



Bud Ossey Oral History Interviews, October 27, 2014

Title

“Reflections on an Immigrant Upbringing, Iron Men, and Service During Wartime”

Date

October 27, 2014

Location

Ossey residence, Tualatin, Oregon.

Summary

In his first interview, Ossey describes his family background in Russia as well as the family's emigration to the United States and settling in Portland. From there he discusses his father's enrollment and studies in engineering at Oregon Agricultural College, and his own early memories of visiting campus and attending sporting events. Of particular note is Ossey's recollection of watching the famous OSC vs. USC "Iron Men" game from his vantage point sitting on the USC bench.

From there, Ossey reflects on his own student experience at Oregon State College, including his involvement with ROTC, various campus traditions of the era, and trips to Eugene to play pranks. He likewise notes his undergraduate academic work - remarking in particular on influential professors - his involvement with the freshman basketball team, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the mood on campus as the U.S. entered World War II, and the story of his meeting and marrying his wife, Maxine.

The remainder of the session focuses on Ossey's military training and service. He recalls his officer training and early assignments during World War II, remarks on the changing of his last name from Osipovich to Ossey, and discusses his leadership of a Combat Engineer unit comprised entirely of African American soldiers. The interview concludes with Ossey's memories of being discharged from the service and the beginnings of his career with the Bonneville Power Administration.

Interviewee

Bud Ossey

Interviewer

Mike Dicianna

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/ossey/>

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Well, today is Monday, October 27th, 2014, and I am in the home of "Bud" Bernard Abraham Ossey, in Tualatin, Oregon, and we're going to talk a little bit about his time at Oregon State, Oregon Agricultural College, even, clear back to 1925. Anyway, I always like to get a little bit of a biographical sketch. Let's just hear a little bit about your early childhood, like where were you born and when, that type of thing.

Bud Ossey: Well, I was born in Odessa, Russia, in 1919, and I came to America after one year. I came with my grandfather, my mother and her brother—two brothers, and one sister. We came over to Ellis Island in 1920. And my dad wasn't able to get away. It was right after the revolution in Russia, and our family was kind of split up because of war, remnants of war, and turmoil, and still, after-war action in Odessa. And my dad was sort of a—held onto to his work, and they wouldn't release him. And so he stayed until 1922, early '23, when he escaped out of Russia, going over the mountains, walking at night, from Russia into Poland. He escaped in early 1923, in January 1923—

MD: Wow!

BO: —when he got to this country. But getting back to me, we came through Ellis Island, and I came into this country as my grandfather's son, and my mother's brother. And that's how we got in as a family, as my grandfather's children. And we came here, and of course that's all been straightened out, immediately. But we came straight to Portland because we were sponsored. The only way we could get into the country is to have somebody sponsor us. And we had an uncle who I never—of course, I was too young to know anything, but we came to Portland as his sponsor, and he was the sponsor, signing an affidavit to the effect that there would be no responsibility of cost to the government for his family to come and stay in Portland. So we immediately came, after Ellis Island, New York, straight to Portland. And we settled in Portland. And that's where my life really began.

MD: Now, elementary school?

BO: Well, before that, if you're interested, my grandfather opened a grocery store in First and Caruthers in downtown—in South Portland, and we lived in the back of the grocery store, at a warehouse sort of thing in the back, where we set up living quarters, where we all piled some beds and stuff in, as far as I know, and a crib for me. And that's where we lived until 1925, when we moved across the street into a house that housed my grandfather, and my mother and her siblings, and myself. And the house had one toilet and one bathroom, and the toilet was out on the back porch outside, and with a overhead water tank, with a pull chain, and [laughs] we used to have the—that was back in 1925.

In 1925, when I was six years old, my Uncle Al, who I never knew he was my uncle—I always thought he was my brother; it's my mother's youngest brother—because he was still in grade school, and he took me to the school, my first day, and enrolled me. And that's when I found out he was my uncle. I didn't know that. And I never called him "Uncle" in my life. [0:05:00] In fact, we used to party together after we grew up. But living in the grocery store was—the first floor of a big three-story apartment, and it was on the corner of this apartment building, and next door to a pool house. And it was quite interesting, playing on the street there. The streetcar ran down there, over the—there was a gulch a block away, and that's where the freeway is now. And they tore everything down in that area, and built the freeway, and homes. But as I grew up there, in South Portland, I had many friends that I didn't know I had later on, but we got together later, as young kids. Anyhow, that was my start of my life in Portland.

MD: Now, you have the distinction of being one of the few people around that can actually say that you have been on the Oregon Agricultural College campus. Now, you went to sporting events when your dad was in college, as early as 1925, I understand, riding the trolley, or the streetcar, down from Portland to Corvallis. Tell us about that experience.

BO: Sure. Well, when my dad came finally here in 1923, January '23, that's the first time I can remember. And I remember distinctly when I first met my dad when he got off the train, and I hid behind my mother's skirt at that time, as a young kid, because I didn't know who he was. And anyhow, my dad worked in my grandfather's store, and he enrolled at Oregon State in 1924, and enrolled in the School of Mechanical Engineering. And in 1924, in the fall of '24, my mother and I went down on the old Oregon Electric train, from Portland to Corvallis, and visited with my dad, and that was when I went down to my first football game, in 1924. Oregon State was playing at Idaho, and that was quite an experience.

