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JH

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Plum Senior Community Center

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Interviewer's Note

A dairy farm and coal mining. Welsh origins. Three boys in the family; all served in World War II; all came back. As the Allies under Generals Hodges and Patton advanced into Germany, a sniper's bullet sent him back to England to recuperate. Riveting War stories, told previously only to family but here told publicly. In more peaceful times the family bought themselves a race car and raced for a number of years—close calls? “Oh yeah, we had plenty.” Bragging rights—he feels he has “majority rights” to Plum, having been born there in

1926. And he adds, “It's been quite a life.”

Interview

bc: Do you live in Plum?

JH: I live in Plum: I feel that I have “majority rights” to Plum because I was born in Plum in 1926. I was born in Renton, Pennsylvania, a coal-mining village, March 7, 1926.

The beginning of my conversation will have to be “hear-say” from my mother and father.

bc: Of course. That's fine.

JH: I was born on Front Street in Renton in a duplex house. We lived there until I was about three-years-old. The reason for us leaving there was the fact that the coal mines were being organized by the unions and there was quite a bit of strife. My mother told me there were a lot of fist-fights and some shootings because of the union trying to break in to a non-union [workplace]. The coal mine itself owned the whole town. Anybody who was non-union could move into one of the houses and work there and participate in the company store—get their groceries on tick [a credit account], pay for it whenever it came due. But, because of the strike, my mother particularly was afraid that my Dad would get hurt and she coaxed him into moving out of Renton. He, in turn, went to Crawford County—in the Meadville area of Pennsylvania—and he made an agreement with an old man there to take over a 190-acre dairy farm.

I'm the youngest of four children: three boys and a girl. The dairy farm took lots and lots of work [on the part of] my two older brothers and my father. At the time

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I was too small, too young to get involved in much of the manual labor, but it came along in due time. We stayed there from about 1930 to 1939.

My parents worked from before daylight till after dark, [six] days a week. My two older brothers were old enough to milk the cows and do the fieldwork.... I was quite young, but I did have chores, things that I had to do. My two brothers—because of milking cows by hand—they had grips like you couldn't imagine. [bc chuckles at this.] They'd grab me and squeeze and I'd scream....

Eventually [my father] had to give up the dairy farm because it was just too much for him: when you start out to plow a ten acre field with a 14"-wide plow and two horses...it takes some time. Like I said, he just worked from before daylight till after dark every day—except Sunday. He took Sundays off. My mother did too. They were religious, Methodists.

Franklin Roosevelt was a Godsend to get us out of the Depression because he formed the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the CCC (the Civil Conservation Corps), the REA (the Rural Electrification Administration).... My oldest brother—at the time he was 18—he went with the CCC for a period. (I don't recall how long he was there.) (REA started to run the electrical lines past our farm. We had no electricity. My mother had a Maytag gas-fired washing machine. Previous to that she had a scrub-board. She did wonders to keep the family together and keep everything going.) My brother came back from the CCC and he got a job with the REA, hand-digging holes for those poles: hand-digging at 40 cents-an-hour. And he had money to spend. He saved up enough to buy a brand new 1937 Chevrolet coupe for approximately \$600.

While we were on the dairy farm, my Dad was able to sell his milk—he'd put it in ten-gallon cans and set them on a stand out on the road and a truck would come along and pick it up and take it to a creamery in Cambridge Springs. He would have to have that milk on that stand at eight o'clock in the morning—which meant he had to milk 24 cows—he and my two brothers—they had to be out in the barn at five o'clock in the morning.

My next older brother, he enlisted in the Air Force. He was sent to Hawaii. He survived the Pearl Harbor attack. He came back [home], and, by this time, I had grown some and he looked at me and he said, I guess I won't be able to squeeze you anymore. [JH himself chuckles over this memory.]

He survived the Pearl Harbor attack. He says he doesn't know why he did it but, he said that, ordinarily, on Sunday morning he would sleep in. This [particular] morning he got up and went to the latrine to shave and shower and the first raid came over and he went running back to his barracks and he said where his bunk had been there was big gaping hole, a bomb had fallen. If he would have slept in that morning, he would have been gone, he would have been history.

