

ORLIE PALMER

C Palmer: This is a portion of the *Oral Histories of Northwest Missouri of the 1940s* program. The Nodaway County Historical Society Museum is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities Council, and with support for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today's date is November 6, 2008, and this interview is being conducted at the Nodaway County Historical Society Museum, located in Maryville, Missouri. The interviewer is Cathy Palmer, and assisting is Margaret Kelley. The interviewee is Orlie Lavelle Palmer; his birth date is November 24, 1918. He lived during the 1940s and this interview is his story of life during this time period, including World War II.

C Palmer: Pappy, where and when were you born?

Palmer: November 24, 1918, Community of Hopkins, Missouri.

C Palmer: Tell us about your family: what was your mom and dad's name, and did you have any brothers and sisters?

Palmer: My dad's name was William Ashbell Palmer, Mary Frances Palmer, my mother, Goldie Lavera was my older sister; don't ask me for birthdays! We lived on a farm out there. I don't remember what year we moved here to Maryville and then in 1930 we moved to Shenandoah, when the war started I was driving for Schaffer Transport Service and that locked me on to that job for the full extent of the war. Hauling aviation fuel from a pipeline in Kansas City to the Fort Offutt in Omaha and that was a round robin deal. I made one end of the route, and another driver made the other end of the route and that was 24 hours a day. That was my position all through the war, was driving that transport truck.

C Palmer: So because you were driving the transport truck, you didn't get drafted, or have to go to military service?

Palmer: That locked me on the job. I could not quit.

C Palmer: Whoa! They wanted that fuel, huh?

Palmer: Absolutely. When you were on a government contract, that was just the same as the service.

C Palmer: What were you doing before 1940?

Palmer: Oh, I was driving truck for this one and that one, a good many years I drove for Howard Trucking in Shenandoah, and before we went up to Shenandoah Mavis and I, we owned our own truck for about four years. So that was just kind of the extent of it.

C Palmer: Now, what year did you and Mavis get married, after you met at the chiveree party?

Palmer: 1939, I couldn't tell you the dates. I lucky to remember my birth date.

C Palmer: Did you have any other family members that participated in the war somehow?

Palmer: Oh, well, none of my immediate family, but Mavis' brother, one brother was in the Army, he was in the Air Corps, he was an examining officer of some type of the medical division of the Army, I don't know.

C Palmer: Is this Orville?

Palmer: Orville, her half brother.

C Palmer: Yes. Were you aware of any propaganda that was used in talking about the war?

Palmer: No particularly, no. The thing of it was, that everyone thought that that was a dangerous job that I was doing. You only had one mistake hauling aviation fuel.

C Palmer: The fuel's quite flammable?

Palmer: Highly so. If you'd drive by something that was on fire why and that would catch your unit, why it exploded.

C Palmer: Tell us about the hitchhiker you picked up.

Palmer: Yes, I picked up a hitchhiker at Slim's Castle Café there north of Kansas City, and he never- he was in the service, and when we were south of Pumkin Center, he finally realized that it was a tanker outfit that he was riding in. He wanted to know what we were hauling, and I said aviation fuel. He immediately said what town's the nearest town? I told him Maryville, ten miles, and he said I'll ride that much farther, but I want out of this thing. I've been overseas, and I've seen these aviation fuel tankers blow all up with no reason what so ever. So he said I want out of here. But I never thought about it in that way. I just – it was a war effort, so we did what was necessary.

C Palmer: How did our country portray the war and the Japanese at that time period? What did you hear?

Palmer: Well, you heard a lot of hate things going on, and when they interned those Japanese and those outfits where they was kind of under arrest, they weren't treated the best. It was kind of a – you know after all the way they did it, when they bombed the ships there in Pearl Harbor, that created a lot of hate. So that is the best that I could do for that situation. My job put me on the road so much that I didn't have much time to listen –

C Palmer: That's true. They didn't have radios in the truck cabs those days.

Palmer: Not even music radios. You didn't dare have anything that would create a spark.

C Palmer: Oh! Right.

Palmer: Because if you'd have a music radio in there, and it would create a short, why that would mean a loss of a driver and a tanker, because it would explode.

C Palmer: How did you learn about Pearl Harbor when it happened? What were you doing when Pearl Harbor happened?

Palmer: I don't recall.

C Palmer: Do you remember hearing about it?

Palmer: No.

C Palmer: Probably on the road!

Palmer: I wouldn't be surprised. Yes, that was a real nice outfit to work for, and they tried to take care of all their drivers. I don't recall if Schaffer had ever been in the service or not, but they realized what the story was and so. I can remember the day that the armistice was called. Ordinarily we'd have a load of contract gasoline coming out of Omaha and we'd be out of Omaha in about thirty minutes, and be out on the open road then. It took us two hours and a half to get out of Omaha.

