

Transcription: Tom Applewhite

Today is Thursday, August 18, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and today I'll be interviewing Dr. Applewhite. This interview is being done in person at Dr. Applewhite's residence here in northwest Austin. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it. I know everybody listening to this interview appreciates it.

Tom Applewhite: You're welcome.

More importantly, we appreciate your service to our nation. I know from talking last time a little bit, you were in the Navy and you were a sonarman, but I want to start with your childhood. Tell us a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up before you went in the service.

Tom Applewhite: Well, I was born in Imperial, California, outside of Imperial, California. My dad had a 40-acre farm there. He was purchasing it like everybody was. I had a pretty uneventful life just as a child for the first 10 years at least. I was born in '24 and we left in '34, of course, as everybody had just about because his job was eliminated in the irrigation district he worked as a foreman of the repair and construction gang. He was an ex-Navy man himself. He went back _ .

He would have served then in the 19-teens and early 1920s?

Tom Applewhite: No. He was well before that.

Early 1900s?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. He was 40 years old when I was born in '24.

Did he tell you where he had been in the Navy? Some of the places he had gone?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, he said he'd been to Nicaragua. Remember they had a big uprising?

That's right. There was an insurrection down there.

Tom Applewhite: He said he had to be a referee.

Was he in the Navy during the Spanish-American War?

Tom Applewhite: I don't believe so.

He didn't tell you about that?

Tom Applewhite: No. His recollection seemed to start with a campaign in central South America.

Yeah. Nicaragua. So you grew up there. In an area of a lot of citrus and agriculture.

Tom Applewhite: My dad had a little farm, as I told you, that was irrigated, the lower half of it, because the grade ran south to north, downhill north, 'cause that's where the water all accumulated. So he was a farmer there. So was everybody. Everybody was trying to make a go

of it. He worked there as foreman of this construction gang which was a Mexican foreman who he and his family _

I'm sure in the Depression it was a hard time.

Tom Applewhite: Well _ They provided, for foremen, they provided a tent house. It was one of those Army jobs. You know the boards up about this high, screen the rest of the way, and boards, board floor. And the varmints would get underneath and the dogs. _

You talked to him a lot about being in the Navy. Did that influence your decision to go in the Navy?

Tom Applewhite: Oh yes. But of course. I had told him that I was going in the Navy anyway, because the general economy was really pretty sad. So we packed up all our substances and the like in back of an old Buick, I don't know, '28, '26, '28, a car. He carried all his tools and expected to overhaul it on the road. He had a brother, a younger brother and an older sister, and they lived in western Texas. His brother lived in a little town, in Tahoka, which is about 30 miles south of Lubbock. Due south. It was really a one-horse town. Had an International Harvester dealer, a mortician whose business was run from a hardware store, and he was both of those. He had a dealership with International Harvester.

Did everything yeah?

Tom Applewhite: Did everything. He was pretty much top dog in Tahoka. And he was a nice guy.

That was your uncle?

Tom Applewhite: That was my uncle Cagney. He was Cage Cass Applewhite. He was about five years younger than my father. He was blessed as opposed to people who are living with, because of their diet, with heart disease. So we went back there when I was in the sixth grade and I went to school in Tahoka in the sixth grade. It was so-so. Compared to California's school system, they were rather antiquated. But beggars can't be choosers anyway.

Were you there when the war started?

Tom Applewhite: We were in _ .

You were back out in California?

Tom Applewhite: We were in California.

Were you in high school when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Tom Applewhite: Yes. I was entering my senior year or I was in the midst of my senior year.

Did you know that day that you were going to go in the Navy?

Tom Applewhite: Oh yes. I didn't know when. So I stretched it out to the last month. I read it in November of '45.

The war started in '41.

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. I went in '42. That's when I got out of high school.

I know from talking with you earlier, you said that they had tested you and you did really well on your aptitude test and they made you a sonarman. Tell us a little bit about being a sonarman.

Tom Applewhite: Sonar was kind of in its development stage. The equipment was quite modern and the operator had to sit there and operate the search engine. I had always been pretty handy with my hands and interested in electronics, that kind of stuff. So I scored very high on the tests. So I took the sonar operator's course and was number one in the course, probably because I was known as a musician. Don't ever tell the Navy you're a musician.

Oh, make you a musician, right? That was your worry?