I can still remember my mother sitting in the stands, in the old Bell Field, old wooden seats, and my mother screaming and yelling, "Go home, Idaho! Go home, Idaho!" [Laughs] They beat us, and that was quite a game. But that was my first experience at Oregon Agricultural College, and it was quite a different scenario then. I don't think there was very many students, because when I enrolled in 1937 there was only 3,000 students. And so the campus was quite a bit smaller then, and it was beautiful, but Memorial Union was there.

MD: Just brand new.

BO: Brand new, and if I remember right, there was tennis courts out in the parkway there, in the quad, as they called it. It was fascinating for my mother and I to walk in that area there, and go to the Memorial Union, and we made, oh, usually one or two trips a year down to visit my dad. Just get on the train—it was easy, and didn't cost very much, because we didn't have very much money. We were very, very, very poor. And my dad worked his way through school, and he graduated engineering school with mostly all A's, in three years, and he averaged around 22, 23 hours a term.

MD: Wow!

BO: And it was amazing.

MD: Especially in engineering, yeah.

BO: Yeah. And of course, his English wasn't very good [0:10:00], and I have some of—I still have some of his books, from engineering in college, and the way he studied is kind of a fascinating story in itself. He had a Russian-American dictionary, and he would transcribe what he wanted to, very important parts of his studies, on the margins of his English books, in Russian. And I've got all that on some of his books. And that's how he studied.

MD: Oh, wow.

BO: But that's the early part of my getting down to Oregon State, and Oregon Agricultural College.

MD: Now, he lived in a fraternity, didn't he?

BO: No. Oh, no, no.

MD: No, it was an independent house?

BO: He lived an independent house on—I think you had known about where he lived.

MD: Yeah, I have a picture of the—yeah, that—

BO: Yeah. Well, there was a very close friend of his that came over from Russia about the same time, and enrolled at Oregon State in civil engineering, Maury Litt, who later married my wife's—my mother's sister, Betty Litt. And they lived, the two of them lived together and studied together in this house, the sporting house. And that was interesting to have the two of them, because they both fought the English language, and did very well. But that's another story in itself, about my Uncle Maury Litt, so.

MD: Now, when he fled the Russian Revolution, I understand that he worked at an airplane factory, and it shows that in his student records. Now, did he have some engineering before, when he was in Russia, or did he decide to be an engineer when he came here?

BO: Well, he had some preliminary engineering background—not too much. Evidently he had taken some classes in English, but no, his background in aeronautical engineering was self-initiated. And he designed several—two or three, four airplanes, I think, that they built here in Portland. One of them was, as I was telling you, an amphibious passenger plane that carried passengers from San Francisco to Sausalito, which was before the Golden Gate Bridge was built, and that was the only transportation other than water-traffic taxis that ran across the Bay from San Francisco to Sausalito. And that amphibious plane—I used to have pictures of it, and the story of how it was built, and everything.

MD: Yeah, because that's early aeronautics, and so that was actually kind of a trip for an airplane back then.

BO: That's right. It was probably in the early '30s, very early '30s.

MD: Now, I understand that you graduated as a civil engineer. Did his school, graduating as an engineer, have an effect on you wanting to be an engineer?

BO: Well, when I was going to high school, my dad was already working as an engineer, and I was enthralled with the work he was doing. I used to visit him where he was working, and I got really excited about the idea of being an engineer. I went to Benson Polytechnic High School, which was all boys at that time, and I laid my foundation for engineering studies with math and science studies, and I did real good in high school. I was a good student, and it came easy for me, because I knew the terminology; I talked a lot with my dad. And that was a terrible handicap for me when I went on to college, because things were so easy in high school. And I was active in sports, and I played freshman basketball at Oregon State [0:15:01] after playing basketball in high school, and I got involved with politics stuff with people, and my grades went down the tube.

And so I had a hell of a time, because things were so easy in high school. I just let things ride, and you can't do that when you go to college. I found that out the hard way, and it took me three years to recuperate from my studies, because I had to work all my way through school. And then my last year, I was married, so my wife and I both were on our own, going to college.

MD: Now, I read a story that you sold programs, as a young teenager, and that you were actually at the famous game in 1933 that featured that OAC Iron Men.

BO: That's right.

MD: Tell us about that. That is incredible!

BO: That's an incredible story. As a young kid, a teenager, a young teenager, in 1932 and '33, my Uncle Leo had the concession for selling programs at the football games, and so I had a job selling programs. And so at the famous Iron Men, 1933 Oregon State vs. USC, who at that time were Number 1 in the country, and unbeaten, played in Multnomah Stadium, and I was selling programs. I traversed all through the stadium selling programs, and when the game started, I happened to be behind the USC bench. The stands were right down to the field, and I happened to be right behind the USC bench.

When the game got started, there was nobody sitting at the end of the USC bench, so I went and sat down on the bench there, and I stayed there the whole game. And a couple of the—well, several USC football players came over, and said, "Hey, kid, what are you doing here?" And I said, "Well, nobody was sitting here, and I wasn't working, and I just wanted to sit and watch you famous USC players." Well, Cotton Warburton, at the time, was an all-American scatback for USC, and Aaron Rosenberg was an all-American lineman for USC, and both of them came over and talked to me. And I'll never forget that. And they says, "Hey, you just go ahead and sit there, kid." And I was there to the end of the game.