C Palmer: Oh, my!

Palmer: The crowd was so raving mad what happy. Yes, you could drive a few feet and then you'd have to wait for people to cross the street, there were so many. So it was a happy day when the war ended,
I'll tell you.

C Palmer: Quite the celebration.

Palmer: Of course, when we got back to Shenandoah it was another one.

C Palmer: How did rationing – how did the government rationing affect your job?

Palmer: Well, my job actually, the rationing really didn't have anything to do with the job because anything our job done was a government contract: the fuel we burned in the trucks was regulated with the government and the hours we worked were regulated by the government, so we had no worry about rationing on that end of the job.

C Palmer: So you didn't have to worry about tires for you truck or anything?

Palmer: No, the tires for the truck was no problem. Like I say, it was all under government contract and each thing it went on that truck line was done through the government. In other words, you might say that the government owned me and the truck because they had full control

over what that truck done. All kind of all above our heads; we didn't worry about it because it was all taken care of.

C Palmer: So you would take a load out and another guy would drive it back. Did you get any time off between trips?

Palmer: Oh, you had your sleeping time when When I'd pull into Shenandoah, why then I'd have the time off that he would take the load and go from Shenandoah by the fort and then he would take contract load and deliver it before he came back to Shenandoah drop the truck off for me to go to pipeline. So that gave me some rest period and sleeping time.

C Palmer: What did you do for entertainment during the forties, if you weren't on the truck? What kind of things did you do?

Palmer: Oh, there were dances and stuff like that normal. Living in Shenandoah, we had the Armory there and that was a building big enough to have entertainments in, so there would be shows and dances and at that time I think we had two or three theatres in Shenandoah, so there was definitely enough entertainment. At that time we were far enough away from the ocean or anything like that, that we didn't have any worries about invasions.

C Palmer: Were you playing your guitar at this point?

Palmer: Don't want to ask back that far! I don't remember. I probably was because you saw that picture there a while ago – that was from when I was younger. Yes, we – after the war we played for dances and stuff, you know, and we had lots of time for entertainment.

C Palmer: You played the guitar, and Mavis played the piano?

Palmer: No, no. My sister played the piano; my brother-in-law played the saxophone. That was the start of our band and we had other people who joined our band when we were playing for the dances after the war.

C Palmer: Did you and Mavis have any problems for rationing for food during the war?

Palmer: No, the only problem we had was that one time when we was delivering a load of corn, and got into a rain storm, and her rationing shoes melted apart in the rain.

C Palmer: Oops! They weren't made for that.

Palmer: They weren't made for much of anything. The glue on the soles felt like something you'd give your child to take to school.

C Palmer: How did you keep up with the news of the war? How did you get most of your information?

Palmer: When you'd get in, there was radio, and of course where we relayed out of what they called trucker's headquarters station there in Shenandoah and everybody had an opinion and a story to tell you. At one time there was 33 private truckers operating out of that station. At that time independent trucking was no good unless everybody could get in to, not like today when farmers got his own vehicles, trucks. I'd say you had everybody's opinion, and radio, and I guess we had television then, but black and white.

C Palmer: Well do you remember any movies or songs from that time period that you enjoyed?

Palmer: Good heavens, no. All of them. Music was our love, so we just remember all of them.

C Palmer: Now you mentioned that you remembered the day the war ended. You said you were pulling out of Omaha when that happened?

Palmer: Yes, it just so happened that I had to pull the truck on into Omaha that day and then the other driver was there to, for some reason or another, I don't know why we were both in there. We heard about the war ending, of course business had to go on, so we started for Shenandoah, and it took us darn near three hours to get down from Omaha. Everybody was so happy.

C Palmer: How long before the guys, the people started coming back from the war?

Palmer: I don't recall.

C Palmer: How were they treated did you feel when they came back. Were there truckers that came back?

Palmer: Was there what?

C Palmer: Were there guys that came back to work after the war was over?

Palmer: Oh, yeah, I don't remember. Of course, trucking business like that went on no matter what, because people either too young to go, or too old to go. You had drivers to do your private trucking.

C Palmer: So you didn't really get to spend much time at home.

Palmer: Not a great lot. No, you just kind of got used to looking out through that windshield.

C Palmer: Was there- Do you remember when the war ended, and Russia was fighting over the European nations, was there any discussion of Communism and worry about them taking control?

Palmer: Not really, seeing as we were here in the Midwest. If we'd have been on either coast, we might have heard something about it, ships and stuff going in and out. Besides from that, we didn't have any scuttlebutt about it.

C Palmer: How long did you contract last with –

Palmer: When the war ended, that canceled our contracts.

C Palmer: Then you were done. How long did you drive longer for them?

