

FATHER NORBERT SCHAPPLER

Joni: This is a portion of the Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri of the 1940's program. The Nodaway County Historical Society is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council and the support from the National Endowment of the Humanities. Today's date is May 14, 2009 and this interview is being conducted at Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri in Nodaway County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley and we are here to interview Father Norbert Schappler and he was born on July 23, 1926, and he's going to tell us a little bit about life in the 1940's and his short stay in the Naval Reserve and we're going to interview him and he's going to tell us his story.

Okay, Father Norbert, can you tell us a little bit about your background, where and when you were born, a little bit about your parents and what life was like prior to World War II.

Father Norbert: Well I was born and raised in Atchison, Kansas, I should look at you instead of the camera, huh?

Joni: You can do either one.

Father Norbert: And I went to a Catholic elementary school there in Atchison. My parents, my Dad was originally from Springfield, Missouri. Shortly after he married - got married, they moved to Atchison which was my Mother's home town, that's where she was born and raised. And my father had a grocery store, sort of a neighborhood grocery store there in town. My mother was mostly a housewife and mother at home. On Saturdays when the store was especially busy she would help out usually on Saturdays at the store and I was a - is that enough about those parents?

Joni: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Father Norbert: Yes, I have 1 brother and 2 sisters. I'm the 3rd in the family. Life was just normal back in the early '40's there in Atchison. The war didn't begin until '41, huh, and I was a high school student, a boarding high school student at Conception, here, Conception High School, I was not at seminary in those days, just a regular boarding high school for boys. Am I jumping ahead too much?

Joni: No, go ahead.

Father Norbert: You want more background about me, about Atchison, okay?

Joni: What was it like at the boarding school here?

Father Norbert: Well I suppose it was a typical boarding school, teenage boys, we just kind of lived in our own world, especially being out in the country like this and they didn't let us off campus very often you know, in those days and so we had our classes and our sports and our

entertainment all on campus you might say. We had our Saturday night movies on campus, we put on occasional plays here and things like that too, you know. We had some - we had lots of intramural sports, but we also, my first 2 years of high school, we'd play some other schools in the area here in football and basketball, it was a very small school, we had around 70 students in the whole 4 year high school. So that's kind of the background of the school. Should I jump to when I first heard about the war?

Joni: Yes, tell us what you were doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Father Norbert: Well, I was playing pool. I was playing pool in the next room to our pool room we had a radio. Some of the students were in there listening to the radio. This was before transistor radios and everything, you know and everybody didn't have their own radio and they got all excited and were hollering and says the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, so the pool players ran in there to listen to the radio too and so we just listened to the news then as it was going on. It was - when the news was first breaking you know, before it got into the newspapers it was on the radio. So we listened to the news and we got pretty excited of course, wondering what was going to come next - what was going to happen, people were even talking about maybe the Japanese were going to attack California - you know - invade California. But then our life just went on a usual with classes and bills and everything the same, we listened to the radio more and caught up on some news, we didn't even have a newspaper you know - available to us, so that's about the only way we could get news was the radio. And, I don't know, since this was - the school was attached to the Benedictine Monastery then - and at that time the Monastery raised lots of their own food our meals and everything didn't notice any particular change you know. Perhaps when sugar became rationed then there was less sweet deserts and things like that. Of course nobody, no high school students had cars so the gas rationing was no problem for us here at school. So in many ways we were kind of living in isolation, in our own world you might say. We knew what was going on and our professors would mention things now and then about the war you know but there wasn't much of a change in our life here in the high school.

Joni: Was there much propaganda or news out there portraying the war up to that point?

Father Norbert: Well -

Joni: What were you hearing about the Japanese and the German people, I mean you had a lot Germans living here, you were in a German community was that affecting any of that?

Father Norbert: No, the Monastery was far enough along that there were lots of Americans in the Monastery and actually the Monastery came from Switzerland - not from Germany and so lots of the monks were Swiss, though they spoke German in Switzerland from the district that they came from anyway and so there wasn't any kind of antagonism between the Germans or against the Germans you might say or Japs, just in the sense that we didn't like them for what they were doing you know. But see - 1941 that December that was when I was a sophomore in

high school -right? - since I started in '40 - 1940 and in the summer time of course we all went home you know and so we had our experiences at home depending on where you were and what kind of job your Dad had and so forth. But since my Dad had a grocery store you know we always had plenty of food. We had to follow the rationing things you know which wasn't much as I recall. Sugar - what else?

Joni: Coffee was rationed.

Father Norbert: Well, I think maybe for awhile yeah. I worked in the store in the summer time a good bit - not completely but yeah.