And when the game was over, the chain for the yard markers, the ten-yard chain, was just laying on the field right in front of the bench, and nobody picked it up or anything. And when it cleared out a little bit, I went over and rolled the chain up onto the two poles, and took it home. And I had that yardstick from the OSC/USC game, oh, for years. But the game itself was unbelievable. The Iron Men. Eleven players played the whole game, both offense and defense, without a substitution, and held them to nothing to nothing, and that was, at the time, the most historic football game in the country.

MD: Yes. Yeah. And there's a statue at Reser Stadium—

BO: That's right, Iron Men.

MD: —dedicated to them.

BO: That's right.

MD: And you were there.

BO: And I knew some of the players. I got to meet some of them. And, oh, Hal Mole, Howard Maple, Red Franklin—I got to meet those guys, some of them, Schwammel, and it was unbelievable.

MD: And to see that in person, one of the most historic Oregon State games ever. I mean, this is incredible.

BO: It was the most historical game I'd ever seen, of course, and it goes along with the Giant Killers, which is a whole new story in itself for me. [0:20:00]

MD: We'll get to that.

BO: Yeah.

MD: Now, when was your first Civil War game?

BO: My Civil War game, I think, was in 1929. I had an Uncle Al, who was, I didn't know, as I said, my uncle. He was at Oregon State, and I used to go down and stay with him in his fraternity house, and sleep on the porch there with—it was kind of fun. And that was my first year at Civil War, 1929. And I think I've been going to most of them ever since, as long as I was in the country.

MD: Yeah. I mean, this history with not only the college, but the history with the sports program and football, is unmatched, I think, by any of our alumni around, and that's why this story is just so important. Well, you ended up—was there any doubt that you would go to Oregon State?

BO: No, as long as—I did get accepted, because I had—well, there was no question about enrolling then. Anybody could get in. But the engineering school was—they called us the MIT of the West. Our engineering was the highest-ranking school on the west coast, at Oregon State.

MD: Even back then?

BO: Back then.

MD: Wow!

BO: And had a tremendously high rating. Now we're trying to get back to that. But there was no question that I would go to Oregon State. I had no choice, in my own mind.

MD: Yeah. Well, what I like to do with alumni such as yourself is to get a little feel of what campus life was like, and you were there during an interesting time. Between '37 and '38, you were a freshman, and that was at the height of the traditional of freshmen wearing the little green rook caps.

BO: That's right.

MD: Tell us a little bit about what it was like to be a freshman on the OSC campus in that era.

BO: Oh, I'd like to preclude that, because I spent a lot of time on the campus before that, and they had a club—the Beaver Knights. I don't know if you—you might want to research them. They were the police force of the campus, so to speak, and they all carried a paddle—a Beaver paddle. And there was no question about giving some guys whacks with the paddle. And I had one of those paddles once, and back in those—going back to '29, '30s—'30, when I was going down there visiting my uncle, they had cavalry in the ROTC, and he was in the cavalry, riding horses all the time, and that was really interesting. The armory was there, and this dirt floor, and I remember going in and watching the cavalry work out and train. It was the ROTC then.

MD: Yup. Now, they also had the polo team.

BO: And they had a polo team, right, and he was on the polo team.

MD: Wow!

BO: And that was more fun to watch that, so. And the students, then, as you said, they were rooks then, too. That tradition started earlier, and I remember as a rook, I had a pair of—you couldn't wear cords as a freshman. You had denims pants, sort of a heavy denim. I don't know what kind of cloth you'd call it, but you wore those, and then as a sophomore, you could wear cords. That was the rule, and you didn't dare break that. Well anyhow, you wore one pair of pants for the whole year, without washing or cleaning [0:25:00], and we used to say we used to just take the pants off and stand them up in the corner by the end of the year. [Laughs] And you didn't dare not have your rook hat on. I'm not sure how severe the penalty was, but there was some penalties if you're caught without your rook hat on.

MD: Now, at the end of the year, they had a big bonfire, and all the freshmen burned their—the women burned their green ribbons, and the men burned their rook hats. Did you burn yours?

BO: Yup.

MD: Yeah.

BO: Yeah, I sure did. They had a big bonfire, and we burned the rook hats, and the green ribbons.

MD: Yeah, because the—and you also had to carry a Rook Bible.

BO: That's right.

MD: And you had to know everything in the Bible.

BO: I forgot about that.

MD: Yeah, you had to know everything in the Rook Bible.

BO: And the sophomores and juniors and seniors would see a rook on the campus every once in a while, and then somebody would stop you, and ask you the questions about, "What do you know about this," or, "What do you know about that?" And you had to know all the answers, or else you had to go into the study.

MD: [Laughs] Yeah, some of these old campus traditions are—they're long gone.

BO: That's right.

MD: But there's a lot to be said for a person knowing their Rook Bible, knowing all about the rules.

BO: That's right.

MD: And I suppose you weren't allowed to walk on the grass.

BO: Oh, no, no, definitely not.

MD: Yeah, because I've heard some alumni talk about being tossed in the creek for doing that.

