

Monique Garcia and Isaiah Colton Thompson (editors)

*“What is it worth to be a citizen if they can do this to you?”
Oscar Bauman’s Memories of Discrimination during World War II*

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The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History.
Project: Personal and Family Histories.
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Oral Interview with Oscar Bauman, conducted by John Sprout,
November 24, 1968, Orange, California.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to the “Personal and Family Histories” collection held in CSUF’s Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH). The interview with Oscar Bauman was conducted by John Sprout, at the time a CSUF student, on November 24, 1968, in Orange, California. The interview lasted 1 hour, 1 minute, and 13 seconds, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH. The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2019 by Monique Garcia and Isaiah Colton Thompson.

Oscar Bauman was born ca. 1929 in Wisconsin and graduated from high school in 1947. The interview provides neither his place of birth nor his date of birth. Prior to the United States’ entry into World War II, his family had relocated to Los Angeles, California, and they moved several times in the downtown and East Hollywood neighborhoods. Bauman eventually took up residence in Orange County, California. The interview reveals conflicted narratives of the U.S. during World War II. On the one hand, Bauman praises the U.S. as a country of justice and inclusivity; on the other hand, he reflects on the government’s failures. Bauman’s description of events he experienced as a child – such as the FBI coming to search his house, classmates chiding him because of his German heritage, the disappearance of his Japanese American classmates who were sent to internment camps, his parents’ fear that the government was watching them and treating them as untrustworthy – all contributed to his criticism. Bauman’s account further questions the assumption that America’s role in World War II was purely heroic.

Oscar Bauman’s story provides a grassroots perspective on the experience of government-targeted groups in the U.S. during and after World War II. It addresses the questionable safety of citizenship in times of war, the use of media to vilify specific groups to stoke fear, and the government’s lack of faith in its people. This powerful narrative includes many striking moments, including the U.S. government’s discriminatory treatment of Japanese Americans and of Oscar Bauman’s own family, which scarred him for life and made him lose faith in the government and the value of elections.

ABOUT THE EDITOR: *Monique Garcia of Whittier, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History and Chicana/Latina Studies at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where she is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). She is a member of the University Honors Program and the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship.*

ABOUT THE EDITOR: *Isaiah Colton Thompson of Cleveland, Ohio, earned two A.A. degrees in Liberal Arts at Victor Valley College in Victorville, California (2018). He is currently pursuing a B.A. in Religious Studies and History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He is a member of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, and the Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Scholars Program. The primary-source edition published below originated in the "History and Editing" course offered by CSUF's History Department.*

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 0079)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Oscar Bauman [OB]

INTERVIEWER: John Sprout [JS]

DATE: November 24, 1968

LOCATION: Orange, California

PROJECT: Personal and Family Histories

TRANSCRIBERS: Monique Garcia and Isaiah Colton Thompson

JS: (cough; clears throat) This interview is with Mr. Oscar Bauman in Orange. (clears throat) First, Mr. Bauman, I would like to just get some background information on your – on your parents. Uh, where was your father born?

OB: Well, they were born in, uh – my mother and father were both born in Germany, uh, around 1895, uh, in between that time. I don't know when they came to America. I guess (pauses), uh, it must have been (pauses) – shortly after the First World War,¹ uh, but I don't – I can't remember – 1920, sometime in there – uh, exactly what year they came over.

JS: Uh, when did your father, uh, take out his citizenship papers?

OB: Well, uh, I can't really say that either, but it was before 1937 'cause, uh, 1937, we moved out to California from Wisconsin, and he had them at that time, so, uh, it was before 1937.

JS: And when did your mother and father get married?

¹ Global conflict (1914-1918).

- OB: Well, I don't know that either, uh, that's something I don't know, uh, I have no idea. You know. I can't really say (both laugh) (sniffs).
- JS: (laughs; clears throat) Well, uh, 1937, you moved from Wisconsin to California –
- OB: Yeah, right.
- JS: – and where did you live?
- OB: Uh, well, first we lived, uh, in, uh, Central Los Angeles, uh, then we moved, uh – well, uh, no, I'll take that back. When we first came, we lived in Santa Monica with my dad's sister until, uh, he could find a place closer to work which – he worked in downtown L.A. and, uh, he found a place first on, uh, near Washington and Union Street,² which is right in the heart of L.A. Uh, then we moved out up north, uh, around, uh, Beverley and Vermont³ and, uh, we spent about eight years in that location. Then we moved over to Santa Monica and Vermont,⁴ which is closer to Hollywood – about seven years, and then we – uh – that's when the Korean conflict⁵ – war came, and I got drafted, and when we came back, uh, I guess it was 1953, and my dad had died in the meantime. And we moved out to, uh, North Hollywood where we stayed about seven years, and then we moved down here to Orange County, 'cause the company I work for, uh, moved down here. And, uh, I just couldn't take the freeway. 'Cause (both laugh) – it was too much. So, uh, here we are in Orange, and we like it very much down here.
- JS: Uh, where were you living at – right before the Second World War⁶ broke out?
- OB: Uh, we were living up on Beverly and Vermont, uh, uh – at that time, uh, December 1941, uh, I was just starting Junior High School at that time. And, uh, I, uh, can remember going – going to school and they all called us in the audi – auditorium and told us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor,⁷ and we were at war with the Japanese. And, uh, I can remember that very clearly, uh, that they, you know, they called us in the auditorium and told us –
- JS: What did your parents –
- OB: – we were at war
- JS: – think about this at the time?
- OB: Well, uh, I – I can't really say that – what they thought about the war at that time. (noise/background) I mean, I feel that they felt like everybody else. Uh, they were scared, uh, (pauses) uh, they were fearful of what was going

² Intersection (Pico Union neighborhood, Los Angeles, California).

³ Intersection (Oakwood neighborhood, Los Angeles, California).

⁴ Intersection (East Hollywood neighborhood, Los Angeles, California).

⁵ Conflict between North and South Korea (1950-1953).

⁶ Global conflict (1939-1945).