Tom Applewhite: It would end up with a bunch of Filipinos in the band and you would pass ammunition to 'em down below. My dad said, "Don't tell 'em you know anything about music." You can tell 'em you're interested in music, you like music, you don't play anything." So I cooled it, I left my clarinet at home. I had started music very early. My mother was a keen one on music. She had _ to come out to the house. She and my brother had a great big ol' upright piano. She kept it tuned and played it herself. This gal that was a piano teacher from the little town of Imperial, and we only just about four miles out of town, about two north and two east. The piano occupied one wall of our living room. The living room was the complex, I called it that. A board, boards filled the studs and a dirt floor and my mother insisted he pave the living room, put some concrete down. It was pretty funky but I had a decent livelihood. So my mother said one day, she said, "I want you to start playing the piano." I said, "What? I'm only five years old." Well, she said, "An early start's good for you." So here comes Mrs. __, I guess her name was. She was a lovely lady, middle aged like my mother, and a very talented musician. So she began teaching me scales, you know. Scales, arpeggios, the whole bit, and I became a fairly accomplished musician in short order. I think I gave my first recital when I was about six.

Wow, that's great.

Tom Applewhite: I had kind of a natural aptitude for music because I had perfect pitch.

So music, and also electronics came pretty easy to you?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. Electronics because that was the years of electronics. Everybody was interested in what was going on and everybody had a crystal set. When we moved from Imperial, we went back to be with my dad's brother for six months. And we did chores. I painted the house, cleaned the yard, and that kind of work. I got room and board for that. My uncle _ who was my mother's sister's husband. She was Kathleen. My mother was almost six feet tall. Let's see, we'll look at it when we get back there. I'll show you a picture of her. It's in the room. My dad was six feet tall and she stood next to him in bare feet and she was almost as tall. I'll show you that picture. I think it was their wedding picture. It appeared from my niece. My older sister passed last year.

She was 10 years older than you, right?

Tom Applewhite: Yes. She was 10 years older. My mother had married a man named Harry Fishbaugh. So my sister was his daughter. She and I were very close. We were probably closer as half-brother and sister than a lot of kids are as just brother and sister. We moved around and went back to California there where my uncle lived. His name was _ and he was a jolly, oh man, young man. At that time he was a young man. His first child was born a year after I was. His father never failed to tell my cousin that he was an accident. You know, that's a hell of a thing to tell a kid.

To tell a kid. That's right. So he was your cousin?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. He was a nice chubby boy, round face and short. Looked pretty sturdy. I was tall and lanky like my father. You can look at pictures.

Let me ask you about when you graduated from sonar school, you said you were first in your class, and they put you aboard the USS James Ward, James R. Ward?

Tom Applewhite: I went to two schools.

I know you went through the schools.

Tom Applewhite: I went to the operator school and then I was made a 3rd class petty officer from that. That was a real jump from seaman. First class.

Tell us about your memories of the war, especially when you first got aboard the ship.

Tom Applewhite: It was the _ . We were on the first destroyer escort built in the Navy, the James R. Ward. James R. Ward was a hero from Pearl Harbor. He had stayed in the turret of the Battleship Oklahoma. As it slowly capsized, he led his crew out with a flashlight from the turret and he died there. He never came up. So he was one of the first to rate the Medal of Honor.

So it was a brand new ship when you got aboard?

Tom Applewhite: It was being built. See I finished my classes and then I was ___ incidental work in the sonar area there.

And you came to Texas to pick it up, is that right?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, then all of a sudden I got orders. And here I am, 18 years old, 2nd class sonarman with a bunch of rowdy guys, most of 'em are from West Virginia, so I was a moose.

Where was the ship built?

Tom Applewhite: The ship was built in the Brown Shipyard in Houston. It was the first one they turned out. So we took it out on a shakedown cruise.

In the Gulf of Mexico?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. Well, we went to the Gulf of Mexico and then we went around Florida and headed for Norfolk.

That was the homeport for your ship, Norfolk?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. No actually, it turned out to be homeport at the start but then we were moved to the Navy Yard in New York. In Brooklyn. The Navy Yard. That's where we returned to and left from. Had our repairs there.

Do you remember the first time you went out, deployed into the Atlantic during the war? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Tom Applewhite: We were all in _

Your job was to hunt U-boats, is that right?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. This was a hunter-killer group and there were six destroyer escorts. All built in the same shipyard, I believe. Subsequently, they came off the line, in fact, I think a couple of 'em were built in another shipyard. Anyway, what happened was they were sequential numbers and that's the way we formed up there.

