

INTERVIEW

**Leroy Addison**

YEAR

**2006**

**GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

**NAME:** Leroy Addison

**DATE:** June 20, 2006

**PLACE:** Cimarron, Kansas

**INTERVIEWER:** Joyce Sullentrop

**PROJECT SERIES:** Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:**

Leroy Addison was drafted in 1944, at a time when he could opt to be in the Navy. While in training at Great Lakes, he was offered a position as a saxophonist in a Navy Band. He spent his wartime year on Midway Island in the Pacific helping entertain submarine personnel who waited for service on their ships at that island. On return to the United States, he returned to the Cimarron area where he joined a local dance band and helped his family on the farm.

**SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:** Entering the service and training and life as a part of an entertainment group for the Navy that entertained submarine troops on Midway Island. His life after discharge and his photos were discussed.

**COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:**

**SOUND RECORDINGS:** 60 minute tape

**LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:** ¾ hour

**RESTRICTIONS ON USE:** none

**TRANSCRIPT:** 12 pages

**ORAL HISTORY**  
**Addison, Leroy**  
**Interview Date: June 20, 2006**

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**  
**Interviewee: Leroy Addison (LA)**  
**Tape 1 of 1**  
**Side A**

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**JS -** The first question we usually ask is, the war started in 1939 and Pearl Harbor was bombed in '41. Do you remember hearing anything about the war or where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

**LA -** When I heard about Pearl Harbor, I was bringing a team of horses out from Cimarron for dad. I heard it on the radio that they had bombed Pearl Harbor.

**JS -** What did people in the community think and how old were you then?

**LA -** I would have been about sixteen, a sophomore in high school.

**JS -** Did your parents, or you, think you might have to go?

**LA -** I thought I was so young that I would never get around to go to it. I don't know that they thought too much about it because I was so young. Nobody dreamed it would last four years, but it did.

**JS -** There were young men in the community that went pretty soon after Pearl Harbor that you knew?

**LA -** Yeah, we had the draft then. At that time, they were a lot older than me. Far as I remember, I thought it would all be over before I had to go. Little did I know.

**JS -** You graduated from high school?

**LA -** I got out in '43.

**JS -** Were you drafted or did you enlist?

**LA -** I was drafted. I went down to Leavenworth and took my physical. I chose the Navy because the Navy was drafted, too. I came home and it was about harvest time and they gave me a harvest deferment. I was waiting for harvest to get over. I heard on the radio that the Navy was calling all the draft enlistments and if you didn't get in by midnight the next night, you wouldn't be in the Navy. Lloyd Frack, over here, had been down to take his physical so he was in the same shape as I was. I said, "Lloyd, I am not going to the Army. I want to go to

the Navy. I am gone tomorrow. If you want to go, you had better get your bags packed." He and I went and got on the train in Dodge City the next day and away we went.

**JS** - To Leavenworth?

**LA** - No, we went to Kansas City for the Navy.

**JS** - You made it in time?

**LA** - Yes, we made it in time.

**JS** - Once you were in Kansas City, you went right on to basic training?

**LA** - We went right to Great Lakes for training. If I remember right, Lloyd and I went up there together and I think we might have been in the same company in our basic training.

**JS** - Why did you want to go into the Navy?

**LA** - I didn't want to tromp in the mud. I figured I could swim better than I could run. I just preferred the Navy. Fact was, when I was a senior in high school, I took the test for Navy V-12 to go to pilots' training. I passed the test and was supposed to go Kansas City for a physical when I got the mumps. I couldn't get up there and they closed that program before I got to go. I didn't get to go to pilot training. I had my heart set on being in the Navy.