⁷ U.S. naval base (Honolulu, Hawaii); attacked by Japan, December 7, 1941.

to happen, uh—everybody was scared out here in California or along the West Coast. The Japanese invasion⁸ and Japanese bombings,⁹ and—uh—there was a great, uh, feeling of this fear. And, uh, I guess they were just thinking about that like any other—or—I should say like most of the people were at that time about the situation. And, uh, I mean we use—used to have a few air raids—the air raid alerts at night, you know. I don’t know whether they were so much as just practices, or if they were the real thing, but then again, you never know, you know. And the blackouts and the civil air raid defense men would walk around and things like that. So, that was about it. Uh—

JS: Uh, did your father ever mention—make any mention, uh, of the war in Europe?

OB: Well, uh, the war in Europe—uh, well—we figured that was far away from us. It wasn’t as close as the Japanese were. Uh, yeah, they mentioned it. Uh, I mean we were little kids. I was about—oh, I don’t know—at that time, I was about thirteen, my sister was about seven, something like that. And, uh, they would talk about the war, but, uh, they were still very fearful about what us kids would say. I mean they would send us out and say, uh, you know, uh, “Just be careful what you say because, if you say something wrong or you say—don’t say the right thing or something, they’ll send somebody after us, and we’ll have to, uh, pack up and move or leave the country or something like this.” So, uh, when you went out, you, uh, were very careful of who you played with and what you said and what you did—and—and that was it, because, uh, your parents had this fear that, uh, if you would say something like, uh, “German people are good people” or something like this, uh, someone would knock you down for it or there would be, uh—there would be, uh, bad results as—if you were to say something like this, you know. Because at that time (pauses)—uh, like (sighs)—I don’t know if it was war propaganda or something like this but, uh, you’d hear some pretty vicious things about what the enemy soldiers do to civilians, and what they do to women and children, and, uh, what they do to our soldiers if they catch—and all this. And, uh, they were afraid that if you were to go up to somebody and say, “Well,” or even neighbors that I’ve—I’ve played with five, six, seven years—and say—“Oh, well, my parents can’t believe this; they feel that Germans are very good people, too, and that they just don’t do things like this.” And they were, uh, you know—they just didn’t want you to say things like this because, uh, they were—they had this fear of, uh, someone might report me or something, and, uh,

⁸ Possible reference to the Japanese bombing of Ellwood (near Santa Barbara, California); February 23, 1942.

⁹ Possible reference to “Fu-Gos” (Japanese fire balloons).

- then there'd be all kinds of trouble. And, you know, like I said, they might be interned.
- JS: Did, uh, any of your family including yourself have any confrontations with anybody at this time?
- OB: Uh, no, I can't, uh (pauses) – I can't remember any, 'cause, like I said, I was very careful. I – I – I more or less kept to myself quite a bit and, uh, I didn't say very much. And, uh, my sister was too little. Uh, as far as my dad at work and things like that, I don't know. That I can't say. My mother was usually sick most of the time. She hardly ever got out of the house –
- JS: Oh.
- OB: – and the neighbors that came around – I mean, they were always nice and everything, you know – they would never say much about it. So, uh, we uh, you know – it seemed pretty good at that time but, uh – we still lived with that fear.
- JS: Okay. How about your father's sister?
- OB: Well, my father's sister, uh, she was a citizen and, uh, she lived in Santa Monica, but, uh, that I cannot say. I never ran into any – I never heard any, you know, confictions with this, uh, this problem, uh, during those years at all from her – from her husband. So, the only personal, you know, uh, conflict I've had – was, like I've told you before, you know, was the FBI¹⁰ coming and, uh, searching the house – and taking our cameras away. Telling us that we've got to be off the streets by – I think, it was nine o'clock or ten o'clock – curfew. And, uh, as I said, you know, my father was a citizen, both the children were born in this country, and the only thing was that my mother was an alien. And, uh, she didn't belong to any of these, you know, German Bund¹¹ parties or whatever they had at that time and all that stuff. And, uh, it was really – uh, it was really quite a blow – it's – it's quite a fearful feeling for little children to see your parents cry and be scared, uh, and, uh, be – live in fear. And, uh, of course as little as I was at that time I told them, "Well, don't feel too bad," I says, "look at all these Japanese friends I have," I says, "They're just being uprooted by their homes and put into what they call relocation centers."¹² Of course, over here, uh, to my way of thinking they were called relocation centers because, uh, it sounds a little better than a concentration camp.¹³ Uh, maybe these concentration camps over here weren't as severe as the ones over in Europe or over in, uh, Japan, but to me it's the same thing: when you uproot

¹⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation; U.S. domestic intelligence/security agency; founded 1908.

¹¹ German American pro-Nazi organization; founded 1936; dissolved 1941.

¹² Internment of Japanese Americans (1942-1946) following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor; based on U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066.

¹³ Prison, labor, and death camps (1933-1945), both in Nazi Germany and in Nazi-controlled areas of Europe during World War II.

families from their homes that they worked so hard for and some of 'em lost their entire savings and businesses and things like this, uh – to me that's just as terrible. And, uh, I can't see much difference. And, uh, just like, uh, President Roosevelt¹⁴ said – uh, you know, I think "the thing we have to fear is fear itself,"¹⁵ and, uh, as far as I'm concerned, that was a great example of fearing fear. Uh, doing this to all these Japanese people.

[00:10:10]

JS: At this time, where did your, uh, father work?

OB: Uh, he worked down at the Los Angeles Athletic Club.¹⁶ He was the head chef down there for quite some years. Uh, he died in – I don't know, '51 or '52, when I was over in Korea and, uh, then, uh, (pauses) uh, I came home and got discharged in '53, um, and that was, you know –

JS: Uh, well, when did the first, uh – when was the first time that the FBI contacted your parents?

OB: I don't really know. I can't say when the first time was. And, uh, I don't know whether they were, uh, sent a letter previous to the man's coming or not. Uh, I would assume that, uh, they would send notification to my father that the man was coming out to inspect our house and uh – (pauses) and, uh, – look it over, you know, and, uh, take our cameras away and stuff like that. And I as – presume also that they did have search warrants because I don't think they would've come out to the house without a search warrant, you know. And, uh, the thing is also – uh, you know, when we told our neighbors, our neighbors were shocked. They couldn't believe that this would happen in this country. Uh, because, uh, they were, uh – some of them were just, you know, just dumbfounded about it. And, uh – so, I mean, this is the way it goes but, uh, like, you know, we were talking the other day about voting, and I said, "I am very skeptical about voting in this country," because this has always left a bitter scar inside of me. One which I will never forget, I will never forget, and I think it'll – it'll go to me – it will stay with – inside of me until I die because, uh, it just proved to me what worth is, uh – what is it worth to be a citizen if they can do this to you just because, uh, we're at war with somebody, I mean, there must be thousands of thousands of Germans living in this country, there's thousands of thousands of Japanese living in this country, and there's thousands of thousands of other people. If it wasn't for all these mixtures of people, uh, this country wouldn't be what it is today. I say, you, know it takes Germans, Japanese – it takes everybody – Italians, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Negroes – whatever you have, to make this country as great as it is. And

¹⁴ Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945); U.S. President (1933-1945).

