INTERVIEW **Elwin Mitchell**

YEAR **2007**

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Elwin Mitchell
DATE: February 22, 2007
PLACE: Garden City, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

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

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:
Elwin Mitchell was taken into the Army after a year at Kansas University School of Engineering. He qualified for an Army Specialty Training Program and volunteered for induction in 1945. After basic training where he got the highest score for rifle tests and received an award, he was sent overseas to France. His Ordinance Unit was attached to the 7th Army. There, his Unit set up mechanical shops and moved behind the infantry in the Battle of the Bulge to maintain equipment. After the war was over in Europe he served in the Occupation Forces in a dance band that played for soldiers' dances. He returned home to finish college on the GI Bill. Elwin farmed sugar beets near Scott City and later was made manager of Wheatland Electric and served there until his retirement.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSEDCOMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:
Education and later service as a mechanic in Europe, his war experiences and duty in the dance band were discussed. Sugar beet farming and work with the Electric Company were discussed.

SOUND RECORDINGS: 2 - 60 minute tapes

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 1 ¼ hours

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: **26 pages**

ORAL HISTORY
Mitchell, Elwin
Interview Date: June 21, 2006

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Elwin Mitchell (EW)
Tape 1 of 2
Side A

JS - Do you remember where you were when you heard of Pearl Harbor? How old were you?

EW - Yes, I was a senior in Ingalls high school.

JS - What were your thoughts, your parents' thoughts or what did the community think?

EW - We just thought this was going to be a real experience and the first thing I thought was, "How soon am I going to be able to register for the draft so I can go? I was seventeen years old at the time.

JS - You registered when you were eighteen, is that right?

EW - Yes.

JS - You registered for the draft?

EW - I registered for the draft in Cimarron, Kansas. I graduated from high school in the spring of 1942 and through the summer, especially after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 it started getting more involved with other countries. I had planned to go to college at the University of Kansas so I enrolled

in the Engineering School at the University of Kansas in the fall of 1942. Shortly after that, I was eighteen years old and could register for the draft. I finished up that first year of school before I was called.

JS - You were drafted; you did not enlist?

EW - I did a little of both because while I was in school at the University of Kansas they had a test that you could take on the Army Specialized Training Program. The idea of that was if you made a high enough grade on the ASTP test, when you were called in or drafted, you would go to a place to take your basic training. Then you would be sent back to finish your college work and then go into the Army.

JS - You scored well?

EW - I scored well and I finished that year at the University of Kansas and during the summer I worked for my dad out on the farm. Because I knew I would probably get drafted before I finished the second year, I decided to volunteer for induction. That is what I did.

JS - At the end of that summer?

EW - At the end of the summer.

JS - Where was your farm, north of Ingalls?

EW - It was south of Ingalls.

JS - Where?

EW - It was about six miles south and about three or four miles west in the sand hills.

JS - You then enlisted and you were inducted at Kansas City?

EW - I had to go to Fort Leavenworth to take my physical and then I was inducted there. After I took my physical, I came back home and I waited about three weeks to be officially inducted into the service. They sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, from there to take my basic training.

JS - Was this your first time away from home?

EW - I would say so.

JS - What did your parents think of you enlisting?

EW - Dad thought it was all right. He was a veteran of World War One. He thought everybody was going to have to participate in some way. I was old enough to go and there wasn't any objection on my parents' part.

JS - Did you have brothers in also?

EW - I had two younger brothers and two sisters.

JS - They were too young?

EW - They were too young to go.

JS - Did your dad ever talk of his experiences in World War One?

EW - Once in a while, he was in the Navy. He didn't mention a whole lot about it. He did tell about when he went over to France on board ship and was in this convoy of ships. One ship was loaded with horses and mules. In World War One they used a lot of horses to pull artillery pieces and whatever. He said, "A hundred miles or so off the coast of Ireland, a German U-boat fired a torpedo and it missed their boat, but it hit this boatload of horses that was off to the side. They started to tow the ship to Ireland, but they saw that was not going to work, it was going to go down. They unloaded all the men to the other ships in the convoy, but the horses had to go down with the ship." He said that was the most pitiful sight he ever saw, those horses. They knew that something was happening to them.

JS - Did he fight?

EW - No, he was in the Navy and I think they landed at Brest, France and they did not get involved in any of the fighting.

JS - Was he drafted?

EW - I think he volunteered.

JS - The Navy was an unusual choice for someone from Kansas.

EW - Right.

JS - I haven't really talked to too many people who had a parent in World War One so I am glad you mentioned that. Your basic training; what was it like to be there with a lot of young men? Was there anyone else from Gray County that went in with you?

EW - No when I went in, I was inducted with three or four other fellows, but we all went to different camps for training.

JS - What was it like in basic training?

