

## **Texas City / World War II Oral History Project**

### **Audited Transcript**

Interviewee: Lyman Reed

Interviewer: Vivi Hoang

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[0:00]

Vivi Hoang: This is Vivi Hoang. I'm here with Lyman Reed. We're in the meeting room at Moore Memorial Public Library in Texas City, Texas. This interview is for an oral history project about Texas City during World War II. Today is June 12, 2012.

Okay, could you share your full name with me, please?

Lyman Reed: It's Lyman Sims Reed. S-i-m-s.

VH: Oh, I'm sorry, could you spell that one more time?

LR: S-i-m-s.

VH: And could you tell me when your birthday is?

LR: It is September 22, 1930.

VH: And how old are you?

LR: Eighty-one.

VH: That makes you how old in 1941?

LR: I was eleven years old.

VH: Where were you born?

LR: In Bryan.

VH: In Bryan? Okay. And how and when did you come to Texas City?

LR: I went into an architectural practice here with a friend in 1962.

VH: And that's when you came to the city?

LR: Yes.

VH: Had you ever been to Texas City before?

LR: I think I'd been here once before.

VH: Okay, what had brought you, that first time, here?

LR: I think I was lost. (Laughs.) But Texas City isn't all that direct, you know, [a] destination route. But I had a friend that lived here, was with the Corps of Engineers.

VH: Is that the friend that you worked with?

LR: No. We went to college together.

VH: Okay. When you moved here in 1962, what was your first impression of the city?

[2:02]

LR: Oh boy, it was bad. (Laughs.) It was one year after Hurricane Carla. And the trees were all torn apart. They were coming out, with their leaves and all but there was quite a few things that looked like they'd sort of been swept away or cleared off that you don't see now. And the small vegetation; it's like (unintelligible) signs.

VH: When you saw that, what was kind of running through your mind?

LR: It was pretty grim looking. I had come from Brownsville, and we'd had a little bit of the hurricane down there, just mainly flooding. I hadn't been through a real hurricane so now I know what to expect.

VH: I'm just going to move this up a little bit. (Sound of recording equipment moving.)  
Let's go back to Bryan. Tell me about your family.

LR: All right. I was brought up by my grandmother. When I was age four, my grandfather was killed in a tragic car accident and he had been a physician there. So my parents had divorced back a little bit before that and so my grandmother brought me up and I lived with her, in her house.

VH: Do you have any siblings?

LR: I have a half-sister who lives in Massachusetts.

VH: Okay. So it sounds like growing up, it was you and your grandmother.

LR: Yes, mostly. My sister was seven years younger than me. She stayed with my parents.

VH: Okay. What do you remember from the war years in Bryan?

[4:13]

LR: Well, to sort of start with, I was at a Boy Scout camp-out that weekend. And the scout leader was there. I think he was a college graduate. We were all just hit, you know, by the news. Of course, then it was only radio. So we came back. Everyone was really distressed about the thing, of course. The newspaper came out with extras and all. That was our main communication.

The scout leader very promptly joined the Navy. Since he was a graduate of A&M and all, he was given a commission and I think worked in naval intelligence through most of the war. We would get occasional letters from him telling about some of his experiences, but it wasn't really on a front-line situation.

VH: Do you think, as a kid, when it happened, do you think you understood what was going on pretty well?

LR: Well, it was a real big shock. 'Course, we had been seeing all the news reports, things like this, of the wars going on in Europe. But the attack and all at Pearl Harbor was a tremendous surprise to almost everyone. You know, big shock. It did terrible damage to our Navy and the city there.

VH: Do you remember how your grandmother reacted?

[6:15]

LR: Not real distinctly. It—of course, it shocked everyone. We thought we'd be drawn into the war but we thought it was going to be just Europe. Then we ended up with the two war fronts after war was declared in Europe, too.

VH: How did life in Bryan start to change after that?

LR: Well, Bryan had of course Texas A&M there. And a number of the students, I think if they'd had two years of college and all, they could go in for a brief officer training school and become officers in various services. I think A&M probably had more generals and high ranking officers than West Point did, just the sheer number of people that went in.

