

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

James H. Southwick – Life during WWII

By James H. Southwick

October 28, 2004

Box 6 Folder 24

Oral Interview conducted by Rebekah Bodily

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham and David Garmon January 2006

Brigham Young University – Idaho

RB: When and where were you born?

JS: March 9th, 1935 in the Idaho Falls LDS Hospital.

RB: How old were you on December 7, 1941?

JS: Six years old and about nine months.

RB: What do you remember about that day?

JS: My brother and I were playing out in the front lawn. It was a strange December, the weather was warm and my folks came out all excited about something, and loaded us in the car. They took us down to my grand folks, and they were talking about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor, it didn't mean a lot to me, but they were all upset.

RB: What did you think when you heard about the attack?

JS: Not very much, I was too young. I was just a little kid and it didn't mean much to me at the time.

RB: How did your parents react to the attack?

JS: They were all excited and upset.

RB: Where were you living at the time?

JS: We were living on 17th Street, about where the present Eastgate Drug is now, on a forty-acre square crop farm.

RB: What were your living conditions?

JS: Primitive...

RB: Could you describe it?

JS: We had a two-story house with no insulation in it. It sat on a lava rock foundation, and you could see daylight right through it. It had no plumbing and we had a path. It had no water in it, all water had to be hauled from the neighbors' or the grandfolks', and the water for washing and laundry and everything were hauled from the ditch. And the heat was a coal and woodstove that was in the kitchen. We had the whole house open during the summer but during the winter we all lived in the kitchen, and the only time we heated the rest of the house was during Christmas for a week. The bedrooms were upstairs above the grand floor had not heat either, so we basically lived in the kitchen every time the weather got cold until spring.

RB: That must have been fun.

JS: Yes, it was wonderful (sarcasm).

RB: How many were in your family (brothers, sisters, your children, etc.)?

JS: There were my parents and one brother two years younger than I am.

RB: You were too young to have a job or a career, so what occupations did your parents have?

JS: Oh yes, Dad farmed and worked for the neighbors, and worked at the Utah-Idaho sugar factory in Lincoln. And in fall he worked for [a] potato crew, sorting potatoes in potato cellars, Mother just stayed home and kept house until I was oh what ten or eleven. That's all they did.

RB: What was your image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito during the war?

JS: Oh hey they were the bad guys, by the time we got into the second or third year of the war there was a lot of propaganda, and they were both the devil, they were terrible.

RB: What about Hirohito?

JS: Same thing, oh they were all bad.

RB: What did the radio and the newspapers say about them?

JS: Well they were bad and they were evil, that's all you got out of the news, and the paper.

RB: How did you get the news?

JS: Oh, well when I was really young all we had was the radio, we didn't even get a newspaper, and when we got a little older we got the Post Register newspaper, but until then it was strictly on the radio. Reporters like Gabriel Heater, and people like that were news reporters.

RB: What's your opinion of the Japanese and Germans now?

JS: Good neighbors, good people, and even after I got into school one of my best friends was a Japanese kid, Kachin Nakia. Another of my best buddies was Dick Workis, and they were German, his dad was even a German soldier in the First World War. So all the ones over there were bad people but the ones I knew locally, they were fine, and I didn't think anything about it.

RB: When did you first hear about the German concentration camps?

JS: That was after the war...at the end of it, after they invaded Germany, that we started hearing about it. We seen pictures, I tell ya we didn't know anything about it.

RB: What do you remember about the German concentration camps in this area?

JS: There was a large group of them, and they were stationed out at Tauphus Park. Where some of the, right now there's baseball fields and county machine shops, or something, city shops, and a pasture for elk, they were in a fenced area, where the fences were about ten or twelve feet high. They were in tents and tent-like things with wooden sides and canvas tops. There was a large group of 'em, and my dad was a, had a job working for, I don't know if it were either federal or city, or county, and his job was to find placements for them to work in the fields. I met a few of them every once and a while, and they seemed to be nice guys. And I used to see them working in the fields, and used to go on the weekends to watch them play soccer. That was pretty interesting 'cause they were really good at it, and the stories Dad told about 'em and what they did, I had no particular feelings about 'em, they were just more people.