When you would go out and do those patrols, were there certain areas they would send you to that there had been high U-boat activities?

Tom Applewhite: We started out as a hunter-killer group overseeing convoys. We would be part of a convoy screen. It's a nine-ship, four on each side and one in the middle. Unfortunately, we were a junior ship, junior commanding officer so we were way out on the end. Port side. But that was all right. That was a good place to be.

Did you guys ever find any U-boats?

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah.

Tell me about the first time you guys found a U-boat. What was that like?

Tom Applewhite: It was like gangbusters. They'd call you at channel four and you would start looking. You'd pick up an echo and then you would use a tool with the impression programmer which is a spiral. Sometimes clockwise, sometimes counterclockwise. And they had it all plotted out.

I know in the movies, they always portray it as a dot on a screen. Is that what you were looking at? A little dot. Was it green? Was it a green screen?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, it was kind of green. It showed a submarine as a five-inch-long echo. They could triangulate and figure out how far away it was.

How would you know if it was friend or foe?

Tom Applewhite: We had code. If it was friend, they would respond with a code.

So if they didn't respond back to you with Morse Code or something. Was it Morse Code that they would send back or did they respond back to your sonar ping?

Tom Applewhite: They would send back a message to the AE. They could send it by radio or by signaling on that ship.

Because when you're on a submarine, you hear the pinging then. You know you're being pinged. So they would know and they would send a message. Hey, we're friends, or whatever.

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. What they'd send you is the code of the day. It changed every day.

So when you hit off one and you didn't get a response so you knew it was enemy? Did you guys sink many of them? Do you remember sinking one?

Tom Applewhite: Well, we got one possibility where we were sent out in the North Atlantic and we went out to where this U-boat was supposed to be. We'd picked up a signal and made a run on it with the hedgehog.

What is a hedgehog?

Tom Applewhite: A hedgehog is a headstone weapon. It would send out a circular pattern, a spiral pattern. It had about 40 . . .

Depth charges?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, but they were about this long, the explosives were.

About two feet?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. Six inches around and it had a little engine on 'em. Peroxide. And you could set 'em to the depth you wanted 'em to go. So we picked up this one on the _ He was up on the surface. _ He dove as we approached. And we, of course, picked him up right away. Made a run on him and _ headstone weapons that a hedgehog would have. This thing that looked like a grand piano, huge thing, on the side of the ship. It had all these spindles on it, in a pattern. That pattern was much like the others, you know, it was spiral.

So it would deploy the depth charges off of that?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. We'd fire the depth charge and then you'd time it and use a stopwatch when you'd fire it. You know how fast it sinks and kaboom. We got one explosion. And there the contact fuses, they're not set for depth, they're set for contact.

It hit something.

Tom Applewhite: It hit the submarine because the next day we were busy picking up oil samples and garbage samples.

So a lot of that came up. It led you to believe that you were able to sink it?

Tom Applewhite: Right. They always give you a maybe. Because the Germans were pretty smart. If they got hit and they managed to isolate the compartment and they'd throw all that stuff out and all the oil and garbage. But we were pretty sure we got that one because we went back and forth over this spot and there was an echo on the bottom.

So that seems pretty convincing.

Tom Applewhite: It's pretty good. That's the way it goes. We'd just started on a convoy duty and they said we would go to EE Group of, this was right after when we first went in service before we ever even went to the homeport. We went north to Norfolk and we didn't go into town. We turned around at the sea buoy and started out. Had the convoy all lined up. It was 105 ships.

That's a big convoy.

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah. Man we were pouring money in, kinda like pouring money down a rat hole, you know _

Did you ever have any ships get torpedoed during the time you were doing the escort duty?

Tom Applewhite: It seemed that it was always, we were always in fear of was _ getting inside the screen and one did, so we were like a Chinese fire drill on a sunken ship and we were getting around her. And really they're running not enough convoys so, you know, if any submarine can make it _ , you know, battered. And the Germans were pretty smart so they . . . this one, he got through the screening and turned around and followed it, picking 'em off the back. So we, of course, ran him down, chased him, chased a lot of 'em but we never got any. He was pretty clever. You know the Germans had very sophisticated electronics and very sophisticated people. I mean, they were real engineers.

They had pretty good crews on the U-boats from what I've read. Their officers and their enlisted were pretty sharp.

Tom Applewhite: Very sharp, yeah. They were the elite of the navy.