But Bryan was a little tiny town at that time, nothing like it is now. There wasn't much to do. (Laughs.) So we made do with our own games and played lots of Monopoly and checkers, board games, things like that. Lot of my friends and I started building model airplanes. We all started following the war and all, particularly with the Air Corps. We all wanted to be fighter pilots, of course.

[8:07]

I was taking a magazine, I think it was *Model Airplane News* or something like that, that would also have the updates on all the various aircrafts and things like that that were being used in the war on both fronts. So we were able to keep them up. I think all of our friends and I knew what every airplane was that flew over by the sound and by the configuration of it.

Toward the end of the war, I heard a different sound in the air. I looked up and it was an airplane I'd never seen before. It was a huge four-engine plane. It had never been announced in any of the newspapers or the magazines I was reading and all. And it turned out to be a B-29, like the ones used and all to drop the atomic bombs in Japan. It came in because I guess it was on a cross-country trip and was going to land at Bryan Air Force Base, or Bryan Field, as it was called then. So we got to see lots of things like that in the air.

Also because it was pretty dull (laughs), we did various things like take down license plates and have competitions of who could find the most car license plates from out of state in a certain period of time and all. And there were lots of those because of the people out at Bryan Field and also at A&M.

[10:00]

VH: Tell me about your close friends, who you spent the most time with.

LR: I had a few close friends sort of in the neighborhood. We sort of palled around. We all got involved in doing the various exercises and all we would read that the paratroopers would have to learn when they went in case we ended up in the paratroopers. We had a tall swing that we practiced jumping out of into piles of leaves and doing all the rollovers that the paratroopers were taught at that time. So we were getting ready. Fortunately, they didn't need us for the paratroopers.

Let's see, we would also go out in the woods, which were real close to the edge of Bryan at that time and we would play the soldiers and things like that that kids still do. I remember one time I had a plastic helmet and all, similar to the ones that the Army was using. I camouflaged myself with this nice pretty green vine that turned out to be poison ivy. (Laughs.) So I had real bad itching and big blisters on my hands for quite a while.

But we had a good time in spite of it all. We would build various toys and things like that to entertain ourselves. But the way we got most of our information, as far as the war went and all, were the weekly newsreels. At that time, all the kids would go to the movie on Saturday afternoons. And they had all these various serial shows running like "The Lone Ranger" and "Hopalong Cassidy," and various things like that, but then they would have a newsreel of the latest movies and all like that that were taken, gotten back to the United States from the two war zones. That really made an impression to see that in motion rather than just a flat picture in the paper.

[12:49]

Of course, everyone listened to the news, particularly at night. There'd be various shows on that my grandmother would listen to. Then they'd have the various news reports come in and all, sort of keep everyone up to date on what was happening. It was [a] very scary time.

As it turned out, in our family, we didn't have any immediate family that was involved in the war effort. They were too young for World War I and it turns out that they were too old for World War II. So we missed on that. But we got in on all of the rationing, you know, not being able to get the food, and the sugar, and the sweets, things like that, that kids eat too much of now.

I think my wife mentioned to you about her family trying brains (laughs) and all once. My grandmother was second generation over here from France. The French believe in the organ meats very strongly and they were available and I had to eat the things. But since I've grown up, I don't. There are better things. (Both laugh.)

[14:35]

VH: Do you remember how you felt about having to eat that when you were a kid?

LR: I wasn't real happy about it. But my grandmother was very stern and I was hungry. But we got along fairly well. Funds were real limited since my grandfather had died. It wasn't in poverty or anything like that; it was the only thing we knew. Young people nowadays have no idea of the world, what we went through like that. They've been so spoiled with all the things that are pushed on them.

VH: Did your grandmother work?

LR: No, she didn't.

VH: Okay.

LR: I think when my grandfather was alive, she assisted in his medical office.

VH; Oh, I see.

LR: I think she was trained as a teacher but I don't think she ever taught.

VH: You had mentioned eating brains. What were some other common meals your grandmother made during that time?

LR: Well, she was brought up in New Orleans so we had a lot of very good Creole food. She would very well season food and all and could make just about anything taste good (laughs) whether it looked good or not.

VH: Did the rationing affect what she made, aside from, for instance, brains?

