

Lansford, Ed, File 1

PJ Stevens [PJS]: Well, this is PJ Stevens, I am chairman of the Williamson County Historical Commission and I am here today to interview Ed Lansford. This is a part of our ongoing Oral History project. Today's date is August 15, 2014 and we are going to discuss with Mr. Lansford his time growing up in the area and as well as during the depression and during World War II. And for the record, his full name is Edwin Myers Lansford Jr. and I am going to turn it over to you, Ed.

Ed Lansford [EL]: Yeah, my life in the USA went through two major nationwide experiences during my childhood and early adult years. The Great Depression during my childhood and WWII in my adult years later. Americans were just getting the over the burdens of the Great Depression when darkening clouds of war in Europe began to appear. And I will recount a little of my depression years, childhood development, and then make a short account of my school days to halfway through college when I was swept up by the currents of WWII. I was born in 1923 on June 26. I spent my first six years with my mother and father in a small house in Woodland Heights in Houston. A middle-class neighborhood with stately, old live oak trees lining the sides of the streets. This was a peaceful, benign setting where I learned all my relationships with people from caring, kindly, benevolent adults: parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and a few neighbors, but not from other children since I was an only child. I had no contemporaries to learn with. The only close neighbor children were believed to have tuberculosis, so I was strictly prevented from ever playing with them.

[PJS]: Wow.

[EL]: However, when I reached age six, I was entered into a kindergarten class in a nearby elementary school, and finally benefited from social contact with other kids as well as learning to read and write in block letters. My father gave me a toy easel blackboard with a scroll device on the top that would display the letters of the alphabet and all the numbers and labeled pictures and he urged me frequently to practice writing on that toy blackboard. The kindergarten teacher was an accomplished pianist that played marches as the pupils paraded around frequently. This invoked in me an interest in keyboard music that has lasted ever since. Around this time, the economic crash of 1929 occurred, but my family was fortunately not much effected by it. My father's job was with a The Texas Company, a large oil company and it was never threatened by the depression as it happened. He had been reared on a Hill County farm. He never went to college, but he went to business school and learned accounting there. He rose to become the second man under the boss of the Texaco accounting department in Houston, which filled one floor of a 10-story building. With my father safe in his job situation and a middle-class job, my only awareness of the impression during my infant years was the repeated occurrence of knocking on our home doors by scraggly looking, downcast men begging to be hired to mow the lawn for \$0.25 an hour, so they could eat that day. While the US moved slowly out of the depression, my family moved into a newer neighborhood in Houston. It was adjacent to Shephard Drive, which was a south/north artery and between Alabama Street and Richmond Rd, which were east/west arteries. And there, they enrolled me in Edgar Allen Poe Elementary School in first grade. After a week, the teacher called me into her desk and asked me to read out loud from a storybook, which I did with some facility and she said you don't belong in this low first grade and she sent me up the hall to join in with the high second class. This was okay for book learning, which I did very well in, but it put me in poor social adjustment because all these new classmates were much older than I was, and they were all well acquainted with each other and I was the newcomer. I gained the reputation of a bookworm and

teacher's pet. Another problem was related to a popular radio show of the time, which had a comedian, a comedian, Ewynn the Fire Chief. E-D-W-Y-N-N on the Texaco Radio Hour who gave himself the stage name Edwynn the Perfect Fool. This led my classmates to dub me "Edwin the Perfect Fool," and I had to stop that, so I dropped my name down to Ed and refused to answer to any name wrong. Other than petty problems like this, our new location gave me pleasant relations with other next-door neighbor kids in a totally safe and peaceful neighborhood with long sidewalks, sidewalks where we could ride our bicycles even into the street and back. Part of my early education about the larger world came during our family's annual summer vacation trips in the automobile to my uncle, James Fitzhugh Lansford's, farm in Hill County. The earliest of these yearly events are remembered as made in a Model T Ford, which had to stop occasionally in repair garages to have the [inspark] coiled points filed so it would continue working. These trips to Uncle Fitz's farm were great adventures to me as in early years, I got to ride on the horse, but they forgot to tell me how to make him stop. I climbed the windmill tower. I slid down the side of the haystack and covered with dust. It was on one of these trips to my uncle's farm in September 1939 that I first became aware of WWII my family had with them a portable, but bulky and heavy battery radio. And that evening as we lounged on deck chairs in the farmhouse front yard [inaudible]. We heard the radio news report that the German Blitzkrieg had just invaded and moved into Poland bringing the European nations into war with each other. Now this reference to a radio might be a convenient point to reflect on our country's state of technology and time. One my earlier childhood memories is sitting on father's lap when I was three years old when he was building a galena crystal radio receiver. At that time trial vacuum tubes radio set were probably available and later in the 30s most household radios receivers were bulky stand-alone floor cabinets containing heavy and bulky batteries; several one-and-a-half-volt A batteries and vacuum tube filaments, bulky ninety-volt B batteries for plate voltage and a full handful of C batteries for grid bias. Later in the 30s, B battery eliminators or red component attachments were built into floor model radios and soon very handsome vacuum tube fancifications came into use like cathodes, pentodes, internal twin triodes, beam power amplifiers, rectifiers, all kinds of amazing little tubes and so forth.

