

Interview with Vern Hanna

By Andi Ogles

January 20, 2015

Q: What decade was it when you were a teenager?

A: "I guess it was, well, if I was born in '33 it would be '49, wouldn't it?"

Q: Where were you living at that time?

A: "I was living across from the old elevator they tore down; that's the house my granddad built. My aunt bought it from my granddad and my dad bought it from my aunt."

Q: So, the house was in the family for a while?

A: "Yep, yes, we did."

Q: Whom were you living with at that time?

A: "My folks and my brothers."

Q: How many brothers did you have?

A: "Two brothers, Charles and John."

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: "Cimarron, I was born in Cimarron."

Q: What year did you graduate in?

A: "'51. I was graduated in May, and me and Mom got married on June third."

Q: What kind of classes did you take in high school?

A: "Just barely enough to get out, I hated school."

Q: Which classes were your favorites?

A: "None, I didn't like school; I just wanted to get through it."

Q: What activities did you participate in?

A: "Basketball back when I was, oh what? A freshman. We had a freshman team. Good Gad during war, the Second World War, there'd be a house like this and there'd be a train comin' with tanks and war stuff on it. Yep, you didn't ask me this though, but Dodge City had the air base they trained B-26 Bombers, and Garden City had the fighter plane base, and, oh Gad, there wasn't any rooms, and I remember the folks had a pilot live with us and we gave him a rent and a bedroom so he and his wife could be together the short time before he shipped out.

Q: Were you involved in anything with the community with the church or anything?

A: "Well, I've been to church all my life; got baptized up there in the basement church. That was the church. We lived in Dodge when the war started for two or three years. We had paper drives I remember. I would take my wagon up and down the street and collect newspaper and take 'em down and sell them. I found an old tire out in the alley. Man I got a whole two dollars for that!"

Q: What did you spend the money on? [that you got from the tire]

A: "Oh Gad, I don't remember, probably model airplanes. I built a lot of those. You didn't ask about that though. Once you get an old man started talking, he don't know when to shut up."

Q: What was your major mode of transportation?

A: " Oh, had an old '36 Ford pickup. It was a '36 or a '35 that we would use to haul hay. Gad, he bought a six-speed special; that was an old international truck. You had to crank it to start it. I drove that forever. I hauled hay in that forever. I thought he was making money, but I got older and Dad had bought us boys a job. I milked three cows all the time; my other brothers were too little. Charles had to separate; we had to milk cows. I milked and John delivered milk. Walked there behind the house and South of the shop. I don't know who owned it but Dad finally bought it, but grewed up in weeds, and John would cut across that comin' back, and people would put

some money for the milk in the empty jars, and John was comin' through those weeds, and Charles and I had some ponies so I said, 'Charles, let's hold him up and get the money.' So we got in them weeds and they was, oh, about this tall, and he couldn't see us. He come through there and we roared down on the ponies and he dropped the tongue of the wagon, and his eyes got that big around, and he ran for the house about as fast as he could. So we got the money and buried it. Boy, our mother was mad at us.

Q: So you were ornery as a child?"

A: "Yeah, of course when school was in the old school, we had study hall after dinner, was in the south corner there in the south corner was the high school and in the north corner was the grade school. I had study hall right after dinner. I was sitting there in study hall looking out the window at the river and Lord's spring, I couldn't stand it. As soon as school let out, I was gone, headed for the river. I skipped a lot of school. Course I didn't get shot.

Q: Did you have a job?

A: "Well, like I said before, I milked them cows, and I worked at Fisher's IGA. I had some cows up west on Ernie Massoth's land now. Had 'em in a pasture and I'd ride my horse up there and check on 'em everyday. That's what I wanted to do; I didn't want to go to school anyways. Working cattle was my favorite. Joe Butcher's dad had the ranch out south east of town and I'd help him. He was on the school board. 'Course when I worked cattle, I didn't have to come to school, but I had a pretty good excuse. I don't know how my folks put up with me; they should have beat me to death."