LR: Rationing, you know, they had the different types of rationing. Food rationing, tire rationing, gasoline rationing and various things like that. Everything was going toward the war effort so civilians got things sort of leftover.

[16:48]

The tires were terrible. Now it's not unusual to go forty or fifty thousand miles without a flat tire. But then you were having blowouts left and right and then having to try to find a tire and an inner tube and all like that. They had devised a great big sort of semi-rigid patch to put on the inside of the tire when there was a hole in it so that the inner tube didn't poke out through the hole and get punctured. It was called a boot. People nowadays don't have the faintest idea what that was.

VH: Did your grandmother have a car?

LR: Yes, she had a car.

VH: Do you remember what kind it was?

LR: I think she had a 1940 Ford Dupet [Dupont?].

VH: Okay.

LR: And I ended up with it in 1947 when she passed away. I drove it oh, probably 75,000 miles before I completed college.

[18:10]

VH: With the gas rationing, how did that affect your grandmother's driving habits?

LR: For a little old lady living in a small town, it didn't make a whole lot of difference. But if you're going on a trip—like one of her daughters lived at Fort Worth—if we were going to Fort Worth, she had to save up the coupons and all so that she'd have enough gas to get there and get back. They had A, B, and C type coupons according to what your profession was or how much driving you had to do to make a living. It was fairly realistic. But people didn't jump in their car and go to Disney World. 'Course, it wasn't there. But we use a tremendous amount of gas now compared to then. But the gas was cheap.

VH: Do you remember about how much it was back then?

LR: Let's see, when I was in high school I think it got up to nineteen cents a gallon.

VH: Oh my gosh. How about those movie tickets, when you went to the movies, how much did those cost?

LR: I think they were, oh, between ten and fifteen cents apiece. You could get a Coke for a nickel afterward or an ice cream cone for, oh, between a nickel and a dime according to what size it was.

VH: Was that kind of your weekly treat, to get to go to the movies?

LR: Mm-hm. Most kids in town that could afford the splurge of twenty-five cents in one day would, you know, go to the movie, get a Coke, maybe an ice cream cone. There were no fast food places or anything like that so you'd have to go to the local pharmacy; it was around the corner from the three movies that were in town.

VH: Was this something you did with your grandmother, or was it more with your friends?

[20:32]

LR: No, it was just friends and all. She wouldn't go see the stuff that we saw. (Laughs.) Cowboys and Indians, things like that. I think Tarzan was even around then.

VH: Got it. Well, tell me a little bit about school and how the war affected what school was like.

LR: I don't know how it affected school much. It was old-type schools. I had the same first-grade teacher that my mother had in the local school. My wife taught in that school, too, when we lived in Bryan. So we went way back. It was an elementary school called Bowie School. They don't use it now; the building's still there, though.

We had two elementary schools in town. There was another school called Iberra School which was mainly for the little Mexican kids and all. There weren't very many of them at the time. I think they went to primary school there, then they came on in to the other schools. Then there was a couple black schools there; an elementary and a high school. And at that time, everything was still very segregated and all like that. People didn't seem to be too disturbed over it because that's all they knew. So things have changed.

[22:17]

We had one junior high school in town and then the high school. Some of the buildings are still there but most of them have been torn down.

VH: Oh, I see. Were there any drives or anything like that at school related to the war effort?

LR: Yeah, we were always having various drives and all. With Boy Scouts and all, we were very active in paper drives. The Boy Scout location was in the garage of a former funeral home. It was about a three- or four-hearse size garage. We would have it filled up, shoulder-high, with newspaper and magazines and things like that before the collection people would come to take it away. We'd have our meetings sitting on piles of magazines. Also, there was metal drives, where we were looking for all kinds of scrap metals.

At the schools, I guess they had some drives and things like that but my activity was mainly with Boy Scouts.

VH: Okay. How about in the community, just the general community? Were there special programs or events?

LR: There wasn't much organized programs or things like that. Everybody just went out and pitched in. They might announce something in the paper for Saturday or something but we weren't very regimented.

[24:20]

VH: When did you meet Mrs. Reed?

LR: We met in high school.

VH: Oh, okay.