EW - The basic training I took was the infantry basic and it lasted about four months. I think I was inducted and went to Fort Benning in October of 1943. I went through a complete basic training with field problems, hiking, out on the rifle range and firing machine guns and mortars and all that. We got training in all that. Then when the basic training was completed, the idea was that we would be assigned to a college, someplace to go to school. I was waiting for the orders to do that and it took a little while. In the meantime, we were doing twenty-five mile hikes about everyday to keep in shape. Finally the orders came through and I looked on the bulletin board one day. I was assigned to go to Norman, Oklahoma, to the University of Oklahoma. It wasn't KU, but it was close enough to home that I thought that would be fine. I was looking forward to that and then I had to wait for orders to get there. In the meantime, while I was waiting, the war in Europe had increased. They were having more problems there and the Pacific was not going very well at that time. President Roosevelt, with a stroke of his pen said, "If you are not already in school, we are doing away with the program because we need replacements for these guys in the different areas where the war was going on." So I never got to the University of Oklahoma to go to school.

JS - What did you think at that moment?

EW - I was eighteen years old at the time and I thought whatever they could dish out, I could take. They assigned me to the 94th Infantry Division in Camp (?), Mississippi.

JS - So you had done training?

EW - I made the top score on the rifle range of the whole battalion. You know what that means. The infantry needs a lot of riflemen and machine gunners so that is where I went. I was prepared and they were training to go overseas. I started finishing up there getting ready to go overseas. Low and behold, this goes back to the ASTP tests that I took where I got a pretty good score and did well on the mechanical aptitude tests. Orders came out for me to go to Camp Bowie, Texas, to join up with the 445th Heavy Automotive Maintenance Company. I didn't go overseas with the 94th Infantry Division although they did go and landed after D-day and went all through the tough battles in France and Germany. Instead I went to this ordinance outfit and they sent me to school to be an automotive mechanic at Fort Crook, Nebraska. I went overseas with them.

JS - When would that have been?

EW - We went overseas, according to my discharge papers, on November 3, 1944.

JS - After D-day that winter where did you go; into France?

EW - Yes. Our company went to New York City and embarked from there and ended up in Southern France. We landed in Marseille, France, and our ordinance company had a lot of equipment such as trucks and maintenance equipment. We stayed in a staging area outside the city of Marseille and stayed there about three or four weeks waiting for all of our equipment to catch up with us. We moved north. The war at that time was in the northeast part of France and we were attached to the Seventh Army at that point. We went north and set up a place to work. We were in charge of the Seventh Army Motor Pool. All the new vehicles that came in for replacements to the frontline companies were brought into our area. We checked them to be sure everything was okay and as requisitions would come in from the frontline companies for them, we would fill those requisitions and send the vehicles to them.

JS - The training you received in Nebraska, what was that, just how to work on vehicles?

EW - Yes, it was automotive, tearing down engines and timing engines.

JS - Did you have to do that or did you just check out new vehicles?

EW - Most of the major repair work, we didn't do. We sent that back to a base depot where they did that kind of work. Anything like replacement of an entire engine or a transmission or things like that we would do. We wouldn't get into rebuilding an engine or anything.

JS - You were in the staging area and you moved to a different place?

EW - Right.

JS - Were there buildings or was it in a town?

EW - It was in a town. The first town we landed in was Cirie, France which was a little town close to Nancy, but it was in the mountains. What we did was just take over a large building that was available that we could keep all the guys in. It was a place where they could sleep and eat. We had a larger area for all the vehicles and we had a shop set up. We just took over buildings that were already there.

JS - The war had not been in that part?

EW - Yes, it had already passed through so we were following the frontline companies. We would stay about twenty-five miles behind them all the time.

JS - Did you have problems getting your equipment and supplies?

EW - As I remember, the new vehicles came in from the States and we checked them all over to make sure they were okay. They were Jeeps, ton and one-half trucks, two and one-half ton trucks, even four ton wreckers and things like that. We would check them over and if they needed anything of a minor nature fixed, we would fix it. They were setting there to move wherever they needed to go. The other vehicles were shot up so anything that could be repaired was sent back to a base camp to repair it. The other vehicles that were not salvageable were just stacked up and left.

JS - How many men were in your unit?

EW - We had a hundred ninety-five.

JS - Were you responsible for getting those vehicles up to the frontline?
EW - Yes.

JS - Did you do that?

EW - At different times, yes.

JS - You would just be assigned to do that?

EW - Yes. I was not very high ranking at that time so I did pretty much what I was told.

JS - Was it hard to take orders?

EW - Oh no, I think when the war ended I was called a T-4 which is a sergeant with a T underneath it and kind of in charge of a group of guys. Usually when those requisitions would come in you'd assign one or two guys to take the vehicle and deliver it.

JS - I would like to go back and ask what you were thinking when you got on that ship and crossed the ocean?