BO: That's right. That's interesting. Talking about "tossed in the creek," my first year as a freshman, in 1937, the Civil War game was in Eugene, and Oregon State, we all—the whole bunch of us went down for the game. And Oregon State beat Oregon that year for the first time, the second year, or two years in a row. And the students that were there, including myself, were on the field after the game, and were going down to tear down the goalposts, and we got into fights, and my folks had given me a nice cashmere coat that I wore, and it was cold, and I was wearing that cashmere coat, and I'll tell you, it got torn apart in the fight. I got in a—I was a little bit aggressive in my youth, and so that coat got pretty badly worn out for that day, and we tore down the goalposts.

Well, after that game, on Monday, they had a big rally on the campus in the morning. I don't know if you heard about this, where everybody skipped school and made it—and they got a caravan with the few cars that were on the campus, and we headed on a parade down to Eugene. And the police got word of it, and the first thing we know, the police were escorting us down the highway. And I was on the first car, and of course, every car in those days had running boards and fenders,

and I was standing on one side of the running board, and had girls on the fenders, over the headlights, and we travelled down the highway.

And then, when we got to Eugene, they were waiting for us, because the word had got out. They had hoses, and water balloons, and everything, and they were out to just get us, because they were not happy that we had beat them, and tore down their goalposts. And so, unfortunately, we got separated a lot, and a lot of them got thrown in the mill race down there. And one group of students, I guess over the weekend, snuck up there on—they have a big yellow "O" on the hill up there. [0:25:01]

MD: Skinner's Butte.

BO: Skinner's Butte. And they painted that yellow "O" orange, and they were not happy with that. Well, they captured a bevy of Oregon Staters, took them up on the hill, and stripped them down to their shorts, their underwear. And they had big buckets of yellow paint, and they dunked them ass in, into that paint, and made them slide down that "O" on Skinner's Butte and repaint that. And that was hilarious, of course.

But I got separated with a couple of Oregon Staters, and we had Oregon State buckles that were pretty prominent at that time, and they were—Oregon students were parading all over the place, looking for Oregon State students to throw them in the mill race, and a tremendous number of them were caught and thrown in. And this other couple of fellows and myself were walking down the street, and here comes these Ducks, and we said, "What the hell are we going to do?" Well, we covered up our buckles with our shirts, and started walking and yelling, "Where are those Beavers? Where are those Beavers?" And the Ducks, these other guys, come by and says, "We're looking, too," and then we escaped that, getting thrown into the mill race. [Laughs]

But that was a hilarious time. A lot of fun was had on there. You knew everybody. Everybody knew pretty much everybody. The classes were small. I had nineteen students in my civil engineering class when I graduated.

MD: Hm. Yeah, that's one of the things I was kind of curious about is, did you meet, like, favorite professors or classes—

BO: Oh, yes.

MD: —during your time in civil engineering?

BO: Yeah. Yes, I did. Glenn Holcomb was my favorite professor who taught—was just a great professor. In fact, I happen to have something here that you might be interested in. I don't know if you've seen that or not.

MD: Oh, alumni magazine. Oh, okay. Cool.

BO: And my dad and my son and I were all students under this Glenn Holcomb, this professor. My oldest son enrolled at Oregon State and had him for a professor, too. And that's quite a story there, in the alumni magazine. And Glenn Holcomb was actually the athletic—faculty and athletic representative for the Pac-8 at that time, for years, so. And then there was Fred Merryfield, who was a great professor, but I didn't like him. I'll never forget.

I worked my butt off trying to do good, to get good grades for him, and I was very articulate with my reports and my drawings, and I did a lot of them isometrically, my drawings. And when I put my report in, he had a big grease pencil, and he would find a word that was misspelled or something, and he'd write, "Bad spelling," and scribble across my report: Bad Spelling. And I went in, and I just tore into him one time, and just—I was an older student then, because I had dropped out of school, and he was picking on me a little bit because he thought I should be just as good a student as my dad was. And I had a heritage to live up to, and I failed miserably in that. [0:35:01] And he was picking on me pretty much all the time.

MD: Because of that legacy. Because I had your dad, and—

BO: Yeah.

MD: Oh, wow! Huh.

BO: But Glenn Holcomb, and Merryfield, and Charlie Mockmore was probably my favorite professor. I don't know if you've researched him.

MD: Yes, I have an image of him.

BO: And he was just a wonderful person, and Charlie Mockmore really took good care of me. I failed in chemistry. I just hated it. I couldn't do very good in it. I failed it, and I had to take a makeup class. Charlie Mockmore called me in, and he was the head of the Civil Engineering at the time, and he said, "I want you to take a"—I forget what they called, the term for it, a makeup class. And he says, "I'll personally tutor you, and give you a grade to substitute for the chemistry. I'll see to it that you don't have to take it." And he was really great to me. And so we'd sit in that restaurant across the street, on Monroe Street there—and I can't think of the name.

MD: The Electric Lunch?

BO: Electric Lunch, yeah. We'd sit there and have coffee, and he'd ask me questions and tutor me while we're having class, and if he had it, he'd give me an oral quiz after several days, and he gave me an A. [Laughs] And that helped my grade a little bit. But yes, there was one professor who was from Notre Dame. Oh, golly, he played football at Notre Dame, was my professor—oh, I feel embarrassed. My memory is not very good. And he was just a great guy. We had a lot of fun. He made learning fun, and he was probably one of—oh, golly, the name will come to me, I hope.