Joni: I think a lot of it was rubber tires and gasoline and all those things were rationed.

Father Norbert: Yes, you had to get retreads for your tires, couldn't get new tires even, at least at a certain point there. And the gasoline you had your coupons - you had coupons for sugar and maybe coffee too, I'm not sure, I didn't drink coffee in those days.

Joni: How about clothing, shoes -

Father Norbert: I didn't notice anything, I don't remember anything being different you know. There was this effort to collect metals, metal of all kinds you know because many of the war items, the weapons and tanks and so forth needed lots of metal and so I recall that we used to try to collect things that were in the house that were laying around places you know and take them to some of these collection points you know that we had in town there.

Joni: Did you have other family members that went to war?

Father Norbert: Yes, my older brother was drafted into the Army, in what year I'm not sure, it was probably around '42, I don't think it was in '41, well it couldn't hardly be '41, we didn't get into the war until December and we didn't have a draft before that, huh?

Joni: I don't think so.

Father Norbert: No peace time draft, no. So '42 some time and he ended up serving in Germany and - well, when he came back he just wouldn't talk about it, he was one of those persons you know, I guess he had several of those experiences that affected him so emotionally that he didn't want to talk about the war at all over there.

Joni: Now you said you mentioned you joined the Naval Reserve. Did you join or were you ---

Father Norbert: I enlisted, yeah, I was very patriotic, a high school graduate you know, just got out in May and enlisted in July.

Joni: Did you have a lot of friends that went with you when you enlisted or --

Father Norbert: No, nobody from Atchison. Most of them went into the Army I think or they waited to be drafted.

Joni: Can you tell us a little bit about your time in the reserves, your boot camp experience and how long you were in there?

Father Norbert: Well I was only in the Naval Reserve there for 2 months as I said but it was quite an experience for a young high school graduate. They swore us in down on the steps of the court house in Kansas City and then put us on a train and shipped us out there. And this was a naval camp that was just recently constructed because of the war and it was you might say kind of out in the boondocks of - the closest town was Coeur d'Alene, a nice French name, there was a lake right near there too. But coming from a boarding school with rather strict discipline you know, the military regimen wasn't all that much different you know, we slept in dormitories here and we slept in barracks in the Navy there and we all had to go certain places at certain times so it was a very easy adjustment you might say for me and I was in good physical shape at that time and so that didn't bother me either. I made some friends there, good Mormons from Utah this was one of them. The smoking restriction was probably the hardest. They had a little fenced in pen for the smokers and you could only go out there and smoke at certain times. Whenever the flag was up on the pole, not the American flag, it's another kind of flag, I forget what it was, that was the only time you could smoke out there in that pen was when that flag was up there. One memorable experience was I got involved in fighting a forest fire in Idaho there, Idaho has lots of forests, in case you don't know and so they took us by the bus load over to the fire and gave us some instructions and told us what to do. It was mainly trying to establish these fire lines where we'd have to clear a line so wide, ahead of the fire so if the fire keep the fire line hopefully nothing to burn there and it would stop but we came pretty close to some of the hot fire.

Joni: This boot camp was in Utah?

Father Norbert: Idaho.

Joni: What was the town again?

Father Norbert: Well they called it the Farragut Naval Base, but I don't there was a town Farragut - we never got off base. I wasn't there long enough to get any leave or weekend off. It was a pretty rigorous training.

Joni: You said there was a lake there, did you spend a lot of time

Father Norbert: Near there, about 5 miles away or so.

Joni: Did you do any training on the lake?

Father Norbert: Only went once when I was there to the lake and that was just in small boats, mostly life boats type of things you know. So that was really negligible, my military experience.

Joni: So why did you only last 2 months?

Father Norbert: Because I got a military, I mean a medical discharge. I was having some trouble with my foot from marching so much on the asphalt so I went to the dispensary, or to the doctor there and he looked me over and the foot wasn't that serious but he says there were some other problems here and so "I think we have to give you a medical discharge." he said. I told him I didn't want one and he said "Well, it's Navy policy." So that's that.

Joni: So what did you decide to do after that?

Father Norbert: Well that was in September and well the seminary, it had become a seminary my last year of high school here, completely seminary and they had summer school while I was in the Navy and so they were on break after that summer school and weren't going to start until October, their first semester. Well I didn't know whether I wanted to come back here or not or whether I wanted to go to St. Benedicts in Atchison to college there, you know. Well I got to thinking about it and I talked to my mom about it some and so I ended up, decided I'd come here for a year anyway and see how it was and so I came for that year and after that year I joined the monastery. Anyway my Uncle happened to be Abbot here you know but that's not the reason I joined. That almost kept me out, discouraged me from joining.

