

## **RALPH H. STEVERSON**

Mr. Ralph H. Steverson is the person who I interviewed.

Steverson was born in Alexander City, Alabama on September 17, 1921. He was the oldest of four children born of Mr. Ralph Steverson and Mrs. Lizzie Moore Steverson. The subject of my interview deals with the period of the depression starting in 1929 all the way up to the early 1940's ending with W.W.II.

Steverson's dad was an insurance man when the stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. This caused The Great Depression and his father lost his job. They were forced to move to Steverson's grandfather's house on a farm in Alexander City. His granddad owned a two mule farm where they raised all of their own food. There were nine people that lived in this three bedroom farm house. The house was occupied by Steverson's grandfather, his aunt and uncles and his three brothers, all accumulation to nine family members. They raised cattle, chicken, and hogs to keep them eating well. The only thing that they had to spend money on was flour, sugar, and coffee. One job that Steverson remembers doing was taking corn to the mill and

letting them grind it into meal. The mill would keep every fourth scoop as payment. They did not have any electricity and all cooking was done on an old wood burning stove. They used kerosene lamps to light the place at night. Steverson recalls going to the grocery to fill a gallon can full of kerosene for a nickel. He said that they were way below the poverty line but did not realize it because they were eating so good. "There was love in the family and we were as happy as we could be," said Steverson commenting on the question of being content.

Along with the nine that lived on the farmhouse, Steverson had an elderly grandmother who stayed with them periodically. Steverson told about when this grandmother was a child, her father owned slaves. She was 12 when the Civil War ended. She would be in her bedroom in the mornings when the slaves were on their way to go work in the cotton fields. She said that they would sing ditties. One ditty that Steverson recalls went like this:

*the frog went a swimmin down the lake*

*a rica a budy mida kya mo*

*he got caught by a big black snake*

*a rica a budy mida kya mo*

He does not really know what this song means, but feels that it is probably old African dialect from when the slaves came over from Africa.

Steverson's first job was working in a grocery store, but when he was 17, he went to work at the Russell Manufacturing Co. cotton mill. He worked at this mill until he joined the Navy. He started working in the mill right after the National Labor Laws were passed which stated that he only had to work eight hours a day and that you would get time and a half overtime. Benjamin Russell was the owner and founder of this prosperous cotton mill in Alexander City. The Russell Manufacturing Co. put up money to build villages for most of the workers. These were called mill villages. The people who lived in these houses were not charged much rent. These houses were generally nice and the bigger families had the bigger houses. The bosses on the factory had nicer houses and the executives had even nicer houses than them. Ben Russell, "The Man", owned a huge mansion outside of these villages. Steverson continued with telling about how Russell went to Atlanta to become a lawyer, but he never got a customer so he came back to Alexander City where he heard of

a knitting mill for sale in South Carolina. He bought it and hauled it to Alexander City and started his cotton mill with that one machine.

Russell was a smart business man. Alabama Power Co. was going to build the Martin Dam on the Tallapoosa River, but Russell was going to build one up-stream to dam the river before Alabama Power could. Alabama Power made a deal with Russell. They made an agreement to give Russell free electricity for several years if he would not build his dam. Russell turned around and sold his free electricity to the people in the mill villages.

Steverson then went on to tell about the history of some of his ancestors. The Gilliland Cemetery was named after his oldest ancestor, Mary Gilliland whom was Steverson's great, great, great, grandmother. Also buried in this cemetery was Madison Gilliland and Mary Locke whom were Steverson's great, great, grandparents. Sarah Gilliland, which is his great grandmother was also buried here.

The Bice Cemetery was the other cemetery in which Steverson's ancestors were buried. Ben and Noah Steverson whom were his grandparents were buried here as well as his parents, Ralph and Lizzie Steverson. The Saturday before the first Sunday in August was when a graveyard clean-up took place. Everyone who had relatives

buried in this cemetery came and pulled weeds and cleaned up. This is how Steverson was able to find out about his ancestors and trace his roots. Steverson said that this was a time when all the people in the community came together and had a good time.

When Steverson was young and lived on the farm, he remembered going to protracted meetings at the Pierson Chapel Methodist Church. This was like a modern day revival. He said that his granddad would hitch up the mules and load up the wagon and go to the church. The church was only about one and one half mile away but it took them 30 minutes to get there.

Steverson remembered a story about his dad courting his mother. He said that his dad would take his date home and the mule, Billy, knew the way home, so his dad would go to sleep and let Billy take him home. He said that one time he woke up right as Billy was about to jump across a ditch.

