

ROMEY DAVIS

Amthor: This is a portion of the Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri in 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 of the Humanities. Today is February 3, 2009, and we are here at TJ's Cafe in King City, Missouri, in Gentry County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley. We are here to interview Romey Clayton Davis and he was born on September 20, 1923. He lived during the 1940s and served in World War II in the Navy and his highest rank was Boatswain Third Class.

Amthor: Well, Romey, we'd like to know first a little bit about your background. Could you tell us about where and when you were born, a little bit about your family and what they did, and if you had any brothers and sisters.

Davis: Yes, I was born east of King City about a couple of miles, and when I was 6 months old, the folks moved to a farm in Sinclair County. We were down there 8 years. And when I come back, they moved back east of King City again in 1932. I started there and took my grade school at Red Star in DeKalb County. I farmed right after I got on my own – farmed and went to the Navy and come back and went to – married Mary Margaret, my first wife. We moved to a farm down by Fairport and lived down there 11 years. Then we came back and I built the motel up here and we were there a couple of years. And then I traded it for a farm out on the Empire Prairie and I farmed out there 7 years, I believe. Then I decided – I had always been in the electrical business and I decided I'd just go into it full time. I sold the farm and come back and built a house north of town and lived there 29 – 39 – 29 years. I'll get it right pretty soon.

When I was in DeKalb County, I was the clerk and assessor for Grant Township for 6 years. I went to television school and worked on televisions then for a few years. But I always kept my wiring up – I always done it. Let's see – after that, I'm trying to think what I done after that. I forgot when I started. When I was first married, I built a garage – a small garage in the south end of King City, put in a filling station and we run it for about 3 years, 2 ½ or 3 years before we went to Fairport. Then we went down there and come back – then we built the motel and was there and we went out to the farm and when the CBs was – had a lot of CBs, I used to sell them and work on them, along with my farm and wiring and hay baling and combining. So then, after we moved down here and built the house, why, I did electrical work all over different places and all: Cameron, Kansas City, Lathrop, Plattsburg, Hamilton, Dawn, which is over by Chillicothe, Stanberry, all around, everywhere. So I kept that up for about - close to 29 – 30 years and then I retired.

Then, right after I retired, I met – I went back to my – met my childhood sweetheart, I guess you'd call it, after Mary lived with me 29 – 49 years and after she passed away, why, then I met Maxine and we got married in about a couple of years and moved to St Joe. So we lived in St Joe 8 years in an association down there just west of the new Christian School there in St Joe. And I was the treasurer, paid the bills and collected the

money for 200 in the association and I done that for 8 years. Then, after I lost Maxine, I moved back up here and I've been here ever since – not doing too much now.

Amthor: Well, let's keep to the 1940s. What do you think the propaganda was during – right before the war? Do you remember what the United States was telling the Americans about the war in Europe?

Davis: Well, I don't know whether I remember that or not. I know that when they bombed Pearl Harbor I was at my grandmother's and step-grandfather's. And Granddad started crying because he was in the Spanish-American War. And he started crying because he hated to see it go back in another war. I'll never forget that.

Amthor: How did you learn about the progress of the war?

Davis: Well, when we were overseas, you didn't hear much about it. I mean, you didn't know what was going on, really. 'Cause we was on our landing craft and out by ourselves and we really didn't know too much about what was going on actually.

Amthor: Did you say you were drafted or enlisted?

Davis: Drafted.

Amthor: You were drafted. How old were you and what was the year?

Davis: Yes, it was 1944 and I went in and went to Great Lakes for training. And as soon as I was out of the Great Lakes, they sent me to San Diego and then I boarded the aircraft carrier and they put me on there. And then when we got over there to Pearl Harbor, why, they was needing men in this landing – to run these landing crafts, so they sent me to – put me on the ship and sent me to the Marshall Islands and that's where I got my boat. And I was Coxswain on it then the rest of the time I was there.

Amthor: What was the name of the ship?

