

MAX AND LUCYLE BENNE

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 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today's date is March 27, 2009 and this interview is being conducted at the Tiffany Care Center, Mound City, Missouri, in Holt County. The interviewer is Joni Amthor and assisting is Margaret Kelley. We are here to interview Max and Lucyle Benne and Max was born on May 5, 1919, Lucyle, March 26, 1918, she just had a birthday yesterday, and Max served in the Navy and the Marines and we're going to talk to them about their life in the 1940's and his service record. Okay, well first we'll start with Lucyle and can you tell us a little bit about your background, where you were born, a little bit about your parents, what they did and if you had any brothers and sisters.

Lucyle: I was born in Jefferson County, Missouri - not Missouri - in Nebraska, sorry, and it was right on the state line, our mailbox was across the road in Kansas, so I always was confused whether I should tell anyone I came from Nebraska or Kansas. When I was about a year old my family, who was a family of 6 at that time, my father, my mother - I had 2 sisters older than I and one brother. We lived on a farm and Dad's father had just been widowed and lost his wife and he was lonesome, so he went to Florida hunting some kind of solace there. But he wrote back to Dad and he says, "Burt, you've just got to come down, Florida is just booming and there is money to be made, bring your family and come on down." So, we moved to Florida and we were there for 11 years in that vicinity of time - times were good and we had a big house and a big yard and lots of friends and grew up there for that length of time. Dad had bought into a Buick garage with one partner and they were doing well, they had people that would come in on the trains to go buy Florida land and they would come in wanting to buy a car so they could go out and find the Florida land that was for sale, and so things were good and we did very well until 1928, the Wall Street crash hit, and the Florida boom also crashed and we went from riches to rags at that time, it seemed like. Dad had several fruit groves and possessions beside the garage. The day that things happened in Florida, it all crashed at one time, the banks, without any indication closed, a person wanting to go draw any money, it didn't make any difference what you had in the bank, you couldn't get a dollar out. I remember the telling story, of course, I wasn't around that, but some lady was trying to get into the bank, and they said you can't get in, they were stacked around there, "But I want to make a deposit," and everybody broke up, because everybody was wanting to get some money out - what they had and she wanted to deposit. I don't think she understood. But while we lived in Florida the folks had another child, a boy, a baby boy in 1924 and he was just the apple of everybody's eyes, a darling. He developed what was called Bright's Disease and if he had been living at this time he would have been on dialysis. But he lived 16 months with it and passed away and that was such a hardship on the family and nothing to do so Mother had - her father had bought a farm for her in Nebraska, where I was born, and it was to be hers whenever he was gone and he says "better come back up and get back on the farm," so it took a couple of years to get moved because the tenant who was using the farm had to get vacated and moved away and we moved up in the car, in a Buick car, of course, they did save that and it was fun that we got back to Kansas and went to school over in Kansas, our mail box, our mail was Mahaska, Kansas, so it was hard to say I was from Nebraska because it was only across the road. Went to school there, graduated and I