RB: What kind of stories did your dad tell you about them?

JS: Oh, he talked about the fact that the farmers weren't allowed to feed 'em, but the farmers discovered if they did, they would build a fire and kill a pig or a sheep or something and leave it for 'em, and they would cook it on open fires at the end of the field. They thought they worked a lot better, if they fed 'em a little bit. They were just guys and we used to see 'em in the fields and didn't seem to think a whole lot about it.

RB: Did you know of any of the farmers in the area who used their labors?

JS: Oh yeah, pretty near all of 'em did. Everyone who had farms, raised potatoes or beets.

RB: What did they do for the farmers?

JS: They thinned beets in the spring and near the fall they topped beets and picked potatoes, and that was about the size of it.

RB: Did your life change because of WWII?

JS: Well no, 'cause I didn't know anything different. The thing was, was by then I was conscious being short on getting things, so we had trouble getting shoes, sugar, and tires, and gasoline and all that sort of thing, and all that went to the war effort. So we had ration stamps and ration tokens. And there were just a lot of things you just had to go without, but we were fortunate compared to a lot of people because we raised a lot of our things, so meat was rationed, but we had all that sort of stuff 'cause we raised it, it wasn't that big of problem, some inconveniences, but we didn't have much anyways. So I really didn't notice much difference, it was, well as far as school I was shocked, I discovered we was poor folk.

RB: Did the farmers do well?

JS: Well yeah the farmers did pretty well, they since they raised a lot of their own, and what they didn't have they could trade and swap with people. Get the things they needed.

RB: So did you have your own bartering system?

JS: Yeah, well everyone had a bartering system, and if people couldn't get meat you could sometimes trade for shoes, or tires, or everybody traded things 'cause that wasn't accountable to the government.

RB: What did the government give you to ration with?

JS: They had a book of stamps that they I don't know if they issued it every month or every six months, I just know we had ration books. I still got an old one around some place. It had coupons in it, and when you bought anything you had to have enough coupons to buy what you needed. And then you had red and blue tokens kind of like a change, if you bought something and only needed a half a stamp then they'd give you change with these little tokens. It was kind of a second money system, sort of.

RB: What sort of things did you do to entertain yourselves as children during the war?

JS: Hey little kids could always find somethin' to do on a farm. We had lots of livestock, pigs, and chickens, sheep and cows and a team of horses, a saddle horse and they all became pets, a dog, and a couple of cats. We played cops and robbers a lot, and we had to make our own guns to play cops and robbers with. Out of wood and a lot of your toys were homemade. But then we couldn't afford to buy marbles when we got up into school. So we'd discovered the red clay in this country if you rolled that into real smooth small balls, and ya put it in the cook stove overnight, on the coals when you went to bed. The next morning when you shook the grids out, then these would all be kinda like, not quite like glass but they'd, they were like brick marbles. They were hard baked; we used those to play marbles. Once and a while somebody'd give us a little bag of real marbles but they were treasured. But we made a lot of our own stuff and we played a lot of cops and robbers, played in the ditch and we played with the livestock. But as soon as we were big enough, dad had us out in the field.

RB: Did you work a lot?

JS: Yeah, you had to be prepared to do your share, I started milking cows when I was oh seven or eight. Everybody had their responsibilities, as soon as you got big enough then you got to take over part of what Dad did.

RB: Besides working, did you ever get to go to town, and see a picture show?

JS: Yeah after we got, I say fourth, fifth, sixth grade we went to town every Saturday morning, and at that time Ammon was a 500 population village, and it was about a six, seven-mile to Idaho Falls, it was quite a trip in an old '35 Plymouth automobile, and the folks would take us in, and they'd do their shopping, and they'd take us down and put us in a movie, and it was usually Tom Knicks, or Roy Rogers, or Lash Larue or I don't know one of those. They'd go do their shopping, while we were at the movie. There were three theatres, Paramount, the Gayette, and the real theatres, so we had a selection of theatres. Eventually my uncle, Roy Southwick, worked for KID and KID had a program every Saturday for kids, and you had to have so many tops off milk jugs to get in, but since he ran the programs, he'd let my brother and I in the back door of the theatre, so we didn't need to have the caps, which we didn't have 'cause we lived on a farm and we had our own milk. And we'd go on in and see the movie and they'd have program and a play afterwards. But that was Saturday, and the folks would gather us up after the movie, and once and a while we could afford to stop and grab a milkshake, I think they cost a dime. We would all meet on Warwoods corner, right in the middle of Idaho Falls, and go home. And we'd better be there, 'cause if we weren't we'd be left behind, and it was a long walk home. Dad was very impatient and wouldn't wait for us, so if you weren't there, they could leave ya. But it wasn't too bad, usually you'd run across one of the neighbors and they'd run you home on their way. So it wasn't too bad.