Q: Where was the popular hangout place for teens?

A: "Well, I guess here in town we had the picture show. Gad, I was a little kid. I didn't know everybody was broke, Gad, everybody on Saturday nights would go park on Main Street, and those two blocks north of the tracks would be full of cars; parents would be sitting on the fenders talking to people, us kids would run up and down the street playing. Once in a awhile we got to go to the show. I suppose our parents didn't want to spend money. I used to have, where the city was now, there was a

platform built up off the ground. Cimarron Band used to go down there and there would be concerts, only I used to mow it with a push mower, one them old wheel tights; we didn't have the mowers with the turning blades in them with the motor; the motor was that you pushed it."

Q: What did teenagers do for fun?

A: "Messed with them cattle, Chased girls. You know how that is. I might be old, but I'm not forgetful.

Q: Where did teenagers go on dates?

A: "We went to the show, and we had school dances. Good Gad, I wasn't in the band. I hated it; I hated everything there was about school. Some of the upperclassman had what they called up songs. The band teacher, he was damned good, had a dance band called them the "Jays in Blue". They were good! I thought they were the best band in the world. And we would always want them to play for the dances, and they one time said, "We would like to be able to dance in the dances" because all they got to do was play, but we just hated it when we had to do records."

Q: What was the popular method of communication?

A: "We called them on the phone, but the people in the country were on party lines and everyone listened to it. We had a phone office up here, and operators Doc Jacquelyn was the Doc and he loved picture shows. When he went to the picture show, he would tell the operator where he was going, and if somebody needed him they'd just go to the picture show and he'd leave. Pete Adams was the ambulance driver, was also the mortician. He'd drive around and tell people, 'You aren't looking so good.' We always gave him a hard time, but he would do the same thing because he was the ambulance man."

Q: Do you remember who the president was?

A: "Oh, let's see well it must have been Truman. You won't believe this, but there was signs everywhere, 'The only good Jap's a dead Jap.' Back then a rattlesnake was

a rattlesnake; you didn't have worry about hurting his feelings or not. It wasn't your fault if he got in the way. The damned Japs bombed Pearl Harbor; we didn't bomb them. I had a cousin killed in New Guinea."

Q: Was there anything that a president did that you really liked or didn't like?

A: " My folks were a Republican; they always gave him heck, you know."

Q: You talked about Pearl Harbor. Can you tell me where you were when it happened?

A: We were on Sunday, of course; we didn't go to church that Sunday. We were living in Dodge at that time. Dad had quit the bank and was selling insurance, and we was over there for two or three years. You know what? When I was living over there, I think I was in the third grade. For the first six weeks I didn't do nothing. We went over there after school had started. I had already started up here [Cimarron], but I had already had it [the learning]. School then was real good. They had air raid drills over there. The sirens would go off and everybody turned off all the necessary lights and pulled down the shades. They had guys go around checking. If you didn't have it, you got a citation for it. Everybody that had family in the service had gold stars over their windows and that's how we knew who had got killed. There got to be a lot of gold stars.

In '48 there was that big snowstorm. We didn't have to go to school for a week. They had our cows where that vacant house is over north east of you. Fred Warren lived there. He was Dad's cousin and we went without power, but back then we didn't have these furnaces that went off of juice. Anyways, you just pumped it up and down. City didn't have any wells, so they hooked an old lifeline up and tried to pull one well finally. There was a well over there that had a pump jack on and you just pumped it with your hand, I'd go down there to milk those cows at six, but I might not get back until ten in the morning. Everybody in town would walk or somehow got down there, and I'd be pumping water for them. Because the city couldn't pump any water.

Q: Do you remember the price of a gallon of gas or milk or anything like that?

A: Oh, I remember the price back when I was in school. Me and Mom got married right after I got out of school in '51. Once in a while in Ingalls up here at the Collingwood Elevator, they'd have a little gas pump out by the elevator; they'd have fifteen to twenty cents a gallon gas when everywhere else it was thirty cents.