He then told about a morning in which his grandparents were cooking breakfast and they kept hearing their dog, Jack, barking at their corn crib (this is where they stored their corn). After the dog continued to bark, his grandparents knew that something was wrong. His grandfather walked up there and found and found a black man by

the name of Racey Marby helping himself to their corn. Marby was scared to leave because the dog was outside the crib. His granddad gave Marby a good ol' talkin to. He said that he would have given the man some corn if he would have just asked. Steverson's granddad was not racist. Marby became a barber and several years down the road cut Steverson's hair. He would often get his hair cut by this black man as they laughed at the corn crib story.

Steverson's grandfather died and his family was marrying and moving out, so Steverson's dad hired a black man named Uncle George Mackedory to help work on their farm. Uncle George did not have any family so he stayed on the farm for cheap wages and good meals. Uncle George was always afraid that he would be kicked out of the house. He was paranoid because he had no place to go. Steverson said that he lived with them for about four or five years until he died. He was hired at an old age. He was like one of the family and people were sad and upset when he died. "He was a good ol' black man," said Steverson.

Steverson had just gotten through with a date and met up with his friends when they received the news that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt declared war on Japan and Germany.

Steverson realized that he was going to war. He said that he wanted to be on the water, so he enlisted in the Navy instead of being drafted into the Army. He was sworn in the Navy in Birmingham with his good friend Stewart. They figured that since their last names started with STE, that they would stay together. They were separated after boot camp. Stewart went aboard a tanker in Miami, Florida. Steverson went to machinist school in Norfolk, Virginia and then went to New York to be on a receiving ship which had no engine and stayed anchored to a dock. While Steverson was in machinists school, he received a letter from his father stating that Stewart had been killed. This shook Steverson up a bit. He was then assigned to the U.S.S. JENKINS. The JENKINS was a destroyer in which Steverson worked in one of the engine rooms. Their first trip was a shakedown trip in the Pacific. This is where they did all of their sailing. This shakedown trip was from New York to Guantanamo Bay Cuba. A shakedown trip consisted of sailing full speed ahead and then a sudden full speed astern. The boat would shake and this was the test to see whether or not the ship was built sturdy.

They were preparing to land troops in Casablanca North Africa so they formed a huge convoy that pretty much covered the east coast.

This was the biggest convoy that Steverson ever saw. This convoy went through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific which was where they spent the rest of the war. The convoy line-ups started with the destroyers on the outermost shell. Next were the cruisers which were a little bigger than the destroyers. The third in line were the battleships and in the middle of the convoy was the aircraft carrier.

The Japs were trying to get ammunition to the Guadalcanal and they would go up to what was called "the slot". The Navy was determined not to let them succeed at this so they would go up into "the slot" every night hunting for the Jap convoy. One night they got into a heated battle with the Japs and the JENKINS made a torpedo run. On a destroyer there were ten torpedo tubes, and to shoot them, you would have to turn a switch on, but you would have to turn it back off in order for the next one to be able to be fired, otherwise you would turn the next switch on but nothing would come out. In the heat of this particular battle, the young Navy officer who fired the torpedoes realized that nine of the ten tubes were still loaded with torpedoes. Their squadron had to make another torpedo run to fire the rest of the nine torpedoes. Steverson said that the officer was in the dog house



for a long time. During this battle, the HELENA was sunk and the JENKINS picked up their crew.

The next time that Steverson's convoy went the "the slot", they ran up on the Japs again. We had radar and the Japs did not. They were using search lights. The LAVALLETTE was the ship that preceded the JENKINS and the Japs shined their search lights on them. Steverson said that the boy that was on the bridge of the JENKINS called down to the engine room "the LAVALLETTE is illuminated." The boy in the engine room yelled to the others "the LAVALLETTE is **eliminated!**" The LAVALLETTE was not hit and the Navy won this battle. Steverson recalls everyone getting a big laugh out of the boy that yelled in the engine room. During this battle, the JENKINS and the RADFORD got a Jap ship isolated from the rest of their fleet. The RADFORD was shooting its forward guns at it while it was shooting his after guns at them. The Jap shells were exploding in the water all around our ships. "It felt like my head was in a steel tub, and someone was beating it with a hammer," said Steverson since he was in the engine room below the water level. The Jap ship eventually ran up on land so the JENKINS and the RADFORD returned to their convoy.

Steverson then told me about the frightening experience in the Linguean Gulf. The Navy was trying to land troops on the coast of the gulf and the Japs were shooting armor piercing shells at them from the shore. A shell hit the JENKINS in one of its gun turrets while someone was in the process of loading the barrel. The shell went through the four inch metal and hit the ammunition that was being loaded. This caused our bullet to explode in our turret and killed seven people that were in that area. Steverson said that this really scared them. This was the first hit that the JENKINS had received.