EW - That was kind of an experience because I had never been on a ship like that. It was a large converted luxury liner. It was the USS Mount Vernon and we loaded out in New York in one of the ports there. There were approximately 7000 troops on this ship. It was manned by Navy personnel. When we loaded, of course, they had converted everything to where you were stacked up about four deep in bunks, one bunk right on top of the other. 7000 guys on there were pretty tight. I had never been out on the ocean before and I was wondering whether I would get seasick at all. Fortunately, the trip over was pretty calm and there were waves. The ship would roll and rock, but it wasn't stormy or anything like that.

JS - Did you think you were in danger?

EW - No, I never even thought about it. This ship could move fast enough and would zigzag and it wasn't in a convoy. It was just by itself. I didn't think about anything like that.

JS - What did you do when you were on board? How long did it take?

EW - It took about ten days and I stayed up on board ship and sat in the sun and played cards and read. We didn't have to pull any kind of a duty on board ship.

JS - They provided the food?

EW - They provided the food and we would go through and pick up our tray and food. Everything was at a table but you were standing. You didn't sit down to eat.

JS - You ate fast so others could eat?

EW - Yeah.

JS - Did all those 7000 get off at the same port that you did?

EW - Yes.

JS - Then, they just scattered?

EW - They went to different places.

JS - What did you think of Marseilles?

EW - We didn't really get to see much of it. When we got off the ship, we loaded our duffle bags on trucks that were there. We had to march through the city of Marseilles to the staging area which was about twenty-five miles. We started fairly early in the morning and although the officers had a map of where we were going, we got lost. It got dark and the officer looked at his map. We kept asking people how far it was to the staging area and they would say, "Just a little way down the road." But we never got there so we finally just took off following this big electric transmission line which we knew went into the staging area. We just went across country. Some of the guys got tired and just stopped and pitched their pup tents and decided to stay till it got light again. I thought if the officers could make it, I could make it so I followed the officers that were leading our group. We finally got into the staging area about two in the morning.

JS - I bet you were tired.

EW - We were tired, but we just unrolled our tents and bedrolls and slept.

JS - Did you carry a gun?

EW - We each carried a rifle.

JS - Did you carry food?

EW - Yes, we carried C-rations.

JS - What about wardrobe? It would have been wintertime so you needed warm clothing.

EW - Most of our clothes were in our duffle bags, but we did carry a pack on our back and it had the bedroll in it. You could maybe stick an extra pair of socks in there. We didn't carry a whole lot more than the bedroll and a mess kit and our canteen of water and a rifle.

JS - Was it cold or snowing?

EW - No, I think it was fairly decent at that time of the year when we landed.

JS - Shortly then after you landed, it would have been Christmas. Did you celebrate or were you aware that it was Christmas?

EW - By Christmas we were in Cirie, France, in fact, I think we were there by Thanksgiving. By the time we got everything unloaded and moved farther into France, it was Thanksgiving and we had a pretty good Thanksgiving dinner. Christmas, I don't remember much.

JS - Were you writing home and receiving letters from home?

EW - Mail didn't go very fast then like it does now. The guys that are in Iraq have their own E-mails back and forth and cell phones. We couldn't do that. It was three or four weeks before I ever got any mail from home. I would write and send letters.

JS - Your letters went through a censor, right?

EW - Yes.

JS - So what could you tell them, that you were okay?

EW - I don't think we could even tell them where we landed. We just told them we were in France.

JS - What was your impression of France and the French people? Did you have much interaction with them?

EW - Not a whole lot.

JS - You were on duty everyday?

EW - Everyday.

JS - Did you get weekends off?

EW - At that particular time, with the war going on, they didn't stop too much for weekends. It was pretty much the same, day in and day out.
JS - And you would move?

EW - We would move about every couple of weeks, it seemed like. We would move following as the war progressed.

JS - Where did you move to and where did you end up?

EW - At one time we were stationed in Kaiserslautern, Germany. We were stationed in Manheim, after we got into Germany; we were stationed in towns called Darmstadt and Augsburg. The 7th Army was mostly in the southern part of Germany and Austria at that time. We were close to Munich at one time.

JS - As you were moving up and doing all the work that you needed to do, how did you keep up with what was going on with the war itself?

EW - The Army put out a newspaper called The Stars and Stripes and that is where we got most of our news. Most of us did not have access to a radio or anything like that, but they did have the Armed Forces Radio Network that did broadcast. Most of that was after the war ended. We did get the newspaper, Stars and Stripes.

JS - That was weekly?

EW - Yeah, I think they distributed it along with PX rations. You would get cigarettes and candy.

JS - Did most people smoke?

EW - Most of them did. I never did smoke much.

JS - That was probably rare; the typical pictures always have a cigarette. So you would have known the war was going well and that we were pushing into Germany?

EW - We were involved in the Battle of the Bulge which was pretty difficult. Our company was in part of the area where the Germans were pushing back and trying to take some of the area over again.