wanted to go to college, but there wasn't much possibility, we thought, but I'd been offered a scholarship in Kansas Wesleyan, and the folks talked about it and they said if I would teach for 2 years, promise to teach for 2 years, they thought they could help me get to college for 2 years for a teachers' certificate. So I went to Salina and enjoyed my 2 years of college and that was fun and I came back and hunted for a job at home and found a country school in Washington County, Kansas, but I had to go to an institute, for a 1 day institute, all the teachers in the county of the rural schools, and I thought, oh, I have to go over to Washington, which is the county seat, I didn't know anyone but I remembered one of my girlfriends in high school had taken normal training and she was teaching and, sure enough, I found her there and she'd gotten married and so she told me - she introduced me to her husband and she says this is Charlie's cousin, Max Benne, and that's how I met Max, was at a teachers' meeting, my first year of teaching and to make a story even more exciting, a week later, after we'd visited, and had chatter for a while, I got a letter from him asking me for a date, and I thought that sounds interesting, I don't know anyone around home, and so I wrote and said that would be fine, I'd look for him on Saturday night, and he hadn't said what time. Saturday night I got ready early and I waited, and I waited, and he didn't show, so I got my letter out again and then I noticed that while it had a stamp on it, it hadn't been cancelled and I thought, OH, somebody got a hold on it and they're just pulling my leg and so I had fallen for it and I even answered it and told him I'd go with him and what would he think when he got that, but it ended up he had gotten a ride to western Kansas and thought he had the ride back, but it didn't develop the way it was, and he said he didn't have money in his pocket to make a phone call to even see if I had said yes, and he just prayed that I'd said no. But he got home and found out that - next weekend he tried to find me and I think that I had gone home, I stayed away from home, I had to have board and room close to where I was teaching, and it took us 2 or 3 weeks, we found each other at the county fair where the school exhibits were and so he told me his plight of being there, and he'd been trying - so we did have some dates then after that, and that was Max's last year of teaching in the rural schools because he was wanting to go to college and he thought maybe he had gotten enough money that he could go to Manhattan and take his Ag Degree, start for that. So I was teaching and my first year was the only one in the rural school and I got a school in town and taught there at Barnes, Kansas 1 year. My superintendent had been my high school superintendent and he was the one that got me changed over to Barnes, Kansas, and he was making a change to Teska, Kansas and since that was close to Salina, he invited me to go with him when he was going down to sign his contract and when he had gone into the home where he went to find - he came out and he said "Lucyle, they've got a 5th and 6th grade vacancy here in the school, why don't you go in and make an application for it." And, sounded good, and they had asked him if he thought he would recommend me and he says "Well, I would have a boy that would be in that class and I would be very happy to have her be the teacher." I think that's what got me the job, but I was there then for 5 years while Max was going to school and going - and then he had to go into the draft and he was going to be called up or he could go enlist in whatever he wanted to in and he chose to go into the Navy, so he enlisted. We thought maybe we would get married before he went in before he got his call but things didn't work out that we could. We couldn't get the weekends together and his Dad was very ill and that was a poor time, we went home but that was a poor time to get married. So he went out to San Diego, he was called and shipped to San Diego and we decided that once school was out I would - if he was still there I would go join him and he was still there waiting for transfer to wherever his assignment would be and so I had signed my contract to return to Teska because I thought he'll be on a boat and I'll not see him again, and so we were

married in San Diego. He was gone until - '44 he got back to the states, I believe it was '44 - my dates might be a little bit wrong and he was stationed in Memphis, so my teaching days had ended then. I went to Memphis with him and I worked in a dress shop there while he was in service and going out to base. But that was fine, and the war ended about that time but Max had gotten a transfer over to around Williamsburg for, to go to school again, he was in the medical corps, and we decided it was time for us to go home and he got his discharge and we went to Kansas and Nebraska, and in the meantime, Max's father had passed away and his mother had moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, because Max's sister had gotten a job for the government there and was going to school in Lincoln. So we decided that that's where we would go and Max could go to school there. So he went to Lincoln and I taught, back in the school system and taught in school in Lincoln, in 4th grade while I was there and enjoyed it very much. We got our first car in 1949. We hadn't had a vehicle, can you imagine? I'll let you ask Max about the rest of the things.

Joni: Okay, Max, could you tell us a little bit about your background, tell us about your family, what your parents did and if you had any brothers or sisters?

Max: Well, I had one sister and she was 5 years younger than I, and she went through the University of Nebraska and she, while in Lincoln, became interested in library science, which I didn't know was even something that was taught in or offered to - as a course, and she became, eventually, a professor in library science, and she became a professor in library science, and seemed like Northwest University - Northwest was a place unlike - pardon me, I have a speech defect that I acquired during the - well, I don't know when I acquired it. But anyway she was given a job at Yakima, Washington - was out there...

Lucyle: And she went to Wenatchee, Washington as a librarian, also, and then she got to Seattle.

Max: Right. But she - yes she was offered a job -----

Lucyle: Washington University there in Seattle.

Max: She was what?

Lucyle: She got to be a professor of library in Seattle, Washington, at the university there.

