

PAUL AND PATRICIA WESSLER

This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri of the 1940s* Program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with The Missouri Humanities Counsel and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today's date is April 1, 2009, and this interview is being conducted at the Tarkio Resource Center in Tarkio, Missouri, in Atchison County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley. We are here to interview Paul H Wessler and his wife, Patricia. Paul was born on July 12, 1927. He served in the Navy during World War II and his highest rank was Seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class.

Amthor: Okay, we'll start with Paul. Could you tell us a little bit about your background, where and when you were born, about your parents' occupations, and about whether you have any brothers or sisters?

Paul: Okay. Well, I was born in rural Westboro, Missouri, on the farm where my folks farmed and lived. My dad was John and my mother was Bertha and I had one brother and three sisters.

Amthor: Okay. Can you tell us what life was like before the 1940s, before the war?

Paul: Of course, we all went to country school then and we walked a mile and a half. And times were pretty tough back in the 1930s. Everybody was about in the same boat that we were, you know. And you just got along with what you had and you did a lot of mending of clothes and one thing and another, my mother did, and my dad would repair shoes, you know, and this type of thing. Of course, Mom and my sisters canned a lot and we raised our own meat for table use and this type of thing.

Amthor: Okay. Patricia, could you tell us a little bit about our background, your family life?

Patricia: I was raised in Shenandoah, Iowa, and my dad worked at Johnson Brothers Mills and Mom was a stay-at-home homemaker and I had one little brother. I was in grade school when the war broke out.

Amthor: Okay. Could either of you tell me about what you were hearing about propaganda at that time? What was the United States or the news at that time? What were they saying about the war, especially Pearl Harbor?

Paul: I was a freshman in High school when Pearl Harbor happened. I remember vividly the superintendent had all of the classes meet in the assembly auditorium that next day and we listened to President Roosevelt making his declaration of war. And so I was a freshman in high school, I said, at the time and four years later the war was still going on in the Pacific and in Germany the war was over, the European War. And little did I know that the West Virginia which was sunk in Pearl Harbor and four years later I'd be serving

on it. They brought it up from the deep, and reconditioned it, and re-armored it and it was in the Seattle area. That's where I got on it.

Amthor: Okay. Do you remember anything about where you were on Pearl Harbor?

Patricia: Yes, I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and I remember we had one of those console radios, one of those tall things that are now antiques. And it was on the radio and, of course, that's how we heard President Roosevelt talk and it just, as a young person it was just beyond comprehension that someone would do such a terrible thing. It wasn't long after that that the folks decided they had to help somehow.

Amthor: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit about what your parents did during the war or what life was like during the war when you were growing up?

Patricia: Well, Mom and Dad - Dad was in the National Guard, but due to health problems he couldn't serve and back then they didn't use the National Guard like they do now. And so, they moved to Kansas, and in Wichita there was a Boeing Airplane Plant; there was Cessna, and another one. I've thought and thought about it, but I can't remember what the other airplane factory was. But Dad worked for Boeing and Mom worked for Cessna and we lived in government housing, which were long barracks houses and there were several families in each unit. I remember the air raid, I guess you'd call them practices or warnings, and they would even, you had to pull your shades, you had no lights on, and you even had to make sure you didn't have the radio on because somebody could come along and see the light from the edge of the shades - they had those pull-down shades- and it was different living in Kansas. The wind blew and the sand pelted the sheets - everyone hung their clothes on the lines then, you know. And I believe that one year in junior high - you moved wherever you could get housing, and some housing wasn't too great. Mom wasn't used to that type of situation and that one year, we moved several times, and that's hard when you're in school to move so many times and have so many different teachers. And we left and came back to Shenandoah...

Paul: No, you went to Phoenix.