¹⁵ Modified quote from U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first Inaugural Address (1933).

¹⁶ Private athletic/social club (Los Angeles, California); established 1880.

just because you're gonna go to war every time or have to go to war against some of these people, uh, you're gonna come around and say, well, uh, we're at war with you, and whether you're a citizen or not you're just gonna have to go into a concentration camp, or we're gonna have to inspect your house and all this stuff. Uh, this sounds very ridiculous to me. Because, uh, after all, uh, — it's, uh — you just feel that, uh, you know these great white leaders — intellectual leaders — have passed all these laws and want to intimidate these people 'cause they don't have a piece of paper. Well, it's just like I told you the other night, uh, where in the hell do they think they came from? Uh, where — where do they think their parents come from? They weren't born here. The only people we know that were born in this continent were the Indians, and we're not too sure of that, (laughs) you know. They might have come from the Orient across the Bering Seas¹⁷ or some other way. So, uh, I really, uh, can't see why you should vote for a bunch of hypocrites. And, uh, it's — it's left a very bitter scar, one I'll never — I'll always resent.

JS: Uh, were you ever present whenever the FBI came to the house?

OB: Yes, I was, once.

JS: Could you describe to me what they, you know, if you could remember what they went through.

OB: Well, uh, the men came in, "Torrance FBI, and we're here to inspect your house," and, uh, they went through the radio. They went up in the attic. They went underneath the house. They went in all the closets, suitcases. They went through the garage. They went through the car, 'cause the car was there; my dad never used it to go to work. And they took all our cameras. And that was the first time, uh, they inspected. The other times I — I — don't remember — I don't — I may not have been home. I may have been out playing, or I might have been at school or something like this. I — I — think the main thing they were looking for was, uh, short wave powerful radio transmitters and, uh, maybe they were looking for, you know, big hidden cameras, like — as if a hard-working family could support or buy this kind of equipment, you know, and stuff, which seems very silly. Also, it was very silly to take our cameras away because, what the hell, you just go next door and ask your neighbor for one. You may be a little ashamed or a little embarrassed when they ask you why, but, uh, anytime we wanted a camera we just asked our neighbors, even though it's a little humiliating. But, uh, you know, uh — it just sounds stupid. I mean this is like saying, "Close the bars, because we don't want any drunks at election time," so who's gonna prevent you from getting stored up before election time, you know, John. This is — this is stupid. I mean, uh, intelligent people, uh, I don't

¹⁷ North Pacific Ocean; divide between Eurasia and the Americas.

- know, it's like I told you before – that they are so intelligent that they get stupid. And, uh, that's the way that I look at e – elections.
- JS: Well, at this time, did your parents still have relatives in Germany?
- OB: Uh, oh, yes, many relatives in Germany. And the fact is my father had, uh, he had – friends in Chicago. Their boys were drafted in World War Two, asked to go over, and, you know, they had to bomb their own people – kill their own people. And, uh, so, uh, I mean, you know, if, uh, if kids and sons are willing to do that, and parents are willing to let their sons, uh, do that for this country, I think that shows this country how great – or how much they think of this country. And, uh, it certainly – when they do things like what they did to me, it certainly shows to me the way that the country doesn't think very much of them. And, uh, it's just a good thing that the people think that this country is as great as it is, otherwise, you know, they'd say, "Well, nuts with you Uncle Sam. I'll just – you just put us in a concentration camp 'cause I want – it'd be much safer for my son to go to a concentration camp or spend ten years in jail than go off and fight for you. So, that's what it amounts to.
- JS: What amounts to?
- OB: Why should I risk my son's life, or why should I ask my son to risk his life for this country if I didn't, you know, think it was as great as it was, which, like I said, is – is a lot more than what this country thinks of some of its citizens sometimes.
- JS: Was – was there ever any correspondence between your parents and any of the relatives?
- OB: Uh, not during – not during (inaudible) over in Germany
- JS: Over in Germany, right.
- OB: No, not during the war. None whatsoever. They wouldn't dare – they wouldn't dare write a letter. Like I said, uh, this boy got put in a Japanese Relocation Center, and he sent me a postcard, and my parents wouldn't even dare let me answer him because they had this fear. They were so afraid that if I answered him, well, you know, they'd think something was going on or something, and they'd be coming around again, saying, "You can't do this, or you can't do that." So, uh, there was never any that I know of. Uh, I think after the war though, uh, my parents would send them care packages and things like this, you know, because they needed it.
- JS: Well, were there any – you said before you had relatives in Chicago – were they ever confronted with the same situation as your parents had?
- OB: I don't know that, I have no knowledge of that whatsoever. Uh, uh, I never heard anything about that, uh, if there was I wouldn't know, you know. And, uh, it's just – it's funny though, I mean, you know, after the war and, uh – it was my last year of high school – all these Japanese – well not a lot of them – but there was about six or seven that I knew, they started coming back into classrooms. And I wouldn't even recognize most of 'em, you

know. And this one boy that I—I'd—been going around with quite a bit when I was in grammar school—oh, about four or five years—uh, he came up to me and said, "Don't you recognize me." And I said, "No, I don't even know you." And he says, "Well, I'm Yuneo," and I says, "Yuneo?!" and I look at him, and I says, "Oh, yeah, I remember you now." You know—and that hurt him so bad that I just lost a friend—of course, that was my own fault, I guess, uh, listening to all that propaganda about how mean Japanese are and all this. And, uh, I guess, I'd just forgotten all about him. And, uh, I lost a friend. He wouldn't talk to me after that. Uh, I used to see him at school, say, "Hi!" And he just walked the other way or, you know, wouldn't even bother. So, all I figured, well, darn, I mean, if I've hurt the guy there's no use trying to, you know, heal the wound.