[PJS]: Uh huh.

[EL]: Well, starting the account of my pre-WWII schooling after Poe Elementary, I went to Lanier Junior High School grades sixth, seventh, and eighth and Mirabeau B. Lamar Senior High School for grades nine ten, and eleven there was no 12th grade offered then.

PJS: This is still in Houston, right?

[EL]: Yes, in Houston. Graduating as valedictorian of my high school in June 1940.

[PJS]: Wow, Congratulations

[EL]: (small chuckle) I have mentioned hearing the beginning of WWII in Poland from a portable radio on my Uncle Fitz's farm. Before that, European troubles that we heard of seemed like distant other world events which we saw mainly on the news reels, which accompanied every movie in those days and which we heard daily in the 15 minutes radio news reports from Lowell Thomas, which my family faithfully and regularly heard every day at 5:45 before family supper at six-point-zero-zero PM. These reports of "brown shirts" marching in Germany, U-stepping SS troops' movements turning incursions in to [inaudible], Austria, and Sudan land, seemed ominous to us but had no immediate effect on our lives. The Poland invasion was a turning point, but US public life is not directly influenced until Pearl Harbor in

1941. In my Rice freshman and sophomore years, '40-'41 and 41-42 I was completely immersed in heavy studying in effort to make top grades as a chemistry major; I had no time for dates and no time for hobbies except a little photography for the high school annual. I frequent studied until 2AM in the morning before driving to the campus for an 8AM class and considered any occasional extra hour of sleep a golden luxury.

[PJS]: I bet

[EL]: At this time, I had many classmate close friends and we studied together in groups of three or four. Then Pearl Harbor brought the American public into the war, but my Rice buddies and I were not really affected by WWII *still*. Until we became Draft board targets in 1942, we received Draft Board postcards directing us to quote "state the occupation for which you were best fitted blank" unquote. One of my buddies, filled in this blank as quote "pondering the essential verities" unquote as his best fitted occupation and sent it to his Draft Board; he was immediately drafted into the Navy sent to Japanese migrant school and was active as a translator through the rest of the war. Most of us in Fall '42 became very upset and uncertain while minding our studies while receiving generously given but widely conflicting advice from Rice authorities. Registrar McCann told us "join the dedicated college reserve group and be deferred until graduation otherwise you will be drafted into the shooting war." But Professor Rictor insisted "sit tight and occupy and apply for a scientific occupational deferments through the war" unquote. Dean Wiser, on the other hand told us, "I will give you boys all the information I have about drafting deferment, but I cannot decide for you, you must decide yourself which way to turn." Shortly starting again about 25 of my Rice classmates and I decided to go into the Army Airforce's Meteorology school college reserve which we read about and according to its literature it would defer us from the draft through graduation. So, we went as a group to the Houston Army induction center on December 2, 1942 took an oath of loyalty to the Army Airforces and thought we would be left alone in college until June '44. Then we soon learned a major lesson about the federal government; never trust a promise it makes. In early February in '43 we had an Army official order saying that President Roosevelt had just called the college reserves all up to immediate active duty and instructing us to report on the 11th of February to the Union Railroad station in Houston to leave for bootcamp. Needless to say, this was a major shock to me and my 25 classmates who had been working intensively for years for most of our waking moments to learn what was needed to become professional chemist or chem engineers. As one of my buddies the put it, quote "all our recent worries about courses and making choices don't matter at all anymore, we no longer have any choices."