**JS** - What was basic training like?

**LA** - At Great Lakes there were six or seven different regiments up there. The camp I was in was for the Twelfth Regiment. It consisted of teaching you to take orders and behave yourself. There wasn't too much about what the Navy did. I qualified for sonar and radio school so that is what they sent me to. I was to be a sonar and radio man. About half way through training a guy that played bugle came along. He said if anybody in the regiment plays the horn, we need to start a band in the Twelfth Regiment. I said I had a saxophone back in Kansas so I called the folks and they sent it, and we started a band there in the Twelfth Regiment there at Great Lakes. We got ready to come home on our leave from basic training. We came home for two weeks and got back up there to see what school we were going to. Griff Williams was in charge of entertainment around the Great Lakes. He was a lieutenant commander, and he called the guys in the Twelfth Regiment and said, "We have got a chance to send the band over to the Pacific as a group if your bunch wants to go over together." We said we would take it. That's how I got to be a Navy musician.

**JS** - That was just because you played the saxophone in high school?

**LA** - Yeah, we said we would like to go over together.

**JS** - How many were in the band?

**LA** - All together there were nineteen of us when we got overseas. We would go out to California and then over to Mare Island and to Vallejo. They wanted us to be a band for a submarine tender that was going to the Pacific. We got every thing together and went to San Francisco. We were headed for Hawaii. We got out past the Golden Gate Bridge, and somebody said they had sunk a ship out there ahead of us. They said we couldn't go by ourselves. We went down the coast to San Diego and tied up there for about five days. We couldn't get off the ship. After that, they sent us right back to San Francisco. We tied up in San Francisco Bay for about a week and got a bunch more flyers aboard. We joined a convoy to go the Hawaii. Our five-day trip to Hawaii ended up at twenty-five days before we got off the ship.

**JS** - When you went to basic training, was that your first time, really, away from home?

**LA** - Yeah.

**JS** - Was it easy or hard to take orders?

**LA** - I guess it was easy. They let you know if you didn't take orders you got to suffer the consequences.

**JS** - Did you get homesick?

**LA** - No, not really. The folks were always sending care packages and stuff like that. Lloyd Frack was in there with me so it was two local boys together.

**JS** - He didn't play an instrument?

**LA** - No, he went to work on a cargo ship. He went onto cargo school and I don't know whether he went overseas.

**JS** - When you got on that ship and were headed out into the ocean, this was a big trip for you. What were your thoughts?

**LA** - When we went under the Golden Gate Bridge, we wondered if we would ever see that thing again. When they sent us to San Diego we came back and went underneath it. The next time we went under it we said, "This is for real, this time." It looked pretty good when we came back a year and a half later.

**JS** - What was the trip over like?

**LA** - It wasn't bad. We didn't hit storms or anything going over, but coming home is when we had the bad weather. I got sick aboard ship and had the fever and was in sick bay for probably two weeks of that trip. I lost twenty-five pounds when I was in sick bay and I didn't have that much to lose.

**JS** - What is it?

**LA** - It is some kind of real high fever and you just sweat your weight off. You lost weight like crazy. I had a friend from Nebraska. They were giving me three meals a day in sick bay so when he came down to see me, I gave him my ticket for Thanksgiving dinner. He ate two Thanksgiving dinners plus his other two meals. He was a character. When we got over there I was so weak, I couldn't even lift my sea bag. I just threw it off the ship and I went out on the dock and got it.

**JS** - This was in Hawaii?

**LA** - It was in Honolulu. They loaded us aboard a truck and we didn't know where we were going. We wound up at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu. It was a submarine rest camp, was what it was. Ray Anthony, who had a well known band after the war, had the Navy band there for the rest camp. His bunch was going to go on leave for thirty days so he put us there for the band for the submariners for that thirty days. Then they took us aboard a ship and we went to Midway Island. It was a submarine tender that refitted all the submarines when they came in. We got out to Midway and tied up at a little sand island about three mile long and a half mile wide. They had an air strip on it and it was about six feet above water so it was quite an experience, too. We tied up at the dock, and when submarines would come in they would tie up beside us. The crews would come off and a crew would come on and work on the submarine. Our job was to entertain these guys while they were off work. They were there for maybe three weeks and would have at least five big picnics in a grove of trees. Every ship that came to Midway had to bring a bunch of topsoil with them. That was required. They had one grove of trees and they used the topsoil for gardens for the hospital and stuff over there. On the submarines, the officer would have a cap on to tell he was an officer and they had on blue jeans and beards. They had plenty of torpedo juice with them.