Patricia: Oh, that's right. We went to Phoenix after that and Dad worked in the Alcoa Aluminum Plant. And that was part of the war effort and there, again, we stayed in government housing. And being raised in Shenandoah and going to a big city - I called it a city - there was only two high schools in Phoenix at a time and that was quite a change to be a number compared to knowing all the kids in your class. But I was quite reserved, I guess. You didn't have the friends like you did here at home.

Amthor: Did you participate in the rationing and looking for the scrap metal and paper and things like that?

Patricia: They sold the little stamps. You had the war bonds, and rationing was a big deal, and I thought, my goodness, you even had trouble getting toilet paper and people

now would think that was silly, but things were so scarce and where Paul lived on a farm, they could raise their own things, you know, – most of their stuff that they needed- but where you were in a city, it was a little bit different.

Paul: You mentioned about rationing. There was sugar, shoes, gas, and tires. One funny incident, the tires that you got weren't very good quality when they sold them new. They called them S3s. I remember one time when we were seniors, my neighbor and I were driving back in his car and, of course, kids didn't drive cars much then to school and we had a blowout on 59 cause we had some chuckholes on that road. And we got out and looked around and all the tires were up. We raised the trunk lid and the spare tire had blown out. That's how poor tires were back then.

Amthor: I heard the roads were really bad, too.

Paul: Yes.

Amthor: Especially, how long did it take you to drive somewhere?

Patricia: We didn't drive very far.

Paul: Oh, 35 miles an hour – that was the limit you could drive, so it'd take awhile.

Amthor: What did you do for entertainment before and during the war – either one of you?

Patricia: I got 25cents – I can remember - and you could go to the show and buy your popcorn and if you were lucky, you had a nickel left over. And I remember going to May's Auditorium in Shenandoah. They had this beautiful theater that was inside their building and it looked like the sky and it was just a wonderful place and you went down by yourself and you didn't have to worry about undesirables. I had to walk quite a ways 'cause we lived up by the water tower and cemetery in Shenandoah and we enjoyed that. You said you went to shows at Westboro. Do you remember?

Paul: Well, Westboro and Tarkio. Westboro used to have silent movies.

Amthor: Really! Tell us about those!

Paul: Well, they were pretty quiet movies. Of course, they were outside and they just had kind of like canvases or sheets on the outside so you couldn't see for nothing. You had to pay to get in. And the writing would be below and, of course, I was young and couldn't read, so I just enjoyed the pictures.

Amthor: Was that like the first drive-in movies or something?

Paul: Yes, like a walk-in movie.

Amthor: Did you play a lot of card games or go to the pool hall or visit friends or relatives a lot during that time?

Paul: Well, we played a lot of activities – ball on the weekends and things like that. I did want to mention one thing that we did back then. Kids, even in grade school, participated in the war effort. Saturdays they'd go out and collect milkweed pods and those pods were used to make life jackets. So the kids even were involved in the war effort. And that's the thing we don't have currently, you know.

Amthor: Uh, you talked about shoes being rationed. How was the clothing? Did your parents – your mothers – have to make your clothing out of the feed sacks and things like that?

Patricia: My mother sewed most of my clothes. And even when you were in high school you just didn't have a lot of clothes. I mean, according to today's standard, you might have been considered poor, but you never felt that you were poor because you had adequate food and a home, but they did use the feed sacks cause that's what the chicken feed came in and his mom was real good about making sure she got enough of one color so she could do.

Paul: Yes.

Amthor: Did you listen to the radio a lot? Did you listen to the programs on the radio – the regular soap operas or news or what did you listen to?

Paul: Yes, we had a radio and they had programs – and of course, after we got home from school – 4:00 or thereabouts, we'd usually listen to the "Lone Ranger" and a few of those.

Patricia: "Amos and Andy" was one. And what was the one that was scary?

Paul: Oh, that came in the evening. It was "I Love a Mystery" and it was a scary thing for kids to listen to. Of course, you had an imagination to go along with it.

Amthor: TV kind of takes that away from us now.

Paul: Yes, it does.