MD: It always does. [Laughs]

BO: Yeah. And he had a good Irish name. But those were some of my favorite professors.

MD: Now, what were your living arrangements while you were at college? Did you end up pledging a fraternity?

BO: When I got down there, I was real friendly with some basketball players, and one that I played ball with in high school was an Alpha Sigma Phi, and they invited me to come and pledge the fraternity. And I moved in there, and I stayed there just for a short time, because I could not afford \$35 a month board and room in the fraternity house. I moved into a boarding house with a couple of friends, and I paid \$21.50 a month, and we insisted on real butter instead of margarine.

MD: Because of that, yeah.

BO: At that time.

MD: And so it was just a boarding house for students. There was probably a lot of them around campus.

BO: That's right. Oh, yeah. Yeah, there was. Yeah.

MD: And so you were actually an independent?

BO: I was a GDI.

MD: A GDI. Yeah, a "God Damn Independent." [Laughs]

BO: "God Damn Independent."

MD: Well, one of the things that I always really get the biggest kick out of, and your time as a rook was real special, but some of your other memories about being a student during the early '40s, like student dances, and projects that the students did for the war effort, home-front things.

BO: Oh, my. Well, first of all, it's getting back to being a freshman. I played freshman basketball at Oregon State, and I made my freshman letters. But I found out that I was flunking my courses [0:40:00], and I knew I wasn't going to make a living playing basketball, and so I had to drop basketball, and I played intramural basketball after that. But your question

MD: Oh, like student activities, like dances, and things that they did during the war for raising—for the war effort.

BO: They had an engineer bust, they called it, where engineers put on a show, and that was in the Memorial Union, and we used to get up on the stage. We had a select group of students they picked to be dancers, and all we wore were jockstraps. [Laughs] That was hilarious. We had no woman engineer students then.

MD: No.

BO: And I know in my later years, we had one engineer student, a female student. Her dad was a professor, and I can't think of his name now, either. But these social functions—we had no liquor store in Corvallis, so kids would steal down to Albany to get their liquor. It's the closest place they could get liquor. And the start of the war, I had come back after two and a half years of dropping out of school because of the Depression, and I was in this boarding house with an electrical engineer as my roommate. And I'll never forget; Sunday morning, he always had classical music on, and hooked up—being an electrical engineer, he managed to hook up onto the house phone, and we had a phone in our room, which nobody ever had, but he had one hooked up that didn't cost us anything.

And Pearl Harbor came. We're sitting there studying on the Sunday morning, when all of a sudden, news broke out Pearl Harbor was hit. And everything stopped. And there was quite a bit of turmoil. I was in the ROTC, and this is 1941, and I had just returned to college that year, after staying out. I'll never forget; I got a call from a crazy friend. He was a Duck. Lived in McMinnville. And he called on the phone. I picked up the phone. He says, "The time is ripe. Tonight we plot; tomorrow we strike." And I thought, "Oh, my God, what the hell are you doing, calling with a message like that?" And I says, "Get off the phone, you asshole," and I hung up on him. He was just a crazy nut, a Duck. And it turned out his wife was a very dear friend of my wife's.

But as soon as the word got out, and the turmoil of the kids enlisting—all over, kids were dropping out of school and enlisting—and of course, I was in ROTC, and I stayed in school. I didn't drop out. And they were collecting all kinds of salvageable things for military. They had all kinds of drives for—paper drives. We were rationed stamps at that time. I've still copies of my dad's rationing stamps and mine. And it was turmoil, to say the least. [0:45:00]

MD: Can you give me a sense of what mood on campus was that Monday morning?

BO: Anger. Anger. Just saturated anger. And of course, I since have toned down my feelings, but at that time, "Goddamned Japs," and, "We're going to get them," or, "Oh, it's only going to take a couple weeks. We'll get back." At that time, the word was out that they'd made a dastardly attack on Pearl Harbor. They sneaked in after we were negotiating peace, and all kinds of stories were out. And the word was out that we'll get them, and it won't take long, and we'll just beat the shit out of them. Pardon by French. But of course, it didn't happen. But they had all kinds of drives to—food drives, canned stuff, stuff for the soldiers, and it was going on continuously on the campus.

MD: Yeah. Now, being a member of the ROTC, that must have had a special impetus on you guys, knowing the country's at war, and you were training to be officers in the military.

BO: And were encouraged to stay and finish, and get our military training finished. Well, in between your junior and senior year every year, ROTC students went to a camp to get training, and become commissioned as second lieutenants. Well, because of the war, between my junior and senior year they cancelled that, and we didn't get our commission after four years. We were sent off to OTC, Officers Training School, and when our class, depending on your engineering category, were sent to—we were sent to Fort Belvoir, right out of Washington, D.C., in Virginia. And that was an experience in itself, travelling across the country. I don't know whether you want to hear about that.

MD: Well, we'll get to that. Actually, I want to talk about your experiences.

BO: But getting back to the environment and the mood on the campus, it was hatred.

