Utah Agricultural College.

RS: No.

TA: It was just like coming home to me, because I had been down there to school the year before. They had good facilities. All in all it was really good. The eats wasn't so good. Milk was canned milk diluted with water, no cow's milk.

RS: Can you remember what the city of Rexburg was like when you left?

TA: Just about like it is now. I think the sidewalks and maybe Main Street was paved. The business district is much like now except older buildings.

RS: After you got out, are you glad you went?

TA: You bet ya, because at that time if you had a discharge from the army you could get on jobs and that was the first thing they could ask you. It helped on getting jobs and positions.

RS: Were there many men who were draft-dodgers?

TA: I can't remember of any. I never heard of any. That would have been a crime at that time. Things were that patriotic. Nody even thought of it.

Millie remembers: "They used a lot of poison gas in that war. So many boys that came back had been gased, and it really wrecked their health."

Mr. Atkinson tells her she wasn't very old only twelve.

She contends she was thirteen.

TA: For years after that Armistice Day, boy, they celebrated Armistice Day. It's about drug out now, but boy, I'm telling you the stores were closed, and it was a big deal. Everybody was patriotic.

RS: Veteran's Day isn't much today.

TA: No, things has changed.

Mrs. Atkinson: There's been all these other wars since. There's been too many wars now.

TA: I can't figure how this world is now. I don't think there's any patriotism at all now.

RS: I don't even know what it would be like, living in a country that was very patriotic.

TA: The fourth of July, that used to be a big day. That's when we got our Independence. They used to really celebrate that day. Lyman and Archer used to have big celebrations.

RS: Are Lyman and Archer much the same then as they are now?

TA: Yes, but Lyman is smaller than it was then. We used to have a store, a Post Office, and a pool hall. But there are a lot more homes, and a lot of families moving into the ward.

RS: Were there very many people around here that had cars?

TA: There was very few.

RS: Did they have any roads to speak of?

TA: No.

Mrs. Atkinson: You used to skate into Rexburg, didn't you?

TA: We used to skate from Lyman into Thorton. I don't think this is Lorenzo Lane was in here at that time. The road used to go down through our field. The Archer people going to Rigby or Idaho Falls went down through our field, down through the brush to Lorenzo. I don't think this road was in at that time. Everybody in the country went right through our old places. We had an old house that burned down a long time ago, and there was a road that came down from Tim's (Robison) house, right down through the brush.

RS: Grandma, can you remember of any food rationing?

Mrs. Atkinson: I remember we had brown bread at that time, but I can't remember if it was rationed or not. We had to use kind of brown flour with the white flour, so flour was rationed, or at least we had to use this substitute.

TA: The flu was bad at that time. There was a lot of fellows that died down at Logan from the flu.

RS: Was there a lot of people around here that died?

TA: There was a lot of people around here that died. It was a slaughter through here. And down there (at Logan) there was a lot that died. The only medicine they had at that time was aspirin. Everything was pretty near aspirin, and it was a cure-all. That's all they had. Now they've got a million pills.

RS: Do you remember when you came back there were a lot of people you knew that had died of the flu then?

TA: Yes. I can remember three right off-hand from Lyman.

Millie remembers, "War Bonds they called them. Everybody was buying war bonds during the first World War. Everybody bought all the war bonds they could. And I remember this brown flour we had to eat, and it didn't make very good bread. It was heavy, kind of bran. Sugar was rationed, too.

RS: It makes you wonder if they are going to ration gas now.

Mrs. Atkinson: It sure does make you wonder what is going to happen.

RS: Well, is there anything else you specifically remember?

TA: I was writing to a girl back here at that time.

Mrs. Atkinson: It wasn't me I was only thirteen.

RS: What happened to her? Did she die of the flu?

TA: No, she got married when I got back.

Mrs. Atkinson: There were a lot of the flags flying at that time. Everybody had a flag either in their window or somewhere during the war. There's a picture of their costumes. They wore what they called "leggings." They used to wrap their legs with leggings. They had long strips and they would wrap their legs. They didn't have caps like they do now. They had those hats. They wore those long trench coats.

TA: I had a lot of old army pictures, they all burned in the old house. They wore those long trench coats. Everybody that was in the service had one of them old trench coats that they wore when they came home.

Logan at that time was a big army training camp. They had taken it right over. They quit the schools for the army training camp.

Mrs. Atkinson: Every time the train would go down, I remember us going down to the depot to see the soldiers get on. Everybody in town would go down to the depot to see the boys leave. There would be a band and a big parade to see the boys off on their trip.

TA: They had a big party for I and Wodo when we left. Lyman and Archer all got together to give us a big send-off.

TA: Well, there wasn't so many people then. There's a lot of people now. Everybody knew each other and knew each others business.

Mrs. Atkinson: And the Armistice. I don't remember what time it was, 10 or 11 o'clock, but and everything in the town began to ring. There was a big bonfire.

RS: I'd like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Atkinson for the interview today, on behalf of Ricks College, and say that this tape and transcript will be placed in the Ricks College library for educational purpose. Thank you very much.