Joni: So what year was it that you took your orders?

Father Norbert: The first vows as a Benedictine was 1946 - July 11, 1946.

Joni: So, what was it like being a monk in the 1940's?

Father Norbert: Lots different than today.

Joni: Can you tell us about this?

Father Norbert: Well, this doesn't pertain to the war.

Joni: But it's 1940's, we're also doing what life was like in the '40's.

Father Norbert: Oh, okay. Well religious life in the 1940's was quite different from the 1960's or the 2000's. Religious life had continued for year after year being about the same you know. Just very minor changes here and there until Vatican II council and then drastic changes, some people call them drastic, they kind of were, there were significant changes in our religious life. For example, before Vatican II monks in the monastery were not allowed to take any vacation. After Vatican II - well let me finish the first - the only vacation we could take was as a group at some place, some cabins at a lake or something where everybody went.

Joni: Like a retreat or something?

Father Norbert: No, it was just vacation, we would swim or go to town to go to a movie or so forth but it was for 1 or 2 weeks, I forget which. But we couldn't go home on vacation or any place else on vacation, is what I meant by no vacations. But then after Vatican II a policy came along, it was set up to where we could take 1 week of vacation at home and 1 week some other way, with another monk or a couple other monks, go take a vacation some place, or you could take all 2 weeks at home if you wanted to. So that is still our present policy now. Before Vatican II you couldn't even go to the weddings of your brothers and sisters, now we can. Also going to funerals was restricted somewhat before Vatican II, ordinarily you couldn't go to any family funerals beyond your aunts and uncles, couldn't go to any cousins or anything like that. Now there's exceptions, we can do that. Also our diet has changed a good bit, you know it used to be much stricter - for breakfast most days all we had was coffee and bread and cereal. I don't remember that we got any fruit even, but occasionally we'd have eggs on feast days or something like that. So the diet was a good bit stricter. The hours when we prayed - we had more hours of prayer then and we got up - our first prayer in the morning was at 4:00 o'clock on feast days and 4:15 on other days and we had compline - after compline, which was around 8:00 o'clock - 7:30 or 8:00 we had what we called our nighttime silence and since we got up so early most of the people went to bed around 9:00 o'clock or something like that - with the birds you know. But now, our night silence goes to 9:30, no it goes to 10:00 now unless you watch the news in the TV room, then you can watch the evening news. And, well, there's cars, the monastery had about 3 cars in those days, now we have about 20, 15 to 20 that are right here at the monastery, that's not counting the cars that the monks out in the parishes have. And of course if you only have 2 or 3 cars that kind of restricts your getting around - transportation. You have to schedule doctor's appointments at the same time so 2 people go instead of 1 - all kinds of things like that. So that gives you an idea of how things have changed somewhat since Vatican II - there's other things too that have changed, but that's enough on that I think.

Joni: So did the war affect the monastery in any way - did anything have to change or media or anything affect your way of life during that time period?

Father Norbert: The media?

Joni: Well or hearing more news - did you spend more time listening to the news or anything during the war?

Father Norbert: I think most people did, yeah, read the newspapers more about the war you know too and the radio some. Even in those days we just had a radio in our recreation room - the only place we had a radio and so this was still in the '40's so everybody didn't have their own transistor radios and so forth, guess I said that before didn't I. OK I don't know, the war didn't

affect life too much in the monastery as I recall. Of course since I came in you know to the monastery after the war I really couldn't say, could I.

Joni: How did you feel or the monastery feel with the dropping of the atomic bomb, did they agree with that, agree with Truman?

Father Norbert: That's not in the questions, did I miss that? No, that's kind of a hot potato.

Joni: What was going on during that time?

Father Norbert: This was '45 wasn't it?

Joni: Did you think that helped with the Japanese surrender - was it necessary?

Father Norbert: Personal opinion?

Joni: Yeah.