All his life he said, I want to learn to fly an airplane. (That was his reason for enlisting in the Air Force.) So they sent him to flight school to learn medium bombers—the B-25s. When his training was done, they sent him over to North

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Africa and he flew 55 missions over North Africa and Italy and never got a scratch on his body [though] his plane was riddled like Swiss cheese more than once. He escaped injury in Italy and North Africa and came back to the United States—they relieved him after the 55 missions. He was down in North Carolina and was training new pilots and he says really that was more dangerous than combat. [We both laugh.] He said the one thing that really stood out with him—the tail gunner on a B-25 lies on his belly in the back [of the plane] to man the machine gun. He says: one day an anti-aircraft shell came in the side of the fuselage, went out over the tail gunner's back and out through the top and didn't explode. [JH laughs.] I often told him, "You had the good Lord flying on your side."

bc: Did you see Service? You were still very young during the War.

JH: When I turned 18, I got the call to go for my physical. I went into basic training in Macon, Georgia. This was late in '44 and while I was down there, the Battle of the Bulge broke out. They needed troops immediately over there. They canceled our last couple of weeks of training, let us come home for "delay in route" and then on to Europe and combat. I went on the front lines in Belgium, on February 2nd 1945. For quite some time we were, more or less, in a holding position. The Battle of the Bulge had just been mopped up. Originally I had been in the First Army under General Hodges. And General Hodges was a human being: he made sure we had hot meals morning and night. Before we started across the Cologne plain on the final push, we were transferred into Patton's Third Army. And Patton was a go-getter [JH chuckles]: no more hot meals morning and night: they were all K-rations: carry all the ammunition and supplies you need on your back. While we were crossing the Cologne plain, the armored division captured the Remagen Bridge and they put us on six-by-six trucks at night.... We arrived at Remagen well after midnight. The officers told us to find some place to get a little bit of sleep until daylight. We just got settled down in a hayloft in a barn and a battery of 240 millimeter cannons started firing; and there were four of them; and they'd fire in succession: Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! And everything in the area would jump because they were firing at a distance of about 20 miles. When daylight came, we went down to the approach to the Remagen Bridge. The approach was still under artillery fire from the German side. (Like I said, we had to carry everything we needed and I was loaded down like a pack mule.) I'd run till I'd think I couldn't run any more and then another barrage would come in and I'd take off again! We got on the bridge and once we got about to the middle of the bridge, the German artillery couldn't hit it any more because of the mountainous terrain. So that was a little bit of a break: we could slow down. (Be a little bit more sensible perhaps.) [JH laughs.] We were up in the hills on the East side of the Rhine River for, I guess, quite some time. My company attacked a little village early on the morning of March 23rd. We were advancing on this village and we came under machine gun fire and I happened to notice that a man in front of me got hit and fell away from me. So, I said to myself, Okay, this guy's behind us...he let us go by...and he's behind us...and I turned like this and when I did...I guess he figured, Here's one that's going to give me trouble...and he fired a burst at me. I got one slug through my hip and, thank God, the rest of them were out here.... I was carrying a Browning automatic

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rifle...and we weren't allowed to take them from the front so I traded the Browning automatic to a guy next to me and I took his rifle and I started walking down over the hill....

bc: Wounded.

JH: Wounded, yes, but it wasn't all that bad. The company commander saw me going and he says,

Where you going, soldier?

And I said, I've been hit.

And he says, That was a long shot. Are you sure it penetrated?

I showed him a hole in my field jacket here and I turned around and showed him one in the back.

And I said, What do you think?

And he says, You go find a medic.

The medics took me out, patched me up, and three or four days later they had me in England recuperating in the hospital. They flew me back to England. And I was there when the War ended.

I don't know what kind of an emotion you would call it...a friend of mine that I graduated from high school with...he had bad eyesight and when he was [undergoing] preparations for being drafted, they wanted to put him in the motor pool and drive a truck. He said, No, I don't want to do that. They put him in the infantry—same as me. We weren't together: we were in different divisions. After the War was over I heard [that] two days before the end of the War he was shot and killed. If he would have taken the job driving the truck, he probably would be alive today.

bc: Have you told these War stories before...to family?

JH: To the family yes, but not publicly.