**JS** - Was that just whiskey?

**LA** - No, it was fuel that ran the torpedoes. They would distill it to get the diesel oil out of it and it was pure alcohol, then. It had oil in it to lubricate the engine. They would get a five gallon can of it and strain it through a loaf of bread to get the oil out. They could drink it.

**JS** - They must have been desperate.

**LA** - The local liquor store didn't have any. They got six bottles of beer a week, one a day.

**JS** - Because you were in the band, did you get the same pay as everyone else?

**LA** - You were rated like seaman first, seaman second and on up. Your rate determined what your pay was, plus, you got overseas pay, of course. I think at that time it was twenty-one dollars a month. You didn't get rich. They furnished your clothes and food and all that. They took your life insurance out of your pay; that was ten dollars a month.

**JS** - On the ship you had a PX or something?

**LA** - Yeah, just like they did on a base. The submarine was a floating city. It had a machine shop, cabinet shop, and hospital. Anything you would have in Cimarron or someplace, you would have on that ship. They could do anything needed to repair the submarines.

**JS** - When you say you entertained them, did you have people who would sing or was it dancing?

**LA** - We had a little group we called "The Salty Shakers". It was small groups. We might have two or three picnics so it took several groups to entertain each one. We would have iced beer and torpedo juice. After about two or three of hours of drinking that stuff, we would take a bucket of ice water and turn it over the skipper's head. They were a pretty good bunch of guys because they had to live together on the boat so you couldn't be a bad egg, you know.

**JS** - What kind of music did you play?

**LA** - We played everything; we had dance music and we had jazz combos. Some of the guys would put on comedy skits and things like that. For a guitar band, a guy from New Jersey went down to the cabinet shop and built the first cutaway guitar. They cut the neck down and built the first cutaway guitar that was ever made, I think there, on Midway Island in the cabinet shop.

**JS** - Did you have practices?

**LA** - Oh yeah, everyday we'd probably have a three-hour rehearsal to keep up on the latest stuff. Some of the guys could write the special arrangements. Then we had another crew that came up beside us and we would have inter-ship rivalry. Lots of matches were on the dock so when we got ready to come back to the states, they wanted to keep our band. They moved us across the dock to another submarine. When we got ready to come home, we had seven submarines in our squadron. We got into a pretty good storm and the submarines could get beneath it. The ones on top were having the problem.

They called the commander on our ship and asked for permission to dive to get underneath. He was anxious to get to Frisco and they couldn't go as fast under water so he would make them wrestle the water on top to go faster.

**JS** - How long were you over there?

**LA** - I went in June of '44 and left Midway in August of '45 after the war was over. We got back to Frisco. Commander Diego said he wanted us to come back and get our mail and your laundry and play everywhere we wanted to play. We played in a canteen in Frisco about three nights a week and at the Country Club. Anybody that wanted a band, the boss would take us to play for them. Christmas Eve, 1945 we closed up the Stage Door Canteen with our band. I have a picture of it. We would go play and go downstairs where they had Coke and sandwiches and cake and things like that. There was an old man and his name was Armsby and he was a janitor. He would sweep up the floor and clean up the tables. This character, Reese, in our group got acquainted with Mr. Armsby and so he told him we were going across the street to a bar and he could come with us. He did, and after about a month he asked Reese, "What are you going to do after you get out? Are you going to stay out here or what?" Reese said he had a sister out there and he might stay out there. Armsby gave him his card and told him to look him up when he got out. Come to find out he was the CEO of the Del Monte Corporation for all of California and Hawaii.

**JS** - He was volunteering?

**LA** - He was a volunteer. It was quite a deal. Reese got a job because he was friendly to that old man. After we closed the canteen, we went to churches and things like that. Pepsi Cola had bought about a ten-story building and on the ground floor they had GIs go there and get Pepsi and sandwiches for nothing. They had bunk beds. For a quarter you could get you a bunk bed to sleep in and spend the night in Frisco. We spent a night at the Pepsi Cola Center. After they closed the Stage Door Canteen, mainly it was churches and country clubs. A lot of the officers belonged to the clubs and they would book us.