[PJS]: No, they're going to put you where they want you, right?

[EL]: Yep. This group of about 25 classmates and I left together [coughing]

[PJS]: Take a break if you'd like.

[EL]: No, it's fine. With um many others recruits from elsewhere in the state on the southern pacific rail on the night of 11 February 43, heading into the eastern darkness not knowing where we were going or whether we would ever come back. After several days on the troop train, we arrived in Boca Ratan, Florida. A former millionaires vacation resort had been taken over by the Army Airforce's bootcamp training of its groundcrew sections. We were there for about six weeks and when a measles epidemic broke out in one of the buildings and in one of the other squadrons. Our squadron was quarantine by being sent out on [inaudible] into pop tents sleeping out on the pine scrub.

[PJS]: Oh wow

[EL]: Pup tents in the February weather were not comfortable especially after we had just received shots and couldn't move around comfortably but couldn't stay still and keep warm.

[PJS]: Those aren't comfortable any time of year.

[EL]: That's right. We had nothing to do all day for about two weeks. We were not comfortable, but the Army did send us a truckload of warm food every day, so we thought it over and concluded that the thing the Army seemed to learn best from experience of 200 years to do efficiently was feed the troops.

[PJS]: Uh huh

[EL]: After much uncertainty most of my Rice classmates were put in mid-March another troop train and we had another five-day trip across America to Los Angeles where we became enrolled students in US and UCLA and in a sped-up version in a group called class six at UCLA's well repeated meteorology course had been modified {into}. A four-year regular course was accelerated with lectures and labs given all day into 12 months in 1943. While we were fully enrolled students in UCLA we lived under strict military supervision in leased hotels and fraternity houses and were marched in formation to and from all classes. We were usually turned loose Saturday afternoons, however, until Sunday bedtime, to freely seek adventure in Los Angeles area. Many of us utilized those opportunities with enthusiasm including trips to Hollywood and vine radio studios various USO United Service Organization setups and many fine arts events. In one USO club I met a young man who said he was a Disney artist and had drawn some of the animated figures in *Fantasia*. We were getting aviation cadet salaries of \$75 a month which many of the older cadets when through fast at nightclubs early in the month used for movies in the middle of the month and ended the month on Long Beach ten cents awry.

[PJS]: Back to this Disney artist. Did you ever find out who that was?

[EL]: He told me his name at the time

[PJS]: You don't remember it? It wasn't Walt Disney or anybody like that?

[EL]: laughing oh no they probably had a hundred of those working

[PJS]: Yeah, that true. Too bad he didn't give you some of those cells. They're worth a lot of money now.

[EL]: Right. During the 11 months before our graduation the second lieutenants in November of '43. We had two one-week vacations; leave time it was called and one after graduation. Those of us who could afford the airfare flew on Braniff Airlines back to Houston to visit family and old friends. The Braniff planes were DC-3 with 21 seats and we were always subject to bumping off by higher priority passengers. But on these visits home we learned much more about the shortages and hardships faced by US civilians during WWII. These included severe meat and sugar shortages. I can recall eating 3 beef steaks during 1943 and all of them were on the airline flights on Braniff that I mentioned. Gasoline and tires were severely short requiring pricing coupons. You had so many ration coupons it almost became a second currency. Likes like batteries and Hershey bars were extremely scarce in civilian stores, but I had noted in the PX, the Post Exchange, in Boca Ratan that both of those were freely on sale in the PX; that's where they were all going. Civilians faced a toilet paper shortage and beer bottles was so scare that no

[inaudible] bottle could be bought without turning in an empty bottle on the spot. I solved the beer bottle problem by going outside the officer's club at Brian Air Field, picking up empty beer bottles off the ground, which had resulted from ample beer sales and flow in the officer's club and I took them home and make a stockpile to use for home use. Well, at the end of our UCLA course and graduation the 2nd lieutenants we were mostly sent to weather stations in the US at first. A large fraction of our 250 class six cadet group, however, were shifted out of meteorology in to air transport or communication.