Q: Did you have a favorite movie star?

A: "John Wayne was just getting started... Gary Cooper was good. Oh, that hadn't got much now do they? Nothing to write home about."

Q: Did you have any favorite entertainers or singers?

A: "Of course I did, but I can't remember their names. They sure had some pretty songs back then. This stuff today just sounds like racket, like a pig caught under a gate. Have you ever heard a pig get caught under a gate? It's a pretty terrible noise, they sit there, and squall like a panther.

Q: Did you have any favorite songs?

A: Yeah, "Give me Five Minutes More" and "Moon River" and "Sentimental Journey" Boy, those was some good songs back then. They had meanings that wasn't just loud. They also had a melody that would just grab you. Music today is pretty sorry.

Q: How did you listen to music?

A: "On the radio, we always had the car radio on. Now I barely turn my radio on in my pickup."

Q: When you went to dances, was there a popular dance to do?

A: "Boy, I always wanted to be able to Jitterbug, but I was always too clumsy, and I couldn't get my feet to do what I wanted them to. Oh, I can't remember his name. I called him Bug Salem because he used to eat bugs; he quit school and went to the navy, but he was older than I was. He got out of the navy, come back, and finished

high school. I don't know that you've ever seen a picture of the Zootsuit, God, them big flared pants, I wouldn't wear them, but, oh, they was real bright colored. I wouldn't have been caught dead in them. They had a long wash chain that went down to your knees. He [Bug Salem] could Jitterbug. Man, he was good. He blew up them school dances. I was doing dang good just to do the two-step. I would have loved to have been able to Jitterbug. That was the wild dance at that time. The Jitterbug.

Q: Do you remember how people wore their hair?

A: "Everybody kept it short and curled most of the time."

Q: How did Emma wear her hair?

A: "Just like she always did, short and curled. Here's our wedding picture."

Q: Were there any boys with long hair?

A: "Some of them got Mohawks, but in my day, or in the '50s they got into that tough knit stuff. No, the way I had my hair there [in the picture] was the way we wore it. Some guys had crew cuts, you know.

Q: Do you remember any fashion trends?

A: "The boys all wore blue jeans. When I started school we lived down there where Raymond Scott does, back behind B&P around the corner, and I was six years old and I think the school was too. It was something. That was the best school. When I was older, we went around for the basketball games. There wasn't nobody in Southwest Kansas that had a school as good as ours. We had the best. Back in them days, didn't think nothing about it. Girls didn't wear pants. They wore dresses all the time, but they wore long handles in the wintertime, long socks. I suppose they was long handles, I had never seen one. I just assumed what they looked like. That was a different time.

Q: Did girls play basketball too?

A: “ Yeah, they we called them the gags, because in Cimarron they were the CAGs, but they didn’t have games like they do today, it was different. Girls had Home-Ec, and they played in the band. They played some basketball, but they never went anywhere to play anybody. I don’t know, I just never thought about it. I don’t think they were being discriminated against, but when I was young we didn’t think about that. You know, that’s just the way it was.

Q: Do you have any Dust Bowl Stories?

A: “ I remember Black Sunday, what’s it, ‘36 or something? I was just three years old, but I remember it. I was born in the little house just south of that two-story house, that’s still there. The folks built that and the depression hit and then the dirt storms came. I was out riding my trike that I had, and must have been in the afternoon, because we had went to church like we did every Sunday, but I looked north and from the ground as high as you could see was just black and rolling, and I sat there and looked at that, and Mother came out of the house, and I remember her grabbing me up and I hooked my legs around the seat of my trike, and it peeled the hide off my legs, I remember that, but it seemed like forever. My aunt, my dad’s sister, and her two kids and maybe Grandma and Grandpa were living in the big house, but they put us, me and my cousin, in the bed, the south bedroom upstairs, and it was just dark upstairs, dark as night. It seemed like that night lasted forever; of course that dirt storm lasted for a long time. I don’t remember how many hours they said it lasted. I remember them having this wet sheet over the top of us, and they’d come in and change the sheet. I thought I would never get out from under that thing. They kept us from catching Dust Pneumonia. A lot of kids died from it. Adults did too.

