(Dictated to Christina Voss by John Williams on July 23rd, 2013)

Story of Life, Part III

There has to be a beginning, and this is it. Born May 22nd, 1927 one mile south of SINU (a teachers’ college) at Carbondale. Had one brother and one sister. The sister was six years older, and the brother three years older (deceased when he was about three years old; he probably swallowed a bean, or that's what they said). Normal young life: started school when five years old at Pleasant Hill Grade School, three quarters of a mile east on a cinder road with no transportation furnished. The road conditions were terrible in wet weather. We dressed to accommodate the weather at hand; storm or otherwise.

My father was a blacksmith by trade and worked for the Erin Lord tie company. He taught me a lot about that type of work, metals, shaping, and making tools, which has been helpful to me. Dad was quite old when I was born, about 50, but he took me fishing about every week when he got home from work. And sometimes on weekends. We lived a quarter of a mile from the city reservoir, so it didn't take long for us to get to a place to fish. Otherwise, he let me use all the tools he had and showed me how to use them, and would let me drive all the nails I wanted to, which was fun for a kid! I have fond memories of him and my younger years.

My mother, a housekeeper, was an industrious woman, who always figured how to do something constructive. She had incubators for chickens in the basement, and would custom-hatch chickens for people. Just a small operation, but she could hatch about 700 chickens at a time. Therefore, I learned a lot about chickens, namely, helping her to move the eggs regularly, to prevent the yolk from sticking to the side, which made the eggs no good -- you had to move them around. This was a nightly affair, and I was about 10 years old, but I was a big kid. She also kept 100 or so chickens for herself each year, plus probably 35 or 40 laying hens, thus creating quite a lot of work for a young boy, namely cleaning the droppings off the roost and distributing them in the garden and elsewhere.... Plus carrying water, feed, and so forth. This continued through high school.

Actually, I had a project in my freshmen year (Future Farmers of America); raised 25 turkeys, and did not lose any. Most all weight 20-25 pounds by Thanksgiving, sold all of them. We had a vegetable garden of about one and a half acres that my mother and I took care of, and that we tended with physical work; hoe, push plows, and occasionally a horse to plow with. In the spring, mother would pay the neighboring farmer to plow the ground with his team mules and harrow it ready for planting. He let me drive the team with the harrow one time, and cautioned me not to turn too sharp on the ends. As you might know, I turned the harrow over, and I was so ashamed and afraid that he just laughed and said that everybody had to learn, and you won't forget that now! So we had to take the harrow loose from the team and turn it over by hand. This took up about three or four hours every morning, to keep the weeds out. We raised sweet corn, potatoes, green beans, sweet potatoes, peanuts, etc.

My sister, named Afton, was six years my senior, and I sure got in her way a lot. When she would have boyfriends come, I always demanded to be right there, until I was chased off. She was very good in school; high grades. Went through college here and taught school for about four years before she married an electronic engineer. She was pretty good to me most of the time, but when we got arguing and fighting, mother would tolerate it only so long. Then, she would get the casteroil bottle out and give us a teaspoon full casteroil each one. If you know anything about casteroil, it's terrible punishment. My sister would cry and scream and have a fit, and I would just sit there, take mine, and laugh at her.

In June of 1943, I got a job with the Illinois Central Railway System, where I worked nights, from midnight until 8 a.m. I had my classes arranged where I could get them all in the morning, so that I could have the afternoon to sleep. This presented a problem of staying awake, to the extent that Miss Wells from English class told my classmates, "Don't wake him. He works nights..." Consequently, I flunked. My sister had had a course under Miss Wells before me, and she was a wiz, and Miss Wells thought I should be, too. The other problem was PE. The instructor wanted me to come back from my sleep at 3 o'clock and do PE, when I had been working all night handling freight out of boxcars for eight hours, anywhere from 50,000-75,000 pounds per car. I didn't always have to lift it, but load it on a two-wheel truck to get it to its destination on the platform.

As a result of my work, I did not go in and take PE. And when I graduated that year, he would not give me my graduation certificate unless I came back and went out for football, and took PE again for one term. I came back out, adorned with a football uniform, and sat down on a bench. And didn't get up! After the fourth day, he said, "Well, you might as well turn in your suit if you ain't gonna play," which I did. And I had a class I was taking anyway about aircraft, so I continued PE and got my certificate.

Graduated from this school after eight years and went to high school at SINU, using the college facilities (the Allyn was the high school). I was raised during the Depression. Graduated in 1944, went into the coast guard in 1945 to train for the shipping service. Rode a train from New Orleans to Houston that was packed so tight with people that you had to sit in an aisle on your suitcase all night. At Houston, they put us on an army troop train; we occupied about one car. This was strictly a chair car. No sleeping. And we rode that train to Los Angeles. I don't remember, probably close to around three days across there. Hot, hot, hot. Wound up downtown Los Angeles, Persian Square, beautiful palm trees I had never seen before, like being in another country. Transported down to the dock and took a small boat to Catalina island. Some thirty, forty miles off coast. We went to Avalon; beautiful place to be. Had small cabins that accommodated for people each. Did a lot of marching and drilling. We went daily to the Casino for classes. Then, after lunch, down to the dock for life-boat instructions, handling, maneuvering, and learning how to lower and raise, and so forth. Beautiful dock. Could see the bottom of the ocean; the water was so clear, and when we were docked, there were always some boys diving for coins. Threw a coin in, and they almost always got it before it got to the bottom. Amazing! A lot of sea life; there were sea lions and lots of seals, and they were quite friendly. We could go on shore if we had any money. It was like a big carnival; had a big ride that went all over the place.