Father Norbert: I can't speak for the whole monastery. But at that time the Japanese were fighting so insanely you might say huh, these suicide bombers attacking planes and we heard or read - maybe this is propaganda - of some of the brutalities that they were involved in whenever they captured some of our soldiers, in fact one of our priests was a military chaplain in the Air Force and he got captured in the Philippines and he was in a prisoner of war camp in the Philippines - Japanese prisoner of war camp for awhile after his capture, but then they decided to transport him to the mainland of Japan. So they put a bunch of those prisoners of war on a ship and they didn't mark it as a prisoner of war ship in any way and just start sailing for Japan. And so our American planes spotted it and bombed it. I don't know whether they sunk it or not but they did lots of damage and killed lots of the people on board the ship. I don't think that our - the priest from the Abbey here got killed in that bombing but they hardly fed them and he ended up according to a survivor that knew him and was with him on the ship that he ended up starving to death. He just got weaker and weaker because he didn't get enough food. And so you heard other stories you know how the Japanese treated in other places through their prisoners of war and then also when they captured some Americans instead of taking them prisoners they decided just to shoot them instead, less trouble, less bother. You don't know just how much of that is true - how much is propaganda but apparently some of the survivors can attest that some of that was true, was going on. And so there was lots of animosity towards the Japanese in my generation and as regards to the atomic bomb it's a moral issue certainly and it's kind of a hot potato but at the time that it happened, the way I felt and the reasoning that was given for why it was done was to save American lives, that it ended the war a lot sooner than it would've ended, the Japanese were so fanatical that they would fight to the death on each little island to get to Japan, you know and so it seemed you know generally - I didn't know that much about morality in those days probably either you know, but it seemed like that it was justified to save lives, even though

these bombs were not refined at that time and there was gonna be some civilian deaths. As I recall, but I'm not sure now that the targets were primarily military but the bombs were so big and so diffuse that even though they may have picked and hit a military target it spread out so far that it may have killed a lots of civilians which certainly is not good and ordinarily you can't justify that except as an unintended secondary effect, even in war time you know, you can't directly kill civilians, they're not the ones doing the actual fighting. So other my age, when we were young, I think most of them felt something like that too. So if you use hindsight, well then you can say things differently or say that it was immoral, it's not justified to kill so many civilians but they didn't know probably how many civilians were going to be killed when they started. It was kind of a guess or - Truman was primarily concerned with saving American lives and that's what he was focusing on and hoping they would not kill many civilians but as it turned out, it did. Boy, I didn't think I was going to have much to say but you're not going to get all of us in today if I keep talking, because Father Joachim says he has a lot he can say.

Joni: Okay. Well is there one last thing you'd like to tell us about the war or the 1940's that you would like to share with us that would be important for students alike to know about?

Father Norbert: Well, one that that just kind of comes to mind off the top of my head is that the 1940's were a much - we had a much simpler life. We enjoyed more simple things. We didn't have all this technology around every corner. And technology changing every month. We enjoyed the simple things more than people do nowadays I think. Ah, homemade ice cream, does anybody make ice cream anymore? You do?

Joni: I have. Occasionally.

Father Norbert: And well I think that the morality generally was higher too than it is nowadays. I don't think, I know. I can mention any number of things in that regard but you are aware of them I'm sure too of same sex marriage and all kinds of things you know, huh? Anyway so, 1940's, the war - did anybody tell you about the Lucky Strike Green going to war? That was kind of a humorous thing during the war there, for us youngsters anyway. You know how the government was trying to collect this metal I was telling you about, huh - well the cigarette packages had aluminum wrapping or foil in their packages to keep the cigarettes fresh. Well Lucky Strike got the bright idea it would be a good advertising gimmick if they would take the aluminum out of the packages instead of using it there and then they had a green cover on the packages so they took the green off too and just put a white cover on it - well they had their name on it of course - white instead of green and so then they come out with the gimmick, you know or the slogan - huh - "Lucky Strike is doing its effort for the war" - "Lucky Strike Green has gone to war, there's no aluminum in our packages" - no metal. So we used to joke about that all the time. So, no more questions?

Joni: No, I think that'll be it.

Father Norbert: I don't know, I read some that you didn't ask but that's alright, we've talked long enough.

Joni: Well, let's see - how about the spread of polio or tuberculosis, did you worry about that?

Father Norbert: Well, our parents did. We had to get polio shots when it became something of an epidemic.

Joni: How about entertainment? What did you do for entertainment?

Father Norbert: Oh, I was a sports man, we'd go to movies now and then. Go swimming, ordinary simple things. See, I didn't have too much time there, see, just the summer times when I was home and then after first college, entered the monastery so -

Joni: Yeah it's those fun years that went from war to the seminary all at once, so you didn't have all those extra years I guess in college. So many of the men at that time - we were just talking about how they would have spent 4 years in college but they spent 4 years in the war and a lot of them didn't come back to college after that.

Father Norbert: Ahum, yeah. Okay, well - if you are gonna get the other today - better move on

Joni: Okay, we better.

Father Norbert: Father Anthony is just down the hall, I'll go get him, now Father Joachim