Fort Smith Historical Society Oral History Center
World War II Project
Interview with Seborn Jackson

SJ: My full name is Seborn Walton Jackson, Jr. I was born here in Fort Smith on (DELETED CONTENT); and I grew up here, born and reared here in Fort Smith.

JW: What was your parents' name?

SJ: My father's name was Seborn Walton Jackson and my mother's name was Lucile Lick Jackson.

JW: And did you have brothers and sisters?

SJ: I had a sister, Caroline Dixie Jackson, a little older, three years older than I am.

JW: Your mother was a Lick. Was she Chauncey's daughter?

SJ: Yeah. You know Chauncey Lick or know of him?

JW: Yes, I know of Chauncey and Cap and on down. Okay. I just wanted to make sure we knew where she fit in.

SJ: Chauncey had two children, Cap and my mother, Lucile.

JW: Okay. And you went through the schools here?

SJ: Yes.

JW: And did you go to college?

SJ: No. I went to trade school for a while, printing school, because I went to work in my grandfather's printing business. A little continuing education along the way, but I never formally went to college.

JW: Okay. So where did you live, what part of Fort Smith?

SJ: We lived with my grandfather and grandmother out on North 41st Street, 41st and N, about four blocks north of Grand Avenue.

JW: And the house is still standing?

SJ: House is still there, yeah. It's an old frame Victorian house, because there were two sets of family, my grandparents, my parents and my sister and myself, and an uncle that all lived there. Large house, and an old Victorian frame and eventually was sold as members of the family died off and was sold to a couple, the husband worked at Hiram Walker. And they did a nice job of rehabilitating the place, renovating it. Looks better now than it ever did, tell you the truth.

JW: It's a beautiful house. What year did you graduate from Fort Smith High School?

SJ: '37.

JW: So between '37 and the war years you probably worked at Weldon, Williams and Lick?

SJ: Yes.

JW: And do you remember the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

SJ: Oh, my goodness, yes. 2

JW: Can you tell us about that date.

SJ: Yes. Let me say that there were five of us in Fort Smith that were all-- In 1941, there was a military draft of all young men in the country. You got a number and you waited until your number came up and then you went in the Army, unless you enlisted in some other branch of the service previous to that, which five of us decided to do. We picked the Marine Corps because we were persuaded by an old World War I ex-Marine who talked us into joining the Marine Corps. So the five of us did, and that was in July of 1941 and we were sent out to the marine base in San Diego where we went through boot camp. After boot camp we got into a special training school called sea school, that's s-e-a, where they trained Marines to serve in marine detachments on battleships, cruisers and aircraft carriers, be anti-aircraft gunners on large ships. And we were in sea school for about a month when December 7th came along. And yes, I remember it very well because we got word there at the marine base eight or nine o'clock in the morning on December 7th, Sunday morning. And at first, we didn't know what was going on. And the word finally came through that Pearl Harbor had been attacked and all those ships had been sunk and so forth. But a funny thing happened, how ill prepared the United States was when that happened and how superior the Japanese forces were to ours. That night, we were standing barracks at the marine base there in San Diego. Across the bay, there's a long sand strip, sort of an island, on which was a big naval air station called North Island Air Station. They got word that the Japanese fleet that attacked Pearl Harbor was going to come on and attack the West Coast, and they figured that North Island Naval Air Station would be a logical place for them to attack. So there were about a hundred of us in sea school. And the weapons we had were an old 1903 vintage thirty caliber rifles, bolt action rifles, nothing automatic about them. And about one or two o'clock in the morning, they rousted us out, put us in trucks and took us across the bay over to North Island and spread us along the beach. And our job was to repel, about a hundred of us with antiquated rifles, to repel the Japanese invasion which fortunately never came. But I think that's a small example of where we stood versus the Japanese on December 7th.

JW: Good thing they didn't attack?

SJ: Oh, yeah.