JS: What—what was the name of the High School?

OB: Uh, Belmont High School.¹⁸ Uh, I graduated there forty-seven and they started coming back about, uh—oh, I don't know—graduating, they started coming back about the last (pauses) three months before graduation or something like that. And, I guess, when they were in the relocation centers they went to school also and that just carried right on over. So, when they got back in civilian life and they went to high schools they could graduate right out with the rest of the class.

[00:20:31]

JS: What did, uh—what did your father think about whenever the Japanese were taken out. I mean, early—during the early part of the war—was he fearful that the same thing might happen to them?

OB: Oh, yeah, I mean, I can't exactly—I can't tell you what he felt about the Japanese be—being interned but, uh, my mother and father were very fearful of the same thing happening to us—if we weren't careful. In other words, uh, you better watch what you say, you better be off the street by nine o'clock, and, uh, don't get in any trouble with the law and all this, you know. And, uh—but like it all comes back to the point again—is, uh, he's an American citizen, both your kids are born in this country, and, uh, this is where the whole rub is, you know. How can you take, uh, cameras away from a man who is an American citizen? How can they prove that the cameras were my dad's or they belonged to the kids? They just said, "Well, the cameras are your mother's, she's an alien. Take them away." Well, I don't see how you could do this.

JS: How many cameras did—

OB: Really.

JS: —they take?

¹⁸ Educational institution (1575 West 2nd Street, Los Angeles, California); established 1923.

OB: Well, they took about four. I mean, there's so—they were cheap cameras, you know. One was a Brownie¹⁹ and, uh, one was, uh—it was nothing elaborate, it was a good camera at that time. I still have it. And then there were two others at that time, I can't remember what kind they were, but, I mean, the total cost of all the cameras couldn't have been more than forty dollars for four cameras, you know. I mean, there wasn't any of these high-powered lenses on them or any of that kind of stuff, you know. So, uh, I mean that's—that's the whole thing that really—really gets to me is, like I have said, I'm repeating myself, but, uh, it's really what—what burdens in me the most is, uh, a person's a citizen and, uh, they go along and do this, just because one person's an alien. And, uh, I mean, you know, why couldn't they trust—take my dad's word or something like that that, uh, he would be responsible for my mother? It makes you feel like, uh, we are all a bunch of foreigners. I'm born and raised in this country, my sister's born and raised in this country, but they come along and do this, and you—you just feel like, well, uh, I just come from an outer planet, and I'm, you know, I'm amongst the strangest people I ever knew in my life. I don't belong. But then, again, like I said, when it comes time, you know, uh, go to the draft, pick up your rifle, and go fight, uh, there's no questions asked, or nothing like that, you know? And, uh, I doubt it if they would have stopped me from going into the army if my mother was still a non-citizen, because they'd figure I was a risk or something like that because my mother was still an alien. I mean, uh, this always enters my mind, too, sometimes, you know, but, uh, they'll take you that way, too, so—but, uh, what can you do, you know, it's, uh, ten thousand dollars or ten years in jail—a draft dodger, so—

JS: Uh, did you ever get to—get all the cameras back that they took?

OB: Uh, yeah, we got all the cameras back. I don't know how long after the war. It might have been a year after the war, a year and a half. And we had to go down and get them, uh, somewhere down in—down in L.A., must have been one of their warehouses, something like that. (voices/background) We had to go back and get them. But, uh, five years we didn't have the cameras, and we forgot all about the darn things, you know, so—uh, and I don't remember if we, uh, went out and bought some more anyway. (both laugh) Just to break the law, see.

JS: Well, did the FBI make regular checks on the house then?

OB: Uh, yeah, I don't know whether—uh, I think they came once every six months, and they made regular checks on the house. And, uh, that's, uh, you know—it's just, uh, something I'll never quite get over. Of course, like I said, too, I mean—it's a lot of people, you know, have it a lot worse. And like the Japanese, uh, they all got moved out and, uh, it's, uh—I don't

¹⁹ Camera manufactured by Eastman Kodak; first released 1900; multiple successor models.

know – it's one of the things you have to live with. I know this is going to sound very hypocritical, John, but, uh, even in spite of all this, uh – like I told you before, too, uh – my dad's been around in Europe, he's been in Sweden and France and Germany. And, uh, even as young as I was at that time, he told me, he says, uh, "You know, there is going to be a lot of" – I'm going to go through life. There's going to be a lot of things that are gonna be – seem very unjust to me and very cruel. "And, uh, sometimes you won't understand these things, and, uh, sometimes it's just going to seem just – just terrible – terrible – terrible – to you." "But," he says, "don't forget one thing," he says, "This, for the working man – for the common working man," he says, "this is still the greatest country on Earth." "And," he says, "it's worth fighting for." "And," he says, "it's worth fighting for with every ounce of blood a man has in him." And, uh, he says, "that doesn't mean that this country is perfect." He says, "There's a lot of things," he says, "that need to be straightened out and ironed out," as we are finding out today, I mean, a lot of injustices, inequalities, and things like this. "But," he says, "that's what makes this country so great – is that it can be done in this country, because in some other countries, uh, you try to do something, you'd be put up against a wall and shot, and that would be the end of it." But he said that's one of the reasons that this country is so great, that you can do something about it. So, uh, that's the same way my mother feels about it, too. Uh, because you have to realize that, uh, they came from Europe, and, uh, they came from some very, uh, poor families. I mean, some of the things my mother tells me I just can't believe. Because, uh, you know, I've always had life very good. I've never had to starve. I've never had to wear rags, I've never had to go barefoot, uh, I've never had to sleep out in the street as far as that goes, you know. Their parents were good, and they worked hard, and they always took good care of their offspring. And, uh, so, to them – to leave a foreign country and from a very poor family situation, you know, and come over here and start on their own, which thousands and millions of people have done, which to me seems like it takes a lot of guts. 'Cause I know for me – if I had to go down to Mexico and start all over, or go to Australia, I don't know, you know. Uh, I guess maybe at that time, when they come over, I'd feel just like they were, too, you know, scared, what's gonna happen, where am I gonna end up, what kind of job am I gonna be doing. But they didn't, uh, it's like the pioneer in a sense, you know, and, uh, they'd come over and start on their own, uh, they'd start working hard, save their money, and even though they lost everything in the '29 crash,²⁰ you know, they still kept working. Start all over again 'cause that's all you can do, you know, either that or you sink to the bottom –

JS: Right.

