

March 18th, 2002

John Gower – Homefront – World War II – 112-00

How did you and your family manage during the great depression?

Mr. Gower: It was kind of hard. Of course I grew up on a farm right around _____ community which is about 10 miles from here. My father had a farm and it was my granddaddy's farm. Times were pretty tough then because that is when the big depression hit in the early 30's late 20's. I was born in 1920 so I was still pretty young. I was old enough to remember that my father lost a farm because there wasn't any money there. You just had food and clothes and that was about it. Things were mighty slow. TVA came in about that time about the early 30's I think. I don't know the exact date. Of course we had electricity then and that got things rolling pretty good.

You were born in 1920, right sir?

Mr. Gower: Yes, November 19, 1920.

In 1939 you would have been 19 years old.

Mr. Gower: Yes.

How aware were you about the political developments in the world and the threats to the U.S. from the rise of Nazi Germany and Japan? Were you pretty aware?

Mr. Gower: Oh yes, I was pretty aware. Around this time, when I was growing up, when I was 18 or 19 there was no work for you then at that time. That is when I left here and I went in the service. I was in the service and of course Fort Campbell is here now and everybody knows what the military is. I was pretty damn dumb then because there was no military around here. I don't ever remember seeing a military person until I got in the service. Really the reason I went in the service is because there was no work. You take a boy 17 or 18 if you don't have something to do you are going to get in trouble. I guess I was smart enough for one thing and do the only thing I could do so I volunteered for the service not knowing a damn thing about it. That is when I left here and I went in to New York; a New York outfit. It was a northeastern outfit, my base was in; the division wasn't together they had battalions here, battalions there, and the battalion I got into was in Plattsburg, New York. It was in the upper state of New York about 27 miles from the Canadian border. Really that is where I grew up and became of age I would say.

Did you believe in the period before the attack on Pearl Harbor that the U.S. would be drawn into the war?

Mr. Gower: I was in the war. I was in the Army then.

Did you believe that the U.S. would be drawn in before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor? Did you think the U.S. would be involved in the war?

Mr. Gower: I guess so because I was in the military at the time Pearl Harbor was bombed. In fact we were on maneuvers down in Louisiana at that time with the division. I happened to be in the hospital then. We had moved up into Georgia and I happened to get in the hospital because I got stung by a damn scorpion down there and they put me in the hospital. When they bombed Pearl Harbor they let me out of the hospital then because I was getting better. By the time I got back to my company they had done had everything loaded up; my stuff and everybody's and they were moving out. I got there just in time to go back north with them.

Did you and your family generally support F.D.R and his handling of domestic and foreign affairs?

Mr. Gower: No, not that I know of or remember.

Before you referred to TVA. Were there any other programs that the new deal affected you and your family in the 1920s?

Mr. Gower: Back then they gave out commodities. We didn't get any commodities but I remember my daddy was part in charge of issuing out commodities. That consisted usually of beans and I don't know what else; stuff like that. We didn't get any but he was one of the ones that helped pass them out. I was in the first year of high school then. I was going to high school here when that happened. I remember that part. The best thing that affected us really was the TVA stringing electricity through here. We didn't have electricity. Of course there wasn't electricity. There wasn't electricity in here but the way we had our lights, we either had coil lamps or we had carbide. We had carbide lights similar to which was piped in through the house where we bought carbide by the barrels full and created that gas from it. We burnt that. Mostly it was kerosene.

Do you know any family members that ever worked in a plant making war material?

Mr. Gower: No. I have one brother and he was in the Navy. He is about three years younger than I am and he went in the Navy after I was in the service.

You were mentioning commodities before. Did you or your family feel seriously deprived by shortages of any of the commodities like butter, sugar, tires, gasoline or shoes; anything of that nature?

Mr. Gower: We didn't get anything. Are you talking about the rations?

Yes, the rationing system.

