

## VIRGIL AND HELEN SMITH

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 Council and with support from the National Endowment of the Humanities. Today's date is February 4, 2009, and this interview is being conducted at TJ's Cafe in King City, Missouri, in Gentry County. We are interviewing Virgil and Helen Smith. Virgil was born on August 30, 1923, and Helen on February 14, 1933. They both lived during the 1940s and they're going to tell us a little bit about life in the 1940s. Virgil served in World War II in the Army and he was a private first class, second rank.

Amthor: First, we're going to find out a little bit about your background, a little bit about your family, and we're going to start with Helen. Could you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born, and about your parents' occupations, if you had any brothers and sisters, just about life in general that you could remember about 1940's.

Helen: Well, I was born in DeKalb County down near Amity, Missouri, and my parents were farmers. And we were poor. And I had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. I was the middle child. And...

Amthor: What was school like in the 1940's?

Helen: Well, I enjoyed the one-room schools until – let's see, I forget what year we moved down and I started school at Union Star, which is a smaller place than King City – and I was scared to death, you know, all those kids. But I enjoyed school, and, as I say, I liked the one-room schools because you got to learn a lot more listening to the teacher work with all the grades, and I enjoyed that.

Amthor: How many students was in the one-room school, on an average?

Helen: Oh, anywhere between 10 to 15 or 17 – around.

Amthor: What year did you graduate from high school?

Helen: In 1950.

Amthor: So, do you remember what you did for recreation or what you did for fun when you were in high school?

Helen: We went to movies some and, of course, we went to the ballgames and, as far as recreation at home, we just played games or listened to the radio. Of course, that was pre-TV, but we would invent word games. And I was always good at spelling and things like that, and so I enjoyed those.

Amthor: Do you remember having to - the rationing or anything like that during the war and how did that affect your family?

Helen: Well, as I said, we were poor. Daddy was just a farmer and he hired out to people who owned the land and he worked for a wage. He worked for a dollar a day back in the early 40s. And, I think it's interesting the way my parents met. My Grandmother Watts put an ad in a religious - my mother was from Kentucky - and my grandmother put an ad in a religious paper for a hired girl. And my mom answered that ad and came to Missouri and that's - the rest is history, as they say. And like I say, I had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. My youngest sister and I are the only ones remaining of those.

Amthor: Did any of your family members go into the war?

Helen: My oldest brother was in the Naval Reserves for a few years and my other brother was in the Marines for a little bit and then my dad got hurt and he got an Emergency Out so he could come home and help out on the farm. But I remember as a child we used to pick up scrap iron. We would pick up every nut and bolt and nail and washer, anything metal we could find, you know. And I remember peeling the tin foil off of cigarettes and whatever else you'd find it on and making little balls of foil for the war effort. And of course, savings bonds through the school. What little money we had, you know, we would start a savings bond.

Amthor: Do you remember any of the feed sacks?

Helen: Oh, my, my wardrobe was feed sacks! That's all I wore, you know. I think I got my first boughten dress when I was a freshman in high school. I had a lot of clothes that were hand-me-downs from my cousin and I always enjoyed those, but ..

Amthor: We had a lady in the other day that had a quilt made out of feed sacks, and she said she had clothing as well, wore a lot of dresses out of the feed sacks.

Helen: We - my sister and I always look at the quilts that our mother and grandmother pieced and say "Mom had a dress like that and I had a dress like that", you know. It's fun to look at those now.

Amthor: How was the cooking? Did you have to change your way of cooking during that time period because you didn't have like sugar and things like that that you needed?

Helen: Mom was a good cook and she could stretch, you know, and so we never, you know, it might have been kind of slim according to today's standards, but we were always well fed and had good meals. She was a very good cook, wasn't she?

Virgil: She didn't know if you was going to come there or not. I don't care if it was one or a dozen, she'd have enough fixed for you.

Helen: She never knew how many of the kids was going to be there on Sundays, but she always had enough. I've never known her to run out of food. And then we liked to play - she loved to play Canasta, so we always played cards in the afternoon when we were down there.

