

Transcription: Ray Chappell

Today is Friday, October 25, 2013. This morning I'm interviewing Mr. Ray Chappell. We're at the William Courtney Texas State Veterans Home in Temple, Texas. This interview is being recorded in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Ray Chappell: Well, you're certainly welcome.

It's an honor for us, sir. Sir, the first question I always start with in these interviews is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Ray Chappell: Okay. I was raised in Pearsall, Texas, south of San Antonio, for the first five years. Then I went to Lubbock. My dad was put on the staff at Texas Tech as head of the Ag Ed Department. I was just a little boy, five years old. I grew up and graduated from Lubbock High School. Then I went on to Texas Tech and in the middle of my junior year or sophomore year . . . I guess it was junior, I was drafted into the Navy. Went to the Navy and . . .

What year was this, sir?

Ray Chappell: This was 1950.

1950?

Ray Chappell: Yes.

Okay. You were drafted even though you were in college? They drafted you?

Ray Chappell: Well, they did. I don't know why but they did. My grades were good.

What did you think when you were drafted? Were you surprised?

Ray Chappell: Yeah. My dad was kind of surprised too. I thought it might be a good idea because I would get out of the service in four years and then I would go back to college.

You had the GI Bill.

Ray Chappell: I had the GI Bill and I would go back to college and I would finish. That was my plan. Well, it so happened that when I went in the Navy, after I went to boot camp in San Diego, I went to New York and got on a ship call the USS Maury.

USS Murray?

Ray Chappell: M-A-U-R-Y.

Okay. What was your specialty at that point?

Ray Chappell: I was a surveyor.

Surveyor. Okay.

Ray Chappell: Uh-huh. I was a geodetic surveyor.

Okay. How did you get that specialty?

Ray Chappell: I got that specialty because I studied geology and surveying in college.

So it had to have been a pretty unique occupation to hold in the Navy. There couldn't have been that many of you aboard that ship that did that work.

Ray Chappell: No, there weren't. And my specialty was surveying under the water in the Persian Gulf and I did that for about eight months, I guess.

What type of ship was the Maury? Was it like a surveying type ship?

Ray Chappell: Geodetic surveying ship. And it was technical, for technical people. I was real glad to be on it.

Sounds like a special crew.

Ray Chappell: Yes, it had a special crew of college graduates and college-educated people. I was very special to get on it, I think.

What was a typical deployment like for you then aboard the Maury? I guess you had a lot of equipment that allowed you to test the depths and that sort of thing?

Ray Chappell: That's exactly what I did. Check the depths of the ocean as we went across the Atlantic. I did that all the way across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean. Then when we got into the Red Sea I guess I was relieved of that. I don't remember. Then I went on to Aden, Arabia, which is south Arabia.

Saudi Arabia now.

Ray Chappell: And then around Arabia to the Persian Gulf. And I was there for several months. I don't remember exactly how long.

This was in the early 1950s?

Ray Chappell: Yes, in the '50s. And I really enjoyed it. It was technical work. It was the kind of work I was used to doing in college and I really enjoyed it.

What was a typical day like for you aboard the Maury? What type of shifts would you work?

Ray Chappell: I would get up in the morning and have breakfast with the guys. I like to be with people so I had a lot of inner . . .

You got along well with the crew.

Ray Chappell: I get along real good with everybody. And then I would go to work and sometimes I would have people that worked with me and for me. And I worked with college graduates that were professional people that were not military.

Okay. So civilian employees. Okay.

Ray Chappell: So I had a good time. It was wonderful. And then I came back and I was supposed to come back to New York on a little relief and then I was supposed to stay there for a week or so and then catch the Maury back again for Arabia. Well, it so happened that when I was halfway across the Atlantic I was in a storm, in a hurricane, I guess. We were in the high seas and the ship was tossing every which way.

The ship you were on wasn't a very big ship was it?

Ray Chappell: Three hundred and fifty feet.

That's pretty small.

Ray Chappell: Pretty small. About as small as it gets in the Navy. And I was carrying a box of something, and I don't remember what it was, down a ladder on the ship, and I got from one floor to another halfway on this ladder, carrying this box, and it made a big toss and I fell on my knees and spilled everything. And I was injured and I got put in the military hospital there on the ship because my knees were completely out.

Wow. That sounds pretty painful.

Ray Chappell: It was very painful for me. And so when I got to New York they decided to put me at Saint Albans Naval Hospital in Saint Albans, New York, which is a hospital for naval personnel. And I got put over there for about four months.

That's a long time.

Ray Chappell: They tried to repatriate me.

Did they do surgeries on your knees?