JW: Well, did you know that the minute that you understood what had happened with Pearl Harbor, did you figure that that was automatically war time and you were fixing to head off?

SJ: Yeah, yeah.

JW: Is that what happened or was it hurry up and wait?

SJ: Well, no. I think the whole country went into kind of a super high gear to prepare itself for what it had to do, and that was fight the war on both sides, in Europe and in the Pacific. No, you could see it, see things change there at the marine base. Within a day or two after December 7th, the recruits started flooding in there like they hadn't ever done before. I mean just masses of them coming in, 3 volunteers. And we didn't have enough equipment for them, didn't have rifles for them, we didn't even have enough drill instructors. And so they took several of us out of sea school and made instructors out of us. And we didn't know much more than the people we were teaching, but that's all they could do. They didn't have enough experienced men that they could take away from what they were doing to put into teaching and drilling and that sort of thing, so they had to rely on almost recruits to do it.

JW: So what happened to you next?

SJ: Well, I was a drill instructor there at the marine base, at the boot camp, until about September. And all five of us that had come in together were getting restless. And two put in for a parachute battalion that was forming there, one had already gone out to the 2nd Marine Division, and two of us put in for sea duty and we got transferred up to a battleship that was in port up in Washington, and I stayed on that about a year and a half.

JW: What was the name of that ship?

SJ: Tennessee, USS Tennessee.

JW: Let me go back and ask you, the five people that you signed up with, they were Fort Smith people?

SJ: Fort Smith, yeah, all friends of mine. Some of us had been in high school together.

JW: And do you remember their names?

SJ: Oh, yes. They're all dead now. Two of them got killed in the war, two of the five of us got killed. One of them just died last year and the fourth one died about fifteen years ago, I think.

JW: Okay. So you were--

SJ: Excuse me. You asked me if I knew their names. Do you want their names?

JW: That might be interesting.

SJ: Okay. The one that went to the 2nd Marine Division was named Harold Lacey, he and I were in the same class in school. The two that got killed were brothers, Roscoe Lamkin and John Lamkin, were both killed. One was killed in Bougainville down in the South Pacific and one was killed at Iwo Jima. Then the fourth one was named Leon Andrews, and he and I were in school together, and he and I went on sea duty. And then later, he got transferred into the 1st Marine Division, made several campaigns with them, and came back, and after the war, survived it, got out. For a time, tried civilian life, didn't like it, went back in. He stayed in the Marine Corps until he retired as a Gunnery Sergeant and lived out in Hawaii. And they were all Fort Smith products, all grew up here.

JW: Okay. So let's see, you went to the USS Tennessee in September of 1942? Right. Okay, and take us from there.

SJ: It was in Puget Sound Navy Yard, Bremerton, Washington, right 4 across the bay from Seattle, right across the sound, I should say, and it was having some new guns put on it. When all that fitting-out was done, we took off for the Aleutian Islands Campaign. The Japanese had come in and occupied some of the Aleutian Islands that, if you remember your geography about that part of the world, they jut out, way out into the Bering Sea from Alaska. And the Japanese had occupied some of them, they established a submarine base up there. And the thinking was that they were eventually going to attack Alaska, so we sent a force up there, an Army division and a small Navy force to stop that. And the Army landed on two different islands and was successful in getting rid of the Japanese there. And we had to stay up there all summer. We got there in the spring, stayed up there until the next fall on patrol. We were patrolling up in the Bering Sea and back down in the North Pacific, almost over to Asia, weren't too far from some Russian and Japanese held islands, we got so far west. And then when that whole thing was over and they finally got all the Japanese out of there, we were sent down in the South Pacific and joined the 2nd Marine Division way down in a group of islands, not too far from Australia. And we rendezvoused with 2nd Division and went with them and a small fleet up to Tarawa. Do you remember hearing about that battle? It was a principal base in the Gilbert Islands. And our job was to keep any Japanese surface vessels from coming in there, furnish anti-aircraft protection and to bombard the island defenses for the landing, the naval artillery support is what we were. And it was a very bad one for the Marine Corps. Fortunately, we didn't have to go ashore because we had jobs there on the ship. But the 2nd Marine Division really got shot up terribly bad. They went in, everything went wrong and they got under heavy mortar and machine gun fire. And when they jumped out of their landing craft, these guys had, of course, rifles and ammunition belts packed on, fully clothed. You can imagine how heavy they were. And when