On the first of July, they put us on a passenger ship that was about two hundred foot long for training on the way up to San Francisco, to be on display over the fourth of July. On the fifth or sixth of July, we got notice that we were to be shipped back to Catalina by railroad to pick up our personal goods, and return to San Francisco to board a new Victory ship named The Hunter Victory. The paint was still wet when it came out of Oakland, CA. We had to go to Oakland to move the ship and over to the San Francisco side near the ferry building to begin loading. Loading and preparation took about three or four weeks. And then we were on our way -- someplace. No one knew where we were going until we got past the international dateline. Then, we headed for the Enewetag Atoll of the Marshall Islands. We stayed there for 30 days, not knowing where we were going yet. Finally, we moved to Ulithi island of the Caroline islands. We stayed there ten days and were picked up by a convoy of ships with armed guards, destroyers, and cruisers, which escorted us to Okinawa, Naha bay. The total trip lasted five months, and we had supplies for only three months with regard to food and everything. Our chief was a big trader – he traded our surplus for other naval ships’ surplus. While there, I don’t know how many nights the island was attacked, but just about every night for two or three weeks. The navy smokers would crank up at night and put out a dense fog, so you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. When we first arrived there, there was a ship near where we were anchored that had been hit by a torpedo and had a hole big enough you could drive a truck through. At this time, the US thought they had control of the island, but there were a lot of Japanese dug in who would shoot at night and crawl back into their holes at daytime, so you could hardly find them. That settled down after a month or so, where it was pretty decent.

We were loaded with heavy material on deck, such as long steel piling, probably thirty of forty foot long, and on top of that, we had tanks tied down and you had to walk on wooden catwalks built on top of that stuff to get from one end of the ship to the other. All this was to me very exciting, and I was too young or dumb to be afraid. We encountered three typhoons that hit the island. During the first one, we had enough boiler water to run from it. It was a brand-new ship that had trouble with the evaporators that removed the salt from the water, so we had pure water for the boilers. The second time, we borrowed water from the navy ship. And the third time, we put both anchors down and ran full steam ahead. The next morning, we looked out and all anchor chains were stretched out as far as they could go. We suffered no consequences, and I had slept through it like a baby. The other two couldn’t eat, because you couldn’t keep anything on the table, and there were a lot of sick people; you’d go over one large wave and then through the next one. This only lasted about eight or ten hours, probably, but the sea was very rough even after that.

To go back to the ship’s load, they used what they called “ducks,” motorized vehicles, trucks. Each time, they could take two slings (nets) of various material over the shore, and then come back for more. We probably had a dozen of them that were working on our ship, so unloading was pretty slow. We did manage to find out where the beer was loaded!!  That we transported with ropes over the side of the ship down the side by the portholes and past through into the cabin part, into our rooms. At this time, the crew was pretty well acquainted. We didn’t see much of the captain. We thought he drank. The rest of the bunch did, too. I got acquainted with two brothers; one was the night cook and baker (Cliff; we baked pies and bread together at night to have something to do), and the other one was the officer’s pantry man. That was before they dropped the bombs. The pantry man had a brother-in-law who was out at the airbase, and he invited him up, so I got to go with him. Consequently, they were going on a mission and they loaded us on and we went right with them. And we were out two or three hours before we got back. Quite a thrill! That young man was probably 23 or 24 years old, and he was a captain. And he handled that big airplane on the ground like I did my car; it spun right around in the parking place. They had parking spaces for each one. It looked almost like a big lollipop on the ground; very large.

We did manage from time to time to see a movie on another ship. I only saw one movie on another ship, and I thought I would die after that one. They had large boats with very high sides; actually, you could stand up and they would come up to your chest. There were rope ladders over the sides of the ship to catch and climb back up. You had to wait until the boat was low; then, you jumped on the rope and got your feet on it, and got up a couple of steps before the boat got up again and you got caught between the boat and the ship. It was kind of tricky to jump onto the rope ladder with the boat going up and down. Several missed and fell off, but the guys caught them and they tried again.

Things were quite normal after the storms, and shortly thereafter, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed, ending the war in a couple of days. The day we heard of the war being over it was around noon, and by one o'clock I think the whole ship was drunk. I was cleaning, since I was a crew pantry man; I had to make the coffee and the drinks, take care of the desserts, and wash all the dishes for the crew, that is, the crew down below. My buddy was crew pantry man for the officers next step up, and I happened to look out the porthole and saw some dishes falling into the water. I looked up, and my buddy was throwing all the dirty dishes over the side. Said he didn't have time to wash them! From then on, I just cruised around watching the others, because it was a sight for everybody. Even the old man must have been drunk, for he stood there and watched my buddy throwing the dishes over. It took another few weeks to finish unloading, and we had to wait for orders where to go. Finally, we headed home to San Francisco. It took us thirteen days and nine hours. The morning we came into San Francisco, I was lying on the nose of the ship as far as you could; I had climbed up there, and I lay there watching for the Golden Gate. And I think I was probably the first one to see it! I turned around and the old man was out on deck up above, and waived and pointed forward, and nodded his head. When we got there, about the time we went under the Golden Gate bridge, there was a troop ship ahead of us, which was coming home from service, and there was a smaller boat out there with a band and singers, and they played the prettiest music I had ever heard in my life, and it was "Sentimental Swing." Beautiful, coming across the ocean.

That afternoon, after we had docked, I took the Greyhound bus and rode over the Golden Gate bridge to San Rafael in Marin county to a friend of mine I had worked with on the railroad. His name was Dale Goforth. Had a nice visit and returned to the ship, and two days later, got on a train for Southern Illinois. It took three days and a half, and then I was reunited with my family. My father met me at the door. And they didn't know I was coming. I don't think I ever saw a happier person!