

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Dr. Harold A. Laatsch
Dentist, United States Army, World War II.

2008

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Laatsch, Harold A. (b.1915). Oral History Interview, 2008.

User Copy : 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy : 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript : 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Dr. Harold A. Laatsch, a Tigerton, Wisconsin native, discusses his stateside Army service as a dentist during World War II. He tells about his early life, his education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he earned his bachelor's in pharmacy, his marriage, work in various pharmacies, and his 1943 graduation from Marquette University with a doctorate in dental surgery. He went into ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) immediately after graduation and he relates his medical field training at Carlisle Barracks (Pennsylvania) and assignment to a dental clinic at Fort Campbell (Kentucky) where he primarily did dental restorative work on enlistees and prepared them dentally to go overseas. He mentions that his next assignment at Fort Benjamin Harrison (Indianapolis, Indiana) was similar work, but his subsequent assignment to Camp Atterbury (Indiana) involved work with soldiers who were being discharged. He says that they were given the option of having the Army do their dental work or to have their home dentist do it. He states that he wanted to stay in the military as long as he could as it was a wonderful place to get training and confidence in his field. Discharged in 1946, Laatsch relates that he was able to have his wife with him and off base housing most of the time and they made many friends during his time in the military that they kept in touch with and visited over the years. He mentions that at Fort Harrison he had a German prisoner of war that worked as his dental assistant for quite a while. He located in Clintonville, Wisconsin and operated a successful dental practice there for about fifty years. He speaks of his sixty years of membership and activities in the American Legion; telling of his musical performances at Legion parties and nursing homes.

Interviewed by Ellen Bowers Healey, 2008

Transcribed by John P. Danish, 2008.

Transcription edited by Gayle J. Martinson, 2008.

Transcribed Interview:

Ellen: This is an interview with Dr. Harold A. Laatsch, who served in the United States Army during World War II. This interview is being conducted at Dr. Laatsch's home at the following address: 115 N. 12th St., Clintonville, Wisconsin, Waupaca County, on the following date, March 28th 2008. The interviewer is Ellen Bowers Healey. Tell me when you were born?

Laatsch: I was born in 1915. May the 28th.

Ellen: And where's your hometown?

Laatsch: My hometown was Tigerton (Wisconsin); it's, ah, ah, sorta in Northeastern Wisconsin.

Ellen: And, ah, tell me a bit about your education when you were a young person.

Laatsch: Well, ah, graduated high school in 1933 and then I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and graduated in 1937 with a degree, a Bachelor of Science in pharmacy; and in 1943 I graduated from the Marquette University with a degree, Doctor of Dental Surgery.

Ellen: Let me go back a little bit; when you were growing up in Tigerton, who was your mother and father?

Laatsch: My mother was Annie Westphal or Westfall(??) Laatsch and my dad was Adolph Laatsch.

Ellen: And where were they born and raised?

Laatsch: They were born, I think, in the town of Grant, ah, Shawano County.

Ellen: Okay. What did they do for a living?

Laatsch: They were all farmers.

Ellen: And were you involved in farming, too, or not?

Laatsch: Until I started going to college, I was a farmer.

Ellen: Okay, ah, when you went to Marion High School, how far away was Marion High School?

Laatsch: That was six miles away, and, ah, at that time there were no buses, but there were quite a few of us who walked to school every day, gave us twelve miles a day without phy ed.

Ellen: Okay. And when did you say you graduated from high school?

Laatsch: 1933.

Ellen: And then you went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison?

Laatsch: Right.

Ellen: And how long were you there?

Laatsch: Four years.

Ellen: And, ah, what were some of your experiences while you were at the University of Wisconsin-Madison?

Laatsch: Well, ah, as you know it would be the years, '33, '34, and, ah, I tried not to get into any trouble, because I wanted to go to school and, ah, everything was run pretty efficiently; and, um, in order to make things go I would go down to the little corner restaurant there in Madison, across University Avenue and have a slice of ice cream bar, or, ah, cake roll; that would be my lunch; and then, I, ah, my rooming house served meals, so, um, that's the way I sort of made things go. And, then, of course, while I went to school in Madison I worked for the Rennebom Drug Stores, at that time, I think, they had twelve different drugstores; and I worked for most of them, at one time or other.