Steverson then shared his even more frightening experience about Borneo which took place toward the end of the war. The Navy was planning on landing troops here and in their formation there were two destroyers ahead of them. There was a mine anchored to the bottom of the sea that the first two destroyers luckily missed. Unfortunately, the JENKINS took a devastating hit by the mine. The mine hit the area of the ship just before the first engine room where the fuel tanks were ( this is not the engine room that Steverson was in). The mess hall and this engine room were filling up with the lube oil that came out of the fuel tanks. Every compartment was made to be watertight. All hatches had to be secure in order to keep the

compartments tight. Everyone that was in the mess hall and engine room was trying to get out by climbing out of these hatches which were only big enough for one person to get out at a time. Orders were given to keep the hatches closed so the compartments would be airtight, yet there were 20-30 panicked soldiers trying to escape. The boy that was securing the hatch finally realized what was going on and he opened the hatch and let the people out.

Navy ships do not waste any water. They make steam, run it through the turbines, then it condenses back into water which is made back into steam. When these ships are moving at sea, they have fins on the sides of the ship that forces water into the condenser to keep it cool. When the ship is at a stand still, a pump has to be ran to run water through the condenser to keep it cool. Steverson was the head person in charge of the back engine room when they hit the mine in Borneo. He had the pump cut off at the time because they were moving. When they hit the mine, the captain called down to Steverson to see if there was still power in the back engine room because the front engine had gone out. Steverson then noticed that the vacuum gauge was dropping. The vacuum is what pulls steam through the condenser and turns it into water. They were losing power

and would have sunk, then he remembered that he had cut off the pump because they were originally moving. Steverson turned the pump back on because they were standing still and immediately they regained power. Steverson along with the rest of his crew were scared that they were going to sink. They sailed to a sandbar and pumped all the water out and then went to Manilla and patched it up and came back to the United States.

Steverson would be on duty for four hours and off eight hours. He had just gotten off duty and he looked up and saw a plane coming. He thought that it was one of ours until he saw the two big red suns beneath the wings. The Jap plane dropped bombs and missed. The JENKINS was unable to retaliate because the plane would have been long gone by the time they would have manned their battle stations.

He then told what he thought was a humorous story about a Chinese man, Ching, who was going to school in America and joined the Navy to avoid being drafted into the Army. Steverson said that this was the type of soldier that they would send after a "left handed monkey wrench." A Jap plane was shot down and there were three survivors that the JENKINS rescued. No one could communicate with them except for Ching. Ching was able to find out about an enemy

airfield that they did not know about. Steverson said that they saw Ching several months later and he had become an officer and he was parading around their ship showing off his officer uniform.

Steverson concluded the interview with a few stories that showed how bad young boys were. He told about how they would steal fresh baked bread from the kitchen and how they would steal eggs as they were being transported to the kitchen. He said they would fry the eggs in lube oil. "I know," said Steverson, "but they were better than no eggs at all." He also told me how beer was kept in a beer locker. He that it was no problem for them to knock out the pins on the back hinges to take the beer. He said that when the people in charge of the beer locker went to get the beer several months later, there was none left.

In 1945, he retired from the Navy and came back home and got married. Ralph and his wife Jacqueline have been living in Sylacauga Alabama ever since. Steverson lived a full life. A life full of hardships and good times. When things were at their worst in the 1930's, Steverson's family made the best out of everything they could. Their family was full of love and respect. Steverson also served the country in a very fulfilling way. He is still going strong today at the age of 73

and he looks and acts as though he could have many more proud and prosperous years ahead.

END

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

History of the USS JENKINS; Office of Naval Records and History;  
Ships' Histories Section; Navy Department

The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1995; editor, Robert  
Famighetti; Copyright 1994 by Funk & Wagnalls Corporation,  
Mahwah, New Jersey; pg. 443-448

**Gift and Release Agreement:**

We RALPH H STEVENSON and Chad Owen  
(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

do hereby give and grant to Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at Sylacauga AL on the date(s) of March 19, 1995 for the oral history collection being compiled by the Jacksonville State University Library.