Amthor: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked? What was going on? Do you remember anything about that day?

Helen: I remember hearing, you know, hearing it on the radio and - and then, of course, the radio was about the only media that we had then. Sometimes we took the newspaper and sometimes we didn't, but the radio was our main source of information. And I remember at school when the president made a speech or anything, we would always listen to that at school.

Amthor: How was it when they dropped the bomb? How did they - were you at school when that occurred or...?

Helen: It was in the summer time when the A bomb? - yes, 'cause Mom was having threshers the next day and we'd gone to town to get groceries and that was all the buzz - was the dropping of the bomb and the end of the war.

Amthor: So how did your family feel about that? Did they agree with Truman when he dropped the bomb?

Helen: I believe so. I believe so, although my dad was not a Democrat and he didn't care for Truman, but anything to get it over, you know.

Amthor: Is there anything else that you can remember about that time period about the war that you'd like to share with us?

Helen: I'm sure there's other things, but I can't think right now.

Amthor: If there's something that you do, let us know.

Helen: Okay.

Amthor: Okay, well, we'll go back over here. Can you tell us a little about your family background, what your parents did, and if you had any brothers and sisters, and where and when you were born?

Virgil: I remember that dad said it was a hot day when I was born - I think about a hundred degrees or something. And I went to a one-room school house all my time - that's all I went - to grade school. And I helped dad on the farm there 'til - well, we had - uh - oh, I can't think of it now. Dad and Mom - when Mom died in 1930, Dad and us four kids - I had two sisters and a brother and I'm the only one that's left. Oh, Muff's left - Mary Alice, I'd better say. And Dad took care of us kids - very little help, and he

always had stuff for us to eat. I don't care how bad it was or anything like that and my Grandmother Gibson was just a little ways from where our house was and I stayed with her a lot of years – I mean she lost Grandpa Gibson the year I was born, I think. No, it was the next year - he died in 1924. And then, we was there at the table eating dinner, I think, when the bomb was dropped. I mean the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Dad looked over at me and said, "Well, it looks like you'll be into it." I was -'43 when I went in the army. Then I went in there March 25, '43, they shipped us out to Massachusetts-Buzzard Bay, it was called – Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. We got there – when I left home, I had mowed the yard one time and I got there and I stepped off in about 6 inches of sand. I said, "My, this is going to be good living." And I was there 9 months. Then, on Dec 23<sup>rd</sup>, we went down to Camp Patrick Henry – no, it wasn't. It was Fort Dix, New Jersey, getting ready to ship overseas and Dec 23<sup>rd</sup> about midnight we loaded onto the Queen Mary. There was about 26,000 of us GIs on there and there was 6 of us in a room with 3-deck beds and two of you couldn't get out of bed at the same time because there wasn't room. That's what we went through all the way and on Christmas Day, '43, about 2:00 we just got one cooked meal on the ship. The rest of it was sea rations or K rations and we had greasy old pork chops and I said, "Boy, we'll all be sick," but I never did get sick. Thank goodness. We lit at Glasgow, Scotland about 5 1/2 days later, about the 31<sup>st</sup> I think, of December got off of there and got on a train and they shipped us down to Redding, England. I don't know how far it was – not very far from London, pretty close. And from London, they took us down there to Plymouth where the Gun LST- I think we got on it the 5<sup>th</sup> and shipped us – we went in a convoy over to France and we set out there. I didn't get off that day. They had too much - waves – a channel would just about throw us off of the boat and they couldn't unload us, so they had to wait until the next day and then we had to unload on the LSM, a smaller ship, 'cause the LST couldn't get up to the beach close enough. And we got off and there was still a little excitement there yet. And I went there and the first little town I went through was St. La Hogue, France. You never know it was a town – a small town like King City – wasn't a building left – everything down to the ground. We went up through France. We went up to Spa Belgium and that's when the Germans initiated us to the U-2 – that was about a 500 lb bomb. You didn't know where it was going to hit. They had them there buzz bombs, too, that agitated us all the time. It'd come in there with a put, put, put, put, put, and if it was right above you and it died you didn't have to worry about it, but if you was back here somewhere, you'd better start looking for a hole in the ground 'cause if it died they just coasted down and blowed up. They done that real bad there in England. They'd just fire them all the time over there. Then we got to....where was I at?