Do you remember when they had one of their U-boats captured? Do you remember that incident?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah.

Did that give any extra intelligence or help to you as a sonarman? Because I believe they recovered some of the log books, didn't they? Some of code books and things?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, it was a good thing that they captured that.

I believe that's on display in Chicago now, right? In a museum there you can tour.

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, we toured it. Yeah, the guy, I guess he had on his engines.

He's on the surface, or he surfaced anyway.

Tom Applewhite: He surfaced. Usually a guy would go down and flood the boat and sink which is the prescribed method is don't be caught so they'd . . .

Yeah, scuttle the ship.

Tom Applewhite: Scuttle it. But then this guy made the mistake of thinking he could come to the surface and out-flank 'em, and when he came to the surface, they just blasted the hell out of 'em with surface weapons.

I read too that those U-boats, that the log books were all lead lined so that if they were at surface where they could throw those books over, they'd sink to the bottom.

Tom Applewhite: Yes, dump 'em over. Yeah, they were pretty smart cookies. Those Germans were damn fine engineers, you know.

When did you get to tour the U-boat? Was it in the '50s or do you remember when you first went through that one that's on display? My question is what was that like, getting to tour a U-boat that you may very well have hunted when you were doing the sonar. It's got to be kind of a neat feeling, right?

Tom Applewhite: Good feeling, particularly since we had participated in several sinkings when we were screening for the USS Pogue. After our group formed up, we were told we had six ships serviceable, and about ready for service. We ran a convoy back and forth. We did the first one was, well, right after our shakedown. We went to . . . It was a rag-tag operation, had two sea-going Coast Guard cutters were the senior men in this convoy. Three minesweepers, U.S., and the rest of the screen was made up of four-stack destroyers from World War I. They spent, see our range was 21 days at cruising speed. Pretty nice.

Without refueling?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. They're very exceptional compared to the steam ships. So we would run along, go across on one filling, you know. I mean we'd fill up and run across without refueling, and then we'd refuel there and get back. The convoys ran the same speed in both directions which was not to our liking 'cause we were . . . and the poor ol' sailors on those other convoy ships really pitched and rolled on the way back.

I've heard about that.

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah, they were in ballast and they were ballasted down to keep the water line like they were and they were full.

As a sonarman, tell us a little bit about a typical shift during one of your patrols. Would you be at the sonar eight hours at a time or 12 or were you . . . ?

Tom Applewhite: I was a senior petty officer so I was the operator at general quarters. And there was a time I was assigned to the electronics division. In other words, when I was second class I was working in the radar _ everything. Had to learn how to do all those things as well as maintaining the sonar equipment.

So the guys that were beneath you in rank that were sonarmen, how many would be manning a sonar at one time?

Tom Applewhite: Two.

Two. How long would their shifts normally be?

Tom Applewhite: Four on and four off.

Four on and four off just continuously?

Tom Applewhite: And I generally didn't stand watch. I slept on the flying bridge. They had an officers' quarters which was just a bunk, and I had it. And it was occupied, usually occupied by the officer of the deck _ going down to their quarters so it worked out that I would use it when I was for night time because I could be called immediately. Usually when I was on the flying bridge fellow, and they just opened the hatch and dragged me out of it. And I got plenty of calls out but we . . . It was interesting. We went to Casablanca, toured the prince's harem. We went to Gibraltar, and went to North Africa, various places.

How was the food on board ships? Pretty decent?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, it was acceptable. We had big freezers and we kept frozen meats, and when we could get 'em, we ate lots of vegetables. The rest of the time we ate canned stuff, of course.

How about mail? Did mail come pretty consistently?

Tom Applewhite: No. Mail came whenever they got it.

Whenever they could catch up to you, that type of thing?

Tom Applewhite: Usually we got mail once in our, once we'd be in the middle of our three weeks. See we ran a three-week pattern. We'd go out for three weeks there with the ship, putter around, do maintenance, turn around, and go pick up our return convoy.

Back to Norfolk, or back to Brooklyn?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. We usually unloaded those at Norfolk. Most of the convoys formed up and left from Norfolk. And we had huge operations there.

Yeah, they still do.

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, it was . . .

Did you ever escort any ships out of Newport up in Rhode Island?

