

2015-07-08 SIDE A

Hayward L. Oubre, Jr.

March 22, 1992

Phone interview

Lael Morgan, interviewer

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

The interview opens up with Lael Morgan and Hayward Oubre talking about publications.

Hayward Oubre introduces himself. He was brought up in New Orleans, Louisiana. He went into Strait College which merged with New Orleans University. He entered college in 1935. He was the first major in art. He had always wanted to be an artist. His father was a mail clerk in the post office. He went to study with Hale Woodruff at Atlanta University. He worked in etchings. After he was discharged he went to the University of Iowa. He was sent there by one of his professors. He had a diversified major in drama, too. He met Dr. Carver at Tuskegee Institute.

He transferred his draft notice from New Orleans to Tuskegee. He was drafted in the army when he was at Tuskegee in July. He had to travel back to New Orleans. They went to Camp Shelby in Mississippi. He was interviewed by a white officer. He was sent to Camp Belvoir in Virginia to be trained in engineering. They wanted him to be a drill sergeant, but he wanted to stay with his group. He went into the 97th Engineers Battalion which later became a regiment. Before they went to Alaska they went Florida. They were segregated. While they were there he guarded a plane. They sent them to the state of Washington and boarded a ship for Valdez. The sea was rough and many soldiers were seasick including him. It took them several days to get to Valdez. He talked about hearing about Pearl Harbor. They left on April 22 and arrived on April 29. He said it was beautiful in Valdez. He was in the HNS Company. He was a draftsman, a structural designer in charge of operations and intelligence. He would file confidential papers that came from the Pentagon. They set up camp in Valdez. They had the whole 97th Regiment there. He talked about seeing lots of equipment coming off their ship including four coffins. He was upset that they had included coffins, but someone from their outfit did freeze to death. The 1942 winter in Alaska was the coldest on record. When they came to Valdez they started planning how they were going to deal with the road. They had him drawing proposals to start the road. They were sent to Slana to start the road. They started on a hill and tried cutting into the hill. Every time they cut the roadbed there would be a rock slide. They stayed there a long time. He came up with a motto for the regiment. They stayed six weeks there trying to get the road started. They strung the different companies along the road so many miles apart. They were in some rough terrain. When they finished their segment they moved. He talked about the long days in summer and short days in winter. He talked about spending Christmas in the camp. They talked again about the soldier who froze to death.

Before the weather was bad they moved their tents into an abandoned gold mine. They tried to have revelry, but the snow was too deep to stand in. When the snow was too deep to work in they went out and gathered wood for the camp. They had to have fires going all the time. He said the buildings they were in were comfortable. He said he didn't have to do a lot of physical work on the highway. He talked about seeing the aurora borealis. He was not bothered by the monotony of the camp. He has always managed to keep himself occupied. Then they moved in the canvas covered trucks they would get in their sleeping bags to keep from freezing. One morning they woke up and his tent mate was covered in frost. They wore leather shoes and some of the men got frostbite on their feet. They used to take thick socks and put them in galoshes and that kept them warm. When he was in Valdez one of the shop owners told them how well they conducted themselves. He thought he was a good example to the people around him.

Morgan asked him how they spent the following summer after they left the gold mine camp. Oubre talked about the mosquitoes. They saw grouse that didn't run from them. They had two cub bears in the camp. The soldiers would go out and shoot wildlife. They also got salmon by picking them up out of the stream. He talked about the kind of food they ate. They flew out of their camp for furlough and landed at Whitehorse. They got their mail from Bush pilots.