Mr. Gower: I'm sure they did but see at that time I was either in Africa or Europe or the Mediterranean area or something like that. I wasn't here when they were getting rations. I was on the tail end of it. I was here when they had to have ration cards to buy gasoline.

Do you recall either your family in any scrap drives that they talked about; like iron?

Mr. Gower: Yes, I remember that they did have some of those. Even before I went in the service, and that was before Pearl Harbor, they were having a lot of scrap drives getting all of the metal they could get. I think they were, at that time, sending it to Japan. I'm not sure. I understand after the war was started there were still scrap drives for the war efforts here.

What about war bonds? Did you or your family ever participate in buying war bonds?

Mr. Gower: Yes, we had some war bonds. I didn't, but the family did.

I'm sorry, what year did you join the service again?

Mr. Gower: I joined the service on March 13, 1940. When I went in the service you can't imagine what size the service how many personnel were in the company, which normally is about 225; we had 25. If you want to go into that I could tell you a little bit more about that. At that time you still had a horse carrier and it didn't get mechanized until up on about the time when the war started. You had to pack mules and stuff like that. I got in there about the time they were going from the horse carrier into the

mechanized carrier. I've got pictures here now. I don't know where I put them where we were on maneuvers up around Pottstown, New York. We didn't have any tanks but they had trucks that they were using as tanks and they had signs on the truck beds that said, "Tanks." That is the kind of equipment that we had when the war started. We had nothing really. I was in a heavy weapons company. We had the 30 caliber machine gun. I had mortars, 81s I believe. If I tell you anything that you don't want to listen to let me know. I'm just telling you about the military then. I will never forget this, when they were bringing the 2nd Infantry Division out of China, the boys out of China around in 1940 we got some of those guys to replace the outfit. When I went in there, there were 25 people in the company and we built from there on up. When the Red 1 went overseas we were 100% regular Army. There were no draftees in there at all. We went over in combat with 100% Regular Army.

Did you have a telephone service or a radio?

Mr. Gower: We had a telephone service.

...and a radio or just telephone?

Mr. Gower: We had a radio too.

Do you recall when you guys first got a radio?

Mr. Gower: No, I can't recall exactly. I would say it was around 1937 or something; it was probably a little bit earlier as I recall. I would say 1934, somewhere in that area.

Was the radio the way you learned about what was happening in the rest of the world?

Mr. Gower: Yes.

You said you did have a telephone as well?

Mr. Gower: Yes.

Did you or your family ever correspond with anyone overseas?

Mr. Gower: No.

Many Americans look back at the war years as the best years of their lives despite the sacrifices the service made and the shortages. How do you look at the war years more than 50 years later? Many people reported a feeling of physical well-being because everyone had a job after ten years of the Great Depression and the nation was united behind the war effort. Do you recall anything like that?

Mr. Gower: Yes, I'm pretty sure of that. Going back to say, I went in the service in 1940. I was in the invasion of North Africa. The Army was different than it is now and I guess you are aware of that. It was over two years before my people knew where I was. Now I guess radio, TV, and everybody else will tell you wherever you go. It was over two years before they knew where I was. I don't have any problem with that. I think it is probably better that way than it is now. The way we fought then, I fought under the British over a year. I'm sure fighting is not like it was then but it's still just as rough and just as tough. Most of my fighting was in the desert. It was around Algiers, Tunisia and that area. I've been on permanent disability ever since then. I got pictures downstairs in the den down there; I got put completely out of action in the Invasion of Sicily. I was on a ship that got sunk going into Sicily. 39 men in my outfit were on that ship. There were others on there but this was my group. There were three of us that survived

it. I am in contact with the other two and one of them will be here Wednesday. He lives in Oklahoma City and the other one lives up in Maryland on Chesapeake Bay up there. We visit and talk all the time. All of us have for years.

When you came back to the states did you feel the country more united than it ever was before you think?