Ray Chappell: No, they didn't, but they did all kinds of testing. And they didn't do surgery.

What was the final verdict of what had happened?

Ray Chappell: The final verdict was I was not repatriatable, however you say that. They sent me home to my home in Lubbock, Texas, and I was there for about five months before I went back to school. And I ended up going back to The University of Texas for further training.

Okay. Instead of Texas Tech?

Ray Chappell: Instead of Texas Tech. I went back to The University of Texas. And then I decided I wanted to go back to Tech because that's where my heart was. Then I changed back to Texas Tech and graduated from Texas Tech.

So you were discharged from the Navy after?

Ray Chappell: I was discharged from the Navy with an honorable discharge. Medical with honorable. A hundred percent, so I was . . .

Were you able to walk after that?

Ray Chappell: Not very well. I did but I had to walk with a walker.

How old were you? You had to have been a young man.

Ray Chappell: I was 22, I think. So I've been kind of this way all my life.

Did they say what happened? Did it break your knees?

Ray Chappell: It injured my knees real bad. I really injured them bad. And I went to Dr. Herbert Maruyama, the surgeon for the Denver Broncos football team up in Denver, Colorado. He looked at it. He looked at both of them and decided the left knee was more injured than the right knee. So he operated on the left knee and gave me a partial knee replacement. He was very careful not to overdo it. I got well from that pretty well where I could walk again.

That's good.

Ray Chappell: And then, about four years ago I had a stroke and the stroke left me pretty well incapacitated and put in a wheelchair. And then I ended up falling one day in my room in a nursing home and broke my hip.

Yeah, that's rough.

Ray Chappell: I broke my hip in two places so I don't have a real happy time in the Navy but I liked being in the Navy and I enjoyed being . . . I really wanted to stay for four years or maybe a lifetime, I didn't know.

And you got the GI Bill after that.

Ray Chappell: Yes, I got the GI Bill and I finished college and everything just worked out fine for me.

After you graduated from college did you do more geological type work, similar to what you had done in the Navy?

Ray Chappell: I went to work for several oil companies.

That makes sense.

Ray Chappell: First with Exxon and then I changed over to Union Oil of California. And I worked for about 15 years with them. Then I finally went independent and I decided I would do everything I was capable of doing independently. So I decided I would do that. Then after a while, physically I broke down.

It's good that you were able to have a career that was similar to what you done, I guess, in the Navy. It kind of just continued on with some of the things you might have learned. When you were in the Navy, after you went through basic training in San Diego and you got assigned your specialty, did they send you to a specialty school?

Ray Chappell: I was a Navy draftsman.

Okay. Where did you go for that?

Ray Chappell: I went to Saint Albans, New York. Excuse me, I went to California, north of Los Angeles. I can't think of the name of the place.

Port Hueneme?

Ray Chappell: Port Hueneme. I went there for that. And then I was transferred to Norfolk, Virginia. Then from there to New York.

During that time you got specialty training.

Ray Chappell: Yes, I got specialty training.

Being a draftsman and being to do the . . . ?

Ray Chappell: I've had very good specialty training all my life and the Navy has been very, very good to me.

So that's good. You were one that was able to go in the Navy and add to a skill that helped you later on in the civilian life. You know, you hear some guys say, "Well, I was just a swabbie," or whatever, "didn't apply to what I did what I got out," and that sort of thing. In your case, you were able to.

Ray Chappell: I was a second class seaman. I would have gone on to be a little higher if I could have stayed in there longer.

Oh sure, you could have been a chief or something if you had stayed in long enough. If you did a career.

Ray Chappell: I think so. I was on my way. Certainly had the ability. And the officers on the ship kind of took me under their wing and they helped me.

There's even a chance, if you had stayed in, you might have gone to Officer Candidate School at some point, made commission.

Ray Chappell: In fact, I was trying to get through the Navy Air Patrol.

Because you already had a couple of years of college which I'm sure the average young draftee in the Navy wouldn't have had any college. Especially in the early '50s. So you probably would have been well set up for that. When you got back home to Lubbock, did you end up later getting married, any of that sort of thing?

Ray Chappell: Yes, I got married in 1950, and since you said that, today is my anniversary.

Really? Well, congratulations.

Ray Chappell: Fifty-five years today, to the same woman, to the love of my life. She and I have been together all these years. She's my one and only.

That's great. So it's actually today?

Ray Chappell: Today. October 25th.

So did you get married before you went into the Navy? Or right around that time?

Ray Chappell: I got married after I got out of the Navy.

After you got out, okay.

Ray Chappell: In 1958.

'58. Yes sir.