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah, but we picked 'em up wherever we could, wherever we should. Our pattern was just we went, we went over, and then turned around after refueling, repairs, etcetera, and came back to Norfolk. And there we went in, delivered the ships, and if anybody had to be taken off for medical reasons, it would have been there. But generally, we dropped the convoy at the sea buoy and take off for New York because our homeport then was Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Where were you on V-E Day? Do you remember Victory in Europe Day, where you were?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, on V-E Day I was 700 miles off the coast of North America running a, we were running a pattern. We had a ship every couple of miles in a line about, off shore about 700 miles, and we were going back and forth in our designated sector. And it prevented suicide. They feared that some of these guys would try to sneak through and be heroes, you know, and get in there. So they had a fairly deep pattern and a close pattern.

Did you learn about it over the radio? Did the captain come on the ship's radio and announce it? How did you learn?

Tom Applewhite: It passes around orders. They had orders of the day and the lead petty officers would pass it out to the groups.

So everybody was pretty elated at that point?

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah, we were happy. The guys who were the happiest were those who were in port.

Yeah, I'm sure.

Tom Applewhite: But my wife had gone with all her buddies. She was a high schooler, you know. She had to go and see the V-E Day, whatever went on.

Where was your wife at that time?

Tom Applewhite: She was at home.

Was she in Brooklyn?

Tom Applewhite: No, she lived in Pelham Bay which is the end of the IRT line that runs north from the heart of the city and goes out on . . .

Pelham Bay, New York?

Tom Applewhite: To Pelham Bay, New York, yeah.

Is that up in, kind of, Dutchess County area?

Tom Applewhite: It's right, she lived in one house one stop from the end of that elevated line. Pelham Bay is a big resort area, and we used to go across just on a car ride. I was _ had a car and we'd take the ETL and then we'd go over to City Island, and right there it's a straight shot across from . . .

Did she go down to Times Square that day? I know that was a famous place to celebrate.

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah, I think they all had to go to Times Square.

That's great. After the war had ended in Europe, were you going to be sent to the Pacific?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, we put in to the Navy Yard in New York for all the rough work. They took off all the, see we only had hedgehog and we had eight, four _ .

They took those off?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, they took everything off except the rear cracked ones. They took the torpedo tubes off 'cause we had torpedo tubes up on the flying bridge, because a torpedo is pretty effective against a submarine.

So was your ship in the Navy Yard when the war ended in Japan?

Tom Applewhite: No. We were in route. What happened was we ran, the division went together, all together, to _ , and that's when I convinced Harriet's mother, and I asked her to marry me. So we had a wedding there in that little church.

In New York?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, on Pelham Bay. And we went on a week, she had a week off so I had time off, and we went to New York City. Stayed at a first-class hotel.

That's great. What hotel did you stay in, do you remember?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, I should remember. I'll come up with it.

Yeah, I know there were a lot of fancy hotels in New York back then.

Tom Applewhite: It was on Fifth Avenue so there was hotel row, more or less, hotel row. My father-in-law drove a limousine at times. He was on a retainer with a guy he worked for. The guy he worked for had plenty of money, and he owned a repair service called _ or something like that. You know, repair and maintenance. So he was a good mechanic. My father-in-law was a very talented tool and die man. He learned it from his parents, from his father, back then in the good ol' days.

Now when the war ended, did you stay in the Navy very long or did you have enough points to get out?

Tom Applewhite: I had enough points to get out very early, of course. But the get-out was always at the discretion of the commanding officer. And so I was the last chief, radar chief, I think, to find . . .

So you were on the war the entire time?

Tom Applewhite: Yup. The final watch, I sat watch with a engineering officer, and so I was running the ship in essence because we were partners in running the ship. He could give all the orders that he wanted to but I was figuring out where we were going. And we had to go to Jacksonville, Florida.

Mayport Naval Station?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, where they had all those on the Green-something river. They had all these oddball ships, and they had been mothballed and then sent up there. And I got off the ship when it hit Jacksonville. They gave me a private ride in to the dock. They just slowed down and I jumped on the thing they had and they took me over to the naval station at Jacksonville. So I stayed there about three to four days.

So that was it for the war though then? You were the main crew and then you were there at the end too. It was mothballed and I guess scrapped at some point?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, probably. They had a whole river full.

I'm sure.

Tom Applewhite: I'm sure they were melted down probably. I think we could probably recover all the working parts from the big reciprocating diesel head, 10 cylinder, I guess it's about that big around and it had upper crankshaft and lower crankshaft, and they were firing that way, and it had a very efficient engine. We could do about 28 knots or more.