JS - Were you close to that actual fighting?

EW - Yes, pretty close.

JS - What did you think?

EW - We had an order. They called us out about two o'clock in the morning one morning and said the Germans were pushing toward us in that direction. There was an ordinance company up close to the line that was in danger of being taken over so we were instructed to get all the vehicles we could get and go up there and load up the company and get them out of there.

JS - Did you do that?

EW - We did do that and I was one of the ones that was driving a vehicle. I was a good sleeper in those days so when these kinds of things happened, they always had to wake me up. I was one of the last ones getting to the motor pool so the only vehicle left for me to take was an Amphibious Duck.

JS - How did you know where to go, you just followed?

EW - I just followed the rest of them.

JS - You loaded up men and brought them back?

EW - We loaded up men and everything and brought them back. It seemed like it was thirty or forty miles.

JS - Since you were such a good sleeper, you must not have been a worrier at all.

EW - No, I didn't worry much in those days.

JS - Why didn't you worry?

EW - Why would you worry?

JS - Because there was a war going on.

EW - We would get information at that time during the Battle of the Bulge that the Germans were dropping a few parachute soldiers behind the lines. We were

instructed if we were on guard duty to be very careful about guys that might try to infiltrate your area and gain information.

JS - In your unit you had regular duties other than the mechanics?

EW - We had guard duty, KP duty and we had to take our turns.

JS - You slept in tents?

EW - At that time mostly we were in buildings.

JS - Right, you would just take over buildings.

EW - We would take over a large building. In fact, in Cirie we had a building that was large enough for a hundred ninety-five guys to sleep in. It was a good size building.

JS - I know you said you did not have much free time, but if there was a free time in a town, were there things for you to do?

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Elwin Mitchell (EW)
Tape 1 of 2
Side B

JS - When you went into Germany, it would have been after the first of the year in the spring?

EW - Yes.

JS - You crossed when?

EW - First town we were in, I think was called Worms, Germany. That is right on the Rhine River, and then we were just there a short time. We moved into Manheim, Germany, and set up a shop there. We had pretty good sized buildings to work in there.

JS - It was the allies that were securing the bridges over the Rhine so by the time you got there, those bridges were secure?

EW - They were secure and you could go across, yes.

JS - I have often wondered when you are in the middle of a situation like that and there is all this constant movement of troops, what was your impression? Was it organized?

EW - It was pretty organized, yes.

JS - Was it sort of amazing in a way?

EW - Before we got into Germany, most of the bigger towns where there was any industry or manufacturing going on, the Germans had a lot of equipment too. They were a very well mechanized army. Before we got into Germany the planes from Great Britain would go over every morning. You would see waves and waves of them and they were bombing all this stuff out. A lot of these towns were completely destroyed. We even had to clear ways to move our equipment into where we wanted to go.

JS - What happened to the German civilians? Were they still there?

EW - They were still there. They did the best they could, but wherever you needed to take over a building, you took it over. They moved out.

JS - If you were going to major in engineering, you must have a mind that would appreciate organization and efficiency. You could see, of course, how the Germans operated and some of their equipment. What was your impression of them as a fighting force?

EW - We were pretty well impressed with the equipment that they were able to manufacture. In fact, the first jet airplane that I ever saw, I saw in Germany. Before the Americans even had any, they were manufacturing jet airplanes. As we moved in we would see a lot of them in certain areas that had been destroyed, but they were jet airplanes. I had never seen any before that.

JS - Did you get any souvenirs along the way?

EW - I brought home a pistol and four or five swords and things like that. I didn't take them off anybody, I just acquired them.

JS - At that time you could bring things like that home?

EW - You could bring some, you had to declare them when you got ready to come home. That came after the war.

JS - From basic training and on in various places in your unit, did you make good friends?

EW - Sure.

JS - Did you keep up with them after the war?

EW - Yes, some of them.

JS - Were they from all over the United States?

EW - All over the United States.

JS - Was that a good experience?

EW - Excellent, I enjoyed it. I spent a year in Germany after the war in the Army of Occupation.

JS - I don't think I have talked to anyone who did that. Most people came right home before or right after the war ended.

EW - I was late getting over there. When the war ended, right at the end of May of 1945, the ones that had the opportunity to come over, the ones that had been in the service longer had more time overseas. A lot of them had been through the African Campaign. They developed a point system and the ones that had the most points came home first. The rest of us had to stay in the Army of Occupation until our term came up.

JS - Where were you when the war ended?

EW - Our Company was in Augsburg, Germany and our shop was set up there. Augsburg is north of Munich, north and a little bit west, I guess. It was on the Autobahn Highway that was one of the main highways north and south through West Germany.

JS - Was that an impressive highway?

EW - It was, it was just like a big freeway and it was still there. They bombed out most of the overpasses and bridges as the Germans moved back. Then the Americans destroyed some too. It had to be cleared out so it could be used, but it was. After the war they did use it quite a bit.