RB: During the war what kind of shows did they have?

JS: Well all I remember of the movies is the cowboy shows, the only one that wasn't that made an impression on me was *The Mummy's Ghost*, scared the livin' daylights out of us kids. I've seen it since, and it's kind of silly, but at that time it really scared us. All the rest of 'em that we went to were cowboy movies.

RB: Did they ever show news reels?

JS: Yeah, every movie had, at the end or beginning, it didn't have any commercials like they do now, but at the end of the movie they'd show what were they? Warner Path News Reels. And generally it was about the war. They'd show pictures, how many of 'em were propaganda and how many were real I don't know, thinkin' back, but we thought they were real. Airplanes bombing things, and big ships, and a big speech by somebody, and patriotic kind of stuff. Very impressive for little kids.

RB: Did your religious beliefs help your family cope with WWII?

JS: I don't know if it had much impact for us, 'cause from the time I can remember my parents never went to church, the only time they went to church was Christmas or maybe at Mother's Day, and every once in a while Easter. But they made my brother and I go to church. And if we didn't, if we decided we didn't want to go, I had to clean out the chicken coop, and my brother had to clean out the barn on Sunday. So Sunday we went to church. But we weren't too quick though, 'cause Monday or Tuesday we did it anyway. But we didn't want to do it on Sunday, so that got us going to church pretty regular.

RB: How did the war affect the community?

JS: Well like I said there was a lot of shortages, and there were quite a few of the young men were drafted and went into the military, so a lot of them were gone. And there were some who were killed in action, and there was a big to do about that, but other than that, I didn't think much about it, I didn't know anything else. By the time I was really conscious about what was going on. There was a war, and I didn't know what it was to not have one.

RB: Did you know any young men who did not return from the war?

JS: I don't know, I have no idea. There was only, let's see the Kent's and the Isaac's, I don't know there was four or five, and I didn't really know them I knew their little brothers and sisters. And I was aware that something had happened, I remember things happening, 'cause my folks and grandparents. But if anyone had a soldier lost they had a little flag hung in the windows, with a black surrounding, with a star on it, indicating that they had lost a soldier.

RB: How did families cope with the losses?

JS: I don't know because our family didn't lose anybody.

RB: Did you have any family who served in the military during the war?

JS: Dad's younger brother did, he was in the Army. Never did see action, he played the clarinet and was a good singer and things, a real nice guy, and he ended up a driver for a general somewhere and played in a band. Mother had two brothers, one was in the Navy officer, and he was stationed in Florida, teaching sailors something, I don't know what, and she had a younger brother who was a paratrooper. The war ended just as he was ending his training. He finished jet jump training and then took radio training, so none of them saw combat. Dad's cousin was drafted. He drove tanks and taught others to drive them. He was a farmer, and drove machinery. He came home and farmed with his dad.

RB: That is good though, you didn't have to go through the loss.

JS: Yup, it was.

RB: How did your family keep in touch then?

JS: I dunno, I suppose by letter that was the only way to reach them, but I really don't know.

RB: What are some of the most vivid memories of the WWII experience that stand out?

JS: The things that I remember the most were the newspaper or went to the movies and saw the news clips, and all they talked about was the war. Other than that the only other thing that I really remember, that made an impact was when we dropped the two atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. That was a big thing.

RB: Was the bombing all over the news?

JS: Oh yes, you just couldn't imagine anything that big. It was mind-boggling. I just thought I've got to get involved in that some how.