Max: But anyway, she was offered a professorship, or whatever it is you call it, and she worked there at a children's library and well she retired as a professor I guess. So, anyway I -----

Joni: What occupation were your parents, what did they do, were they farmers?

Max: Farmers.

Lucyle: They were farmers.

Max: My father died in 19—

Lucyle: '42.

Max: '42, yes. And my mother continued to live on the farm until probably '40 something, I don't remember. I never lived on the farm and my mother was in - when she lived - she lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. I enlisted in the Navy in 1942 and my mother died in 1949, I think it was, it's probably wrong, and she lived in Lincoln – oh, I'm about to run out of gas.

Joni: Why did you join the Navy, is there a certain reason why you joined the Navy?

Max, Oh, I don't know, I had an uncle who was a kind of a wayward man, and he was - talked about the Navy and what he did and sea stories, I guess. He talked about things that he did and he was - he lived in _____ and I wasn't - I don't see him as being an idol, but it was interesting, I guess.

Joni: Where did you do your basic training?

Max: San Diego. I don't why, when you join the Navy, you don't pick your place.

Joni: What was your job title, what did you do?

Max: Oh, I became a Seaman First Class, which was the second highest enlisted, right? And it was kind of the highest rank in the Navy for a first class enlisted, and I didn't know sickum about what was offered when I enlisted and what to do.

Joni: Now, you mentioned earlier, you had a background in science, and they put you in the Medical Corps, can you talk about that?

Max: No, I went into the recruiting office at that time in 1942, and in the enlistment office and told them that I'd had chemistry, so many hours, I forget how many, and they said, well, we'll go into the office, where you could - and I'd have the rate of a Seaman First Class, and the rate started out as a pay of \$54.00 a month. And if I went in as an ordinary seaman, I would make \$21.00 a month. Well, you know, for a poor farmer kid that was working his way through college, that made quite a difference. A lot of difference. So I went - I didn't know how much difference at the time probably had I been an ordinary seaman.

Joni: Explain how you got into something about the Marines, too.

Max: Well I didn't - yes thank you. I didn't know too much about the Marines at that time, and I went

Lucyle: You were just assigned to the Marines, weren't you?

Max: Yes. See, the Marines were - probably most of you know, the Marines are their own unit. Would you like me to just quit now? I have - and I didn't know this at the time, but while I'm in San Diego my name went up on the board, like all other enlisted to and they had my names on the - wearing a Marine uniform and dressed I was assigned to a unit, and I was no longer a swab jockey, as they said, but they - I went to Camp Elliott which was a Marine Base. Fact is, Marines on the west coast at San Diego were very prevalent, and then I went aboard ship.

Joni: Did you see any combat while you were in service, did you witness any battles?

Max: Oh, on the Mariana Islands, which were consisted of - well there was no battle, but in 1942, that was the year I was sent to the South - we ended up in a – see, this was – we went South from San Diego – see, this was in '42 and how many years was that from now?

Lucyle: You went –

Max: I've forgot a lot. I've forgot a lot of things that happened since then, too.

Lucyle: That was 66 years ago.

Joni: What you can remember is wonderful.

Max: A calculator,here. They wonder why they brought me along! Well, anyhow, I went to law school and graduated from Lincoln or at the University of Nebraska. I think I better quit just about now. I did graduate from Lincoln - from the University of Nebraska.

Lucyle: You had a law degree.

Max: Yeah, with a law degree. And you know something, I can't remember all the stuff they have there.

Lucyle: We decided that we wanted to come to Missouri, because my sister and her husband were at Fairfax, and they had a family and we enjoyed them so much ,we thought we'd like to settle close. So we moved to Fairfax, and he got set up with an office in Fairfax, just felt like things were about to be moving, and he had joined the reserves in Lincoln, because it paid a little enough to pay our rent.

Max: I joined the reserves in Kansas City, really, in '42 but I went in on active duty in '42.

Lucyle: But then he got the call to go report back for the Korean War, and that was a rough one, and he went to Japan and Korea and he was shipped to help take care of the ones that had been wounded and were brought back to the ships and things like that. How long were you over there? It was over a year - 16 months maybe, then we returned.