Ellen: And, ah, how long did you stay in Madison?

Laatsch: We, ah, left in 1937.

Ellen: Okay, and tell me again, what did you do after you left in 1937; where did you go from there?

Laatsch: I got a job at, ah, Wisconsin Dells in a pharmacy store; it was Bauer-O'Neil Pharmacy and, as you know, Wisconsin Dells in the summer is just like Chicago; then, of course, after it got cold and there was no more business in Wisconsin Dells, I got a job at Whitehall (Wisconsin), which is the county seat of Trempealeau County; and I was there until I, um, went to school at Marquette University.

Ellen: And, were you married at the time that you were working as a pharmacist?

Laatsch: I was married the day before we got our diplomas; my wife and I both got our diplomas at Madison the day after we were married? That was June the 20th 1937.

Ellen: And, ah, who were you married to?

Laatsch: I married Ruby Bauers, and, ah, she was a home-ec graduate from Madison.

Ellen: Okay, go ahead and tell me a little bit about your experience at Marquette University; why did you decide to go to Marquette?

Laatsch: Well, as I was a pharmacist, I noticed that the dentists over there would, ah, be heading out to the golf course in the evenings, weekends; and another dentist was going fishing, walking by with a fishing pole, and they were having a sort of a nice life, I thought. So, I thought, I would take a chance and get a job as a part time pharmacist in Milwaukee, and see how far I could get.

Ellen: And, how far did you get?

Laatsch: I happened to be going to the Marquette Dental School in the time when the war was on, so, that, in order to speed up things, ah, we did two semesters in two Summers; so, I actually graduated in three years.

Ellen: When you were going to Marquette, were you already in the service, or not?

Laatsch: Well, in my last, ah, in order to stay in school, we had to sign up for the reserves and I, in my last semester, I got into what was called ASTP, and, ah, July the 1st in 1943, they hauled us in a flat-bed truck to Rockford (Illinois); and, ah, we got into uniform and had our hair cut.

Ellen: Ah, let me go back a little bit. When did you start dental, dental school?

Laatsch: I started dental school in the Fall of 1940.

Ellen: Okay. And do you remember what you were doing when Pearl Harbor?

Laatsch: During Pearl Harbor, I was working in a drugstore; it was a Sunday; and, ah, we, of course, had the radio on all the time anyway, and, so, it was quite a shock to hear what was going on at Pearl Harbor.

Ellen: How did that impact your schooling?

Laatsch: Well, ah, being, working at a drugstore as a pharmacist, a lot of people would ask, and say, How come you're not in the service? And I would tell them I actually was in the service; but, ah, I was, ah, getting there; but, um, like I said, the, ah, Pearl Harbor speeded up the dental course, so that, we did a semester in the last two Summers of my, ah, dental education.

Ellen: Ah, you mentioned ASTP; do you remember what that stands for?

Laatsch: Army Specialized Training Program.

Ellen: Okay.

Laatsch: Then, I guess, you also had the ROTC for the Navy people.

Ellen: And when did you graduate from dental school?

Laatsch: Ah, in October of 1943.

Ellen: And, what happened then?

Laatsch: Well, ah, we had a lot of graduation ceremonies at Milwaukee, there, we had my folks, my father-in-law and mother-in-law, all came to celebrate the occasion, went out to eat; and, ah, upon graduation I got to be a first lieutenant in the United States Dental Corps.

Ellen: Were you promoted right there in Milwaukee?

Laatsch: Well, yes; every dentist that goes in gets a rating of first lieutenant when they start.

Ellen: How many people from your dental class went into the ASTP.

Laatsch: I'd say probably around half, thirty, maybe; I don't really know exactly; but I'd say half were Navy people and half were Army people.

Ellen: How did you end up in the Army as opposed to the Navy?

Laatsch: Ah, I guess, the ASTP sorta brought you right in there; and, um, I liked the uniform that these Army officers were wearing when we went, ah, downtown Milwaukee; so, I liked the Army better than the Navy at that time.