they stepped out of the landing craft and told to disembark, the water was over their head. They'd go down like a rock, a lot of them drowned before they could ever get in action. And all this was because of so little intelligence about the island and the terrain and the depth of the water and the tides and all that. Was such a remote place, they didn't have any charts on it, so they'd go in and take their chances. Anyway, that was over in a matter of a few days. And then eventually, the ship went back to the coast briefly and I was transferred off with some other guys and wound up back in the South Pacific after a short time in the States. And was put in an anti-aircraft artillery battalion down in Soloman Islands, and we were in reserve, waiting to be called up. Another thing that happened along about that time, probably spared us from having to get into any action, was that in the Battle for the Philippines and the Battle for the Marianas, which principally was Guam and Saipan, there were two big air battles called the Turkey Shoot. And the carrier planes for the United States Navy so shot up the Japanese planes that it just decimated the Japanese Air Force, they took away their offensive power. Well, along about that time when we gained control of the Philippines, we had control of the sea lanes that went from Japan down to Indonesia and that's where they got their oil. And so they 5 couldn't keep their industry going to replenish all these military losses they had, so they had very poor offensive power from that time on. That's why they reverted to kamikazes, that's about all they could do, suicide, fly the plane into the ship, which they did successfully on many occasions. And that saved us, as anti-aircraft gunners, from having to get into anymore action than we did.

JW: Were you an anti-aircraft gunner on a naval vessel or were you on shore?

SJ: Both, first on that battleship, and then later sent into the South Pacific and that was land based. And then we eventually wound up on Guam, where we were all prepared, we had our guns and equipment down on the beach ready to load up on LSTs when the atomic bombs were dropped and that ended the war, saved us from having to go to Japan, on the invasion of Japan. That was a big relief, I'll tell you. When I think about the pros and cons of dropping those bombs, I sincerely believe that many more lives would have been lost on both sides had they not dropped them and had we literally invaded Japan. And you know that in the weeks before they dropped the bomb, they fire-bombed twelve or fifteen Japanese cities. And more civilian lives were lost in the accumulation of those fire-bombings than in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And that's not publicized very much, all you hear about is the atomic bombs. But as far as civilian damage, more of it was done in those fire-bombings. Japan was pretty much knocked out by the time they dropped them, they just wouldn't give up. But they think that if we'd gone in there, they would have fought with everything they had, man, woman and child.

JW: And it was a fortified island?

SJ: Yeah. I think those atomic bombs so horrified them, so frightened them, because of the enormity of the destruction and everything that happened just with one bomb. But they didn't know that after the second bomb, we didn't have anymore.

JW: That's good they gave up when they did.

SJ: Yeah, yeah, it sure is.

JW: I've recently seen photographs of the tunnels and the caves and whole locomotives and airplanes and all that, it was like Swiss cheese evidently, and they'd hid things in every crevice.

SJ: The Japanese Islands? Yeah.

JW: So it sure makes me think that if we'd had to invade them with ground troops, that it just would have been millions of people killed on both sides.