Davis: Well, as far as the ships, I was on several different - I was on the Ajax; I was on the Aircraft Carrier 19, Hancock, different ships. And I serviced over 100 ships, like the Wisconsin, the Iowa, all of them – the battleships and aircraft carriers. We'd haul – we kept them in ammunition and supplies. The cargo ships would bring it out to us and then we'd put it to the third fleet. I believe it was the 3rd and 7th was what we furnished. I know it was the 3rd and I think it was the 7th fleet. What the Japanese didn't know, it was all the same ships. They'd send it out as the 3rd fleet and then they'd go out and when they'd come back in and they went out, that's be the 7th fleet but it'd be the same ships. They'd fool the Japs, thinking they had 2 out and had actually just one. We was servicing the 7th and 3rd fleet and servicing the same ships.

Amthor: So what was actually your actual job on the ship? What did you do?

Davis: I was the Coxswain. It was assigned to me. I was the one that run it. It was my boat and I had to take care of it. They'd give me a deckhand to tie it up and a mechanic to keep the motors going. That was just three of us – they kept three of us on it all the time.

Amthor: So, was it a real big boat?

Davis: No, no. I don't remember no. About 50 or 60 feet long and 14 or 16 feet wide. It had two 225 horsepower marine diesel engines in them. And we would get on them and whenever we'd get attacked, we'd just take them and run just as far as we could from the ships and just stay out there because they was more after the big ones than they was the small ones.

Amthor: How did you adapt to military life? Did – how was the barracks? How was the food?

Davis: It was good. We always had good food. I never complained about it. And, by the way, Keith Gray from out at Maysville, we knew each other before we went in and we was together all the time that we went through boots together. We come home on our leave together. We went back out, and we was – got to – I believe it was in the Marshall Islands and they was calling off so many men to replace men that was there and they started in and they called his name – they had us out on what they called the grinder – which is like a big parking place - and they called his name and loaded him up and took him to a ship to load him out. Well, then after dinner why they called my name and took me down. Well, when we got down there, there was just three ships lined up and they had this ship and a middle ship and the 2nd ship. Well, I was assigned to the middle one. So I thought, well, I just wonder which one Keith's on, so I picked up - no, I was assigned to the 3rd one, I'm sorry. Then I went back and when we got up to the 2nd ship, I met Keith and he was assigned to the first one and he was coming down to see where I was going. Okay, we stood there just a little bit and visited there, and when we did, why, they started taking aboard the 2nd ship and so we wondered, "I just wonder what would happen if we just go aboard that one together," so we did. But, I'll tell you what, we were almost picking up cigarette butts and everything before we got paid. They didn't know that – they didn't have us assigned, see, so we was on this ship, I believe that was the Ajax; I believe it was the Ajax, and we got to sitting around too much. We didn't have a job. So one day we was sitting out there alongside there a smoking and just as happy as if we had good sense, and we – pretty soon here come a boatswain mate down by there and said, "Well, you guys, why ain't you working?" We said, "We don't have a job." "Now don't tell me that. Everybody's got a job." I said, "We don't." He said, "You come to the office and we'll prove it." So we went down to the office they took us in and asked for our civil numbers and we gave it to them and they checked, and he says, "We don't have any record." Then asked Keith and said, "We don't have any record for you." They said, "We're going to assign you a job." So they put me in the garbage detail and they put Keith in the bakery. So that's what we done for that trip while we was out. And they didn't have any record of us or nothing. Boy, we like to never get paid. Finally they caught up with us.

Amthor: How about -what did you do for entertainment? Did you have USO or did you play cards?

Davis: No, we had no USO. They did have a beer party – a beer island we could go to at one place we was at. But I didn't like that. I didn't go to it. But, really, we didn't have any entertainment. We worked – we were assigned to these boats and we kept them going 24 hours a day – 24 hours a day. The only time we'd get to sleep would be if we was unloading – either loading us or we was unloading and we'd build our own, had our own bunk. We'd build them ourselves on the boat and we'd sleep a little bit – one of us would sleep while the other one was driving – I'd let my engineer and deckhand, we'd trade off and I'd let – they'd run it and I'd sleep or I'd run it and they'd sleep. We didn't get much rest. They kept us going continuously.

Amthor: Did you see any combat at all?