Amthor: Do you remember any music or movies, or songs that were popular at the time?

Patricia: They had the Hit Parade and they put out a magazine and it had all the words to a song and it was nothing for – I know those words more than I do now to the songs because you could understand what they were saying. Hit Parade was a real popular program on the radio. Oh, I remember one song during the war was "Coming In On a Wing and a Prayer, and I was able to even get the sheet music. I can't play it now but

that was part of the war effort. There were some really good songs that they had out. I can't think of any other songs.

Paul: Well, I'm thinking about that time "God Bless America" came out prior to World War II. I don't believe it was much before then. And we had a piano at home and my sisters learned to play and we would sing occasionally with them on weekends or something, you know. And that was about it.

Amthor: Did you go dancing? Did you have a lot – was that the time of the swing bands or the big bands?

Patricia: We went roller skating a lot.

Paul: At the time I wasn't really old enough to be dancing. I didn't figure and didn't know how, of course, and there wasn't much of that available in our area.

Patricia: That was after we met that we went dancing.

Amthor: Before we go on to your service, if there was one thing you two could think about compared to the economy and comparing it to today, is there any advice you could give anyone today about what you experienced at that time that might help them get through this era - even though it's not the same, but it's similar in some instances?

Paul: Well, maybe the difference would be back then you just purchased what you needed and not particularly what you wanted, like we do today. That's probably the main difference that I see. You just bought the essentials.

Patricia: I think nowadays the older generation, I'm thinking of like my folks that had their family during the Depression. They got by with what they earned and made do with what they had and so many people now, in what I call the credit card generation, it doesn't bother them to have lots of debt and back in our days we didn't buy something unless we had the money to pay for it. And I think this is a hard thing for young people now or even middle-aged people. They've got to learn to live with their means and not have all these extra things they think they have to have.

Amthor: Now, before we go to your services, is there one last story you would like to tell us about the 1940s that you remember that stands out in your mind that you'd like to share with us?

Patricia: One of the things that was really popular when I was in high school during this – well, let's see, the war ended in '45 – so then I was just going into high school – but I remember the drive-ins...

Patricia: Well, then they had like Orr's Drive-in what was that where the guys and gals would come and they had the gals that would come out and take your order and put the

tray on the side of your car and that type of thing and that was really popular at that time cause it was way to get a job cause it was hard to get jobs at that time, too.

Amthor: So, when did the two of you get married?

Patricia: '49.

Amthor: So that was at the end of the 40s. Okay. Let's go to you now. About your service, did you enlist or were you drafted?

Paul: No, I enlisted. I had an older brother that wasn't going to serve because he had an agricultural deferment, cause we had to produce a lot of items for the war effort, so I knew I would be drafted, probably, so I chose the Navy instead.

Amthor: Now, is there a reason why you chose the Navy over some of the other services?

Paul: Well, it just appealed to me more and it was something new I'd never done before. I remember in boot camp we took the train from Kansas City to Los Angeles and it was the first time I'd seen the ocean and I got to thinking maybe I was in the wrong service.

Amthor: Well, tell us about your boot camp and where you went.

Paul: Well, that was 12 weeks in San Diego and it was really enjoyable. It was kind of tough work. But the thing I remember, I weighed 166 as a senior in high school and I went to 12 weeks of boot camp and after that I weighed 190 and I think it was probably the best physical shape I was ever in.

Amthor: Did you get any specialized training?

Paul: No, I didn't.

Amthor: How did you adapt to military life after being a farm boy going...

Paul: Well, it was relatively easy because we had quite a few rural people in with our unit, so you had a lot in common to start with and you both learned as you went along.

Amthor: How were the food and the barracks?

Paul: Well, it was really good food. In boot camp it was, better than we had on ship.

Amthor: So where did you end up serving? What ships were you on? Where did you go in the Pacific? Tell us about that.