Mr. Gower: I think it was united, yes. To answer that question I would say yes it was united as much as it is now I think. I don't know too much about it now. I can give you more about war service than I can about the country being united. I know when I got back here I think it was united. I was in northern Italy and I was taken out of combat and put in the limited service outfit and then we got back in, it wasn't really combat but it was a combat area. I had been over there for a pretty good while, over three years. The only way you got back home then from wherever you were, you either expired, got killed or you were in such bad shape that you couldn't do nothing. One day I was in northern Italy up around Laverno and they told me to get ready that I was fixing to come home. They were having a test run or a publicity run of discharging people out of the Army. About a week up in northern Italy, there was still fighting going on up there then, and in about a week I was home, discharged. I have been on disability ever since. I'm still on disability. Yeah I think the whole country was pretty well united.

How do you look back at the war more than 50 years later, how do you think the war affected our country up to this point?

Mr. Gower: What do I think about the country at this point?

What do you think after World War II affected America?

Mr. Gower: Well I think World War II affected this way, it got the people together and it also brought us out of a deep depression, which it did. Most people during World War II and after World War II the people that wanted jobs had a job with maybe a few exceptions, but most people did. I think it had a positive affect it.

Was there anyone in your neighborhood that you knew of whose loyalty was suspect that you didn't think he supported the country full effort?

Mr. Gower: I don't know for sure but you know how rumors are, you get some of those. Like I say, I wasn't here at that time. I do know some rumors were they more than rumors, I don't know, two different cases. I do know the one case, there was on a farm not too far from me there was a guy that disappeared, they came and got and he disappeared. They found a bunch of radio equipment there. I didn't witness that first hand but I had people that I knew that did know him. I knew the person. He was sent back to Germany and he never did get to come back here. What else happened to him, I don't know.

Thinking back on your childhood whatever you can remember during the Great Depression, can you take me through a typical day of how you and your family passed it? How you guys made ends meet?

Mr. Gower: Like I said, back when I was a kid, I grew up in the _____ area. The only thing we done was work on the farm. We didn't have anything. It was hard to make it but we had food and we had clothing. As far as us having any money or anything like that, money was pretty scarce. In fact we were tobacco farmers and that was the main crop. At that time you couldn't hardly pay for the fertilizer for your tobacco that you raised. You didn't make any money. Nobody had any money; very few people did. The average family, if they lived on a farm they had food and they had clothes but that is about it.

After you were a farmer you went straight into the service?

Mr. Gower: Yes.

You didn't have no other job or nothing?

Mr. Gower: Not before I went in the service, no. That is the reason I went there. In fact I didn't get my education until I got back out of the service.

Your father and the rest of the family stayed here on the farm in _____?

Mr. Gower: Yes. Of course we lost the farm in _____. We stayed here in Montgomery County, but yeah, they stayed here. My brother went in the service about two years after I did. The rest stayed here.

Do you recall you father telling you about hanging the blue stars, gold stars outside your house doors and windows?

Mr. Gower: Going back to say, I wasn't here. I think I seen a little bit of that after I did get back. I got back here in July 1945 I believe it was. Of course there was still war going on but it was in Japan. Europe was wound down. I was in Europe then. When I got back here everybody that wanted to work was working. In fact there were plenty of jobs at that time.

Compared to when you left was it completely different?

Mr. Gower: Yeah, it was quite a bit of difference because like I said everybody was working and everybody had some money and went out. When I left, that was the main reason I left because growing up as a young person you get up in your early teens you need some spending money. That is the same way today. I think I was pretty wise. I would have probably stayed in the Army if I had been able to but I was in bad shape when they put me out; bad physical shape.

You did hear of the death of Roosevelt while you were still over in Europe?

Mr. Gower: I beg your pardon?

You heard about the death of Roosevelt while you were still in Europe?

Mr. Gower: Yes.

Did that affect you anyway?