Ellen: Okay, and what did you do after graduation?

Laatsch: After graduation we go orders to, um, go to Carlisle Barracks (Pennsylvania); that's at Carlisle (Pennsylvania) and it's a medical field

training school. Besides conditioning and other training the main course over there is for life-saving procedures in battle zones; so it was a school where the medical officers were the hospital administrators went to school, where the, ah, veterinarians went to school, and the dental people went to school to get indoctrinated into the service.

Ellen: How long did you stay at Carlisle Barracks?

Laatsch: That was, ah, six weeks course.

Ellen: And what time of the year were you there?

Laatsch: We were there in, um, from, um, probably the middle of October 'til, um, the end of December, partly January.

Ellen: Were you able to take your wife with you?

Laatsch: I had my wife with me, the, ah, after we had our orders we decided to, ah, I think somebody took us to Fond du Lac (Wisconsin) and we took a bus from Fond du Lac to Chicago (Illinois). And that was as far as we could get that day, so, we went to the Chicago Theater to watch a movie. And the next morning we took a bus to Carlisle (Pennsylvania).

Ellen: And, what kind of accommodations did they have for you, ah, and your wife at Carlisle Barracks for six weeks?

Laatsch: Well, we stayed at a rooming house, ah, at Carlisle, and it was, you know, fine. And, ah, we, ah, made friends with that lady that we stayed there and she sent us a Christmas card for many years. And the nicest thing when we were at the rooming house there where we stayed we ran into a classmate of mine, who had a car, which, ah, helped things a lot.

Ellen: And that was a classmate from dental school?

Laatsch: From dental school.

Ellen: Okay.

Laatsch: He had his wife with him, too. So, it was nice.

Ellen: Where did you do after Carlisle Barracks? Where did you go after that?

Laatsch: We were sent to Columbus (Ohio) and from Columbus (Ohio) I got orders to report to Camp Campbell (Kentucky).

Ellen: What was your purpose to go to Columbus (Ohio)? What did you do there?

Laatsch: Well, that, I guess, where you just went to get your orders to go to where you were really gonna go.

Ellen: So, that was just a short period of time?

Laatsch: Yes, that was just for about a day, just to get my orders.

Ellen: And then you said you went to Fort Campbell (Kentucky)?

Laatsch: Campbell (Kentucky).

Ellen: And, what was your purpose for going there?

Laatsch: That is where I got an assignment in the dental clinic. It was a post where they had four different dental clinics and I was assigned to dental clinic number four.

Ellen: When did you get to Fort Campbell (Kentucky)?

Laatsch: That was probably in January of 1944?

Ellen: And, how long were you at Fort Campbell (Kentucky)?

Laatsch: I'd say I was there, most of two years.

Ellen: Okay, and what kind of work did you do there?

Laatsch: Oh, there, I did mostly restorative work; that is putting fillings into teeth and doing examinations, charting all the teeth, and any dental work that had to be done. Our job was to get every recruit or enlistee, so that his teeth were completely restored and that he would be ready to go over seas, and get him into, what we called class four. And, um, that would entail whatever; if you needed bridge work, you would get bridge work, or dentures, if he needed dentures, he'd get teeth extracted, whatever they would need so that they would be to move on.

Ellen: And, so, these soldiers, were they primarily soldiers who had not gone off?

Laatsch: These are mostly enlistees. And, like I say, they are probably mostly all from the Kentucky and Tennessee area that were brought in over there.

Ellen: Describe Fort Campbell (Kentucky) back in the '40s, when you were there.

Laatsch: It was, ah, you know, a really nice post to be, because they had seven theaters and they had a lot of things that we could do to sort of occupy our time.

Ellen: What sort of recreation would you do?

Laatsch: Well, we had, ah, we through horseshoes, we had volleyball, and the later post even had a golf course. And, we, I liked to play Ping-Pong. I sure played a lot of Ping-Pong. I, ah, usually at the noon hour. And they always had pool tables, so you could shoot pool. Like I say, there were a lot of things that we could do to take up our time.