When you got out of the Navy, did you know at that time you wanted to go to college?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, I did a little bit. So did everybody else.

Were you able to use the GI Bill?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. So I went to, since I couldn't really get, I went out to Columbia. They just laugh at ya.

So you got into Columbia?

Tom Applewhite: No. I said they just laughed at ya.

Oh, laughed at you, okay.

Tom Applewhite: _ . And so I said to my wife, "I think I'll work for a while and decide what I want to do. So the first day _ , I went to _ . I went to it under the GI Bill to _ radio school and I learned how to do all that maintenance and stuff. But it wasn't the deal that I wanted to pursue because there were too many, too much competition right after the war. So I worked at Dunn and Bradstreet. My wife worked out on the west side of . . .

West side of Manhattan?

Tom Applewhite: Manhattan, down in the business district. And I was down that way too 'cause we'd go together. I would get off wherever I got off, 22nd Street maybe, something like that, where Dunn and Bradstreet had their big offices, and I operated the mimeograph. Those were the days.

Sure.

Tom Applewhite: So it paid a buck ten an hour, whatever. The going rate then was about that I guess. And I talked to several people about opportunities. I had one old guy that was really enthusiastic about me going in with him and he'd provide the money and we would go into the ship repair business. I said, "I don't think so. There's a million sonarmen out there, and I ain't doing that."

Where did you end up ultimately going to college?

Tom Applewhite: Cal Tech. That is kind of a long story too. I went to work right away working with my father. He eventually went to California. He went to California because he wrote me a letter and said he had passed the gas fitters state exam, and so he had a license to do gas fitting and all that stuff and that I could.

California was booming after the war, right? There was a big boom.

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah. We made pretty good money out of that. And he was, he was about 63, I guess. No, he was younger than that because, well, yeah, I bet he must have been 63 then. He was 61 when the war started.

So you moved to California. Where were you living in California at that point?

Tom Applewhite: In El Monte. When we first got there we were living in a, we lived downstairs in a _. It had two bedrooms, bath and kitchen, or just kind of had a floor next to the garage, attached to the garage, on top of this two-story house, you know. And its upper floor was three bedroom, two bath, kitchen, dining area, and porch. You know, kind of a sun porch.

Now getting into Cal Tech was quite an accomplishment, right? To be accepted there?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, _ I said to myself, I would really have to have a review of everything if I'm going to get in that school. So that was my target, Cal Tech. _ I had Occidental also, some of those schools in . . .

Yeah, that's a good school.

Tom Applewhite: That were highly rated. UCLA, I interviewed in East County and to . . .

After you graduated from Cal Tech, you got your doctorate at some point too, didn't you?

Tom Applewhite: Stayed there.

Same school?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. Here's the way it worked. I went to Pasadena City College for three years to catch up with everything, be prepared to go to, transfer to Cal Tech. And when I got in, transferred as a junior 'cause that's the way they worked it, you know. Whether you get in at other times but it was a two-year thing. So I worked that one out, graduated in the top percent in my class at Pasadena City College. I went to and talked to my adviser and said, "I really would like to go to Cal Tech." He said, "Yeah, you can get in there. Just study up on all the stuff you did." So I had done very well at Pasadena City College.

Yeah, being number one, I guess so.

Tom Applewhite: Well, that was usually my _.

Well, you had done the same in your sonar school as well, right? You finished first as a sonarman.

Tom Applewhite: All those courses. In everything I took, I usually tried to be in the top five percent. I tell people that I took two years of college physics from an old man named Forrester. And Forrester had a reputation that nobody ever made an A from his class. I said, "You old son of a bitch." I got an A.

Really? Wow. So you really felt like you'd earned it then obviously.

Tom Applewhite: I put up.

What did you do after you got your doctorate? Did you teach?

Tom Applewhite: I went directly to Dow Chemical, and Dow had a western region _ office and stuff in Pittsburg, California.

Where is Pittsburg, California?

Tom Applewhite: It's due east of San Francisco.

Okay, kind of that Contra Costa area?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah, in Contra Costa County, and we bought a small . . . First we rented a house when we first got there, and then we found a little house there in a real small subdivision in an old walnut orchard on the end of a turn-around.

Cul-de-sac?

Tom Applewhite: Cul-de-sac, yeah. And we bought that house for 23 four, and we sold it for 10,000 more than that. And we bought another house at the same price we sold ours for, and we bought a nice, auto dealer house who was being transferred down to Stockton to a Ford dealership. So he had a classy house. Four bedroom and two baths, big swimming pool in the back yard. It had all the whole ball of wax, you know? My next door neighbor was a physician.