Mr. Gower: No. I remember it very well. I was in northern Italy. I remember very that day, I was in northern Italy and they were bombing Germany and bombings were going on five or six hundred at a time one right after the other. I remember that very well. When I heard it that is where I was. That is about all I remember about it.

Going back to your family you said basically they all worked on the farm so there wasn't really nobody unemployed there was just no money or enough money to make.

Mr. Gower: Well it just took everything we had to survive on. You were still employed, the family was, there was no money for nothing but food and clothing and that was it. In fact then, money that you borrowed you borrowed mostly from individuals. There was no government regulation or nothing on it because you had some people or very few that had money and if you needed to you borrowed from them

and when they wanted their money back you didn't have it to give it all back to them then they were going to take your property. That is about the way it was. There were no government regulations on that type of money. That is the way most people went down. They had farms that went bankrupt. It was because they in the early 20s when times were good and then you go down into the depression you have no money to pay your notes off on your property or whatever you got and that is what happened to us.

Were there any other programs that your family was affected by like the CCC, Christian Conservation Corp, or any other accounts?

Mr. Gower: I remember the CCC but it didn't affect us at all.

You said you got your education after you came back from the war right?

Mr. Gower: Did I do what?

After you came back from the war that is when you got your education?

Mr. Gower: Well that is when I got part of it. I was in pretty bad physical shape when I came back. I didn't get it right off. I went to work for awhile at Fort Campbell. I was working in small arms. After that I got in a little bit better shape physically. I went to Austin Peay for awhile but I didn't graduate from that. I got in a government program. I was working for the federal government. I got in a government program and I got in pretty good jobs then. The government sent me to the University of Oklahoma to school and really that is where I got what education I had. I was in the fleet service, vehicle fleet. I managed two fleets of vehicles, one for the federal government. After I retired from that, well first thing when I got back I went to work for the post office department and then I got into the transportation part of that. They sent me to school in Oklahoma, the University of Oklahoma off and on for a couple of years. I lived in a dormitory out there but I would go out there and stay a few months and come back to study and go back and they would call me back again. Between that and Austin Peay that is where I got my education after I got back. I managed to get the State of Tennessee's vehicles for seven and a half years. I retired from the federal government.

Last question would be is there anything that you would like to add about anything about during pre-war or during the war that you think would be valuable for future generations to learn or listen to?

Mr. Gower: I don't know. I can answer questions like I was saying but I am not much of volunteering. The Army kind of bothers me right now. I know that World War II is different from this era, I know that. I don't believe I can fight in this Army now like I fought when I was fighting under British because I don't understand the Army now and I don't know anything about it and I don't have no contact with it. The only thing I know is what I see on TV and on the radio. You know more about it than I do. I don't know that I am smart enough to even comment on it. I will say this; let me ask you a question, when we were talking about World War II it's altogether different. The only comparison is you get shot at and you shooting at. I was in the infantry and by all means shot troops. We were under British command. I'm very well familiar with the French foreign allegiants. I have fought with them and have fought assigned to them and I do know this, now whether you still do it or not, a lot of times if we were going to take a place; I could talk to you all day long about the allegiants and about some of the other units under the British if you had asked me the questions. Say we were going to take this town or this wooded area or this mountainside, if they told you to climb that damn house over there on the top of it and you didn't have a ladder you were going to get up there some kind of way then. I don't know whether you do that now or not. I'm not saying you don't. I just don't know. I know a number of times we went in a place and they told you not to fire a shot. You used your hands and you used your knives. Now whether the Army will do that now or not I don't know. I would say the Army is probably as good now as it was then but I am

pretty sure the fighting is different. You know more about that than I do. We had to do a lot of hand to hand, the unit that I was in had to do a lot of hand to hand fighting. I want say a lot but we had to do it at times. I'm not critical of this Army and I'm not of any Army. I doubt if the Army right now is trained to do what we had done. Of course they don't have to I don't think. It was difficult times, a different war.

(End of Interview)