Amthor: You were in France.

Virgil: We went from France up to Germany – towards Germany – went across the Rhine River into Aachen, Germany. We's – they had – the engineers built a place to go across on because in Germany they had that nice Autobahn and there wasn't a bridge or anything. They blowed every one of them up when they tried to get away. Well, I forgot one thing. We was about the first outfit in France and we had a ball. (laughs) Them French gals are something. And we got there in Germany – well, we didn't get in very far then came the derved breakthrough and I was in the anti- aircraft artillery in the

army which – I had a good job – I was on the radar which I was always warm – these other poor guys on the guns and stuff, I controlled them with the radar and most generally I was on the IFF, that was the Identification Friend or Foe. Some of these planes'd come over and you'd keep it on the scope there and if they didn't give me the right signal, I'd tell the gun attack boys to get ready and I'd tell them how far the plane was and they'd fire about 1 or 2 rounds. Pretty soon we got signaled. They'd forget to turn them back on, see, they went over the line and they'd shut them off. And that breakthrough – they put us in the infantry and, what did they give me. Five of us guys was on the front row where to tell the outfit where they was coming from or, most generally, you sent tanks back. They'd come down the road there – we had mines on the road there to keep – and them Germans would get smart to know there was a difference in the ground or something, but they'd never get over them. They'd turn around and go back. Well, I'm kinda glad that it ended when it did. I was sent home right at the end of the breakthrough. There's two of us boys in our battalion got to get a whatever you call it – send us home – and I was one of the lucky ones. Colonel called me up - or called the outfit up I was in there and said, "Private Smith, how would you like to go home?" I just kinda laughed. "You and another guy gets to go home," so I got everything ready to go and I went home, got back on slow motion boat and went home and gave me 30 days. So I got there and I stayed home 30 days – went back to Kansas City and get on the train and a Red Cap come in there. "Private Smith, Private Smith, " - I supposed he was calling me and I said, "Yeah." "Your dad just called. You get 15 more days." Back home I went and had to go through the sequence again. Then I went back to – got on the boat there at New York, went back, and was in La Havre, France, station for awhile and I just got on the train to go back to my outfit and somebody hollered, "War's over!" And there I was sitting there in the train and I wasn't at the lines and I never did get back to my original outfit, but when I did, I was set there until other outfits, 2 or 3 of them, got to go home. I – I think about the 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup> of December – they's back to Marseilles, France, to get on the boat to come home and we landed back at Fort Patrick Henry, Virginia, or somewhere, it was about the 14<sup>th</sup> of January and on a train back to St Louis and the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, '46, I got my release from the Army. I come back home. I farmed one year which I found out that wasn't very profitable and, well, '47, I guess, I started down - I got a GI loan to be a mechanic, which I'd done a lot of mechanicing before and went to work for Esthel Colville in Union Star for about, what was it - I got how much a week?, about 90 cents an hour. I thought it was a lot. And I worked there 5 or 6 years. Well, 1948, I met somebody else and, I don't know what got into me, but we got married-

Helen: We celebrated our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in December.

Virgil: We stayed together 60 years which was a big bet when I got married to her - about how long would it last – how long would it last! She was really – we just got in trouble and I've been pretty happy since.

Helen: One thing I think about the Queen Mary. It didn't need an escort.

Virgil: No, it zigzagged.

Virgil: It'd outrun a sub.

Amthor: Did you enlist or did they - were you drafted?

Virgil: Well, I could have stayed out another year, but I told Dad I was getting tired of answering dern questions they was sending me to keep me out, so I just said, "Forget about it," and it wasn't very long and they didn't forget about me. They had me down.

Helen: Our oldest son was killed in Vietnam in '69. He enlisted because he knew he was going to be drafted and he just wanted to get it over with. Well, he had only been in the country 2 months when he was killed a week before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Our next son enlisted in the Air Force because his – they'd adopted the numbers then, you know, the lottery and his was coming up, so he enlisted. He joined the Air Force and spent 23 years in the Air Force.