I was in combat. I went on the front lines in February 1945 in Belgium [at a location known for its] "dragon's teeth tank trap"—with concrete pillars. We were stationed along there. No place to get in at night—in February. The snow was pretty close to between two feet and 30 inches deep. At night the temperature would go down to about 20 below zero. No place to get in. You can't build a fire because you'd give your position away. All you could do would be wrap up in a blanket and overcoat. I often said I thank my lucky stars that I went when I was 18.... At the time they were drafting anywhere up to about 30-years-old. We had a 30-year-old in our section. He was a rifleman, the same as the rest of us. (I mentioned previously that General Hodges made sure we had hot meals morning and night.) Somebody went to wake up [the 30-year-old] and to come and get his breakfast and he was dead—he'd died of exposure. He couldn't withstand the rigors.

When I left to go overseas, they took just about everybody over by boat. The air service wasn't all that great back then. They didn't have the huge planes that they fly with now. I was on the "Isle d' France," which was the third largest ship in the world. It had been commandeered for the War. They had ropes that held the bunks—three bunks high. (I don't know how well you know soldiers, but, at night, after the lights went out, and everybody's in their beds, you'd hear a bayonet

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wackin' at that rope and letting the bunks drop to the floor.) [We laugh.] But we survived it.

The German subs were heavily patrolling the Atlantic. They transferred us to Boston, Massachusetts; we boarded a ship there. We went down along the East coast to the Florida and Caribbean area and then turned across to the African shore and up again into Scotland. We got off the ship in Scotland, got on troop trains and went from there down to the English Channel; transferred again to a small ship and went across the Channel into France and there we were assigned to combat divisions according to how many the division needed and how many were available. At that time the Germans had been driven out of France as far as the Siegfried Line.

I spent my 19th birthday along the Rhine River, helping to clear an anti-tank mine field—where you probe the dirt with a bayonet. They had a system: a bunch of guys line up with bayonets where they knew the mine field was and then you would probe with your bayonets. And then you had a crew that would de-fuse it. I'm glad I went through it when I was young....

There were three boys and a girl in my family. All three of us boys were in the Service. All three of us came home. (I came home with a hole in my side, but, we were very fortunate: three in and three out.) My oldest brother is 91 and still active. I just turned 81—my last birthday. The other two, in between, are dead and gone—my brother and my sister.

bc: Let's backtrack a bit: what did your father do in Renton?

JH: He was a coal miner. He was one of eleven children. His father came over from Wales [in the early 1800s]. My Dad, I think, was born in 1884. According to my Dad, he lost track of nine brothers when they made the move [from Renton]. So I could be related to some of the [families with the same surname and not know it].

[My grandfather] moved into Coulter, Pennsylvania, down by McKeesport. And my Dad told me he went to work in a coal mine when he was 13. [Except for that while he was involved with the dairy farm] most of the rest of his life was in coal mining to one degree or another. Back in the '40s and early '50s there were an awful lot of coal furnaces around the area. The coal that they burned came from little slope mines. That's what my Dad concentrated on. When it was wintertime, it was coal mining; summertime, farming—one way or another.

[When my father came] back to Allegheny County, he rented a farm of about 78 acres. He paid rent on it for about three years. Things got better: he was making money then. He was able to buy this farm from the previous owner for \$5,800. Then along came World War II and there was a demand for strip coal for the steel mills and he signed an agreement with a coal stripper to strip off about two-and-a-half acres of coal underlying the hilltop. They completely stripped that top, took the coal, and then pushed everything back. His share in the whole operation was \$18,000. So he paid \$5,800 for the farm and was reimbursed \$18,000 from the coal stripper. He and several of his brothers were coal miners pretty near all their lives. The one I was named after, Uncle Joe, he was a ballplayer. He played

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baseball two years for the Washington Senators and two years for the Pirates and less-than-a-year for Cleveland. And there was one other team as well.... Uncle Joe served in World War I and he was severely injured over there in a truck wreck and they thought it would be the end of his baseball career...but it wasn't. He came home and he was able to play. He played first base for the Pirates. One time, my Dad and my Uncle Joe and Bill McKechnie (who was with the Pirates as a manager)...McKechnie and my Uncle Joe were close friends...they trained hunting dogs together.... We all went to a ballgame at Forbes Field and we had a radio with us and we heard Rosey Rowswell say, I see Joe [H.] sitting down there.