Palmer: Oh, yeah, I went ahead and drove quite a while after that. Schaffer's a big enough of an outfit that they had other contracts besides that, that they could go back to. Because, let's see, we had an office in Sioux City, one in Omaha, and there was another one somewhere else, but I can't remember where it was. So it was a big enough outfit that you had worked to do.

C Palmer: If you got to spend some time at home, was there any special radio shows you listened to?

Palmer: Oh, we had two radio stations right there in Shenandoah.

C Palmer: Henry Fields?

Palmer: Well, at that time Earl May had the biggest theatre in southwest Iowa

C Palmer: Whoa!

Palmer: I don't know if that building is still up or not. But there was a – oh, the auditorium there held at least 300 people and it was built with the ceiling that had stars and everything in it; it was just like being outdoors. It was a beautiful place. And it had the first in Iowa a big plate glass divider that went down over the stage and was lifted hydraulically so that you could walk up on the stage and when that was not in use, so we had another entertainment right there at home that we didn't have to go anywhere.

C Palmer: That makes sense. What was your overall impression of that time period? How did you feel about the war going on?

Palmer: I don't know. It's hard to tell anymore. You forget after all those years.

C Palmer: I know that when it first started out, there was some controversy about us getting involved.

Palmer: Yes.

C Palmer: But Pearl Harbor took care of that?

Palmer: Yes, It was pretty controversial. Good old Harry. There was a lot of controversy over Harry Truman giving the order to bomb Hiroshima, but I think it would have lasted years and years more if he hadn't have done that. He – well, I'm not going to express my opinion of what's a going on.

C Palmer: Well, thank you Pappy, for coming and talking to us today.

[break in taping]

Palmer: Borrowed a model T coupe, I charged a dollar's worth of gas at the station, and I drove from there to Emerson, Iowa, I rented a dance hall on my face, I wrote a floating check for dance bills, I talked Pop Howary into taking his truck and taking some extra people up there to the dance. We played that first dance, my Dad had the door, Mom had tickets, and all the band – seven of us – I forget what we paid Pop to take us up there in the truck, but when it was all done; when people – grown men were working for 7 to 10 dollars a week, we each had five bucks profit that night on that first dance we played.

Kelley: Incredible! I was going to ask you what a band was able to charge if they did do a dance.

Palmer: I don't recall what it was, but that was a monstrous hall up there at Emerson, but people were so hungry for live bands, I mean it was just – we played up there I don't know how many times, but it was just so crowded each time.

Kelley: Really! People did that back then. It sounds like you were quite the entrepreneur. You were into not only the talent but the marketing too.

Palmer: I had the drive I guess.

Kelley: If that was in the 30s when you did that, you were only like 20 years old. Real good. You had a cooperative work force, it sounds like, too.

Palmer: Well, up to a certain point after so long a time, big sister and brother-in-law thought they were smarter than me, and they decided to take the band over, and it only lasted six months after that. Because my brother-in-law had a – he just like a sack full of worms, and his personality was nothing. Now then sis, why, she'd decide "Let Woody take care of it."

Kelley: Oh, dear.

Palmer: I chased him one night all over Shenandoah one night with a 38 in my hand and couldn't catch him.

Kelley: Oh, my gosh!

C Palmer: That's good.

Kelley: That's probably a good thing.

Palmer: I guess it was. He'd beat sis up, and that was a mistake.

Kelley and C Palmer: Yes.

Palmer: He never did it again. I kept that 38 for a long time. Somebody stole it out of my car or I'd still have it. Dad bought that for Mom, back in the days when we was out there on the farm and they got to stealing the chickens, so he went and bought her that little 5 shot 38. That little old chicken house still had two bullet holes in it.

Kelley: I was going to say, did she ever get to use it?

Palmer: Somebody was out there one night, and she just opened the kitchen door on that old house and she seen them out there and she shot out there twice. She'd heard cars screaming and a-going

Kelley: And still had her chickens then

Palmer: Nobody bothered the farm again. It was before I was born.

Kelley: That was up towards Hopkins, right?

Palmer: East of Hopkins.

C Palmer: East and south of Hopkins.

Palmer: You go east of Hopkins six miles and a mile and a half south, that's were I was born.

Kelley: Towards – getting close to Worth County there, I'd expect.

Palmer: No, Worth County's five miles east.

Kelley: Okay.

Palmer: The funny part of it is, you see the township line divided the farm where I was born and the farm where my grandparents lived. So I was born in Hopkins, and if I'd have been born another quarter of a mile south it'd been Sheridan.

Kelley: Yes.

Palmer: Then you go on south to the corner, and five miles east, was Sheridan, which would have been , that would have been about four miles to the Worth County line.

Kelley: Yes.

Palmer: Yes.

C Palmer: Gaynor was on south of Grandpa Palmer's place.

Palmer: Yes, it was on south of that corner. Well, I've mouthed enough to you folks.