SJ: On both sides, yeah. I think you're right. Well, after the thing ended, I had enough points to get out. They let you apply for a discharge on the basis of the number of points you'd earned through your term of service. I had enough to get out. And so I had to wait, they put us in a camp, all of us that were in a like situation there on Guam and we just waited until we could get transportation, and I came home on a destroyer. And one of the scariest experiences I had, 6 oddly enough, was coming home, the destroyer got caught in a typhoon first night out of Guam. And we were escorting a battleship that had been badly damaged and patched up, and they wouldn't steam it over six knots because they were afraid the patching would give way. And the job of this destroyer, in addition to carrying us, which was just incidental, had room for about thirty or forty of us, was to go alongside as an escort. And in case the repair work did give way, we'd take the skeleton crew off and let the ship sink out there. So that night when that typhoon hit us, a destroyer normally has enough speed and their configuration with the ship is such that it can cut through waves, cut through heavy seas. But we couldn't do that because we couldn't go over six knots, we had to stay with this old battleship. And I'm telling you, that was some kind of a night. I stood up all night holding on to stanchions because the ship was going like this.

JW: Do you remember the name of the destroyer?

SJ: No, I don't.

JW: Do you remember the name of the battleship?

SJ: Oh, yeah. The battleship, oh, yeah, it was the Pennsylvania.

JW: When was this, what date was this more or less?

SJ: This was October, early October.

JW: October of 1945?

SJ: Yeah, that's right, some time in October. I got out and the destroyer took us to Seattle, and then they subsequently put us on a train and sent us down to Camp Pendleton in California, where we were discharged. But all that took a matter of two or three weeks, and so it was the middle of November before I finally got out. And I think one of the questions here was what did you do the first day you got out. And I looked for a way to get home, I mean they didn't give me a ride, didn't tell me how to get there. They gave me three hundred dollars, that was the ruptured duck pay, they called it, and I got a ride up to L.A. and then looked for transportation. I took a bus overnight to Phoenix, yeah, to Phoenix, and then managed to get on an airliner, American Airlines to Dallas. And then I took a train from Dallas to Muskogee, and then took another bus from Muskogee to Fort Smith, but I got here.

JW: So you came into town. Was anybody there to meet you at the bus station, did they know you were coming?

SJ: They didn't know when I was coming, they didn't know I was coming at that hour. No, no, there was nobody there. I didn't want to wake them up because I got into Fort Smith at about four or five o'clock in the morning, so I just went on home.

JW: Did you get a taxi?

SJ: As I recall, that was the only way to get around, was a taxi.

JW: I thought of something and forgot. You were an artillery gunner? 7

SJ: Anti-aircraft machine guns and heavier anti-aircraft, like ninety millimeters.

JW: And did you have any stories connected with that?

SJ: No, not really. When I was in the anti-aircraft artillery battalion, we never got called up. We were down in the Pacific Islands waiting. We'd go on stand-by and be ready, but because it existed where the Japanese Air Force was so decimated, they didn't need anti-aircraft as much. But onboard ship, our biggest threat from the Japanese, in my experience on the Tennessee, was submarines up in the Bering Sea and that area up there. The Japanese had, on one of the islands, a submarine base on an island called Kiska and they were out all around. We had to have destroyers with us all the time to keep the submarines off of us. Occasionally, we'd be stalked by them and when we went south, Japanese had a lot of submarines out in the Pacific. Not giant ones like we have in our Navy today, were smaller ones, but they had a lot of them, and they could spit out "fish", you know. One of the sad tales was not in my personal experience, but I've read a lot about it, was the cruiser Indianapolis, which was the cruiser that took the first atomic bomb to Iwo, I guess it was, where they flew out of there. But it was on a mission just a very few days before the war was over. It was ordered to go from Guam to the Philippines. But it was a heavy cruiser and heavy cruisers don't have any submarine protection; neither do battleships, destroyers are there for that purpose and are supposed to escort these ships, keep the submarines away from them. But they didn't send destroyers with the Indianapolis. Somewhere out there between Guam and the Philippines, a stray Japanese submarine had had quite a bit of experience out there and was really stalking for another kill, saw the Indianapolis and put two or three "fish" in it and sunk it. And I think there were eight or nine hundred men on it, and only about a hundred and fifty, two hundred of them survived. You probably heard that story.