MD: Now, Andy Landforce speaks of some of the Japanese students that he was at school with, and them being taken off to the internment—and one of them was on the football team.

BO: Yeah, and a good friend of mine, and he wasn't able to go to the Rose Bowl game because of that. And I had friends that were Japanese. In fact, I had one that I studied with who I used to bring home. He was from San Francisco. I used to

bring home for Thanksgiving vacation. He'd stay at my house. We were very good friends. And as soon as the war broke out, they were—most of them were severed and taken to internment camps.

MD: Yeah, there one day and gone the next.

BO: And it was a sad story about—oh, I wish I could think of the football player's name. He was—

MD: Yoshihara?

BO: Yeah.

MD: Yeah. Henry, I think, yeah.

BO: Yoshihara. And he was more American than most Americans. He was born in America. He had family heritage from Japan, of course. And they wouldn't let him go with the football team.

MD: Yeah, he did receive his Rose Bowl ring, finally, in 2006, I believe.

BO: That was a long time afterwards.

MD: Yes. One of the things, every male student during that period of time, when you went to college, were required to take your first two years military drill or military tactics, so all students were actually part of the—all male students.

BO: All male students had to enroll in ROTC. [0:50:00]

MD: Now, what caused you to continue on, and finish out the last two years?

BO: I liked the study of the military, and I was fascinated with the preparedness for the war that was going on at that time, because Europe was in a turmoil, and we read all about it all the time, and I wanted to be a part of it. I mean, at that time, everyone was gung ho to—especially after Pearl Harbor, everyone wanted to sign up and get into it, and I was no different. And even though my senior in year in Fort—right after the war broke out, I got married, my wife and I, and she was a sweetheart of mine from high school days. I remember when I was playing basketball in high school, I was at Benson and she was at Jefferson, and when we played at Jefferson, she was wearing my letterman sweater. [Laughs] That was kind of funny, and she got razzed a lot about it, and there's a picture here.

MD: Yeah, and that's Maxine, yeah.

BO: That's Maxine, and there's our graduation pictures up there.

MD: Oh, wow.

BO: And, anyhow, I don't know. Where was I? [Laughs]

MD: Well, being a married couple on campus, I understand that you were one of the few seniors that were actually married.

BO: Well, in '42, when we were married, we were one of four married couples on the campus. Bob LeTourneau was one, and his wife. And I don't remember who the other two couples were. But it was quite an unusual thing to be married and going to school.

MD: And so where did you guys live?

BO: This is interesting. On 26th and Monroe, when we got married, back off the street, back off and behind the building, was a little cabin, a little house, a real small house, and we rented that. And gosh, I can't—I wish I could remember what we paid for it, the rent. But in the winter, they had a terrible winter storm, and it flooded the downtown Corvallis, and this was in '42. And mice were all over, and we had luggage that was given to us for wedding present, and mice got into it.

And we had a little storage shed right adjacent to the house, where we kept our luggage, and the mice got in there and ate all the trimmings off the luggage.

MD: So they just fell apart, yeah. [Laughs]

BO: It fell apart. And so that was one incident. But when we were married, we were the—you were asking about social events and things. Well, we never were able to get to social events, because everyone came to our house for drinks and stuff. And Camp Adair was in existence then, and this uncle, brother, Al, of mine, was an officer in the military, and he was stationed at Camp Adair for a period of time, while I was in school, right after the war started. And he was the officers' club—officer in charge of the officers' club, and he had liquor all over the place, and so he furnished me with liquor, and I mean, he had lots of it. And we had parties at our house, for every time there was a kind of a function, kids, friends of ours—Maxine had made a lot of friends—and they all seemed to congregate at our place.

MD: So you were the party house?

BO: We were the party house, and it was very small, but we managed.

MD: [Laughs] So you, being a cadet during those first years of the war [0:55:00], at the West Point of the West, is what they called OSC at the time—now, when you graduated—you graduated in '43, basically at the height of the war, as an engineer. Now, what was commencement like in '43? It was kind of a different commencement that year, I know.

BO: Oh, I can't remember very much about it. Actually, I don't think I had attended the commencement, because I was on duty. We were sworn into the Army, and we were in regular Army as ROTC students, actually. They moved us into a—we were moved into Alpha Chi Omega fraternity house. They took over some fraternity houses, and they moved us in there. And I had to move out—not live with my wife. And they took us to Camp Adair in buses, to give us our shots, and some indoctrination. And the shots were—I don't know; I think I had four shots in one day, and I think I passed out on one of them. And I was not alone; I know that. And then they took us, and paraded us downtown to get a train to go to Fort Lewis.

We paraded downtown, and I was married, and I was still in school, but they took us out of school, and paraded us downtown Portland to the train depot. Got on the train, and we went up to Fort Lewis, and they gave us shots again—the same shots! [Laughs] I'll never forget that. And my mother and father stood on the street, along with my wife, and were waving as we paraded by. I can still see them on the street, because we didn't know if we were ever going to come back. We thought we were really on our way. Well, we got up there, and then they sent us back to finish out our term while we were in uniform. And then immediately, we were off to war.

MD: Yeah. Well, let's actually spend some time, because I mean, I am always amazed when I have a chance to speak with World War II veterans, and I know that you're—as an engineer, you were—they, I'm sure, utilized those skills for you. But let's talk a little bit about your military career during the war. That's also very important to this whole history of you. So where did they send you for the actual officers' training?