Amthor: Did you get any specialized training?

Virgil: Just on the radar, is all. Just the training, you know.

Amthor: How was the training? Did you go to a specific place for that?

Virgil: Do what?

Amthor: Did you go to a specific location for your basic training?

Virgil: Well, I was in Camp Edwards for 9 months before I went overseas.

Amthor: How was that? What was your training like? What was your duties?

Virgil: Well, a lot of my training was walking guard at night or something like that or in the kitchen – peeling potatoes or washing pots and pans or something. They'd keep you occupied.

Amthor: How was the barracks?

Virgil: Good. We had good barracks.

Amthor: How was the food?

Virgil: I never did complain about the food. I know a lot of people do, but I didn't. I don't care what they served, if it was edible I'd eat it. I never spit nothing out.

Helen: Not even spinach?

Virgil: Well, sometimes I ate it.

Helen: He won't eat it to this day. What about that Christmas over there in Germany where they kind of had a one-day truce? Didn't they...

Virgil: I was up there pretty close to the front lines. That was during the breakthrough. We was in the infantry then, and Germans was right down the road there from us. We didn't fire a shot Christmas day.

Helen: And they didn't either.

Virgil: It was something – I mean- I shouldn't say this, but that's the day they sent over them 7,000 bombers loaded and one of them dropped his eggs too quick and I never did tell the Air Force, but they took out quite a few GIs there. Then I came back home. The buddies I was with in the Army, which I had several. There was three of them that lived in Denver, Colorado, and I went out and seen them – twice, I guess it was. I went out there that time I ran off from home and that's right after I got out of the Army. I just didn't know what to do. And I drove out there by myself to see Otto and Aslim and George Mitchell and Mr. Pat Patterson's was his name.

Helen: I never met him.

Virgil: No, I just saw him that one time when I was out there. Then I went up here to Kenny Mitchell there in Corning, Iowa, and saw him once. That's all the guys – I was in the D Battery and one of my pretty close neighbors, Donald Lancey, he was in C Battery, which we saw each other pretty often at home and over there.

Helen: Another interesting thing - his brother was in the Army and they met a couple of times at a point, you know, and got together.

Virgil: Yes.

Amthor: What did you do for Christmas when you were over there?

Virgil: When I done what?

Amthor: For Christmas, how did you celebrate Christmas on those days when you were in the service?

Virgil: Just another day.

Amthor: Did you get a lot of care packages from home?

Virgil: Oh, I got – my grandmother sent me cookies – I don't know – I didn't – it was – a lot of stuff to remember and a lot of stuff to try to forget. A lot of stuff's coming back.

Amthor: I'm sure with the combat that you were in you witnessed a lot of casualties and destruction.

Virgil: Yes.

Amthor: How were you able to handle that emotion during that period?

Virgil: It – to me, I knew it was going to happen. I just felt like it'd never happen to me. And that one boy in our outfit – he about went ape – I mean I had to pretty near slap him to get him calmed down. I mean, he went wreck right there, but he didn't have much to blame – he had been in the states 18 days before. Well, I'd been over there getting tough.

Helen: I've heard him talk about D-Day and how the beach was – it was blood, water and bodies and it was just a horror.

Virgil: That's the day after the others went in there. One of our places was a big cliff just a short ways from where we landed. There was 800 – what we called them – the suicide battalion trying to get up that rope to get to the top and I think there was, if I'm not mistaken, less than 100 that didn't make it. I mean, that got - they volunteered for it, so they's probably getting in jail or something like that.

Helen: Well, there was a German fortress up at the top there, wasn't there?