Q: Was there anyone you knew that died from Dust Pneumonia?

A: “I didn’t, but you know I was just a little kid.”

Q: Where were you when you heard about the Japanese Pearl Harbor attacks?

A: “We was living in Dodge, and the news came out immediately, and I remember the folks were just pinned to the radio. We lived there on Seventh Avenue, and I was

going to school at Lincoln. It was on the hill and they had a big sidewalk and I had a sled so I went over there and was going to slide down that because there was just a light skift of snow, and you'd take it and run, you know, and jump on your stomach. I had just got jumped on it and had her going good, and she hit the dry sidewalk and rubbed my tooth into the sled and broke a corner off it. There were some Cimarron Boys, Reeds, and I think a Roberts, in the bottom of Pearl Harbor. I had an uncle, well, most of my relatives fought in the Pacific, was the gunner on a ship, and towards the end of the war the Japs were in bad shape, and everybody called them Japs. Period. They weren't Japanese; they were Japs. Japs that had those kamacazi pilots, and my uncle, you had to know him. I guess I took after him. He was kinda ornery. He was the gunner on a ship; he had those guns on these high- powered machine guns. It wasn't a cannon, but it was an aircraft gun. It wasn't a big one, just one that they had to man and shoot like a machine gun. You had to be belted into it, or you would get shook out of the seat. He had a colored guy that was supposed to help unbelt him if they couldn't shoot one of those kamacazies down. He had to help belt him in too. And he had to unbelt him when the flight was over. My uncle said, 'I kept a-shootin' and that Jap kept coming, and he said I hollered to that guy to unbelt me and that black S.O.B. was running down the ship. He said I turned around and kept shootin' and I finally got that Jap, and after that battle, I ran that N*gger down and he said, 'You ever run again I'm going to shoot your black self. The plane may get me, but I will get you first.' He said the guy never ran again. He also said that a bunch of marines, after the navy went in with their ships and bombarded the islands, he said the marines landed and so we weren't shooting yet, but the marines were having a bad time, but this chaplain, but didn't know what rank he had, but he was a high enough rank that if he suggested something, and he suggested it to you, it got done. It was an order. So this chaplain saw three or four guys standing around and said, 'These Marines are having a bad time; let's get some coffee took into them.' So we had two big pots of coffee, and we started wading into them, and he said this chaplain was always after them about their language, and he did. He knew all the words but he didn't like to use them. He said this chaplain was always after them, and he said they got close to the shore, but they was still in water that was about

chest-high, and he said they were holding these pots up to keep them out of the water, and said that the Japs opened up on them with machine guns and he said Judas Priests, the bullets were hitting all around them, and the Japs were out and the chaplain yelled out, 'Duck boys, the SOB's are coming.' He said after that the chaplain never said nothing about their language after that. He had some fun stories like that. I had another uncle that ran a landing craft in the navy, took the troops up to the island, but I had several other cousins over they're too, just the one got killed though.

Q: After the war got over, did the Interstate Highway System affect you at all?

A: "Not really, I was just a kid then. After the war, gas was rationed, and tires were rationed. Of course, tires didn't have to be rationed, but there wasn't any to buy. Everybody's tires, when you looked at them, there wasn't no tread anywhere. You could just look at them and tell, they were flat. They had a speed limit at thirty-five miles an hour, and, boy, you better run just thirty-five to save gas. The tires were so bad you'd be scared to drive a bus much faster. Dad had one sister living in Dodge at that point, and her husband was overseas in the European center, and she lived in Dodge and we lived here in Cimarron. They decided they would have a picnic, so everybody had about the same distance to drive so we met at Howell at that school, and we had a picnic there, I remember that.