Ellen: And, how about your wife, what was she able to do there?

Laatsch: My wife, at, ah, Fort Campbell (Kentucky), she got a job as a teacher at one of the, ah, day care posts there, so, she had a little things that she did; and she was nice for her to have some things to do.

Ellen: And, where was there, was there housing on base for you, or where did you live?

Laatsch: We lived, ah, when we first got to Fort Campbell we ah, stayed at a apartment in the, ah, I'll have to see. Anyhow, ah, in later years we went to Hopkinsville (Kentucky) and rented an apartment there.

Ellen: Was Hopkinsville anywhere near Fort Campbell, or, what was at Hopkinsville?

Laatsch: Hopkinsville was north of, ah, the post, and Clarksville (Tennessee) was south of the post. And that's what I was trying to think of, Clarksville (Tennessee) is where we first had an apartment. And, then, later, like I say, um, we got a little nicer apartment over in Hopkinsville (Kentucky).

Ellen: Were there other military families living in those apartments?

Laatsch: Lots of them, lots of 'em. And we'd get a ride to the post every day and a ride back again.

Ellen: Any particular people that you remember from that time period?

Laatsch: Well, like I say, we made so many friends there. Ah, not only all dental friends, but also other people that we met when we went to the chapel and so, um, I'd say, maybe a couple dozen people that we remembered, that

we got Christmas cards from over the years. They came to visit us and we came to visit them. And, ah, it was so nice. It all helped to make the, ah, being in service a better life.

Ellen: What did you do after you left Fort Campbell?

Laatsch: My next assignment was over at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis (Indiana). And they, ah, had only one dental clinic there so it was a little bit different. Fort Campbell is a school for accountants and that type.

Ellen: Did you do a different kind of work when you went over to Indianapolis or Benjamin Harrison?

Laatsch: Mostly all restorative work, like say, putting in fillings; very seldom did we do any extractions, mostly, it's getting the teeth restored, ah, bridge work or whatever they needed.

Ellen: How long were you at Fort Benjamin Harrison?

Laatsch: Ah, I'd say, about a year. And, um, ah, it was a, we were still in Indianapolis (Indiana) when the war quit, because we had a nice duplex that my wife and I stayed in at Indianapolis.

Ellen: And, ah, when did you finally get out of the Army?

Laatsch: Well, ah, my next assignment was at Camp Atterbury (Indiana) and that was a separation center.

Ellen: Okay.

Laatsch: And over there they would bring a busload of soldiers that were being discharged. It was our job there to chart everybody's dental condition. And that would mean charting all the fillings, charting missing teeth, charting any dental work, that is needed. And ah, when we got through doing this, we would ask the person whether he would like to have his dental work done in the Army or if he would like to have his home dentist do that. And some opted to have their dental work done before they left and some opted to have the dental work done by the home dentist. And, I was probably there about two, three months, anyway. I got to be the ranking officer. And, at one time, I got to be in charge of the dental section of the separation center.

Ellen: What time period were you at, ah, Atterbury?

Laatsch: Pardon?

Ellen: What time period were you there at, um, did you say Camp Atterbury?

Laatsch: Yes.

Ellen: Okay, what, ah, do you remember what year? Was the war over yet, or not?

Laatsch: Well, ah that was, that was getting, ah, 1946.

Ellen: Oh, okay.

Laatsch: And, ah.

Ellen: When you joined, did you know how long you were going to be in the service?

Laatsch: No, no, I wanted to be in there as long as I could; because it was, for me, it was a wonderful place to get my training and confidence in the work I was going to do for the rest of my life.

Ellen: Okay, I interrupted you, I think, go ahead and, ah, you said were, got to be while you were there, the ranking officer at that dental clinic. Go ahead.

Laatsch: While I was still at Fort Campbell, I was promoted to captain. And, like I say, as people were being discharged, I got to be the ranking officer at the separation center. And, so, I was, at one time, in charge of the dental section of the separation center. And, from there, ah, is where I got my orders for being discharged.

Ellen: And, when were you discharged?