²⁰ Wall Street Crash of 1929 (September 4–November 13); launched the Great Depression.

OB: –So, they started all over again and, uh, they made it again, you know. But it takes a lot of hard work. So, uh, you know, uh, they had things at dinner that they never had in the old country. And, like my mother said, uh, you know, all they ever had when they were kids for clothes was gun sacks,²¹ no shoes ever, slept on the floor, and, uh, same with my dad. So, they come to America and, uh, I mean, you know, these things are here. And, uh, it seems like a miracle to them really, so, uh—and that’s why they’re proud of this country and, uh, stuff. But, uh, like I said, there’s just certain things that—sometimes you just can’t see how you can ever forgive them. But, uh, when you sit down and think about it and, uh, you know, uh, keep cool and (clears throat) rationalize things out, you get to—uh, you get to the point where you can—you can forgive them, you know. And another thing, uh, I attribute to the greatness of this country, uh, is something to this day, which amazes me. It’s like I told you before, too, is how they, uh, could ever get a Japanese army²² together of young Japanese Americans to go and fight. Uh, to me that again shows the greatness of this country, even though some of our leaders, uh, don’t think that some of their citizens are that great. And, uh, that’s another sign sh—you know, that just shows to me, uh, how great the people think this country is, even though they are being persecuted to a certain degree, you know. So, uh—

JS: Did you or your sister have any trouble at school with anybody making remarks of such or anything?

[00:30:30]

OB: Well, yeah, uh, you know, you’d get those remarks, “You dirty Nazi pig,” or “You filthy German pig,” or “You’re a German dog,” or something like this. But, uh, it’s just one of those things you lived with. Uh, and, uh, you know, sometimes you’d come home crying and stuff, but, uh, your parents are always there to put an arm around you and say, “Well, you just have to sort of let those things go in one ear and out the other. These are young kids, and they don’t understand.” And they said their parents probably don’t understand either, uh, so you sort of have to forgive them in a way, too, you know, because, uh, after all, what are wars? Wars are of political making mostly, you know, as far as I’m concerned. Maybe someone else doesn’t feel that way. And, uh, what are you gonna do when the, uh—so—the people in power say, “Well, the kids have got to go to war.” Uh, individual families are scared, so what are you gonna do? You have to send your kids to war—you got no choice. Uh, who wants to spend ten years in jail or ten thousand dollars fine for, you know, not doing it? And then again, too, I mean, the

²¹ Gunny sack; large bag made of coarse material.

²² The 442nd Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army/World War II regiment; active 1944-1946; comprised of second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei).

thing is, uh, this country is worth fighting for, so—the majority of the people feel that way—so they'd go—go anyway, you know. Uh, the thing is that hurts so much is the little wars like Korea, the one we are having in South Vietnam²³ now, uh. But, uh, it's like my dad said, "Darn it, if you're not gonna fight for what you want, uh, well you're not gonna keep it." And I think that's what is wrong with America today, uh, like Cuba.²⁴ Cuba is a prime example. We didn't fight—we didn't fight for it. And, uh, you're going to have many more Cubas, uh, and we are just gonna be right in the corner. And, uh, I feel that there's too much intellectualism and not enough uh—uh, telling these people where—where—I'm—I'm the father, and if you get out of line I'm going to spank you 'cause that's the only way you are gonna keep your family in line. And I figured Cuba, the Monroe Doctrine,²⁵ all this ties in, and I think we let down on that very much. And, uh, if you don't wanna, uh, if you don't wanna fight, uh, for what you do people—people have always had to fight and die for this country and they always will, as long as this country exists—if you wanna keep it. So, uh, that's the way my dad felt, uh, even in those times, you know, uh, when the FBI's coming around their house and stuff. Uh, if you want your freedom and you want things to keep the way they are, you just have to go and sock them in the nose, and if they get up again, sock them again, otherwise, uh, we ain't gonna have it. But, uh, all in all, I mean, as a result of, uh, you know, during the Second War, uh, my parents were very proud to be in this country and live here.

JS: Did your parents lose any, uh, relatives in Germany during the war?

OB: Uh, I don't know. Uh, I can't really say that—they must have. I think my mother, uh, lost some brothers in the Russian war.²⁶ One—you know, on the Russian front there. And she might have lost some more on the other side,²⁷ but, uh, my father—I—I can't really say, uh, 'cause they never really talked too much, you know, about the relations over there. So, uh, I can't really say. (pauses)

JS: Well, all the time that the FBI came around—approximately every six months—did they ever stipulate anything, one thing, they were looking for or say anything, or just come in?

OB: No, they never actually said what they were looking for. You'd just—would have to assume, you know, because that's what they looked at. I mean they

²³ Conflict in Vietnam (1955-1975).

²⁴ Probable reference to the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962).

²⁵ 1823 policy assertion by James Monroe (1758-1831), U.S. President (1817-1825), that the U.S. would view any European expansionism in the Americas as "unfriendly" toward the U.S.

²⁶ Eastern front of World War II (1941-1945).

²⁷ Western front of World War II (1939-1945).

- looked at – they went through the radios and, uh, you know, they just went underneath the house and into the attic, the closets, and stuff. So, I think, uh, mainly they were just looking for high-power radio equipment and stuff like that in that line, but that was about it. So, uh, you know, (pauses) like all things they'd come – they'd pass over – and you'd more or less forget about it, but there are certain scars that you – you just don't forget about, you know, no matter how long you live.
- JS: Well, at this time you mentioned before you had Japanese friends. Did they ever talk to you at all about – before they were interned – about the war?
- OB: Uh, no, uh, they never, never said anything about the war. The only thing is, uh, like when I told you, this is many years – well not many years – but about four years before the war, uh, 1937, '38, I was going to grammar school, and it was a mixed school – Japanese, Chinese, you know – you know, Mexicans, Negroes, and what don't you have it. And, I mean, you just had to watch what you said. When one of your Chinese friends come up and asks you how the Japanese-Chinese War²⁸ was going, (laughter/background) you know, naturally – oh, sure, if the Japanese boy come up to you, well, you just had to be diplomatic about it or you might get punched in the nose, you know. (JS laughs) Or somebody'd be waiting for you after school and, uh, so, you just had to watch what you said. That was about it.
- JS: Well, the – the neighbors around where you lived, did they ever, uh, say anything to you about it or –
- OB: No. We had very good neighbors. Like I said, well, when we told our neighbors, most of them, you know, well, they were very shocked about it, and one lady even said, "Good thing it wasn't my husband," she says, "because he would have gotten a shotgun." (both laugh) Good thing nobody went after him. But what can you do, you know, so, you just live with it – you live with it. Like I said, though, we were lucky because, you know, we still got to stay at our home and my dad got to keep his job. Whilst the Japanese people – they all got moved out, and I would imagine a lot of them had to give up their businesses and their property and things like this. And even at that time, uh – I don't know what the law was but – uh, I don't know if it's changed or not, but I think the Japanese or Orientals couldn't have any kind of citizenship whatsoever.²⁹ And I don't know about the offspring now, if the offspring of the Japanese children were born in this country – uh, I don't remember my civics this good, but I think that they,