JW: I've heard that story and the sharks.

SJ: Sharks got there, they were in the water for several days before the Navy ever found them. They didn't even know where they were. Kind of a sad ending to their experience.

JW: Sure is. When did you learn of V-J Day?

SJ: We learned when they dropped-- well, what was V-J Day? Was that the day that the Japanese surrendered?

JW: Surrendered, uh-huh.

SJ: Okay. As soon as it happened because we had a radio man in our battery and he was listening to his short wave newscast out of Pearl Harbor about the first bomb and then the second bomb and so forth. And then a day or two later, they finally capitulated and that's when we heard about it.

JW: They announced it over the speaker?

SJ: Matter of fact, nothing much went on after that first atomic 8 bomb. The reports about it were so unbelievable, the enormity of the destruction it did, that everything kind of stopped because we thought the battle ended. But it didn't, so they had to drop another one. So there were several days there where things were kind of put on hold and didn't do anything but wait for reports from Pearl Harbor. Soon as V-J Day was over, in just a few days they started demobilizing. Had a good plan worked out to do it, put it in affect almost right away.

JW: Well, you had been in since July or August of 1941 and got out in November of 1945?

SJ: Right, yes.

JW: That's a long time.

SJ: Yeah, long enough for me.

JW: I think that's long enough for anybody, and that's pretty remarkable. So you came home at four or five o'clock in the morning and probably snuck in the house?

SJ: Yeah. I had to ring the doorbell because the door was locked.

JW: And so I don't suppose you got up and went to work the next day?

SJ: No, no, I didn't. It was awhile before I got my head screwed on right and started to work. I went back to work at the same place.

JW: But you took X number of weeks to kick up your heels?

SJ: Yeah, yeah, I think so, yeah.

JW: And you weren't married at this time?

SJ: No, no.

JW: You were single?

SJ: I didn't get married until two or three years later, 1948 is when I got married.

JW: When you got back after that long time being away, did Fort Smith seem the same or had the war changed it, had the war years changed?

SJ: No, it hadn't changed that much. Things couldn't change much during the war except those towns that were flooded with servicemen like San Diego, I mean in the Marine Corps out there. And course we had the camp here, but I don't think it altered the town much. It looked about the same because you couldn't build much, civilian building almost came to a halt, and so the town looked the same.

JW: And when you got back, it just felt like home?

SJ: Yeah, yeah, that's right. They quit manufacturing civilian automobiles, and an awful lot of civilian products were taken out of production because everything was focused on what was needed for the war effort. And that even got down to, like, you couldn't get real whiskey, good whiskey. You got something mixed with grain alcohol, something people wouldn't have anything to do with in this day and time; but that's the way they had to make it then. 9

JW: What affect did the war have on Weldon, Williams and Lick? What did they do?

SJ: I think they kept busy during the war.

JW: Did they convert to some sort of war work?

SJ: Well, not much, they weren't able to. It was a printing company and particularly specializing like they did. They did some ticket work for Army and Air Force motion picture service, where they had theaters in camps around, but it didn't amount to much. They couldn't make munitions or anything like that, they just didn't have the right kind of plant.

JW: They didn't make ration booklets or things like that?

SJ: No, I think the Government made those.

JW: Those four years, did they lose money or did they just pretty much stay the same?

SJ: I don't think so. I think they made money.

JW: I guess theaters did good business during the war.

SJ: Oh, yeah, very good, yeah.

JW: That's interesting.

SJ: Some parts of the business dropped off, far as enterprises didn't draw the people that they would in peace time; but they managed to do all right. Were able to keep-- I think there were times they had some trouble getting enough people.

JW: Right. That was going to be my next question, because there had to be a lot of--

SJ: Had so many young men on the draft, and even some that weren't drafted, and women, too, went to work in defense plants. The West Coast attracted a lot of people from this part of the country because of higher pay scales and employment was plentiful out there.