Laatsch: Ah, I think it was October the 12th 1946. And, um, it was, ah, had another dental officer that, he and I, went to Fort Sheridan (Illinois) to be discharged. And, ah, he had a song that he had written. And we went, in our trip over there, we went to this, ah, Chicago, where they was some western star performing. And he got to see him and he talked to him about his song, that he'd written; but I don't know if he got, ah, how far he got with that. But, ah, for me, it, ah, like I say, one thing I might add that I did have a prisoner of war, a German prisoner of war as my dental assistant for quite a while. His name was Miller and he was a very, person that learned easily. And, ah, seemed to be very cooperative.

Ellen: Where was that that there was a prisoner of war?

Laatsch: I think, it was Fort Harrison.

Ellen: Do you know? Were there other prisoners of war there?

Laatsch: Well, there was a big, ah, big, compound there just for prisoners of war there. and this person was very happy to be left out for a small period of time, so he could do something, and learn something.

Ellen: How long did you work with Miller, I should say the prisoner of war?

Laatsch: I'd say around six months. I don't know if he was shipped home after that or what happened?

Ellen: Did he have dental training?

Laatsch: He didn't have any training at all. Like I say, he was, he could learn easily and, um, so we got along real good.

Ellen: Did he speak English?

Laatsch: A little bit. In those days, um, nowadays everybody talks English, or can talk English if they want to; but in those days, it was, ah, very different. And one of the experiences, like being in the service, from coming from the northern part of the country, we found that it was very strange to see different sections of a bus or waiting rooms just located for the colored people. And this was a little bit strange for someone who came from the northern part of the country.

Ellen: Any other experiences that you can think of while you were in the Army?

Laatsch: Well, I could say, ah, when the dayrooms closed, I bought a pool table from the Army; and I had that sent home. And, that's one of the things we went to, ah, the parks around the areas when we had free time.

Ellen: How were you able to pay shipping, or freight, to get the pool table back to Wisconsin.

Laatsch: I had a, ah, brother-in-law that brought our car down to Fort Campbell and after that we were pretty, it was pretty nice to get around.

Ellen: Okay, okay. This was your car? Did you live back in Wisconsin?

Laatsch: It was our car, yes. It was our first car. We bought it new when we were in, ah, Wisconsin Dells, \$550.00, brand new, Ford, 38/60.

Ellen: 38/60, okay. You got any other, ah, I'll let you, you comment if there is something else that you'd like to, ah, discuss.

Laatsch: Well, I thought I'd like to make a closing statement here; we tried to place an order for dental equipment. And some of the dental offices, of course, had been in practice for some time before they went into the service. But in my case, we, ah, sort of had temporary orders for equipment and when I got out of the service I

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Ellen: Go ahead.

Laatsch: In a closing statement, I'd would, ah, like to say, it was a wonderful experience to be just, after just graduating from dental school, to be working with so many other dentists, that could assist me, or help me, if I needed it. And I certainly have to say I got a lot of experience. I gained confidence. And this is what I certainly needed to go out and have a successful dental practice. And I did have one that was just about fifty years here in Clintonville (Wisconsin).

Ellen: When you got discharged, where did you go?

Laatsch: When I was discharged we, ah, were fortunate. We had my wife's parents, kept us there for, ah, I don't know, two, three weeks.

Ellen: And, where was that?

Laatsch: That was in Marion (Wisconsin) on a farm.

Ellen: And, did you have any children at that time?

Laatsch: And one of the highlights of our being in the service was in 1946 we had our first child, Randy, was born in Indianapolis (Indiana) at the Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. It was wonderful! It was our first child.

Ellen: And, how many children did you and your wife Ruby have?

Laatsch: We had two boys and two girls. And we brought those up at our little house here at 115 North 12th Street, here in Clintonville (Wisconsin).

Ellen: And, how long have you lived at this house?

Laatsch: We built this house in 1950. And it is fifty-eight years old now.

Ellen: And, ah, how long were you married?

Laatsch: We would have been married seventy years; but my wife passed away before, ah, six months before it would have been seventy years.

Ellen: Now, you say, you practiced and lived in Clintonville (Wisconsin) for well over fifty years; you kept your dental practice going. Did you get involved in any veterans' organizations?