²⁸ Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).

²⁹ OB's impression here is probably based on a series of U.S. laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1917 (a.k.a. "Literacy Act" or "Asiatic Barred Zone Act," which did, however, not exclude immigrants from Japan or the Philippines), and especially the Immigration Act of 1924 (which did exclude all immigrants from Asia, including Japan, but not the Philippines).

uh, can have their citizenship.³⁰ Now, that I can't say, but at that time I knew that—that—that an Oriental—I don't even think at that time they could even apply to obtain even citizenship papers in this country. And, uh, (pauses) so, uh, I guess that's why most of them, you know, got interned. And then they say, well, they found all kinds of things down in San Pedro at the time, which was close to the shipping industry, you know, and stuff like that.³¹ (pauses) But, uh, then, again, I think, uh, if, uh, the investigating powers were on the ball, uh, then they wouldn't have to worry about these things at all. I mean, they could have suppressed it before it even got started and, uh, not have had to move all these people out. Of course, then, again, maybe there's a reason for, uh, moving the Japanese people out. Maybe because, uh, they were easy to identify and, uh, probably there would have been a lot of race riots and stuff like this also. Which, in a way, uh, might have been a good thing. Uh, this is another thing that's hard to, uh, say, you know, because, uh, there might have, you know, been—may have been a lot of racial trouble at that time. Maybe, you know, whites getting mad and going into Japanese neighborhoods and starting trouble, or even the Japanese kids that would go to school and, uh, other kids would start—starting on them or something, you know. I mean, but, uh, Japanese boys are tough, and they take care of themselves and all that. But, uh, maybe it avoided a lot of, uh, bloodshed and killing, too, you know what, 'cause in a way, you know, they were easier to identify than me. I mean, I can walk out amongst the white people and, uh, unless someone didn't know me they—they would have to guess pretty hard whether I was German, Italian, Jewish, or French or what I was, you know. Uh, as where with the Japanese people, you know, they can be identified. Uh, so maybe it was a good thing, uh, who's to say? Uh, the way I felt at the time, I felt, it was a bitter thing because, uh, it's just like ripping a living tree with its roots right out of the ground and throwing it to the side, you know, to more or less die. And I thought this is very cruel and, uh, a very harsh thing to do.

JS: Did you ever have any confrontations with the teachers in school? At all?

[00:40:04]

OB: No. No. Uh, none whatsoever. Uh, we never—well, of course—I never mentioned anything, you know, because then, again, there was the fear, and

³⁰ Pursuant to the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) as interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898), 169 U.S. 649, citizenship is acquired by virtue of birth in the U.S. or a U.S. territory, or if one or both parents are (or were) U.S. citizens.

³¹ Terminal Island (San Pedro, California); before World War II inhabited by ca. 3,500 first- and second-generation Japanese Americans; its inhabitants were interned in 1942 and the neighborhood was destroyed; one of the absurd rumors was that San Pedro was a Japanese spy colony.

if you said anything or you started pot-boiling³² or something, you know, you're just gonna get put away somewhere. So, you didn't say anything to the teachers or anybody, you know, about anything. Of course, there's pro – pro – probably – some people, like there always is, saying, "Oh, it's a good thing," you know. "Bravo, the FBI's on the ball, and they should be doing this to Germans or Japanese or what have you," you know. 'Cause there's always those kinds of people that, uh, I guess – to me – that don't understand, you know. So, uh, in school, I mean, you never mentioned it, uh, or said anything about it, uh – it was always something you kept inside of ya and, uh, you never said to anybody.

JS: Did you or your father or any member of your family ever have any trouble with curfew – that they imposed?

OB: No, not really. Uh, I mean, uh, who'd be around to enforce it? Uh, of course the only thing is that, I guess, this was a lack of discipline or maybe they didn't – just didn't care. They just said it to scare you, but I think if they enforced it they could have called you up every night at nine o'clock or send somebody around, you know, or maybe send somebody around once a week. But, uh, I don't know. I guess my sister told me, one time she – they were walking down the street and she was worried or started crying that the officer was going to put them in jail because it was close to curfew, and they were still walking out in the street and things. But, uh, you know, I mean, regardless of whether they enforce a curfew or not, it's just to tell you something like that, uh, when you're supposed to be a free man in this country, uh, you know it (laughs) – it just gets you to the bone. Uh, it shakes you up because, uh, you're born in this country, your dad's a citizen, and all of a sudden, you know, someone's around telling you, well, "You can't go out after nine o'clock," because, you know – and, uh – but, uh, it's just the idea of saying it that hurts you more than anything, you know. And, uh – but they never, uh, checked on it that I know of, you know – made sure that you were in by nine o'clock or ten o'clock. I suppose though – while this is all supposition, uh – if I would have got picked up or gotten in trouble, you know, after nine o'clock and got hauled in a juvenile hall³³ or something like that there might have been some trouble about it. But, um, like I said, you were very careful of what you did and what you said. So – and there was, uh, no trouble in the end.

JS: During this time, you've mentioned before, your mother was sick. Uh, how did she feel though? I mean, although she wasn't a citizen, uh, besides, you know – you've talked a lot how your father felt. Did your mother ever express anything how she felt?

³² Keep something going.

³³ Detention facility/prison for underage delinquents.