Paul: Okay, after boot camp I was stationed on the West Virginia Battleship. And mainly what we did was what they called Magic Carpet System and what it was that we'd

go to Hawaii and pick up about 2000 returning servicemen and bring them back to the states and we did that three times. And twice it was with Army and once was with Navy personnel. And I remember one person, a Navy veteran from St Louis, who had always been on a destroyer which is considerably smaller, and he said if he'd knew the Navy had anything that rode as good as that battleship he'd have signed up for it. So we decommissioned the West Virginia up at Seattle Washington, that was in June of '46 and we was signed up on the Indiana and started to decommission it and then I was discharged.

Amthor: So did you see any combat?

Paul: No, I didn't.

Amthor: How old were you and what year was this when you joined the Navy?

Paul: Yes, It was '45 and I was 17 at the time I enlisted and would turn 18. That's the only service I had was on those two ships.

Amthor: So you were in it for about a year?

Paul: Yes, a strong year.

Amthor: Did you form a lot of friendships and have camaraderie with some of your fellow....

Paul: Oh, yes, we did. We had four or five people that we conversed with or corresponded for several years and some we still do even after 60 some years.

Amthor: Did you have time to write letters home to your family?

Paul: Yes, we did, probably twice weekly or something like that and we'd receive from home about that many, too.

Amthor: Were you able to tell your family where you were? I know they looked at your letters before they sent them out, but did you ever create a code so you could tell them where you were?

Paul: No, we didn't have that problem at that time cause most of my service was after the war. We did have a fleet post office, but I don't think it was censored at that time.

Amthor: Did you hear Tokyo Rose at that time?

Paul: No, I did not. I heard about her, but I never did hear her.

Amthor: Did you have any entertainment at that time?

Paul: We had movies. I'll never forget that we were watching a movie in the harbor in Seattle there and they had an earthquake and that ship just sunk about 2 inches while we were sitting there.

Amthor: Wow!

Patricia: Tell them about your little trip while you were on the ocean.

Paul: Well, maybe I'd better not tell about that one. Well, we were on liberty and another friend and I went up to Vancouver – not, it wasn't Vancouver, what was it – maybe it was Vancouver. Anyway, we rented a little boat and we was out on this boat and we got farther out than we intended to and pretty soon a steamship passed us by and we thought we'd better get back home. Well, we headed home and we got there, but it was a little scary. It wasn't too smart an adventure.

Patricia: You had a rowboat, didn't you?

Paul: No, we had a motor.

Amthor: So what other stories can you tell us about life on the boat?

Paul: Well, that's about it. You mentioned about the food, it was good food at boot camp, but when you're on a ship you have a lot of dried eggs and this type of thing and, you know, the milk, it was cold, but it didn't taste like it did back in the states. And the chicken, once in awhile you'd have pin feathers still on it; you know, this type of thing,

Patricia: You might tell them how many people were on that ship?

Paul: Well, what they'd call a complement was 2200 people on the ship – 2000 sailors and then they had 200 officers. So it was a pretty large group.

Amthor: Wow! And what was your actual duty while on the ship?

Paul: Well, we were on the Fire Control Division which was to control the firing of the guns on the ship. And even though it was after the war, we'd still had gunnery practice.

Amthor: So, how good of a gunnery were you?

Paul: Well, I don't know. We didn't have much of a target.

Amthor: You didn't have any targets to shoot at. I thought maybe you had practice targets out there. So what else did you do for recreation or leisure, other than watching the movies on deck?



Paul: Well, remember on shore we'd go to dances, and of course, I wasn't much of a dancer then and we could go there and they'd provide you with some entertainment and snacks and this type of thing.

Amthor: Were there movie stars or anything – did you see any of those while you were there?

Paul: No, I didn't.

Amthor: So after the war was over, how did you feel about the atomic bomb? Did you agree with Truman after it was dropped?

Paul: I sure did. Because other than that they claimed we'd have lost over a million people over there if we'd been inundated. And we don't know how many Japanese. I think it was a wise decision.