Ralph H Stevenson  
(Interviewee's signature)

Address 405 ODENS MILL ROAD Date March 19 1995  
Sylacauga Alabama  
Phone 205 245 3791

Chad Owen  
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 503 Mountain Street NW Date 3-19-95  
APT B1  
Phone 435-4781



**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: RALPH H STEVENSON  
Address: 405 ODENS MILL ROAD - SYLACAUGA, ALA  
Phone Number(s): 205 245 3791  
Approximate age or date of birth: 9-17-1921 73 yrs old  
Mother's name: LIZZIE MOORE STEVENSON  
Father's name: RALPH H STEVENSON  
Places lived and when: ALEXANDER CITY 1921 - 1941  
U S NAVY 1941 - 45 - SYLACAUGA ALA  
1951 - PRESENT  
Education: 11 GRADE

Religion: PROTESTANT  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present):  
SALESMAN FOR SEARS - 33 YEARS

Present occupation: RETIRED  
Former occupation(s): SALESMAN

Special skills: GARDENING  
Major Accomplishments: RAISED 2 CHILDREN - PUT THROUGH COLLEGE - ~~BOUGHT~~ BOUGHT + PAID FOR MODEST HOME  
Local events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: WORLD WAR 2

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF EVENTS FROM 1920-1976

- 1920 19th Amendment ratified giving women the right to vote
- 1921 KKK began a revival with violence against Catholics in the North, South, and Midwest
- 1925 John T. Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution in Tennessee
- 1929 stock market crash
- 1932 Bonus March by the WWI vets
- 1933 prohibition ended
- 1935 Social Security Act
- 1938 national minimum wage
- 1941 Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and we declared war on Japan, Germany, and Italy
- 1942 Marines landed on Guadalcanal
- 1944 Allied forces invaded Europe at Normandy
- 1949 NATO was established
- 1950 start of the Korean War
- 1954 racial segregation was declared unconstitutional
- 1957 Civil Rights Bill
- 1963 "I have a dream" speech by Martin Luther King; Kennedy was assassinated
- 1965 Vietnam War began
- 1968 MLK was assassinated
- 1969 Woodstock
- 1970 Earth Day on April 22
- 1971 voting age was lowered to 18
- 1972 Alabama governor George C. Wallace was shot
- 1973 Watergate trial
- 1976 celebration of bicentennial July 4

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF EVENTS THAT OCCURRED IN  
THE LIFE OF RALPH H. STEVERSON

- 1921 born on September 17
- 1929 the stock market crashed so he moved to his grandfather's farmhouse
- 1937 worked at a grocery store
- 1938 went to work in the Russell Manufacturing Co.
- 1941 the US declared war on Japan, Germany, and Italy  
joined the Navy
- 1941-1945 fought in World War II
- 1946 married Jacqueline Steverson
- 1949-1983 salesman for Sears
- 1984-present retired

## QUESTIONS

Background information?

What do you remember about The Great Depression?

How old were you?

Living conditions?

Who worked?

Wages?

Prices?

What was it like working in a cotton mill?

Working conditions?

Mill villages?

World War II?

Why did you join the Navy?

What was your job?

Tell me about your ship.

Lengeyan Gulf?

Borneo?

Ralph H. Steverson

AUDIO TAPE TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION
3. THE GREAT DEPRESSION
  - living conditions
  - raising food
  - no electricity
  - 9 people in a 3 bedroom house
  - grandmother who stayed with them periodically
  - slave song
4. RUSSELL MANUFACTURING CO.
  - age 17
  - mill villages
  - Benjamin Russell starting his business
  - Benjamin Russell, the smart business man
5. ANCESTORS
  - Gilliland family and cemetery
  - Bice cemetery
  - graveyard clean-up
6. PROTRACTED MEETINGS
7. STORY ABOUT THEIR MULE
8. STORY ABOUT RACEY MARBY
  - stealing corn
  - cutting Steverson's hair
9. HIRED HAND ON THE FARM
  - Uncle George Mackedory
  - story about George courting young women
10. ENLISTED IN THE NAVY
  - attending schools
  - Stewart
  - assigned to the U.S.S. JENKINS
11. CONVOY LINE-UP
12. SHAKEDOWN TRIP
13. STOPPING THE JAPS IN THE GUADAL CANAL
  - torpedo error
  - rescuing the HELENA
14. GOING BACK INTO THE SLOT
  - story about the LAVALLETTE
  - chasing down a Japanese ship
15. LINGUEAN GULF
  - JENKINS was hit
  - 7 people dead

16. BORNEO
  - JENKINS was hit by a mine
  - how they survived
  - how the ship conserved water
  - story about Stevenson's engine room
17. JAP PLANE
  - dropped bombs
18. CHINA MAN IN THE NAVY
  - Ching communicating with 3 Jap survivors
  - Ching made into an officer
  - Philappeno chef trying to kill the Jap survivors
19. STEALING BREAD
20. STEALING EGGS
  - frying them in lube oil
21. STEALING BEER
22. GOT MARRIED AFTER THE WAR

end of tape