Davis: Oh, yes. Our main thing was suicide airplanes and two-man submarines. They'd slip in on us. The airplanes – the suicide planes – they'd try to keep them out, but they'd get through and hit the ships and stuff by us. Yes, yes, we had – they'd come off and Yap – Yap Island, I believe it was. They'd slip in and get to us. They kept watching. We were in a secret – we were supposed to be in a secret – I didn't know this until about a year ago. We were in a secret outfit and I didn't know it. They tried to keep the Japs from knowing where we were at. It came out in a magazine telling all about it and I happened to see it in a magazine– telling about it being a secret. You didn't know what was going on, really. They didn't tell you. You didn't know much.

Amthor: Did you see many casualties or did you....?

Davis: Oh, yes, some, but not like a lot of them did. No. Where we was assigned to, we didn't have it like some of the boys did where they was in it all the time. I was kind of lucky, in a way that I was assigned that way.

Amthor: Did you form a lot of friendships and have a lot of camaraderie with your other mates?

Davis: Friendships with different ones, you mean? Well, oh, yes, we had others that were on the boat and we'd meet when we'd get our orders and stuff like that.

Amthor: Did you ever meet up with them later when you were back home?

Davis: Cowen Marshall. I saw Cowen Marshall while I was over there. Of course, Keith, and let's see. I can't remember whether there were any others or not. I don't think there was. One of them, yes, one of them was – I can't think of his name. He was from here. I believe he was friends with Gerensfelds. But I can't remember ... I seen him and I made – with him I made a bracelet for Maxine, 'cause Maxine was writing to each other and had went together before I left and I made her a bracelet. He was on a kind of a

repair ship and I went over there and we made a bracelet and I've got it over here in my apartment – put a seashell onto it and I've still got it. She had it and when we got married, I got it back.

Amthor: How did you stay in touch with your family back home?

Davis: Uh, with the free mail. You could send your letter back and it was marked free. And I've still got – I've got the letters that I wrote back to the folks and to Maxine. She still had them. And the ones that they sent me. Still got them. 'Cause I kept them and I kept the ones that they kept. So I've got all of them now.

Amthor: That would make a good book.

Davis: Yes, they would.

Amthor: So, where were you – let's see. You probably weren't – were you out there during D-Day when the war was...

Davis: Yes...

Amthor: What were you doing that day?

Davis: I was in the hospital. I got my leg hurt and – in the Carolina Islands and then went on to the Philippines and it got worse. And they put me in the fleet hospital 114 in the South Philippines -Samara was the name, I believe the name was – I believe it was. And I was in there when that happened. Then after that, they couldn't do anything for it. They couldn't - they said they was going to have to send me back to where they had more medical – so they – there in the Philippines they put me on an airplane. I was on it 48 hours from the Philippines to Pearl Harbor. We were down at Guam for about 6 or 7 hours. We were down at Kwajalein – we went to Kwajalein and landed there.

When we was landing there, they – it was so foggy they couldn't see to land after we got there so they kept – so the pilot come on the radio and he said, "We can't see to land. We're going to circle the field and see if it'll clear up enough that we can see to get in. So we done that for about an hour and then he came on the radio and he said – told the nurses, he says, "Turn everybody with their – we was on stretchers – with their feet toward the front of the plane. We're going to make a force landing 'because we're running out of fuel. Now that makes you feel good. So he landed and you couldn't even feel it touch the ground. That old boy was on his toes. So, when the motor shut off I kept wondering - seeing if we was sloshing. I didn't know if we were on the island or on the water.

But anyway, we made it through everything there and then we went to Johnson and landed there and then Pearl Harbor. And I was on the plane 48 hours. One time he come on the radio - said the pilots would set their own automatic control and they'd come back and play cards. They and the nurses would play cards. Yes! And he come on the radio