Max: Yeah. Several times I would probably got out of the reserves, but each time it seemed that I was going to be drafted - not drafted, but looked like I would be in the reserves - well no - I'm just mumbling on here, and talking about things that ----

Joni: Ah, back to the war. What were you doing when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

Max: I was a junior in college.

Lucyle: In Manhattan, Kansas - Kansas State.

Joni: Did you hear it on the radio?

Lucyle: Yes, I got it on the radio, did you hear it first on the radio?

Max: Well, of course, there was a -----

Lucyle: When Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

Max: Yeah.

Lucyle: You were staying at the Farm House Fraternity in Kansas State, you might have heard it there.

Max: You see there's a period about - I don't know - let's say a year that – it was between - any time let's see - I can't recount the – oh, I'm -----

Joni: How about propaganda? Do you remember what they were saying back there about the war? Do you remember on the radio what they might have been saying about the war in Europe and how that was going? On the home front how was it?

Lucyle: Well, I was trying to think, we were so busy gathering scrap iron and anything that could be recycled and buying stamps, I was teaching in school, and so the youngsters would bring - I believe you could get a 10 cent stamp to go on bond books and then when you filled it up a certain amount, why then, you got issued a bond. We sold those in school and the youngsters, we had a big scrap pile that we brought the iron and things in, and we practiced the "lights out" and black outs and things like that, and you know, when you asked me about the - any slogans or things, what did somebody tell you, I don't remember, and I can't believe that.

Joni: Like maybe posters or some other political cartoons.

Lucyle: Oh yes, and Uncle Sam needs you, and that was encouraged very much to join and to help and to do whatever you could to be sure and save. And we were rationed for - we were rationed in all kinds of foods and things like that.

Joni: Was there any one item that you felt was very hard to get for your family?

Lucyle: I was staying in a boarding house, when I was teaching, and my ration books I just turned over to the landlady, because she used them to buy our food and things. We were issued shoe rationing, too, and Dad was real generous too, he saw to it that I had all but his shoes, he didn't need extra shoes, and I think Mother was also for us younger ones. But there was no problem there. Tires for cars were rationed, and you couldn't buy new merchandise of anything because everything that was with iron, there was nothing being manufactured for the people in homes. Got along with what you had, and I think it was one of the good things, we really learned, that you could do without an awful lot of things, and you could make do, and you could create, and it was good for us. It wasn't always fun, but it was good for us, and I think that we'll

probably get to see more of it again in this time in life because things are a little bit tough yet, even with the stimulus that they are trying to get out, I think we still have some bad times.

Joni: Is there any - as you can see the times back then and the times now, would there be any good advice that you would tell us now that would be something we should learn from your experience?

Lucyle: I think that right now, we should be very careful to ask ourselves, do I really need it when you go to buy something, do I really need it? And ask yourself three times, my sister used to tell - older sister told my nieces when they wanted something, she'd say ask yourself 3 times, and if you really need it the third time, then go buy it but - and I think that's good advice for people now, not to say, well, they've got a discount, I can get this so much cheaper - do you need it? I think that's - and see what we can get along with.

Joni: Now, did you have a Victory Garden or anything else that was - how about a lot of people put their little signs or flags in the windows if they had someone in the army?

Lucyle: Oh, we had our star or flags and I had my star for Max out in the window where I was, and of course, had a little locket that had a 1 star on it and things like that. Yes, we tried to be very much conscious of who was in service in all of our families. Of course our mail was censored for quite awhile there. I don't know when it wasn't censored, so we tried to be careful with what we wrote.

Joni: Did you ever try to come up with a code so you would understand what each other was talking about.

Lucyle: We weren't together where we could talk about it. He was overseas and I couldn't tell him anything to do or anything, but I think that I knew pretty muchly where he was. He could say that he was in a safe place, and he was alright and what he was doing, a little. I think that I still have most of his letters in a box, but I haven't read them for a long time. I'm sorry I didn't have them here where I could have looked at them before we talked today.

Joni: That would really be nice to someday have them out and maybe have them printed up in a book.

Lucyle: That very likely is what maybe some of the family is doing that. I have nieces and nephews who are very good about helping us accumulate things and saving them.