Ray Chappell: And I got out in 1952.

'52. Okay, great. Well, that's excellent. I guess you had a chance to share your stories through the years with your wife about your time in the Navy.

Ray Chappell: I have but I don't really talk about it a lot. To me it's past and I try to stay in the future.

Sure, that makes sense. Well, one thing we try to do at the Land Office though is to save these stories from the past for the future, for future generations. We have at the Land Office the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of the settlers that came to Texas. And we have the land grant that Davy Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. So our goal is to take these interviews and add them into that archive for posterity. So hopefully, a hundred, two hundred years from now somebody might listen to this interview or all the other interviews we've done.

Ray Chappell: Now that you mention that I hadn't even thought about this but in 19 . . . I can't remember exactly what year it was, but I spent four years working for the General Land Office in Austin.

You did? So you're a GLO . . .

Ray Chappell: I'm a geologist from the General Land Office.

That's great.

Ray Chappell: So I've had a lot of experience and a lot of ability and lot of training, lot of people that worked with me.

What years were you at the General Land Office? 1960s? '70s?

Ray Chappell: I think '60 to '64. I'm not sure.

Who was the land commissioner at that time? Was Earl Rudder the commissioner?

Ray Chappell: It wasn't Earl Rudder. It was . . . I can't think what his name is. He was kind of a reprobate. It was guy from east Texas.

It wasn't Bascom Giles?

Ray Chappell: No.

Because he had the big scandal, I think in the '50s. I'll have to look him up.

Ray Chappell: This was a guy from east Texas and he ran a real tight schedule and he got real upset if he found you as an employee outside the building. So if I went over to the capitol building to mail a letter and he caught me, which he did one day . . .

Really? The commissioner himself.

Ray Chappell: He really did climb over me.

Wow. Wow.

Ray Chappell: So I thought that was kind of interesting.

Yeah, that's not very good.

Ray Chappell: I took it well.

What building, were you all in the building there on 11th and Congress, right by the capitol at that point?

Ray Chappell: It was to the east of the capitol building. It was the Land Office building.

Okay. The De Zavala Building? Is that the one?

Ray Chappell: I don't what it was called.

There's a building now that's the State Archives building that I think the Land Office might have been in at that point. I'll have to look it up. We've got a poster somewhere in there at the Land Office. It has the different buildings that the Land Office has been in through the years.

Ray Chappell: I don't think it was on 11th Street.

If you are on the one directly to the east of the capitol.

Ray Chappell: The new one.

I know what you're talking about.

Ray Chappell: It was a new one at the time.

Because the one we're in now, the Stephen F. Austin Building, was built in the '70s. I think around '73 or '74. So if you were there in the early '60s and you said it was directly east of the capitol, I know what building you're talking about. I think that's the one that's the archives building now.

Ray Chappell: I'm not sure what year that was though. I can't remember. See that's one thing that happened to me when I had the stroke. I have trouble with my memory. Memory has gotten me down sometimes.

Well, you've got a pretty good memory though, I think.

Ray Chappell: I have fair memory but I forget things and I get things mixed up sometime. But I think whatever I've told you here is correct.

Well, I think it's great that you also have worked at the General Land Office because that's who we work for with this program. Because the Veterans Land Board is part of the General Land Office.

Ray Chappell: Excuse me, Earl Rudder just came to me.

So it was Earl Rudder?

Ray Chappell: It was Earl Rudder.

So Earl Rudder was the one that jumped over you for mailing the letter?

Ray Chappell: Yeah, he jumped over me, but he jumped on everybody.

That's great.

Ray Chappell: But he was good guy. I liked him.

There's a book that came out about him recently.

Ray Chappell: I didn't know that.

Yeah, he was a pretty well-decorated war hero during World War II and led a raider unit and he took over after Bascom Giles had been removed, basically removed from office. Bascom Giles had been caught in a land fraud scheme with veterans where veterans who didn't know what they were doing, getting them to sign paperwork on land loans, and then basically embezzling that money from those veterans, and a lot of fraud.

Ray Chappell: It's obviously wrong.

Oh yeah. He got caught and I think to this day Bascom Giles is the only elected official in Texas to go directly from being in office to being in prison. He went to Huntsville. So Commissioner Patterson likes to tell those stories sometimes.

Ray Chappell: That's a shame.

Oh, it was horrible. That's part of the reason why I think Rudder came in was to clean house and get rid of the corruption.

Ray Chappell: Earl Rudder was a good man. He was tough as a boot.

Sounds like it if he was getting on you for mailing a letter.

