

ORAL HISTORY 01-75-05 PT. 1

Henry David McCary

Henry McCary was born on July 21, 1891. He was the son of a northern Alabama sharecropper farmer. On December 20, 1907 he enlisted in the United States Army at Anderson, Alabama. He received his boot training in Missouri. In January of 1908 he was shipped west and assigned to Company G of the 22nd Infantry in Monterey, California. In the month of June 1908 his infantry proceeded north to the Territory of Alaska. They relieved the 12th Infantry who were guarding the boarder of the territory. Company G and Company M were under the command of Captain Henry A. Hannigan. They were assigned to Fort Egbert. They arrived in Skagway in a troop transport and they were transported by the railroad to Whitehorse. They proceeded down the Yukon River to Dawson by steamer. At Dawson they continued down to Eagle. The post had been completed. There were two-story barracks, a headquarters, and officer's quarters. There was a guardhouse with a watch tower. The guard consisted of mostly keeping a sharp lookout for fires in the buildings. As the winter of 1909 approached two officers arrived on the last boat of the season from Dawson. One of the officers was named Racey Hill and the other one was Leslie L. Bahr or Bher. They were recent graduates of West Point. The officers were carefully selected to conduct activities in the gymnasium which was in back of the barracks. They led the men in physical drills in the morning. They received their winter uniforms in September or October which included two pairs of fleece underwear, mackinaw double breasted coat, special stockings, felt shoes, moccasins, mittens and a fur cap. The two young officers would hitch up the dogsleds and go hunting. They brought in caribou to feed the men. They had caribou steaks with mashed potatoes and gravy.

He was located at Fort Egbert from 1908-1910. They had mostly total leisure. The post was completed. He had his sixteenth birthday there. He was the bugler in Company G. He sounded all calls including first call at six, assembly, mess call, reverie and bugle taps at eleven p.m. He was on guard duty every fourth night. He slept in the guardhouse in his uniform. He talked about bugle taps at the end of the day. The notes of the bugler would echo through the forest as many as five times. Their leisure time was spent in the gymnasium. They had a full basketball court. One of the big leisure time activities in the summer was to watch the boats come and go. The last boat of the season usually came from Dawson. There was a mad dash to get it unloaded. Private Wilson shot himself with his own rifle.

Their water supply came from Mission Creek which was a mile or so from the barracks. In the winter it was brought in by large tanks on sleds pulled by horses. There was a bunkhouse at Mission Creek with a few soldiers. There was a poker game that operated for two years. The only way to get a seat was to go out there and take someone's place. There was a cemetery on the way out to the creek. Private Barnes was a man that joked but he was able to get back at his tormentors. Someone set up a ghost to scare him. He took the sheets and figured out who set up the ghosts by the numbers on the sheets. After one winter storm Private Barnes streaked through camp and dove into a snow bank.

Back in those days the American soldier was different. Any one could get into the Army. An ex-convict could enlist in the Army. Most of the enlisted personnel of the 22nd Infantry consisted of mostly professional soldiers. They had a good name for themselves and were considered an elite group. They performed a drill timed to music. After Fort Egbert the Infantry went to Texas. They did not tolerate any sexual deviates. It came to pass that Private Adams made passes at some of the men. He was taken out to Mission Creek where it junctioned with the Yukon River and murdered. Many rumors were started. No investigation was ever made of this.

School was held in the second floor of the headquarters building every Friday night. Every man who did not have a high school education was required to attend. The school was conducted by the lieutenants.

Mail delivery came down from Dawson once a week. In the winter it was brought by horse and sled. No matter what time of the day or night the bugler was required to signal mail call. They didn't receive furloughs but simply served their three years. If a death occurred in someone's family then the soldier was given leave of absence.

While they were at Ft. Egbert they witnessed a Malamute dog swim the Yukon. He swam from the far side over to the village. In the late winter of 1909 there was a spectacular display of northern lights. They looked like they were coming down to Earth. The entire group came out together to look at the lights. Everyone mixed as if there were no ranks. The colors danced on the snow. Henry Hannigan said it might be because of Halley's Comet. They did see the comet for three days in a row.

The regiment left Alaska in 1910. They returned to Fort Sam Houston, Texas where he was going to be discharged. His commanding officer wanted him to re-enlist. He served three more years as a sergeant. In 1914 he was discharged and began to work in a studio in Hollywood. The war in Europe broke out and the government sent out a call for officer's training camp. He graduated as a First Lt. and was assigned to the 63rd Infantry. He was made athletic officer of the Infantry. After the war he returned to Hollywood. He was a good gymnast and decided to become a physical ed teacher. He was an athletic director at an athletic club in Hollywood. His career was created back at Ft. Egbert when he worked out at the gymnasium. After the war he read an article by Henry Hannigan. He was in command of the National Guard in California. Henry McCary talked about his visit with Hannigan. He talked about Lindberg's achievement. Lt. Hill became a major and Henry ran into him during the war.

The only time they were exposed to the elements at Ft. Egbert was when they had target practice. There was a fire there for warming. He described the target range and how they practiced. In order to fire the rifles they had to fire without their mittens. They would race back to the fire to warm up. They were taken in details so they did not have to stand around to wait around. As soon as they finished their practice they could return to their quarters.