BO: Well, from officers' training, they sent me to Louisiana, to Camp Fort Alexander, and put me into a pipeline distribution company, signed me to—and we were scheduled to go to CBI, third territory, India. We were heading to the South Pacific, and just before we were ready to ship off, I got transferred out of the unit to go back to Fort Belvoir for some additional training, because I had—when I dropped out of school, I went to work for Bonneville Power Administration in 1938, and that's another story in itself. And I got quite a bit of experience in engineering, and I worked for Bonneville Power Administration on the first field survey crew, and sent to Goldendale, Washington. [1:00:00] I was on the first field office surveying the Bonneville Grand Coulee transmission line. And they were clearing, and I got a lot of visual experience, on the site experience, in engineering, as a young indoctrinate into the engineering business.

Well, when I got in the Army and was sent to Camp Claiborne, my record of engineering history caught up in the military, and they sent me back to Fort Belvoir for some additional training, and then they sent me to Fort Leonard Wood. No, while I was at Ford—they didn't send me to—after Belvoir they sent me up to the embarkation station for overseas, and I had all my shots for overseas, and I had my duffel bag all packed with the overseas number. We were on the boat, and they pulled me off the boat, because they got word that I had background experience in engineering, and training, and that

I was a four-year ROTC, and I was an officer, and here I just got my commission just shortly before. And I was on my way overseas just about the time of—Normandy time. And they pulled me off, and sent me back to Fort Leonard Wood to train troops.

MD: Oh, okay.

BO: They said I was more valuable training troops than I would be going over and fighting, and getting killed. And I went to the commanding officer, the general, and I pleaded with him. I says, "I want to go with my outfit." I was assigned to a unit, an engineer combat regiment—or battalion, it was, at that time. He said, "No, Lieutenant"—at that time, my name was still Osipovich. He said, "Lieutenant, you're more valuable to the Army training troops for replacement than you are going over there," and he wouldn't let me stay. They pulled me off the boat. So I went and got assigned to Fort Leonard Wood, and was working training troops there, and I had black troops under my command.

And that's one of the times—and I was married—and that was the time when we decided we'd like to change our name.

MD: Yeah, because I see that in 1944, your name changes.

BO: Well, my wife and I were married under the name of Osipovich, and it was a difficult name at that time—very difficult, especially for black troops. And also, when I was playing sports, the coach, a basketball coach of mine, would come down to the bench during a crucial time and say, "Hey, Oss—hey Smith! You get in there." Instead of—and I sat on the bench a lot because they couldn't pronounce my name. [Laughs] So my wife and I talked about it, and this was before my first son was born, Dick, and we asked permission from my folks. Everyone called us "Ossey." Everyone called my dad "Ossey." They never called him anything else. It was "Ossey" here, "Ossey" there, and everything was "Ossey." So we asked him if we could formalize it and make our name official, and they gave us their blessings. My mother was not too happy, but my dad was very cooperative.

MD: He understood, yeah.

BO: And he understood. And so we went through the military court and had our name changed, and then we went to the civilian court later, and validated it. And so we have papers that shown our change in name to "Ossey." [1:05:03]

MD: From Osipovich.

BO: And I changed it to Bernard A. Ossey. I don't use the name "Abraham," although I'm very proud of the heritage of my dad's name. In our family, they used to name the sons, like mine—my dad's name was Abraham Aaron Osipovich. Aaron was his father's name. So they named me Bernard Abraham Osipovich, because Abraham was my father's name. And they named the middle name after their fathers. All the kids all have the same middle name. But I shortened that down, too, just for convenience of the—oh, just shortened it to make it easier. And so that's how we changed our name to "Ossey."

And so when I got into—and also, we changed it because when I got to training black troops, they couldn't anywheres near come close to pronouncing Osipovich, although I had some pretty intelligent black sergeants and noncommissioned officers under me. That was another reason we decided; it was too tough, in life, and people ask my wife—her maiden name, was Harris—how could you ever condescend to marrying the name Osipovich? She said, "Well, I love the guy." [Laughs]

MD: Well, let's talk a little bit now—what exactly were you training the men in? Were these black units being shipped overseas to be engineers?

BO: Heavy equipment, graders, heavy-duty tractors, all kinds of heavy equipment, engineering equipment. And I got to be pretty good at it. I used to run some of that stuff myself. And building roads, bridges, water purification, training them for all that sort of thing. And I was one of the officers in charge of training black engineer students.

MD: Yeah, because during that time in the military, the "colored units," is how they put it, were all in—had white officers in charge.

BO: That's right. We had no black officers.

MD: No black—now, did you experience any problems with that? This is something that you shared with Andy Landforce, and I'm curious about how the soldiers accepted you as their white officer, basically.

BO: I got along pretty good, mainly because I had a black first sergeant under my command who was a police officer from Washington, D.C. He was six feet four, 240 pounds. His name was Bithay, Sergeant Bithay. I'll never forget that, and I'll never forget one time we were training on the grounds, and I happened to be walking around the corner of the building there, where he was training some troops, and a couple of them sassed him back, or did something that he didn't like, and so I stepped back and waited to see what would happen.