[PJS]: But you stayed in the meteorology

[EL]: Yes, I did. Of course, the Army found that rather [*ticketly*] that it had overestimated the number of weather forecasters needed and trained many more than it needed. So they diverted a lot of them to other groundcrew occupations. I stayed in meteorology and was practicing weather forecaster during the rest of WWII. While based at Brian Airfield, which I was sent to initially, and which was the central USA training field for instrument for flying training for pilots. I was occasionally sent away from there on temporary assignments; one of the most interesting of these was a month at dugway proving grounds Utah, way in the Utah desert close to Salt Lake City. There was a permanent chemical warfare service there carrying the US large scale stocks of poison gas agents. The staff also gave short term courses for Navy, Airforce and other groups who might need to integrate their own specialties with weather for example with chemical warfare and technology considerations. I got to see during that time some of the US's main stock of quote "mustard gas" unquote, which is actually a dense oily liquid as it was stored in 55 gallon steel drums laid out about 50 feet apart on the sand in long parallel rows about 100 feet apart over an area of several square miles—we had lots of mustard gas.

[PJS] Wow, so were in charge of helping dispose of that?

[EL]: No, we were in charge of weather forecasting that chemical service might need in order to ensure that they didn't have any blow back on themselves after they launched it.

[PJS]: Right, wind patterns and things like that.

[EL]: Right—very specialized. Another thing I recall about Dugway Proving ground is the only other beef steaks I ate during '43, '44 were there since their commanding office was buddy with a nearby rancher who had large herds of beef cattle. Ironically, this commanding officer's name was Colonel Bacon—even though he's eating beef!

[PJS]: Kind of ironic, isn't it?

[EL]: After more than a year, 1944 and some of '45 at Brian Airfield and when after D-day in Europe all of the attention was immediately turned to the Pacific Ocean and the possible invasion of Japan. I was transferred to large airfield Seymour Johnson Field in North Carolina where they were assembling some mobile weather squadrons that would be self-supporting and would have equipment including all needed observation instruments and staff housekeeping gear in trucks to support independent weather station functions anywhere on land—looking forward to landing in Japan. While this was coming together, President Truman dropped the two atomic bombs on Japan and word of the six-year Manhattan Project were exploitation of nuclear fission certainly came out into full media exposure for the first time ever. We learned about the Manhattan Project \$4 billion that went into it.

[PJS]: First time you heard about when they dropped the bomb already?

[EL]: Yeah

[PJS]: So you remember where you were when they dropped the bomb?

[EL]: Um no, I just heard about it on radio broadcast. I was on Seymore Johnson Field somewhere. That's a big field

[PJS]: Was that a good feeling? I mean were you all excited about that?

[EL]: Oh yeah

[PJS]: What were your thoughts?

[EL]: My thought was that my physics professor forewarned us back in freshman college that atomic energy might someday change the magnitude of the whole energy world in unpredictable ways and my thought was now it's finally come

[PJS]: He was right

[EL]: That was the case. So, shortly after then these bombs were dropped of course and the Japanese surrender occurred the US Battleship and we were in VJ Day—Victory over Japan. That evening was a big big day. I witnessed in the airfields, officer's club the mother of all loud celebrations in my lifetime.

[PJS]: I bet.

[EL]: I was in the club with possibly a hundred other celebrators and noted beer or liquor in nearly every hand and all the toilet paper in the building had been tossed over the open ceiling beams in joyous down and up again. And general noise prevailed at an unbelievable level. At one point, the commanding officer in the field came in the front door with his wife and some second lieutenant with scissors in his hand rushed up to the general and snipped off his necktie shortly below the knot. The general was good natured and said, "I can see this is no place for me" and took his wife back home. I don't remember how late I stayed in the officer's club that night.

[PJS]: That's funny. Thought he got away with murder, didn't he?

[EL]: Yeah [laughter]. With no invasion of Japan impending, all of us weather officers were sent back from North Carolina to about where we were previously. I landed at Hondo Airfield, west of San Antonio, and waited out a long and irritating period to get separated from the military. Nearly all the six million US people in uniform wanted to get out at the same time [in audible] national confusion and disarray. Officers needed to accumulate a certain number of quote "point" unquote to be separated, and for reasons I don't remember, weather officers accumulated points relatively slowly. I was sent for two or three months to another Army Airfield base this time in Clovis, New Mexico—a dismal place where there was seemly always either a snowstorm or a sandstorm blowing.

[PJS]: I just got back from Clov-, we drove through Clovis

EL: Yeah?