LR: I was a senior and she was a sophomore. I took an art class that was an elective and she was in the art class. We started going together in, I guess, the spring of 1947. We went together all through college.

VH: Where did you go to college? You went to A&M.

LR: I went to A&M and she went to what was then called TSCW, Texas State College for Women. It's now Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas, which was a long way. But they would have buses that would bring girls down for various school dances and things like that.

VH: Between A&M and—?

LR: And Denton, yes.

VH: Wow.

LR: Because, you know, back then, very few college students had their own cars. They still weren't real available at that time. People weren't as affluent as they are today. So we had to get by with using public transportation.

There was a train that went from Houston through College Station and on up to Dallas. And sometimes she would come in on the train, she would ride a bus from Denton to Dallas, and then get on the train, come down. There was one called the Lincoln—not Lincoln, the Zephyr. And other one was the Sunbeam.

VH: Nice.

LR: So it was a big event.

VH: And what did you study?

LR: I studied architecture.

[26:38]

VH: What led you to choose that as your major?

LR: My stepfather was an architect. I hung around his office, all like that. Decided I sort of liked it, that's what I wanted to do. But at that time, that was in 1947, and the war had just been over for about a year and the veterans were coming back, coming home. A&M got so crowded that they didn't have enough classroom space or dormitory space and all for people, so they took over what was Bryan Field from the Air Force and they still had the wooden buildings and all for the housing, double-deck bunks lined up like you see in the comic strips now. They weren't brick, they didn't have a wood facing on it. It was just black what we call tar paper, at that time.

So the whole freshman year that year attended out at Bryan Field. I lived at home and commuted back and forth. But I'd say probably a third of the students were war veterans. I think that's where I learned not to say too much because they'd be telling about their various war stories, things like that, where they'd been, their ship had been sunk in the Pacific or they'd been in the European area, North Africa, Italy, all around. They had a lot of things to tell about.

My only stories and all were related to Boy Scout camp (laughs) because I'd never been anywhere, certainly hadn't then. I was sixteen when I started A&M and these guys were mostly in their early to mid-twenties. They'd had a lot of time to think about what their goals were. [I had] just went from high school to college; it was still pretty much the same thing, just at a different location.

But architecture was very interesting and I really enjoyed that.

VH: Do you think having the veterans back at school, did that affect you as a student in any way?

LR: Say that again?

VH: Having the veterans back at A&M and talking with them, interacting with them, did that affect you as a student?

LR: Not too much. I didn't work near as hard as they did. A lot of them were married and they were trying to get their education and get out of college and get into a profession. So, but they were different, more goal-oriented, for sure.

VH: With the return of the veterans, did Bryan change because all these people were coming back?

LR: I think a lot of the housing was suddenly rented out and all because veterans didn't live out at Bryan Field. There just weren't the accommodations there.

But on the main campus, they'd converted some two-story barracks buildings that they'd had hauled in from military bases that were being closed down. They remodeled those into apartments and all for the married veterans that wanted to live in them. Most of them didn't want to but a lot of them had to because of the funding and all, which was very tight still. They had the G.I. Bill—that helped them a whole lot—but it wasn't just really super generous. They had to work, their wives worked, to help through school.

VH: I see. We talked about what you remember on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed.

LR: Yeah.

VH: Do you remember where you were for V-E Day? Do you remember V-E Day?

LR: The newspaper?

VH: Just, how you heard the news that Germany had surrendered?

LR: I guess we heard that on the radio. It was fairly well predicted.

VH: Oh okay.

LR: After the invasion at D-Day, pushing through Germany, France, all like that. It was fairly obvious that we were winning; it was just taking a long time and a lot of lives.

VH: And then V-J Day happened a couple months later. Was it similar in reaction?

LR: I think it was probably more dramatic and all an ending—because of dropping the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. That brought it to a quick end whereas in Europe, it was a slow slog, you know, inch by inch.

I think that was a very good thing that they did. It cost a lot of lives but they didn't pick a large city like Tokyo or somewhere like that where it would have killed so many people. But it was definitely a statement. After the second one, it convinced Japan they didn't want any more. I don't know whether they had any more or not but they were through.

VH: You'd said that news—you heard news through the radio and through the newspapers. What kinds of things did you listen to on the radio outside of the news?