Joni: Now at the end of the war - how did you feel about Truman dropping the Atomic bomb?

Lucyle: Well, it was frightening at first, but I thought, if it ended the war, it was worth it, because there were many, many more people being killed in the war and wherever and the dangers of places and things and we just needed to get that over with, and so I was grateful. I guess we heard that the war is over and that was the big news.

Joni: Did you have a lot of celebrations when the war was over and men were coming home?

Max: You see there was war in the Pacific

Lucyle: And then in Europe, too.

Max: Well, one in Japan, one in Germany and they ended - they did not end at the same time - one the first one, well, you probably know if you studied your history that ---

Lucyle: VE Day, I'm not sure of the date now, that was of Europe.

Max: And Japan was one and Germany was one and I don't know whether - I think VE Day – that was victory---Oh, there I go again, anytime I try to concentrate on it, I run into a problem.

Lucyle: And I'm no help here, because I've forgotten those dates, too. Then we needed to get it over and get the next taken care of.

Max: Probably - I know I'm taking up your time, and I can't concentrate on the Europe and Asia. There are different dates and different places and all that. To concentrate on a time is---- If you ladies want me to stop, I will, I'm not giving you much information.

Joni: I think she has another question for you.

Angela Bownes: I was just going through some of your information that you've given me and you have down that in your battles and campaigns that you were in the invasion of Saipan in June of 1944. Does that bring up any memories for you? I thought maybe I might jog your memory a little bit. June of 1944 in Saipan.

Lucyle: Is that when you dug a foxhole and slept in it?

Max: In Saipan, after we had spent a year in New Zealand, or more, we - that was - you see there was those islands over there, little ones, and some of them were fortified and some of them weren't, and the Japs had - I shouldn't say Japs, I guess, the Japanese, we were not - wasn't just one battle, there was

Angela: A lot of little battles.

Max: Yes, and islands like – oh, I know the names of those, and I spent 6 weeks or more on at least 2 of them, and I'm trying to remember the names and places that were fortified and some that weren't. See, the Japanese did not fortify all of them, they didn't feel, apparently – well, they picked the ones there they had- well the Americans didn't defend all of them either. If they had, they would still be over there.

Lucyle: I know Max did not talk about the war at all when he came home. They would not, and I don't think many of the service men did talk for a long time, and it's only in the past few years that suddenly, at some of our meetings, the VFW meetings or Legion meetings and dinners, that some of them would start talking about a place where they had been, and then it's loosened up and they've all talked - Max has talked more in the last few years until he had his accident that

kind of knocked him out of where he couldn't remember anything for a while, so he's recovering from that and his memory is still many gaps in it, and so that's the reason he has so much difficulties - still working on trying to get his memory back.

Max: I was not in any hand to hand combat. I was - in other words, I can't start to say Midway, of course, Midway was in June or July - oh I ought to be able to rattle those things off - I can't even remember now when I think Midway was.

Angela: I want to say '44 but I'm not sure. I was thinking it was '44 - Midway.

Lucyle: I think that was probably just before he got to come back to the states after he had been in that, that he had landed at some time, and I remember at one time, there was either conversation or a letter, about his having to dig a foxhole and he got it deep enough that he could get his head down, and all and I really wasn't worried so much about that because most of the time he was not in the actual battlefield, he was where they were doing the recovery and being brought back in.

Joni: Well, I won't keep you much longer unless there is another comment you would like to tell us. Were you wanting to say something else?

Lucyle: Did you think of something else to mention?

Max: Nothing of importance

Joni: Well anything is important.

Max: I realize that but –

Lucyle: I think it was interesting that in the '40's, it was '49 when we got our first car. We had to depend on public transportation at all times, when we went to school, when Max was teaching, he had his folks' car that he would borrow and our dates were in our folks' cars.

Joni: Okay, well I think we're done today, but I really appreciate your coming in and talking to us, because we've enjoyed your stories, and I think they're wanting to eat lunch so we don't want to keep you. So thank you very much, it very nice to meet both of you as well.

Lucyle: Thank you.