OB: Uh, no. Uh, uh, I can't—I can't say that either my father or my mother really—really expressed to me as to how they really felt about it. Uh, I mean I could see them crying, I—I could sense the fear, uh, and stuff like this. But, uh, they never really expressed how they really felt. Uh, some things what—uh, the thing that oppressed me the most or what I felt the most was, uh, all this propaganda—it must have been the same with the Japanese people, that Japanese people are bad, and they are like mad dogs, and Germans are mad dogs, and all this, you know. And this hurt them very much because they felt that Germans were good people, and they loved children, and they loved the outdoors and flowers, and they didn't enjoy going around and killing people, uh, like the papers and all these propaganda items would make out to be, you know, like, uh, all the German people are monsters and, uh, all this stuff, uh, this—this hurt them very, very much, this—this was the only—this was one of the main things that I was impressed with that, whenever somebody would say that, uh, you know, German people are mad or crazy or they're mean, uh, they kill little kids for the joy of it and stuff like this, uh, uh, that—that really made them, uh—that really hurt. And, uh, I guess it brought up a little anger within them, you know, 'cause this really shook them up, and I would imagine, uh, that it did also with the Japanese people because, uh, I mean, let's face it, regardless of what you are or what you look like, uh, the masses of people are about the same! They wanna love, get married, raise kids, and, uh, yeah, you know, have a good place to live and, uh, not—have good meals, and that's it. They don't want to go around looking for trouble or looking for wars and things like this. But, uh, like I said, that's, uh—to me, I could feel that the most. That's what really got to me, you know. But I guess when you're at war with somebody, uh, all this propaganda helps. I don't know. But, uh, I thank God my parents always raised me to tell the truth and, uh, it's always paid off. 'cause I found out, uh, even if you get in trouble, I mean, I've never been in any real serious trouble or anything, but even with little, minor things, uh, and not—not only my father, uh, but I've heard my neighbor's father tell this to his son, too, he says, "Son," he says, "as long as you tell the truth," he says, "I'll help you with everything I have but," he said, "if you lie to me," he says, "so help you, you're going to get everything that's coming to you." And, uh, that's the way I was raised, and that's the way my neighbor, you know, boys were raised. So, uh, I don't know, I think the truth is always the best policy and I think, uh, the news media and some of these, uh, uh, communication agencies, I think the government ought to step on their toes a little more for—the exaggerations that, uh, they're allowed to print and things like this, I mean. Even today, I mean, uh, you know, if you have to sell newspapers—sensationalism, you know, regardless of how—how, uh, emotionally you can stir the people and build this fear into them through, uh, papers or headlines, you know, and

- things like this. Uh, like today, every time, uh, something happens: “Oh, we’re close to war with Russia,” and all this, and “You don’t know how close we came to war with Russia,” and all this, and people get just, you know – it just stirs a terrible fear with people and gets them scared and, uh, uh – I don’t think it’s a very good thing to do.
- JS: Did your father ever have any trouble working for the, uh, Los Angeles Athletic Club?
- OB: Well, uh, I can’t say that either because I didn’t work, you know, with him there at that time. And, uh, I don’t, uh, I don’t really know, because, uh, he never said anything, and there was nothing, uh, you know, ever said. So, uh, I don’t really know.
- JS: As the war went on in Germany and towards the end, whenever the United States soldiers found, you know, the concentration camps and the brutality within them, uh, did it make things any – did it make things worse for you, for your mother and father? I mean, as far as they felt and you yourself?
- OB: Uh, no – uh, no – it didn’t have any – uh, this was five years later and, uh, all these things had cooled down a bit, and I think people were too busy and preoccupied with the end of the war, getting back to normal and seeing things like this and, uh, at that time, uh, it didn’t really make, uh, any difference one way or the other as far as our – our family lives were concerned at all. Uh, there was just more news and, uh, was terrible things to read about – shocking – and, uh, that was about it. (pauses)
- JS: How did your family feel whenever the war was over though?
- OB: Well, uh, they were very happy and very grateful like anybody else. And, uh, they were probably thankful to God that, uh, it was over, and they were probably as prayerful and hopeful as the masses of other people that there wouldn’t be any more wars. You know, this was supposed to be “the war to end all wars”³⁴ and, uh, I think they – they were very much in that line of attitude at that time to, uh, you know, get back to normalcy and, uh, let’s set something up so there’ll be no more wars, so you won’t have to send your boys out to be killed, you know, and things like that – that was about the feeling at that time.
- [00:50:16]
- JS: Uh, at the beginning you mentioned that your, uh, parents sent something like care packages over to Germany after the war was over. How did they find out if any – or if they had any relatives were alive yet?
- OB: Well, uh –
- JS: Yeah
- OB: – that I can’t tell (JS coughs) – I really don’t know, uh, maybe they kept my dad’s address, and after the war they started writing or, uh, I don’t know if

³⁴ An epithet for World War I (not World War II).

they got in contact with my sister, um – not my sister but my father’s sister, you know. And, uh, uh, I really – that I really don’t know – uh, how they got, whether they got, uh, the letters – whether my dad’s sister got the letters from home, or if my dad got them from home. Uh, I really don’t know.

JS: Did your mother ever become a citizen?

OB: Oh, yeah, she got her, uh, her citizenship, uh, right after the war she had to go, uh, down to, uh, night school and, uh: Shoot, I forget what the name of the school was; it was down on Temple and Hill Street, right where Bunker Hill is.³⁵ Uh, we used to have a name for that school because that’s where they sent all the bad guys, you know. The guys who were smoking in school, (both laugh) stuff like this and, uh, I forgot the name of it. But, uh, she had to go down there, I think, three times a week – I don’t know how long – you know, study civics, and in five years she got her citizenship paper, and she’s very happy about it. But, uh, I think it was easier, it was easier then to get her citizenship paper than it was before the war when she was in Wisconsin because, I think, you had to get first papers, second papers, and third papers, you know.³⁶

JS: Well, did she try back in Wisconsin?