**JS** - They were closing the canteen because the war was over?

**LA** - Yeah, a lot of the guys were getting discharged. I think about the first of May, the skipper of the ship called us in and said, "You guys are getting short on your band." We had a kid that had come up to at the Stage Door Canteen to sing with us and his name was Al Civik. He was a Polish kid, and come to find out after he got out he turned out to be Guy Mitchell, the movie actor. The skipper said they were going to send us home as a unit so we could be discharged together. About the end of May he sent us to Shoemaker, California, for discharge.

**JS** - When you came back and were entertaining, did you still live on base or where did you live?

**LA** - Our base was the ship. In fact, we drew sea-pay offshore about two hundred yards. It was crazy, but I thought if they wanted to give it to me I would take it.

**JS** - When you look back at your experience, when those submarines came in did you have contact with the men who worked on the submarines? Did you keep up with what was going on in the war?

**LA** - Sure, fact is, a lot of the guys were relief crew on our ship. Some of the guys that were due to go home would sign on as crew. Several of our good friends went out on patrol and their boat got sunk when they were out there. You had friends you lost when you were aboard that tender. I think ours escorted seventeen subs. We went over to another fleet and they had about twenty-four in their fleet.

**JS** - There was always at least one sub there?

**LA** - We had five or six tied up beside us all the time.

**JS** - Do you remember when you heard that the war in Europe had ended?

**LA** - Yeah, we were at Midway when that happened. Everybody said, "It won't be long, now." It wasn't too long.

**JS** - How did you hear that they had dropped the bomb?

**LA** - Midway had a cable station, an undersea cable for United States over to Asia. We could go to their station office on Midway Island. They had program messages like Mother's Day and Father's Day so you could send messages to family. For a quarter they would send a cable to your family like a greeting card.

**JS** - You wrote letters home and you received mail there?

**LA** - Yes, we had two days a week that the C54 came in with mail and we would be looking for it.

**JS** - What was the food like?

**LA** - Excellent, fact is you got tired of eating steak. Submarine people ate the best in the world.

**JS** - Once you were there, did you ever get a leave to go anywhere else?

**LA** - No, you were there until the ship came home. I suppose in an emergency, you could, but other than that they didn't. We were just on Midway about a year, from September of '44 to September of '45. We were at Frisco until May of the next year.

**JS** - When you were on Midway, did you have free time, time that wasn't scheduled?

**LA** - You could go back to your bunk or something like that, but you always had something to do. They had a beer hall on the island to go drink beer and there were movies and that was about it. You could walk around the island in about two hours. If you wanted to go fishing, they would take you out in a motor launch and take you fishing. It was the home of about ten million albatrosses, I think. They would take that sand and pile it up and lay two or three eggs on top of the sand. You didn't mess with those "goony birds" because they would run you off. Sometimes they would get on the runway and cause a plane to crash. After the war, they were a real hazard. They tried to transport them, but they would keep coming back. I have some pictures.

**JS** - What were the church services like?

**LA** - They were non-denominational.

**JS** - Some days you did more than one thing?

**LA** - Oh yeah, when a sub was in and they had supper, some of us might be down there entertaining the crew.

**JS** - There was the regular band and then there were smaller groups?

**LA** - Yes.

**JS** - You were kept busy so you couldn't get in much trouble could you?

**LA** - I was head of the band there at the last and I was the guy that got to keep the books and I got some schedules for programs. If we had deaths we would have burials at sea. We would take a small group out to play church music. They had picnics with nickel beer. If you didn't drink beer, you could sell them for a buck apiece.