How long were you with Dow? Did you work your whole career with Dow?

Tom Applewhite: Two years. This particular arm of Dow used Ph.D.s as lab assistants, and so I learned that more advanced people were looking for opportunities, and so right around then was when the USDA was really booming and expanding. And they were expanding into the vegetable oil business, chemistry of castor oil and, you know, industrial oils. And everybody _ . I was the lead petty officer, first man hired, for this little, this small group, and it ended up to be about 10 or 15 people, men and women together. And I walked in and worked my tail off and stayed at eye level and got promoted fast. I had gotten up as high as . . .

I was going to ask you, your doctorate was in chemistry?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah.

So you're considered a chemist or a chemical engineer? Which?

Tom Applewhite: Organic chemist.

How did you end up in Texas?

Tom Applewhite: Well, long story. Went to Texas first when we were commissioned 'cause we boarded our ship out of Houston. I horsed around and got acquainted with Houston.

Yeah, I knew you had lived in West Texas a little bit as a child. So we knew about that.

Tom Applewhite: Then eastern Texas, it's more interesting. And from there our ship was built there so we went to New Orleans, got familiar with New Orleans that way. And then we'd go back to New Orleans on occasion.

What was it that brought you into Austin? Did you end up working here for a corporation?

Tom Applewhite: Let me see. My daughter and her husband had worked, he was the _ prison administration. And so he moved, had to move to Austin because that's where the headquarters of that, and he was one of the six people that ran that.

So your daughter and son-in-law are here, so that's why you're in Austin?

Tom Applewhite: Yes, they're still here in the same general place. But it was kind of funny that Pam graduated with good marks and good reputation, and she went to work for John Sealy Hospital in Galveston. She was head surgery nurse in the head department, in the brain part. And she said it was just like, the operating room was just like MASH. Crazy as hell. So she got a real introduction to the nitty there, and then when she and her husband were married, she moved out to Huntsville for the state prison. She stayed there about 10 years.

Yeah, that makes sense if you worked in the prison.

Tom Applewhite: That's where he went to school. He went to . . .

Sam Houston State?

Tom Applewhite: Yeah. And so we went up there to visit some. We'd go there. We'd fly or take a plane. We never drove except the days when we'd normally a load of stuff for the kids. We'd drive.

Sir, I really appreciate you taking time to let me interview you like this. We have archives at the Land Office that go back hundreds of years. We have David Crockett's widow's original land grant. We have the registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of all the original settlers, and this interview is going to be added to the archives so that potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to this and learn something from it.

Tom Applewhite: I can provide you with . . . I have all the paperwork.

Oh yeah, I'd love to get some copies of that, and Mary can help.

Tom Applewhite: I got my discharge from the Navy.

Or even just photographs and things of that sort would be great. But what I wanted to ask you, sir, is with posterity in mind, is there anything you would want to say to anybody listening to this interview potentially a hundred years from now about your service in the Navy or anything along those lines?

Tom Applewhite: It was an opportunity on the road to a very _ life. It was one of the stepping stones because I went from I went to work for my dad. He died. I sold, and in the meantime, Harriet's father and mother had come out there and settled down because they had lived there before earlier, and they bought a house about six to eight blocks away from us in Prospect Heights.

In addition to being a stepping stone, you also helped defeat the Nazis which I think everyone is pretty grateful for as well.

Tom Applewhite: Oh yeah. I think after that, we didn't do much. We did nothing in the Japanese war really.

But you did a lot with what your job was, helping defeat the U-boats and everything. I want to thank you from Commissioner Patterson, everybody at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service to our nation. This program is just one small way of saying thanks.

Tom Applewhite: Well, I appreciate it.

In about a couple weeks we're going to be sending you copies of this interview on CDs that you can keep some or give them to your family or friends. And we'll also send a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson in a binder.

Tom Applewhite: I can provide you with all the pictures.

Sure, absolutely. And you've got my card there and my phone number, and just give me a call anytime. It's got my address on there and everything.

Tom Applewhite: What would you like?

You can send us any pictures you want. We can scan them and make copies and send them back to you or anything like that.

Tom Applewhite: Or I can do it too. I can scan.

Yes sir. I really appreciate your time, and it's been an honor talking to you today. Thank you.