Ray Chappell: He'd get on you for everything, I mean you could just walk down the hall on the wrong side of the . . . He'd get on you and he'd say, "You going this way, like in a car, you're supposed to be over on the right." He'd get after me about everything.

And you worked in the geology?

Ray Chappell: I was a geologist with one other geologist at the time.

What did they have you doing there? Would you go out and do a lot of surveys or were you working in the office reviewing . . . ?

Ray Chappell: I was working in the office the whole time.

Were you reviewing maps and surveys and things?

Ray Chappell: Right. I had all the geological maps that the General Land Office put out. I had all the expertise. There was a lot of expertise there. But it was a wonderful job and I loved it but it came to an end.

So when you left there did you go back to Lubbock then at that point?

Ray Chappell: I was there but I was married at the time. It was '55, I think. I got married in '50. I hope I have these right.

I think you told me you got married in '58.

Ray Chappell: I got married in '58. That's right. My wife and I . . . I was there at the General Land Office and she was there with the ladies in the auxiliary.

Did she work at the Land Office too?

Ray Chappell: No, she didn't work. We were raising our child.

Okay. Did you live in Austin?

Ray Chappell: We lived in Austin, right close to the university, and it was fun.

Easy drive to work, I guess, if you were by the university.

Ray Chappell: Only half a mile from the office.

That's great. That's great. I know people will like hearing this interview at the Land Office too. Especially talking about Earl Rudder and your memories of working there as a geologist.

Ray Chappell: Yeah. I worked there with another geologist and right offhand, I can't recall his name. But he was a real smart fella and I enjoyed being with him because I enjoyed being around intelligent people who were very knowledgeable.

And skilled too.

Ray Chappell: And very skilled.

That's great. And now you're here at the Courtney Home which is run by the General Land Office.

Ray Chappell: That's right.

That's kind of an interesting note.

Ray Chappell: My daughter lives over in Belton and my wife lives over in Belton.

That's very close then. That's good.

Ray Chappell: And my wife is . . . One of the things I want to do is . . . I'm taking therapy here. What time is it right now?

Nine-forty.

Ray Chappell: I'm late for my therapy.

What time does your therapy start?

Ray Chappell: Nine-thirty.

Okay, we'll wrap it up then so you can get to it.

Ray Chappell: Okay, and I'm trying to learn to walk again with a walker and if I accomplish that, well then my wife wants me to come back and live with her.

That's a good goal to shoot for.

Ray Chappell: But she said, "Right now, I can't take care of you." She said, "If you fall, what would I do?"

Sure.

Ray Chappell: And I understand her feelings.

No. That's very wise of her. I think there's a lot of people that wouldn't be that wise. They would think they could do it all on their own when they can't and that could be bad. So it sounds like she's thought it out.

Ray Chappell: She's a better thinker than I am right now.

That's good. I think that's a good goal. You've got something good to shoot for and it's great too that there so close.

Ray Chappell: Yeah, they're real close and that's one of the reasons I'm here. They wanted to get me back over here. I was in five different veterans homes before I was here.

Good. Well, we're glad you're here now. Hopefully you like it.

Ray Chappell: My daughter is my Power of Attorney and she takes care of everything because I have trouble with that sort of thing now. So she's kept working trying to get me closer to where they are.

Well, I've always heard great things about this home and every time I've been up here every veteran I've talked to has always said it's a pretty good home.

Ray Chappell: I've been pleased with it.

That's good. Excellent. Well, I don't want to keep you from your therapy session because I know that's a big goal to shoot for.

Ray Chappell: This is the big thing in me. I'm not here because I'm . . . Well, I'm here because I'm old, I guess, but I'm not . . . I'm 84 but I want to learn to walk again with a walker. If I do that, well then I've accomplished what I came here for.

I don't want to keep you any longer but sir, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson at the Land Office and everybody else that works there, we want to thank you for your service to our nation and for letting us record this interview. In a couple of weeks we're going to send you copies of this interview on CDs along with a letter and certificate of appreciation signed by Commissioner Patterson.

Ray Chappell: Wonderful.

So be looking for that in a couple of weeks. Those CDs are ones you can give to your wife or your family and friends, that sort of thing. It's just a small token of the State of Texas saying thank you to you for your service as a veteran.

Ray Chappell: I appreciate this so much. Thank you so much.

We appreciate you sir.

Ray Chappell: I had no idea what I was coming in here for.

Oh really? You thought you were in trouble?

Ray Chappell: No, I knew I wasn't in trouble because I don't do anything that would cause me to be in trouble.

I'm glad somebody saw fit to have us interview you today. Thank you very much sir. It's been an honor.

Ray Chappell: Thank you James. Thank you sir.