**JS** - Did you have pop or soda?

**LA** - Yes, all kinds of stuff like that.

**JS** - Did most of the people smoke?

**LA** - I don't know. Cigarettes were cheap, like fifty cents a carton. Some of the guys were fiends, really.

**JS** - Did the membership of the band change much?

**LA** - No, not when we were overseas. Here are some pictures of bands.

**JS** - Did you have to take care of your own uniforms as far as cleaning them?

**LA** - You sent them to the laundry. There was a laundromat on ship.

**JS** - When you were doing this, did you think it was an important thing for morale?

**LA** - Yeah.

**JS** - Would you keep up with popular songs that were being played back here in the United States?

**LA** - Yes, that picture is Guy Mitchell, he got to be a drug addict.

**JS** - That happens a lot. You all look so young in these pictures. Did you continue to learn about music? Coming out of high school, you had a good music education?

**LA** - Yes.

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**

**Interviewee: Leroy Addison (LA)**

**Tape 1 of 2**

**Side B**

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**JS** - Did everyone have to provide their own instrument?

**LA** - Well, the sousaphone belonged to the Navy. Our commander was a boson third class and he was a drunk. When he barked you jumped. When we left to go overseas on that train from Chicago to California, he was sober then.

**JS** - You were all so young in these pictures, were there not older men there?

**LA** - We had two or three guys that were in their thirties and the physical training beat them up.

**JS** - Were most of the men not married?

**LA** - No, most of them were married.

**JS** - Here you are at the Great Lakes. Part of your training was swimming?

**LA** - Yes.

**JS** - When you look back at those days, what do you think?

**LA** - We were kids, really.

**JS** - What was it like meeting men from all over the United States and with different customs?

**LA** - There were a lot of guys from the East Coast and some of them were perfect asses. Some were pretty good guys.

**JS** - When you got out, did you ever think of staying in?

**LA** - They wouldn't let you stay in, they wanted to get rid of you. They were downsizing.

**JS** - I'll bet there are a lot of funny stories. Had you ever been on a submarine before?

**LA** - No.

**JS** - I think I would be claustrophobic especially if I knew it was going to dive down. When you got out did you know what you were going to do?

**LA** - I knew I was coming home, but I didn't know what I would do. There is a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge when we were coming back.

**JS** - You had a camera with you?

**LA** - Oh yeah.

**JS** - I have talked to some men who did not have cameras or could not even get film where they were.

**LA** - They now have subs that stay down for months. Nuclear subs only have to refuel every twenty years. Only time they come back is for provisions and crew.

**JS** - Most of the submarines that came in were doing work in the Pacific?

**LA** - Yes, we only served the Pacific Theater.

**JS** - They kept you busy.

**LA** - You didn't have time to get too lonely.

**JS** - Did you ever drink the torpedo juice?

**LA** - You mixed it with grapefruit juice. You couldn't drink it plain.

**JS** - These are good pictures that you have.

**LA** - They have a film of our ship.

**JS** - When you came home, what did you do?

**LA** - Started working on the farm, I guess. I played in a band, too. I played with Rocky Hansen out of Great Bend. We started in Texas and went all the way to South Dakota.

**JS** - When you look back at your experience during the war, is there some specific thing that you remember?

**LA** - No, just that it was good.

**JS** - Was there a specific person?

**LA** - One guy lived in Kansas City. I think he is still alive. One lived in Wisconsin.

**JS** - Did you keep in touch?

**LA** - We went to Chicago for a reunion.

**JS** - When you came back, you came into the West Coast, San Francisco?

**LA** - That is where we came in.

**JS** - When you were discharged, you caught a train home?

**LA** - I had my car out there. When I came home on leave, I took it back out there. We had an option of getting discharged at Shoemaker or some place else. They would buy you a ticket either way. A lot of guys that got discharged got their own ticket and the ones that had cars drove home, themselves.

**JS** - Can you think of anything else that I might have not asked the right question about your experience? Something might be important for people who are reading this to know about World War Two and the bands roll in it.

**LA** - When you were overseas, the guys appreciated the USO Service coming in.

That is the only time we ever saw a woman.

**JS** - Any thing else?

**LA** - Not really.

**Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)**

**Interviewee: Leroy Addison (LA)**

**Tape 1 of 1**

**End**

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