Well, he called the two of them over, out of the way, and he started talking to them, and he used some language that I won't repeat—typical Negro language. And finally he said, "Now, you two"—and I won't use the words he used—but he said, "I want you to understand what I'm saying," and he grabbed one by the nape of the neck on one side, and one on the other, and he says, "Now, don't ever forget what I'm telling you," and he clashed their heads together and dropped them. And I had more discipline.

But I had a good relationship with the troops. I treated them as equals. When I grew up, I didn't know there was a difference between black and white. [1:10:00] In fact, I found, when I was a little kid, a picture on my mother's mantle—a picture of two little boys holding their—with their arms around each other, and I didn't realize it until later years, that one of them was black and the other one was me. And I never knew that. We played with a—as kids, and we didn't know the difference. And I never grew up knowing there was a difference. They were just friends, so I treated them as such. And I was pretty popular with the black troops, and they turned out to be pretty good.

I remember I had one troublesome black soldier on the firing line that countermanded some of my orders, and I had to take my pistol and aim it right at him, which I shouldn't have done. I says, "You either straighten out, or I'm shooting you." And I was serious. And he saw that, and he straightened out. But then I went up afterward, when we—next day, and I said, "I hope we don't have any more trouble like that. You've been a good soldier, and I want you to do the right thing." And he did all right. I put him on—

MD: Report, yeah.

BO: —on report, and he had to go company punishment for a day, and I had him cutting the lawn. We had a lawn in front of our company headquarters, and I went out—after a while, I went out to see how he was doing, and he was sitting on the lawn with a pair of scissors cutting the grass one piece of grass at a time. He was cutting the grass! [Laughs] I'll never forget that, either. [Laughs]

MD: So your time, then, in the military was basically training, totally, all throughout the war, at Fort Leonard Wood?

BO: No, no, no. I only was there for a short time, and then they transferred me to the engineering compounds at Fort Lewis.

MD: Oh.

BO: It was a heavy engineering training grounds, and I spent the rest of the war there, and we were—when war ended in Europe, we were preparing to go to the Pacific. My outfit were all dressed and prepared to ship out, and we were on our way to San Francisco for de-embarkation, and when the war ended in Japan, in the Pacific. So they brought us back to Fort Lewis, and that's where I ended up my career.

MD: Mm-hm. So, yeah, so you learned about the dropping of the atomic bomb basically in transit, then?

BO: Oh, just almost, yeah. Just almost in transit, right.

MD: And so, like many veterans that I've spoken to, that you would have been in that lead assault on the Japanese home islands prior to that.

BO: That's right.

MD: And wouldn't probably be speaking to me here today.

BO: That's right. The good Lord was looking out for me.

MD: Yeah. So what was the victory celebration like? Was there—?

BO: Oh, there was all kinds of happy celebrations all over, yeah. Everyone was happy to see it end—very happy. They celebrated excessively, and justifiably so.

MD: Yes. Well, what I want to do is kind of, let's finish up your early years. Now you've separated from the Army, and came back to start a family in Oregon. Let's get, just, what happened right after the war.

BO: Well, right after the war, when I got out of the Army, in 1946, I stayed enlisted in the reserves, and I became very active in the reserves throughout my time. I had 26-plus years. But I went to work. I went back to Bonneville Power Administration to see about going back to work in my old work, with Bonneville. Well, they were happy to have me come back [1:15:00], but they wanted to hire me at the same rate as when I left! And when I left, I had worked myself up to a pretty good position in the basic power investigation section, studying power potential for the Northwest. And I had a couple people that worked with me, or under my supervision, and when I came back, here are these guys who hadn't gone to war, who had moved up and were in higher-level positions.

Well, they wanted to hire me back at the same position as when I left. And I said, "That doesn't seem reasonable. I have people here that worked for me that are in a higher position." And I says, "I'd like to come back." My dad had worked for Bonneville Power Administration, and was working for them at that time. He was chief of the transmission design branch there. And I wanted to go back and work for Bonneville, because they were a good outfit, and I wanted to keep my seniority status, and progress along the line. Well, they wouldn't consent to give me any raise or any different status, so I went and applied at the Corps of Engineers. They were looking for engineers. And they hired me at a higher rate than what I was at Bonneville. And I was the first civil engineer hired at the Corps of Engineers for the hydroelectric design branch, to work on the design of the powerhouses in the Northwest. I was the first one under the chief civil engineer hired. So that's where I went to work, was with the Corps of Engineers.

MD: And spent a career.

BO: And I spent my career there. My total time with the government was 36 years, including World War II.

MD: Right. So I think this is a point where we have your life as an engineer, professional life, but there's a whole story of you as your life as a Beaver alumni.

BO: Oh! [Laughs]

MD: And in our next session, we're going to talk about what it's like to be the top Beaver alumni that I've ever met. And so at this point, we have got some solid gold information from you, and we thank you for it, and we're going to have another time where we're going to sit down and we're going to talk about what it's like to be a true alumni and Beaver, through and through.

BO: Well, thank you very much. It's been a real treat for me to sit and reminisce, and that's exactly what I'm doing. It brings back a lot of memories to me.

MD: Well, that's great. Well, we thank you very, very much. [1:18:18]