JS - How would they clear it out? Did they have heavy equipment?

EW - Heavy equipment, yes.

JS - You then heard immediately, that the war in Europe was over.

EW - We were glad to hear that and everybody started wondering when they were going to get to go home. After this point system was developed we had an idea then. Most of them in our outfit went over the same time so we pretty much stayed, not in the same Companies, but we stayed in the area in different places.

JS - Were you doing the same kind of work?

EW - Not the same for long, I'll tell you what happened to me. When the war ended the Colonel of Ordinance Headquarters in the 7th Army was in charge of all the Ordinance Companies in the 7th Army. Our Company, the 445th Ordinance Company was one of the Companies under his command. He decided since some of the guys were going home and others weren't the morale was going to get to be a problem for the guys that had to stay for awhile.
He said, "What can we do to help keep the morale up because we are going to be involved more in policing the area." We would not be doing the things we had been doing like replacing vehicles and that. We were to make sure the area remains secure. He said we needed something and said, "Why don't we start a dance orchestra in Headquarters and have the group go around to different places and play for dances." I was called in because I had on my service record, somewhere, that I played the piano. They called me in and interviewed and asked if I could play the piano in this band. I said, "I don't think I can play that kind of music; I play more classical music." They said, "Do you play anything else?" I told them I had played in a small jazz band in high school, the bass fiddle. They said they needed a bass fiddle. I was called in to help start this band.

JS - How many were in the band and where did you get the instruments?

EW - We ended up with about fifteen. It was a big band because it was the big band period, Glenn Miller and all the big bands played the kind of music that we liked. I was transferred from the 445th into 52nd Ordinance Group Headquarters. This was in a little town called Forsheim, Germany. It was in the area, but was a different place than where our Company was located. We had five saxophones, three trumpets, two trombones, piano player, and bass fiddle. There were about fifteen guys; some of them were pretty good musicians. I wasn't that great but I could play the bass fiddle okay. They just searched around and found the instruments in music stores someplace and so they just managed to get instruments for everybody. We started the music, just to play and after about three or four weeks someone would call in and want to know if we could play for a dance. The Colonel got us a bus to travel in and a driver so I spent from June of 1945 to April of 1946 playing in that band.

JS - All over Germany?

EW - All over West Germany, not East Germany, and we would go north. One time we were clear up to Castle in the north part and all the way south to Munich. We played over the Armed Forces Radio Network and in Heidelberg.

JS - Did the band have a name?

EW - 52nd Ordinance Group Headquarters Band.

JS - Did you practice everyday?

EW - The Colonel said, "Your duty is to take care of this entertainment and play in this band. You are relieved of guard duty, KP duty and everything else. You just do that."

JS - That was a different role that you played. As you traveled around, what was your impression of the occupation?

EW - I felt that these poor people were having a very difficult time because they were just living in a lot of places in the rubble. In the beginning, at the end of the war, you couldn't fraternize with the German people. That gradually changed because if you were going to have a dance someplace, who are you going to dance with?

JS - That is what I was going to ask.

EW - There weren't enough nurses and WACS. There were enough for the officers' club, that wasn't taking care of the ones for the ordinary soldiers. They lifted that fraternization rule fairly fast so the girls could come in when they had the dances and have a great time.

JS - Do you think it met the Colonel's purpose to help morale?

EW - Sure, I think it did. I think it helped the morale between the German people and the American Army, too.

JS - You got to see a lot of places. I suppose a lot of them would have been destroyed?

EW - Well, they never dropped a bomb in Heidelberg. It was declared an open city because of all the large buildings and castles in that area. Old, old buildings and churches were there so it was declared an open city and the Americans did not bomb there. Castle, Germany, which was up north, was completely destroyed.

JS - Yes, yesterday I talked to Cecil Davis and he was there and he talked about that, too.

EW - That is one of the places where I said they had to bulldoze the streets out before we could get down the streets. It was that bad. We stayed there for awhile and we were located in buildings out on the edge, but it was quite an experience.

JS - You were definitely aware that equipment and soldiers were going home?

EW - Sure, some of them were being pulled out to go to the Pacific.

JS - Did you ever think that you might?

EW - I thought I would, yeah. The ones that hadn't been over so long, figured that we would be the first ones to go to the Pacific. I don't know how the orders were made to decide who was going to go and who wouldn't.

JS - Do you remember where you were when you heard that we had dropped the bomb?

EW - We were in Germany. That happened in August of 1945, I believe. That would have been about two months after the war ended in Europe. They dropped that bomb and ended the war in the Pacific so not too many had to go from the European Theater to the Pacific.

JS - I am sure the government figured that they weren't going to send many because they knew they were dropping the bomb. Do you remember what people said when they dropped the bomb?