one time and said, “We’re 2 miles high and flying 200 mile an hour.” That would seem slow now. But, anyway, they landed us then in Pearl Harbor and they had me in the hospital there and kept me there about 2 weeks. And they said, “We can’t do a thing for you,” so they put a cast back on me and put me on a hospital ship Solace and sent me back to San Francisco. They kept me there for about 2 weeks and said. “There’s nothing they can do for you there,” says the doctor. The doctor that operated on me in the Philippines messed me up, see. Of course, I didn’t know it until we got to the lakes. So we come back – they put me on a Red Cross train and sent me to the Great Lakes – back to the Great Lakes. So the doctors up there - they examined me and all and each place they’d take the cast off – I had a cast clear up to my hip and they’d take the cast off and x-ray it and says, we can’t do it no good. So I got back up there to Great Lakes, but when they was operating on me in the Philippines, why, of course they had the nurses on both sides and the doctors, you know, but they give me a spinal and they had kind of a shield over here. Well, I could see their hands working and they had them bright lights so I told the doc I said, “Doc, if you take anything out of there I want it for a souvenir,” and nobody said a word. Nobody said anything.

And about three days later here come a corpsman in with a ball of cotton and said, “Doc sent this to you.” And what it was, was the ligaments they cut out of my leg – see, they’d cut part of my ligaments out. And they wasn’t supposed to do it, I found that out later. So when I got to the Great Lakes, the doctor examined me and he says, “I know what’s wrong. It’s a football knee.” I said, “It’s not a football knee because I never did play football.” So I said, “I’ve got over to the apartment – the barracks, I said, what they took out of my leg.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, I’ve got it.” He said, “If you’ve got it, I want to see it.”

So I was on crutches and a big cast and I hauled back over to the barracks and got it and took it back to him. And I won’t tell you the words he said. He looked at that and he had some pretty fresh words and he said, “That doctor ruined you.” He said, “I’m discharging you,” and that’s when I got my discharge. And I’ve suffered with it off and on ever since. It’s better – been better here lately than it has been. About a year ago it flared up and they had to put me in the ambulance and take me down to get it fixed. They’d take and – oh, tap it – they’d take the blood out of it. But I’ve walked on bone on bone for 30 years or more – longer than that, probably.

Amthor: And there was nothing they could do for it?

Davis: There was nothing they could do for it. Well, I was too young to put a new knee in. They kept telling me, “You’re too young,” says I’d wear it out. Well, I got a blood clot in my lungs and after that they wouldn’t do it at all. After I got old enough to get a knee, they wouldn’t give me one. So that’s the reason why I had to put up with it. But I’ve been blessed.

Amthor: So what were the actual places you were stationed at?

Davis: During the war? Well, I was at the Great Lakes where I started, then I was at San Diego – let's see. I'm about to forget what the names of them are. I was on the Navy at the Great Lakes, but they didn't leave me in the states. I didn't get to stay in the states. From the time I went in, I had 7 weeks of training – come home for 10 days, and went right back and went right to San Diego and right on an aircraft carrier and out. I didn't stay in the United States at all. I forgot what you asked me now.

Amthor: The places where you were stationed.

Davis: Just two places, 'because they didn't keep me in the states. I was right on out. Great Lakes and I can't remember the name of that other one. It was in San Diego. I was two weeks there and that was it.

Amthor: Where were you stationed on the seas?

Davis: Off base?

Amthor: Yes.

Davis: I didn't have any regular station. I was just on ships. I was on the water continuously. The biggest percent of the time I was out there, I was never on land, never on land. One time – well, about the only time I got on land until I got to the Philippines was in the Caroline Islands. I was – I had to – I was supposed to go to a aircraft carrier and pick up 75 men for recreation – they had come in and was going to have...so we started to go to the island and it was pouring down rain and the officer on board said, "Why do we have to go clear down there when there's an island here?" Well, it's restricted – you ain't supposed to be on it. And he said, "Let's just go over there." He said, "Let's just go over there." So I got to thinking when I got my boat, they said you're in charge of it. It's your boat and you're in charge of it. If anyone wants you to take it anyplace that's going to damage it you can refuse - I don't care if it's an admiral. But, if they're not going to tear up your boat, you're supposed to take orders from anybody higher in rank on your boat. So I thought, "Oh boy, there's an officer here and I've always wanted to hit that island," so I just turned it and drove right in and dropped the ramp and let 75 men out and it wasn't 10 minutes until we had all them little kids smoking, clear down, boy, they wasn't very big and them smoking.