Amthor: Where and what were you doing when you got news that the war was completely over?

Paul: Well, I was still in boot camp at the time – just about at the end of boot camp.

Amthor: So, when your service was over, how did you get back home?

Paul: I took a bus back home and stopped and saw some relatives in middle Nebraska and then came on from there.

Amthor: Did it take you long to readjust to civilian life?

Paul: No, cause I wasn't in it that long. It was good to get back on the farm, though. I remember that.

Amthor: Did you take advantage of any of the GI bills?

Paul: I went to the University of Missouri for 2 years on a 2-year soils course and then I had a little time left so I spent that in GI School here in Tarkio.

Amthor: Did you ever join the American Legion or the VFW?

Paul: No, I didn't.

Amthor: Are you proud to be a veteran of World War II?

Paul: Yes, I am. I am.

Amthor: Were you concerned about the spread of Communism after the war?

Paul: You know, I don't remember a lot of that other than Senator McCarthy and some of the hearings they had. Other than that, I really wasn't much concerned about it.

Amthor: Did you ever see any of the generals, the main generals, when you were in the service?

Paul: No, I didn't.

Amthor: What do you think is the main difference between the war that you were in and the war today? What are the major differences?

Paul: Well, I think mainly that we don't have the backing or the people at home aren't contributing like they did then. Of course, maybe the changes have occurred so much that you can't contribute the way we did then either. Evidently, we're contributing financially, of course, but as far as any personal contribution to the war, we don't have that.

Amthor: Do you think it's ironic that today they're using computers and they're e-mailing each other and they're telling everybody what they're doing and where they're at and in your war they couldn't do that. They were all being monitored and things like that.

Paul: Yes, there's quite a bit of difference there. It almost makes you think that there's not a war. We know it isn't. There still is war.

Patricia: I can remember Paul saying that during the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war, they didn't tell everything that was going on as far as where the troops were going and the numbers, and nowadays everything is out in the open and it's also there for the other side that's doing the harm and that makes quite a bit of difference. And they know what you're going to do ahead of time, also.

Amthor: Well, is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your experiences of life in the 40s of the war that we didn't have a chance to cover – a story that you'd like to tell your kids or something that you remember that was something that meant a lot to you at that time?

Paul: No, I can't think of anything really.

Patricia: One thing that I remember as a young person. When we were out and lived at Phoenix, my parents didn't hesitate to pick up a soldier that was hitchhiking and it was so nice to visit with them and they were so hungry to be with their families, and that's something that you can't do nowadays, but no one hesitated to help a serviceman in those days.

Amthor: Okay. Well, think this has been a great interview and I've enjoyed you listening to your story. And I appreciate both of you coming in.

Paul: You're welcome.

Patricia: It's nice to meet you and you.

Amthor: Oh, wait. Before we turn off, you've brought some pictures. Let's talk about these pictures before we sign off.

Paul: It's probably too far away.

Amthor: Well, just hold them up.

Patricia: Is that your ship?

Paul: Yes, that's the West Virginia we served on. That's the one that sunk in Pearl Harbor and they raised it up and fought again.

Patricia: You've got a bigger picture of that.

Paul: There's a picture of how it was a few years back.

Patricia: That's my handsome sailor.

Amthor: You were ???

Paul: You're sweet.

Patricia: I wanted to bring this along because it was just unbelievable how they could get all those people on one ship.

Paul: Yes. Here's a picture of West Virginia and their crew. These are the 2200 people that served on the ship. This was taken in San Diego Bay.

Patricia: Maybe you could find him in there.

Paul: I'm up in here someplace.

Patricia: He thought he had it marked.

Paul: And then this is just an ashtray that was made after they came back to the states and it shows the different areas the West Virginia served in. Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Luzon? and up in Tokyo. They saw the capitulation of the Japanese and the signing there in Tokyo Bay. And that's about it.