Laatsch: I think before I even got out of the car here in Clintonville (Wisconsin), I was asked to join the American Legion, which I did. And last year I got an award for being a continuous member of the Legion for sixty years.

Ellen: And what have you done with the American Legion? What types of activities are you involved in?

Laatsch: Well, I went through the chain of officers; I was the commander for one year. And, ah, I have helped whatever I could. For many years I've been in the parades. I usually carry the American flag, ah, we've, and some of our American Legion members from our Post went to so many American Legion State Conventions. We would always participate in the parade, if they had one. I understand that now, lately, they don't have any parades any more.

Ellen: Okay. Now, I know that you're, ah, have an interest in music, ah, what do you do in the musical field?

Laatsch: Well, I was one of the first members in the Marion High School Band, when they started the band in Marion High School. And then, I.

Ellen: What did you play?

Laatsch: Coronet. And then, I played coronet in the University of Wisconsin Marching Band at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from '34 to '35. And it was, it took place of my phy ed course.

Ellen: Where did you do performances with your coronet at the university? Did you have performances?

Laatsch: Ah, not, ah, outside of playing at a football, that I did. It was just a, ah, phy ed. replacement for me, a phy ed. Course replacement.

Ellen: When you were in the service did you have an opportunity to use, or share, your music.

Laatsch: I think I had maybe a mandolin along there, but, ah, you didn't want to bother the neighbors too much.

Ellen: Okay. (laughs) And how about with the American Legion?

Laatsch: At the American Legion, I, ah, with some other people, I've been playing the American Legion parties and I go to the nursing home once a month and play there.

Ellen: What do you play there? What instrument do you play?

Laatsch: I usually play, ah, button accordion. It's mostly, ah, otherwise, I play, ah, let's see, um, awe the accordion to, ah, I like to play the button accordion.

Ellen: Where did you learn to play that?

Laatsch: Well, um, as you know, in my early days, there was no music outside of the music that you made. And, um, so, probably late in grade school I was already playing the button accordion or a violin. So, we'd go get together with the neighbors and make our own music. And if there was a party someplace, we would be there and do a little playing, or even, once in a while had a barn dance.

Ellen: Did you play with other members of your family, or who did you get together and play with, in terms of music?

Laatsch: Ah, the only person that played was my brother Herman; he was the older brother. And he took violin lessons. It was always enjoyable, for me, to get together with somebody and play a little music.

Ellen: I see that you are wearing a sweatshirt with a golfer on it. Is that something you've done?

Laatsch: Ah, I started playing golf over at Fort Harrison (Indiana). My classmates were playing over there, so, I had to buy a set of golf clubs in Indianapolis. And after I got settled here in Clintonville (Wisconsin) I was a member of the Clintonville Golf Course for sixty years. But, um, the time has come where I guess that I can't play anymore; the ball doesn't want to fly anymore.

Ellen: (laughs) As we're sitting here today on March 28th 2008, tell us how old you are (for those who don't do the math)?

Laatsch: Ah, today, it's the 28th of March, so, I've just exactly two months to get to ninety-three.

Ellen: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Laatsch: Like I say, for me, it was just a wonderful experience. It was getting training, getting confidence, and getting me set up so that I could have a successful dental practice.

Ellen: Okay.

Laatsch: Thank you so very much!

Ellen: I thank you!

[End of interview]

[Comment by interviewer following the interview:]

Ellen: This is recorded on March 31st 2008 by Ellen Bowers Healey. After the interview was completed, Dr. Laatsch handed me the following information, which I'll record: He was volunteer of the year twice for playing music at the nursing homes, the first Tuesday of every month for eleven years. He was Rotarian of the year, perfect attendance for forty-five years, president one year. Dr. Laatsch is a member of the Clintonville Veterans' Park Committee. He is a member of St. Martin's Church for sixty two years in Clintonville (Wisconsin). He is a member of the American Legion Post 63 for many years. After two years in the service, he received orders to report to Germany, however, they were cancelled. This concludes the note, given to me by Dr. Laatsch.

[End of tape]