OB: Oh, yeah! She had her, uh, she had her second papers even when we were out here but, uh, she had, uh – she had to get her third paper or something like this, and she couldn’t make it because she was sick, you know. She couldn’t go so she, uh – she never quite got it but, uh, she was halfway there even before we, you know – before the war started. But, uh, she got sick and then they had to cancel it out so, uh, she didn’t get them at that time. So, after the war, uh, she went down and got them. Well, that was – that was one of the main, uh, reasons that, uh, she went after it so, uh, vigorously, because, uh, she didn’t want, you know, this thing to happen again. See, now, I mean, I’m not saying that, uh, you know, I’m not saying she would never have done it, because she did – she did try to get it before it happened and, uh, she probably would have gotten it afterwards, too. I mean, maybe not – she wouldn’t have went after it as fast as she did. But I think eventually she would have had her citizenship papers, but I think this – this, uh, well, this event that occurred to us, uh, so, right after the

³⁵ Intersection (downtown, Los Angeles, California). The north corner of this intersection was heavily developed in the 1990s to make room for the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. The other corners feature L.A. County administration and records buildings (e.g., L.A. County Probation Office).

³⁶ The naturalization process for immigrants to become citizens takes several years and usually requires a minimum five-year residency. Historically, the “first papers” were the “declaration of intention,” filed after two years of residency (in use until 1952); the “second papers” or “petition for naturalization” were filed after another three years of residency; and the “third papers” are the “certificate of citizenship.”

war – soon as she could – she went and got it right away so there would be no repeat – or we, how would you say it? I guess, like an insurance policy. What you would say that – so this wouldn't happen again, see. But who's to say? I mean, what can you do? Uh, you can't go out and hire a lawyer. Who's got the money to fight the courts? They say, well, "You've got public defenders," and all this, but who's got the time? You gotta work, you gotta support a family, you can't take this time off and fight it through the courts. You gotta pay bills and things like this. I mean, uh, maybe the rich man, uh, he can do it, you know, or the poor man's got nothing to lose anyway – maybe he can afford the time to fight these things but, uh, a working man, he just – he just can't do it, no matter which way you look at it as far as I'm concerned. But, uh, that's, uh – that's one of the things she did right after and, uh, she got it right after the war ended, uh, so that was that. (helicopter noise/background)

JS: How did you feel when – right before you were drafted, before you went to Korea – about serving in the United States Army, after all these events that had just taken place a few years before then?

OB: Well, uh, (pauses) I can't really say that that had any effect on it. I mean, I felt the same as anybody else, uh, being drafted at that time. "Uh, why me?" You know, that's the way I felt, uh, because, uh, by that time all this is behind me, John. I mean, there still, uh, you know – uh, I don't know, there's still a bitterness inside of me about it a – and stuff like that. But, uh, by that time it – it had more or less went way back into my mind and I – I just felt like anybody else. Uh, sometimes now – at that time, you know, you feel lower than, uh – than low. You say "Why me?" "Why me?" Uh, Joe Blow's³⁷ running around here having a good old time. And, uh, "Why did I get called?" "And why me?" You know? And, uh, here I was in college. I was still just starting to find myself, you know, and starting to make good grades and had finally found an objective to go for, you know, and then I got drafted. Well, uh, like I said, at that time, you're just feeling terrible. "Why me?" Well, why didn't I join the Air Force for four years ago (both laugh) or the Navy? You know. At least I'd have a dry bed and good chow and stuff, you know, wouldn't be so close to the flying bullets most of the time anyway, you know. But, uh, by that time it, uh, you know, it's, uh – it's more or less, uh, passed over. 'Course now, uh, it's been, what, fifteen years since that – Korea for me and, uh, I think maybe it's a good thing I did get drafted, you know, uh, because, uh, well, by the time I was drafted, well, my two years, uh – (coughs) excuse me (coughs again) – a lot of things had happened. And, uh, like my father died and, uh, so when I come back I had to go to work. My mother was sick, my sister was still in high school, uh, I tried to get out and, you know, on hardship discharge,

³⁷ An average or ordinary person.

- twice, was turned down. So, when I got out I didn't wanna go back in the kitchen, so I just decided I'd get a job and go to work, see how far I could get. And I've done pretty good. So, maybe it was a good thing. I might have just wasted my time, you know, trying to get through college. 'Cause, like I said, too, if you want to go to college you have to have a good burning desire, and if you don't have this desire, don't go. Go, get a job and work until you find something that's giving you a burning desire to, you know, be something or be this or be that. Then you're gonna make it. But if you're just going to college to more or less try to find yourself, it's pretty rough.
- JS: Did your father ever mention, after the war was over, any of the events that took place? I mean, how he felt, you know, like a father-son talk or something like that?
- OB: Uh, no. Uh, we never had anything s—like that come up. Uh, the only thing is that, uh, he was just as glad as anybody else that it was all over with, you know, and that was it. But, uh, there was no discussions—serious discussions about the aftermath of it or after it was all over. (pauses)
- JS: Did your, uh, mother, uh—could you—when did she get her citizenship papers? Do you remember?
- OB: Um, (sighs) well, I don't know—must have been around—the war was over, what, forty-five? She might have got them in forty-six or forty-seven, somewhere around there, you know, but I—I don't know exactly when. (pauses)
- JS: Well, I want to thank you very much for your time—
- OB: Okay.
- JS: —and, uh, I think that'll about do it for right now.
- OB: Well, I hope that, uh, I hope it helps you a little bit in some way. (laughs)
- JS: I think it will.
- OB: You get something out of it, uh, so that's—that's about all I can say, John, you know, I, uh, but it's like I said, uh, just one last thing, that's—I feel the same way my dad does, uh, that, uh, to me, any part of the United States is home. And I think, um, most people don't realize that until you get drafted, you get sent overseas, you spend two, four, five years overseas, and, uh, you come back for that first time, and I think there is very few soldiers that when they come back don't have a lump or a tear in their eye because they're home—United States—you know. And, uh, when I came through the Golden Gate Bridge there, uh, coming home, uh, I was crying, and I said, "Boy, I'm home at last. Never thought I'd see it again," you know. And, uh, it's—it's like, uh, many guys say, "It's so good to be home again," you know, and it—it sure is. Uh, it's, uh, it's a great country, and it's worth fighting for, uh, regardless of, you know, what, uh, you may have to suffer or go through at times, but, uh, I think if you take anything or everything in the—in a proper spirit or something, uh—uh, you can—you can make it, you know. So, uh, that's about it.

[01:01:10]

JS: Okay, thank you very much.

OB: Uh huh.

[01:01:13]

END OF INTERVIEW