EW - It was just unbelievable. We couldn't believe it, it was something that we had no inkling that it was going to happen until it did happen. I wasn't even aware that they were working on anything like that, trying to develop it. See, the Germans did have buzz bombs, kind of like our missiles today, and they would shoot those into Great Britain and a lot of them hit.

JS - That was during the Battle of Britain?

EW - Yes, those were kind of a rocket type bomb that they shot across the channel into London and different places.

JS - Any specific people or event or stories that you talk about or that you always tell?

EW - I was close to the place where General Patton was involved in that wreck. As a result of that, they took him to a hospital and he died from that wreck. That was toward the end of the war, I think. We were in Manheim at that time.

JS - I think he had just been told to go home.

EW - I remember that. Our shop at one time had one of the cars of Field Marshall Herman Goering of the German Air Force in our shop. We knew that and knew it was in our shop that time.

JS - Were you aware of the concentration camps?

EW - Oh yeah, in fact we were very close to Dachau. We were aware of that.

JS - You had really wide experience.

EW - Could hardly avoid it.

JS - That is true. You were there in 1946?

EW - I got home in April, 1946. It was almost a year after the war ended in Europe.

JS - By that time you had earned sufficient points?

EW - I did, I had spent a year and a half overseas and a year in the United States. Before I went overseas, I was in the service about a year here, two and a half years total. We went through two different campaigns, one the Rhineland Campaign and one the Battle of Central Europe. We got a Battle Star for each of those. I was listed as an automotive mechanic, third echelon and a rifle expert.

JS - But you never really used your rifle?

EW - Not really, no.

JS - Did you hunt growing up, is that why you were so good?

EW - I had an uncle that was in the Marines in World War One and he taught me how to shoot a high powered rifle.

JS - He was in the Marines and your dad was in the Navy so you had some military tradition in your family.

EW - A little bit, but he would take me over to Dodge City and he was an enthusiast. He collected guns and he worked on them. He loaded ammunition in them and was always shooting as a sport when I knew him. He would take me, once in awhile, with him and show me how to adjust the sling on a rifle and that kind of thing. I was pretty good with a rifle, I am not bragging or anything, but out of the five hundred guys in the battalion, I ended up with the top score.

JS - You could be bragging a little bit. Did your uncle have any war stories that he told?

EW - When he was in the Marine Corps in World War One, he was younger than my dad by about eight years. He lied about his age to get in because he joined the Marines when he was about sixteen or seventeen years old. He did not get overseas. At that time they had a detachment down in Cuba so he was down

there. While he was in Cuba he was an expert rifleman, and he was picked to be a rifleman on the rifle team that went to the Olympics. He didn't make it because he got in the flu epidemic. He did not die but he got very sick so he couldn't make that trip.

JS - What was his first name?

EW - Homer Mitchell

JS - And what was your father's name?

EW - Walter.
JS - Walter Mitchell, I did not realize that we had people in Cuba.

EW - That is where he was located.

JS - Is that where he got the flu?

EW - I think so.

JS - That is the flu where a lot of people died.

EW - Yes Dad, for several months, thought that uncle Homer had died in the flu epidemic. He ran across somebody that was in the same area and he asked about his brother. They said, "I think he died in that flu epidemic." Dad didn't find out until three or four months later that he was okay.

JS - Communication just wasn't there, I guess. When you headed home did you have an idea what you would do when you got home?

EW - Sure, go to college and finish my education.

JS - Where did you go?

EW - University of Kansas.

JS - In engineering?

EW - Engineering, I have a degree in mechanical engineering.

JS - Did you use the GI Bill?

EW - Yes.

JS - Could you describe what that was?

EW - The GI Bill was one of the better programs that the United States Government has ever come up with. It enabled anybody that wanted to, to go to college and get a job.

JS - Did it pay your tuition?

EW - Tuition and books were all paid and I was allowed fifty dollars a month on my board and room.

JS - Were there a lot of others?

EW - There were a lot of them that came back to the University. Some of them, by that time, were married and had families. At the University of Kansas they put up kind of like trailer houses in different areas. These families would move in and stay there while he was going to school to finish college.

JS - When did you then get your degree?

EW - I graduated with the class of 1950.

JS - Was there any thought about the Korean War?

EW - In fact, I almost got called in the Korean War.

JS - The draft was still going?

EW - No, I made the mistake of joining the Inactive Reserves when I got out of the service. I was a Staff Sergeant at the time and as I was being separated from the Army in 1946, I was passing down the line. I remember this one girl was sitting there at the typewriter and she said, "Do you want to join the Reserves?" I asked what that would do for me and she said, "One thing, if you ever called back, probably won't, but you can retain your rank to start out with instead of starting all over again."

JS - That sounded like a good deal.

EW - I thought I had just as well do that so I signed up for Reserves. She said, "Since you already have two and a half years active duty, you won't have to be in the Active Reserve. The Active Reserves have to have meetings once a month and training.

