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Howard Rock

Lael Morgan, interviewer

Series: Lael Morgan Collection

Lael Morgan said Howard Rock left for White Mountain when he was fourteen years old and asked if that was something decided for him or did he want to go.

Howard Rock said he wasn't complaining. He was curious about what he might be doing. He heard it was a bigger school and there would be a lot of young people from other places. When he got there he was homesick. After he was acquainted with the other students it wasn't so bad. He enjoyed studying and other things. He was there for about seven years. He had to finish grade school when he went there. He was adept at machinery. He took care of tractors and repaired them. He used to take them apart and put them together. He stayed at White Mountain for several years without going home. He had thought about going home. He worked his way home on the North Star. He remembers being in Seattle and seeing a long line of people in a bread line. That was in 1929-1930. Morgan said that was when you studied with the artist. Rock said yes in Oregon with Max Siemes. He helped Rock get into the university along with one of his former teachers, Ruby L. Dingee. Rock said Mrs. Dingee is now living in Oregon.

Morgan asked Howard Rock what job he had after he got out of college. Rock said he was existing at the University of Washington. After the third year things got a little more expensive. He had to quit and look for a job. He found a job in a jewelry store in Seattle. He tried etching on ivory for the first time. He got twenty-five cents for each piece. At first he was slow and then he got used to it and was earning five dollars a day. He was earning about 8,000 dollars a year. He didn't like the work very much. He was getting homesick for Alaska. He would find someone from Alaska to visit with. He was thinking of making a living through art, but didn't think about coming back to live in Alaska. Later on he did return to Alaska. He was drafted into the Air Force for a year or so. He was 4F for a while and was later drafted. After being tested he was put into radio work. He was sent to Sioux Falls, South Dakota for training. He said it reminded him of Alaska and the people were very nice. After a while he was sent to Madison, Wisconsin. He graduated from radio school. He was chosen to be a high-speed code operator. He could handle twenty-five words a minute. He was transferred to Smyrna, Tennessee. He dated a girl in Sioux Falls who worked in a liquor store. He said drinking wasn't too important to him. When he was transferred to Wisconsin the girl got a job in Madison. While they were visiting a policeman showed up at their door. They were concerned about her being a camp follower. They were questioned separately and then let go. When he went to Nashville he had another girlfriend. She was a performer who was a dancer. He talked about eating southern fried chicken. Morgan asked if he noticed any problems with whites and blacks in the south. Rock said he saw a sign that had "for whites only" and said he never had any trouble. In Tennessee he had advanced radio training. He talked about how hot it was in the summer. After Ft. Lewis he was sent to an Air Force camp named Clearwater near St. Petersburg. The temperature change was abrupt. After Smyrna they were ready to be shipped overseas. He was shipped to North Africa. Many of the men got sick on the boat. The food wasn't very good and they didn't have fresh food. One evening one of the guys auctioned off an apple. They were in a convoy with eighty ships. They started in Norfolk, Virginia and zig-zagged for twelve days. They noticed oil slicks and debris floating on the ocean. They found out that the convoy before theirs had about seven ships sunk. The

convoy behind them had about five boats sunk by German U-boats. His convoy was never touched. There were American destroyers on the outside of the convoy. They had a well-known passenger on their ship, Mickey Rooney. Rock said Rooney was entertaining. On the way over a big bunch of the ships veered off to England. They stopped briefly at Gibraltar. They went over to Algeria and landed there. They were taken to their barracks and did drilling. They were to go to Tunis. They were waiting for about a month. They flew to Algiers. When they landed in Algeria there was a small Arab boy with newspapers. He was saying Stars and Stripes and swearing. They made it to Tunis. He talked about the condition of the barracks which had been damaged by bombs. After a while things were repaired. He said it was a dry heat so he could tolerate it. They used to go swimming all day and come out wrinkled. They had a place where the band played and they danced with local girls. When they got to Tunis they weren't allowed to go to the city for about four months. They were shown how to handle guns because of concerns in the city. He said Ronald's men and officers (Germans) treated the Tunisians very well. After a while he and the other soldiers were able to go into town and learned where the bars were in town. There was a shortage of whiskey, but they had other things to drink. He went to the Café Royal. While he was sitting there three French women came in. He described the women. He said they were speaking rapid French and he only caught a word or two. He knew they were talking about him. One of them asked him for an American cigarette. Another lady in the group started saying no, no, no. She didn't want the lady to be so forward. Howard said that was OK. They started asked him where he was from and they found out he was an Eskimo. They were very pleased to find this out. They had questions from him about Alaska and other cities in the United States. After quite a while they started to leave and the smallest lady introduced herself and wanted to see him again. Her name was Madelaine Faulcon. She gave him her number. It turned out that she owned a hotel. He did go to see her again. He talked about the way she acquired the hotel. She was very wealthy. She had been living in North Africa for many years. She married a much older man when she was eighteen and she inherited all of his property. He described her hotel lobby.

Lael Morgan asked about his friends in the military. Rock said Charlie Brooker was from Florida and had a southern accent. They used to go around together in Tunis. They used to stop at a small delicatessen for beer and eggs. He told his French lady friend that he didn't have a pillow. She made him a pillow with fancy embroidery. He was reluctant to take it back to camp. The French lady was offended and wanted to take it back. He ended up taking the pillow back to camp. He said it was the best pillow in the whole camp. They were good friends for about a year and a half. She also owned another hotel in Algiers which had been taken over by the American military. She went to Tunis and bought another hotel. Rock said he corresponded with the lady when he returned to the United States. He had to get an interpreter to read her letters. She wanted him to return to Algiers and manage a hotel for him. He was surprised to get an offer like that.