Virgil: Oh, gosh, pillboxes – them things – old Missouri would send over them Lebanese shells and that shell'd hit the bunkers and they'd make a hole about that big around and about that deep. That's all it done to it. I wouldn't have wanted to have been inside. Boy, that thing...but they wasn't no Germans in there when we went up through there 'cause the hill we went up, after we hit the water and sand there on the beach, the - we had one lieutenant that got shot going up there and we was put out just as guard duty at first and I was standing there on guard and 6 Germans come down the road there just hollering Comrade. I took them in as prisoners, but the guy there with me – I'd shot them. I says No. Didn't want to shoot somebody and know it. I know it. I caused a few deaths by letting the guns shoot planes and stuff was most generally I 'spect 60 or 70% of them went down that was shot at. That gun had a range of 7 miles up there.

Amthor: What kind of gun was this?

Virgil: 90 mm

Amthor: How did you stay in touch with your family when you were there?

Virgil: Hum?

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

Virgil: Write them letters and they'd write me letters.

Amthor: Did you have a special code in your letters to let them know...



Virgil: No, they was all censored. You didn't write nothing about....I never told anything more that I wasn't supposed to.

Amthor: How about entertainment? Did you ever see the USO or the Red Cross?

Virgil: Oh, yes.

Amthor: Was there anything in particular that you got to see?

Virgil: Well, I went to a few – Jack Benny and Joe Lewis, I saw him. We didn't get to many of them shows when I was overseas – I mean over in Germany and France.

Amthor: What'd you do for your leisure time when you weren't in combat? Anything like play cards or movies?

Virgil: All of us got paid and we'd sit there and play cards at night and we'd still be playing in the morning. Nobody'd ever get broke because somebody just kept shuffling back this way and that way and that's about the way – Well, we had teams of volleyball and stuff like that. I don't think that my side ever won.

Amthor: What was the people like in Europe - in the different places?

Virgil: Well, I hate to say anything about the French, but I'd rather talk to a German soldier as to talk to French. English people treated us real nice and we stayed with a woman at Essex, England. Mrs. Taylor was her name. They had 5 of us in that house. They was houses – people would take us in, so we didn't have to set up camp.

Amthor: At the end of the war, how did you feel about the dropping of the bomb? Did you agree with Truman at that time?

Virgil: Well, we really enjoyed it 'cause we was getting ready to go to Japan and they back ordered that, so.....yes, it was cruel, I'll say that much, all of the people killed and everything, but on top of that, we killed a lot of people while we were in France and Germany and stuff. They wasn't soldiers, I mean. You can't go back. When you drop a bomb or something like that or shoot artillery, wherever it goes, whatever it hits, it's going to be civilians. Most generally they try to fire into the soldiers, I mean....

Helen: His dad always said that he fought the war to end all wars – you know, he thought so his kids wouldn't have to.

Virgil: And I thought so, too. In that Vietnam War, I haven't thought much of it yet today.

Amthor: Did you join the American Legion or the VFW when you got back?

Virgil: Do what?

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

Virgil: Yes, but I missed a few years, but if I'd paid every year, I'd been about 50 some years in. But I missed out some, so I think I'm about 46 or 7 now. A lot of them's got 50 year pins. That second war – we're not no spring chickens anymore. I found that out.

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

Virgil: I didn't understand you.

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

Virgil: Yes! I'm proud to be an American citizen, too.

Amthor: Were you afraid of the spread of Communism after the war?

Virgil: I've been afraid of it all the time. I just – I don't know – I think we're getting closer to it than it ever has been. I don't know. We're in one pitiful shape right now. Mr. Obama says we're going to put people back to work. But half a million people out of work! Boy you ain't going to put all of them back the next day. These people...you know what...I don't know.

Amthor: What do you think are the differences between the war today and the war that you fought?

Virgil: Well, if we had the stuff now that .....

Helen: Then that they have now...

Virgil: Now, they could stop that war in one day. But wars go with time. And the time ain't working worth a dern.

Helen: Today, it boggles my mind that they e-mail each other and soldiers can call home.

Amthor: Now, is there was one thing that you would like to share with us that stood out about the war or the 1940s, what would that be and what would you like to share?

Virgil: I got back home.

Helen: I think my biggest memory about it is the rationing and food stamps – you know, the rationing stamps and the shortages of flour and sugar and basic things.

Amthor: Well, I think we've had a great interview and I appreciate both of you coming today and I enjoyed meeting both of you.

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