JW: Was the Depression hard on Weldon, Williams and Lick?

SJ: They had some lay-offs at times, they had down years; but everything considered, I think they got through it pretty well. I'm not saying unscarred, but nobody did in those days.

JW: Well, after four years of being away, and a question that's just recently occurred to me to ask, there's a lot of young guys come back from three or four years of high adventure and foreign sights and that sort of thing, and then just settle down and work the same job for four years without a peep. That seems to me like that would be difficult.

SJ: Yeah, I think it was. Some got out and tried civilian life awhile and just didn't adjust to it and went back in the service and stayed. But for the most part, guys managed to make the transition. Most of us were civilian soldiers, we didn't want to be professional soldiers, we didn't want to stay in the military the rest of our 10 lives.

JW: But I guess being glad to be home was such a big feeling that that might outweigh the boredom of being home after high seas and jungles and that sort of thing.

SJ: Yeah. But I didn't get bored at home, I didn't look at it that way. I didn't want anymore excitement.

JW: Enough to last you?

SJ: I was tired of the sort of living conditions you had and that sort of thing. I thought it was mighty nice to sleep in a house and so forth.

JW: Right, right. Imagine so.

SJ: Now, I don't think that was a great problem with ninety-five percent of the guys. And the ones that didn't like it, went back in.

JW: And also I was thinking the other day, when you look at the Viet Nam War veterans and what they're saying, they're saying that thirty some percent of the returning Iraqi War veterans are having emotional problems, mental problems, that sort of thing. I feel fairly safe in saying that the twenty-four people that I've interviewed were not the ones who came home from World War II with major mental problems. Those people are probably not alive today, you know what I'm talking about. So I have to keep in mind that I'm interviewing the well adjusted.

SJ: Yeah, yeah. I think you're probably right there because we're still here.

JW: I'm sure that Viet Nam wasn't the only war that had veterans return home that were scarred, terribly scarred by their experience; but not much is mentioned of World War II vets.

SJ: I would think that there were a lot more problems of a neurotic nature, emotional nature, with the men coming out of Viet Nam and the Iraqi war because of the difference in those wars, there's so many. In World War II, the whole country was focused, these were wars that we had to fight, you know, we didn't have any choice. We had all this pressure on us from both sides, going on in Europe and threatening to come over here and then throughout the Pacific. My gosh, the Japanese controlled the Pacific Ocean except right up next to our shores in 1942. And I just think that that made a difference in the men that were in the service. They knew it had to be done, they knew everybody was behind them, they knew they weren't being sent out like they felt in Viet Nam. And a lot of these guys, I'm sure, feel in Iraq, is why are we here, why are they making us do this, doesn't make any sense, we're not getting anywhere. I think that must have left emotional scars on those guys, just my opinion.

JW: Well, it seems to me like, you know, it's like you said earlier, World War II was the last good war, but that's kind of a troubling statement to make. I think better is: World War II was the last clear-cut war that it was easy to figure out why people were fighting 11 because we haven't had a war like that since.

SJ: That's right. I would say it was a justifiable war; where these other two are extremely doubtful. Well, I'm putting pressure on you here to make up questions. I've about run out of steam here.

JW: Well, it's up to you how long or short you want.

SJ: I was waiting on you to terminate it, but I can't think of anything else, really.

JW: Okay, all right. Well, that's--

SJ: I appreciate the opportunity to do this.

JW: Well, we're certainly thankful that you allowed us to do this.

SJ: I'm glad you gave me a chance to mention the names of those four guys that I went in with. They're all dead now, but just feel like I'm speaking for them, too.

JW: We don't know all the uses that this videotape will have over the next fifty years, but that may be very important information to somebody fifty years from now. Never can tell.

SJ: Right.

JW: Well, I thank you.

SJ: You bet you.