Q: Where you anymore connected to people in Cimarron because of the highway?

A: "I don't know. Back then you knew everybody in town."

Q: Did you watch much TV?

A: "Well, there wasn't no TV."

Q: What did you do instead of TV?

A: " Oh, we listened to radio programs. The Lone Ranger, and Shadow; on Sunday afternoons there was three of four mystery programs on the radio. You listened to

music on the radio, and that was it. You played games, and I had my little brother; he'd cheat on Monopoly."

Q: Were you really close with either of your brothers?

A: "I guess, never really thought about it like that. I guess so."

Q: Do you remember anything about hippies or anything of that nature?

A: "In the '60s they had a bunch of them screwballs; they didn't realize that people were dying so that they had the right to protest. You don't protest in Russia or China. You can but you won't live to tell about it. But back during the Second World War, there wasn't no protests. We were in that to win it. We didn't attack them; they attacked us. People had a different mindset, you know.

Q: What did you think of Woodstock in the '60s?

A: "Thought it was a waste of time, but keep in mind, we got married when we were 17. We got married in '51, and by the 60's we was old married people. Then there was a bunch of kids that wasn't working and didn't take a bath and they was, what that free love crap? Nothing's free. Nothing really is. If you cared about your girl or your husband, you wouldn't pull that crap. We didn't think much of it.

Q: Was there a lot of kids around here that went along with Woodstock's ideas?

A: "Nobody around here thought of it as too smart; it was just a waste of time. This is a different part of the country; people think different here."

Q: Do you remember the Fall of Saigon or have any stories of Vietnam?

A: "None of Saigon. There was a boy from up at Kalvesta that was killed over there, and hell and people didn't think enough of our country to fight for it. I had a cousin that died here a while back, but he was over there and got shot all to heck. So I asked him about these bleeding heart people was hollering about kids getting shot, and I thought, man, I never was in the Army and I never was in the war, but I'm not going to make a judgment call on somebody that I've got no idea. If you hadn't been there,

you don't know. I ask Mark about it and he said, 'Well, they sent everyday or maybe not everyday, but every so often they sent us on a mission. Sometimes my mission was to get to the top of a hill,' and he said, 'I got there and I laid there all day long and boys twelve to fourteen years old was laying landmines around all day,' and I said, 'Well, you didn't shoot at him?' and he said, 'No, I had done everything they told me to do. You would do something else and you would get in trouble.' He didn't tell me this, but his sister told me that he got shot up several times. Anyways, they would come in and load up the dead guys on a helicopter, and loaded him up too, and was flying him back to the base, and somebody on the helicopter saw him move. They thought he was dead when they picked him up. Anyways, I asked him about on the news they had talked about tunnel rats, the Vietnamese, but according to the news they were tunnel rats. They would go into these tunnels, North Vietnamese tunnels, and I thought how was that? And he said that was my deal. He said I was a sergeant and he said I had a bunch of 'em. Whatever they were. He said, 'Hell you come up to a tunnel, look around, them guys was all gone.' I said who went in? He said, 'Well, I did.' And I said, 'Judas priest, I wouldn't of went in there.' He said, 'You would throw a concussion grenade in there and after it goes off you start crawling in.' He saw things. He said that the Vietnamese's' eyes would be popped out from that concussion. They saw things that were just awful. The lieutenant, him and a bunch of army guys, they got put in the army stockades and I don't know if they are still there or not. Them guys that tried them had never been in combat. I thought that was wrong. I'm not saying there aren't bad things that happened, and there are bad people, and everything but somebody that hasn't been in combat should not be allowed to try somebody who has been. They just don't know. It'd be like me trying them. Crap, I wouldn't have an idea.

Q: Do you have any other wise words or anything you would like to share?

A: "Wise words? [Chuckles] No, I don't think I do. I've always got stories, but I spent all my time working with men, and I don't know how to tell them in a refined manner. And you're a little young to hear my stories anyways.