So a lot of them scattered and picking up seashells and so and they had kind of a bamboo deal and it was a church, I know it was a church because it had a bamboo floor and it had kind of a little pulpit deal so I was sure that was a church and I was standing there listening at it and I heard someone holler and looked around and here come an officer with a gun and wading in water up to his hips and he – uh - hollered up there and he said, "Who's the coxswain of that boat?" Uh oh, that was me. He said, "You're under arrest." And I – and he took us out to the LCI that he was on and they were patrolling the island and they weren't supposed to. Anyway they took it out there and I was under arrest. So, when we got through and the officer they took back to this LCI and then they took him up on there and they went up there. He come back and said, "Shove off," so we did and we

headed back to the aircraft carrier. And he – I says, “How did we come out? Oh, he says, we come out all right. He says he turned it over to the executive officer that was on the aircraft carrier. He says we’re just like that. That was a relief. Anyway, some of the big things that happened.

Amthor: Tell us about the dropping of the bomb. Did you agree with Truman? Was that a good thing?

Davis: Oh, yes, that was the best thing that ever happened. I was headed there. That’s where my next assignment was – up there - the Japanese. We were headed into the Japanese island. That was my next assignment. Boy, he stopped that.

Amthor: How did you get home?

Davis: Uh, train. Well, an airplane to Pearl Harbor and then a hospital ship to San Francisco and then that Red Cross train from there to the Great Lakes. And then I believe I came on – let’s see I came on the bus that time back to Cameron. The folks picked me up in Cameron one time. Then I went back – I was back up there probably a couple of weeks and then they discharged me and I come back and I come in to St Joe on a train.

Amthor: How did you think the people treated you when you came back?

Davis: Oh, boy, they were nice. When we come back – the hospital ship come in to San Francisco, they had kind of a barge deal – a tugboat pushing it – they had a band on there – a big band – and when we come in they played back “California, here you come right back where you started from” and played along side us and played music and stuff ‘til we got in the dock.

Amthor: Did it take you long to adjust to civilian life when you got home?

Davis: No, not too long. I was just happy to be back.

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

Davis: I joined the VFW the day I was discharged. And then I joined – the day I got home I joined the American Legion here. And I’ve been a member, right now I guess I’m the oldest, longest living member of that Legion.

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

Davis: Yes. You bet. Oh, yes. Yes.

Amthor: After the war, were you concerned about the Soviet Union’s spread of Communism?

Davis: Well, it’s always been a – it’s always been a real worry, I think.

Amthor: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill when you came back?

Davis: Yes, I was on the farm, and they – I don't know – they paid us what \$50 a month or something like that when we went to school up here for 4 years – I went up there 4 years on Saturday – every Saturday they had a deal – and I went to it and we'd go around different places and see different things and do different things. It was nice.

Amthor: I have one last question. What do you think are the differences between the war of today and the war that you fought?

Davis: They're all war. It's on to where they are located and what's going on, but it's all war. The same – it means the same thing only in a different way. Now they do it more different than what we did. But – well – there'll always be wars. There'll always be wars and rumors of them.

Amthor: Well, if there was one last thing that you would like to leave us with, a comment or a story, what would that be?

Davis: Well, I'd just have to say I was probably one of the blessed men that would ever live. There's a lot of them, but I mean I'm one of them, 'cause I've had two wonderful wives, wonderful wives. I've got a nice family. And, so far, I'm doing pretty good with my health. So I think that'd be what I would say.

Amthor: Is there any advice you'd give to college students about World War II or...

Davis: Well, I don't know what I'd tell them, really. The only thing is, I would tell them, I want them to get their education. Don't drop out. Go get that education because they're going to need it. They can't do like I did. I didn't have any, but I was where I could and I made it, but you won't do that today. You've got to have that paper whether you know it or not. I had to learn my skills myself 'cause my dad was sick and I had to keep the farm going and I went to my school and made good grades and have it and all, but I missed a lot of it on account of having to keep the corn shucked, the wood cut, and all that, but I had wonderful parents though. They kept us fed and clothed through the Depression, so we were – I'm blessed.

Amthor: Well, we thank you for coming today. We really enjoyed your story and your sharing it with us.

Davis: That's kind of been my life.