JS - It is that the same as the National Guard?

EW - No, the National Guard is a different organization. This was called the Army Reserve Program. Inactive, I was allowed to be in the Reserves, but I did not have to train or go to summer camps or anything.

JS - And then came Korea?

EW - I was attached to an Anti-aircraft Company, I believe in Topeka, Kansas on an inactive basis. I signed up for three years in that. That took me to 1949. In 1949, I was still in the University of Kansas, and about to get married. I decided I might as well keep that in force so I signed up for another three years in the Reserves. When I graduated, it was difficult to find a job as an engineer anyplace. We got married on August the fourteenth of 1949. I finished up then in the fall semester. We both went back to Lawrence and stayed that fall to finish up my degree. Since I didn't have anyplace to work at that time, I went out to the farm and started farming again. Then at that time, the Korean War started and I didn't think too much about it. I was supposed to keep the Army advised of where I was located and what my address was and I hadn't done that very well. Our first child was on the way and was born in October of 1950. I had about 300 acres of sugar beets planted and almost ready to harvest. I got a letter that had been forwarded to me from my mother who lived in Fort Collins, Colorado. It stated that I had to report to Fort Riley to take a physical to go to Korea. I went to Fort Riley, took my physical and came back and about a week later I got a special delivery letter from the Army saying that I was to report to Fort Lewis, Washington, to go overseas to Korea. I thought, "What am I going to do now, I have all these sugar beets to harvest." My wife was about to have a baby. I went to see an attorney at Scott City. He said he didn't know what I could do. First thing you need to do is get off of these orders. He said, "Why don't you go down to Garden City and see Representative Cliff Hope." I did that and sat down with him and told him my situation and he said, "Well, it is pretty important that you get that crop harvested. I can get you off of these orders for two or three months. I don't know what will happen after that. I can't get you completely out of the Reserves." He did get me off those orders. I didn't have to go to Korea and by the time that short deferment was over, my wife had the baby, I turned twenty-five and my second term was over. They sent me a notice that I could be discharged so I was discharged.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Elwin Mitchell (EW)
Tape 2 of 2
Side A

JS - How do you think your experience in the war affected or changed you?

EW - It made me grow up.

JS - When you look back at it, and growing up would be part of that, what do you think about war in general? Has that influenced your life; that experience?

EW - To a certain extent, I had no objection to going into the service during World War Two. I thought the fact that the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor and we immediately started gearing up to fight that war was what we had to do. Everybody got behind it. Even the women went to work and worked in defense factories and took care of the home base while the guys had to go to the service. We got it done, but since then some of these wars that we got into lately kind of bothers me. I think we are getting involved in things that we really ought to stay out of.

JS - The world has changed a great deal, hasn't it?

EW - I don't think, for example, the war in Iraq is one the majority of people are in favor of. The way we got into it was kind of manipulated.

JS - I want to go back to your farming around Scott City. That is what you did from then on?

EW - No, I farmed for twenty-five years and finally my engineering got me into another business.

JS - Tell me about that.

EW - In the 1960s I went selected to be a member of the board of Wheatland Electric which is a Rural Electric Cooperative. I was only on that board for a couple of years until the manager that was there got cancer and he was involved in treating that for a year and passed away. The board at that time realized that I had had some training. In fact part of my training in college was in power plant testing of equipment and design of power plant equipment. They asked me to fill in as interim manager until they could find someone to take his place. I ended up being the manager for eighteen years. That is when I started using my engineering studies a little bit. It was more electrical engineering than it was mechanical, but still the two are involved in some of the same things.

JS - You had an engineering kind of mind, evidently.

EW - I was the general manager of Wheatland for eighteen years and I was also on the board of Sunflower Electric. I was involved in the building of Holcomb One out here and also the largest gas fired generator in the west side of Garden City. We built those two plants while I was general manager.

JS - That is a whole other story. Is Wheatland's base here in Garden City?

EW - The main office is in Scott City.

JS - So, you just stayed up there?

EW - Wheatland has an office in Garden City too, but the home office is in Scott City and always has been.

JS - Then you didn't farm at all?

EW - I finally got completely out of the farming business.

JS - Could you talk a little bit about farming sugar beets?

EW - There used to be a lot of sugar beets grown in Western Kansas. There aren't anymore. When I started farming in Scott County, I was on a little irrigated farm south of Scott City. At that time my father-in-law was raising sugar beets and so I started irrigating and raising crops to irrigate.

JS - What were the sugar beets used for?

EW - To make sugar.

JS - Like in Holly, Colorado?

EW - Yes, there used to be a sugar company in Garden City called the Garden City Company. The year that I had the 300 acres of sugar beets, all those beets came to Garden City to be processed.

JS - How do you plant them? Do you have a seed plant?

EW - You plant seed.

JS - Where does the seed come from, out of the beet?