[PJS]: A week ago

[EL]: Uh huh

[PJS]: And you're right, that's a pretty desolate place.

[EL]: Well, it probably dismally hot now

[PJS]: Yeah.

[EL]: Because it was dismally cold when I got there

[PJS]: There's not much to break the wind over there either. It's just wide-open country

[EL]: That's why the sandstorms. The base was close to a large natural gas field, but since a New Mexico senator owned an interest in some eastern coalmine the airbase used only coal for fuel and there was small mountains of coal piled up just outside the airfield all around. It was the principle base of all the Army Airforce's B-29 bombers. I still have a small 200-page Army Airforce issued book full of wiring diagrams entitled *Simplified Wiring Diagrams of the B-29*. Eventually, the joyful news came to me in March 1946 that I was authorized to go the San Antonio separation center for reconversion to a civilian. on the way out of that separation center I had to exit through a large open room which contained near its right-hand wall a desk labeled reenlistment desk; I carefully walked through the room as far over

[PJS]: Yeah, I bet

[EL]: on the left-hand wall as I could get

[PJS]: [laughing] Don't want to make that mistake again

[EL]: Together with almost all of my previous Rice classmates, I enrolled in Rice again for what was called the Spring 1946 quote "short term" unquote. The one-time only term, allowing two courses to be taken. Incidentally, all my Rice buddies came back home in one piece.

[PJS]: Good

[EL]: Some other buddies who did not go to college at Rice did not make it back. And I repeated in that Fall of '46 all of my junior courses taken earlier in '42. Rice charitably dropped the junior semester courses from '42 grades and only counted the repeating grades which were much better for all of us. Some of us sent transcripts of our previous Rice grades to UCLA, which helpfully combined them with our course work taken during 1943 and granted us meteorology B.A. degrees in 1946, so I thereby gained for a 36 months in Airforce uniform a spare B.A. Degree from UCLA granted in '46 as well as my originally sought B.A. in Chemistry from Rice granted in '48. Well, this is coming to the end as a final irony of my WWII experience, during 38 months in uniform I never personally saw a single act of violence that was part of WWII warfare. But in 1966, back in the peaceful and enlightened civilized Texas [UN] Austin, where I was then employed as a research associate, I witnessed Charles Whitman kill over a dozen people from the top of the tower and injure about two dozen others.

[PJS]: Wow, so you were down there when that went on?

[EL]: Yes, I was walking across the ground when he dropped two people about 20 feet in front of me.

[PJS]: Oh my gosh!

[EL]: He wasn't aiming at me and I instinctively ducked under an oak tree and jumped from one oak to another and got into the Hogg Auditorium building.

[PJS]: That's terrible. Good gosh.

[EL]: Well to sum up this whole survey, it seems to me that the Great Depression of my childhood years and the USA's part in WWII during adult years both showed the US population in similar states nearly all felt they were in the same boat and worked to solve the same problems together. President FDR, F.D. Roosevelt, helped lead us through both of these. But since these two national experiences, I have never again felt that such a spirit of national unity and collaboration has been achieved.

[PJS]: I would agree with you.

[EL]: Well

[PJS]: Well so that was very—that was a great, a great, I don't know, encapsulation of a large portion of your life there, but very interesting story. So, your time in the military was—I'm sorry you went in in '42 did you say?

[EL]: Well I went to bootcamp in February '43 got out in March '46 got back into Rice in April '46.

[PJS]: So you got your degree at Rice?

[EL]: Much later '48 instead of '44.

[PJS]: And what was your degree in? It wasn't meteorology

[EL]: No, it was a Bachelor of Arts in chemistry and Rice gave B.A.s to all academic majors and B.S.s to all engineers. I had taken the academic not the chemical ones engineering course in chemistry at Rice. Actually, I started out for the first two years as a chem engineer and the organic professor talked me and a lot of other kids into straight academic chemistry. I'm not sure that was a good thing, but we did it.

[PJS]: Right

[EL]: He had an interesting way of classifying students to decide whether to move them into biological chemistry or physical chemistry: he said, "which do you find more interesting: mathematics or blood?"

[PJS]: [laughter] Kind of weird question, but okay

[EL]: But it worked.

[PJS]: Well let's take a break for just a second and give you chance to---

RECORDING ENDS