LR: At night, we mainly listened to things that my grandmother wanted to hear. I think there was several mystery serials that would go on around four, five o'clock. She'd let me listen to the serials. Almost everything was serial productions, just going mostly from day to day. Just all verbal.

VH: How regularly would you listen?

LR: Oh, the things that I listened to, probably it was most days except maybe for the weekends. I don't think they had them then.

VH: Oh okay. Any particular favorite serials that you had?

LR: Oh. Well, I think I mentioned there was Tom Mix, "The Lone Ranger." Some of these may have come in later. I don't know whether "Superman" was around at the time but "Tarzan" was. It was just typical boy-kid type things and all.

VH: I am curious, what was your grandmother's reaction with the poison ivy?

LR: (Laughs.) She said, "You deserve it." (Laughs.)

VH: That's pretty good. I think those are all the questions I had regarding the World War II years. Was there anything else you wanted to add?

LR: Yes, there were a number of things my wife and I discussed but I'm having trouble thinking of them right here.

VH: Okay.

LR: But we all managed to live through it. Everything is just, you know, totally different now. Even the very, very poor people are not a whole lot worse off than we were during World War II with the rationing and lack of things. We did get lots of nice produce and all because we were on a farming area. I think that will pretty well sum it up. I'll think of a hundred things when I get home. (Laughs.)

VH: That's usually how it works. And that's all right; we can talk again if you think of other things you want to discuss. I just wanted to revisit Texas City a little bit: When you moved here to Texas City, you lived on, was it 12<sup>th</sup> Street?

LR: Yes, 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

VH: Okay. Can you kind of describe what the area was like, aside from the lack of trees?

LR: Yeah, there was, it was pretty bare because the foliage had been blown away. But we found a little house and it was up on brick piers and for some reason it was low

underneath the house. Water stood under it most of the time. In the winter time, with the north wind blowing under it, it really chilled the house. It had two tiny bedrooms in it, one bathroom, a kitchen, a little living room and it wouldn't fit—well it would fit in this room here with space leftover. It was a little tiny thing. It's still there.

VH: What was city life back then like?

LR: Well, Texas City was considerably different than it is now. According to Chamber of Commerce and various statistics and all, Texas City was one of the highest-paid areas in the state. Also, the educational level was one of the highest in the state. This is mainly because of the scientists and the high-paid employees and all at the local industry. It wasn't too long after that before these companies started moving them to central headquarters, all like that. It left a big void. A lot of them were retired here. Some of them are still around, some of our friends we first met when we moved here.

VH: Wow.

LR: But 6<sup>th</sup> Street was the business area of Texas City. Texas City started slowly, went out Palmer, toward where I-45 was, which was, I think that was Highway 75 or something like that back then. It was pretty small getting here. Nothing like now. So, let's see, where was I? The school system had some of the highest-paid teachers in the state here because Texas City was booming at the time. It was almost the same size that it is now.

VH: The city was?

LR: Mm-hm. It hasn't grown I guess much more than ten percent since 1962. So that's sort of a disappointing thing because the Clear Lake area was nothing but fields and cows grazing and all like that. Nothing was there; no road, no houses, except for farmhouses.

VH: That's, like you said, very different from now.

LR: Oh yes. Totally, totally different.

VH: Well, you and Mrs. Reed have lived here almost fifty years. What have you liked so much about Texas City that you've stayed here for so long?

LR: I think it's mainly our friends. Of course, I had architectural practice here until 1998.

VH: Is that when you retired?

LR: Yes. I retired, and then my partner continued for a couple of years, then he closed the firm. Our total firm went lock, stock and barrel up to Bay Architects near the mall. So they were very successful. I'll see them every now and then, but not too often any more.

VH: Well, Mr. Reed, I think that's all the questions I had. Did you think of any of those things that you were trying to remember?

LR: No, not yet.

VH: Okay, okay.

LR: Wait 'till I get out of the door. (Laughs.)

VH: I know that feeling. All right, well I'm going to go ahead and end it here. Thank you so much for coming in today.

LR: Oh, thank you. It's been real enjoyable here, getting to talk a while. (Laughs.)