EW - Yes, the beet will make seed if you let them go to seed. You have planted little old beet seeds in the garden for red beets. It is planted in rows about twenty-two inches apart usually.

JS - With a drill?

EW - We had a beet planter and then you plant them pretty thick. The thing that caused farmers to go away from planting sugar beets in this part of the country is that it took a lot of hand labor. You planted them in rows, pretty thickly and hire the field laborers who were mostly out of Mexico. Coming in groups, they would hoe the beets out of those rows to where you would have a plant about every six or eight inches apart. They would leave those and then you would have to meticulously water those fields and cultivate them. About once or twice while the beets were developing you had to hire the laborers to come back in and hoe weeds. When the beets were ready to harvest in the fall, usually about October or November, the sugar beet would be large. You would come in with a machine

called a beet puller. It would go down the rows and raise the beets up out of the ground. These laborers would come in and pick up those beets and put them in a ditch that was put about every six rows, taking the tops off as they did that.

JS - They had to be irrigated?

EW - They had to be irrigated five or six times in the year.

JS - How many acres did you have?

EW - 300 acres and that is a lot of sugar beets.

JS - When the laborers came in, where did they stay?

EW - We had houses. They were not very elaborate, but they were bunk houses. The Mexican families and the women would cook and feed the group. We would usually have twenty or twenty-five in the group.

JS - Just the men worked in the field?

EW - Sometimes the women hoed too.

JS - They would have children?

EW - Right, whole families would come in.

JS - Did you contact someone to get them to come or did they just come and apply?

EW - The beets that I raised that year were contracted to Garden City Company and in the contract, they would provide the field workers to come in. They moved from field to field. They would not always stay at your place. They would stay long enough to do one particular job and then they moved on. They were moving around through the area to all the farmers that had sugar beets.

JS - It would seem to be a very hard job that they did.

EW - It was.

JS - Was it a profitable crop?

EW - Sometimes it was real profitable, and sometimes it wasn't, depending on the seasons. The sugar content of the beets could vary and the final price that you received from the company was after the beets were processed and made into sugar. Then they would give their final payment. They would give payments

progressively as those were being processed. You didn't get your final payment until they knew exactly how much sugar they were going to get.

JS - How many years did you grow the sugar beets?

EW - It became such a hassle to keep up with the cost of hand labor which was very expensive. They did develop equipment which eliminated some of it, but still beet farming was bad. We finally quit and started raising crops like corn and alfalfa and milo. We didn't raise beets, but five or six years and then gradually moved into corn, milo and cattle feeding.

JS - You just learned on your own how to raise beets?

EW - Oh yeah, you learn from experience.

JS - Is there anything else that you think would be valuable to people who would be using these tapes as resources.

EW - You asked if I kept in contact with these guys. When I was in the band we had fourteen or fifteen guys that lived and stayed together for a year. They were from all over. This one Jewish kid, that was a little younger than I, played a saxophone and clarinet. He and I played ping pong for relaxation. I got to thinking about him and wondered what ever happened to him. We hadn't exchanged letters or communicated for fifty or sixty years. Since I retired, I have a computer. I was on line one day and wondered if I could find him on that computer on the internet someway. I knew his name, where he was and approximate age. I put his name into the computer and information and four or five names came up. This guys name was Norman Barole. The last I knew he was in Randolph, Massachusetts, and his age about 81 years old. It came up with his address and telephone number. I called him and he recognized my name. We talked for an hour. He told me of several guys that he had kept in touch with. He said, "Do you remember that toward the end of the war we got pretty good." Our band was in demand all over West Germany. We were called into Heidelberg to play over Armed Forces Radio Network. He talked about when we played on the radio and we had gotten a vocalist from another outfit to sing with us. He came in and we practiced and then played over the radio. They made records for each one of us and gave them to us. At that time that singer called himself Joe Bari and his songs are on the records. I did remember that. He said, "A few years after I got back, my wife and I were in a place for dinner and it had a band. This guy got up to sing and I knew I had seen that guy. I knew he was the guy that had sung with us in Germany. He remembered singing with us. Who do you think that was? His name was Tony Bennett. He changed his name from Antonio Benidito." I have researched him and he met Bob Hope who advised him to shorten his name to Tony Bennett. That is mind boggling to me.

JS - All because you put your friend's name in the computer.

EW - Yes, I have enjoyed this. I had no idea anyone would want to do this. It has been almost a year since I was first contacted to be interviewed.

JS - It is hard to get the interviews scheduled when I can come out to do them.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Elwin Mitchell (EW)
Tape 2 of 2
END

Please note

My official name as far as the Army was concerned is Lewis E. Mitchell. Elwin is my middle name, which I always used up until I was drafted. Also, if you mail any thing to me it should be sent to P.O. Box 226 in Scott City, KS

Thank you.

Lewis E. Mitchell