It's been quite a life.

bc: You came back from the War...what kind of job or jobs did you have?

JH: I really lucked out on that. To begin with: when I graduated from Plum High School in the Spring of 1943, the War was going on. Businesses around the area would hire anybody that came in. I went to the aluminum company down in New Kensington and filled out an application and handed it to em: they didn't even read it.

They said, Come to work tomorrow morning at eight o'clock.

You could work as many hours as you wanted for 78 cents-an-hour.

[When I came back from the War,] I went to the State Employment Office and they said,

Do you want your old job back?

I said, No, I don't think so. I think I'd like to try something else.

So they sent me to a building contractor in Arnold, Pennsylvania; I went and applied and got the job. And I've worked at construction most all my life—carpentry and one thing or another. I did about 29 years in commercial kitchen equipment—schools and hospitals and things like that. [As well] I did a lot of house-building. In commercial kitchens I worked in a sheet-metal shop but, if there were parts of the jobs that needed woodwork, I'd do the woodwork.

(I've heard people say chiropractors can't help you; I am positive proof that they can. There were times when there was extremely heavy lifting and I got to the point where my back wouldn't take it anymore. So, I went to a chiropractor in Unity, Pennsylvania, and I got him to adjust me. I kept going back periodically getting readjustments. I started that around 1960 or 1961. To this day I'm still going to the same chiropractor on a once-a-month basis.)

[In those 29 years] I was only laid off once for about two weeks...three weeks. I was real fortunate in that respect.

bc: Hobbies?

JH: [One of my twin sons—the twins were eighteen at the time—and I stopped at a flea market one Sunday morning.] We came across this book on race cars—street stock class. We were standing there looking at it; and the owner says,

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I'll sell you a good race car.

I said, Well, I know it's a good one because I've seen you run it.

And I said, Probably you want more money than I can handle.

He says, You might be surprised.

I said, Lay it on me: what do you want for it?

He says, Thirteen hundred dollars.

I said, Thirteen hundred? The way it is? It's ready to race.

He says, Yeah. Thirteen hundred.

I said, Don't go away: I'll be right back.

I went across the street and called my wife. I told her about the car and what he wanted, and she says,

Buy it.

My wife was the biggest promoter. I drove one race. I managed to come in eleventh place out of 19 cars.

bc: Where was the track?

JH: Up in Butler County. (The main one was in Butler County.) It was called Lernerville—a half-mile dirt oval. We had a ball.

bc: How long did you do this?

JH: For about seven or eight years we had our own car. We sold [our original car] and bought one a little better. In fact we had bought two. My wife was the biggest promoter of the whole thing: she loved it.

bc: You must have been into cars well before you spotted this car that you bought, right?

JH: We had been spectators. There was a track down at Heidelberg and we went down there quite regularly to watch them. At that time I didn't even dream of buying a car. But, as things progressed, we bought one and we went racin'. After my wife died, we had to sell the business. We sold our share in the race car to somebody else. There was a guy whom we had befriended all the while we were racing—he was into it all his life; he built and raced cars. He knew all the in's and out's of how to build em up. [My son] Kenny and I went to work with him for a period of about eight or ten years.

People would ask me, Why do you let those boys get out on that race track? and endanger themselves?

I said, Woa, now. Wait a minute—they have a steel roll-cage up and around and over their head. They have a safety harness and a belt and a helmet. They're going at the same speed that other cars are going around that track. Once in a while somebody gets swirly and they hit—so what?—you don't get hurt because you've got all those safety devices.

You yourself [JH indicates bc] would get out on Route 28. You'd go 60 miles-an-hour this way; somebody else'd be going 60 miles-an-hour this way. And you'd pass maybe ten feet apart. You've got the equivalent of a 120-mile-an-hour head-on crash. That doesn't scare you. But you'd be afraid to get out on a racetrack where you're safe.

bc: How fast did you get going when you were racing?

JH: I would estimate 60 or 65.

bc: Close calls?

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JH: Close calls? Oh yeah, we had plenty.

When we were running our own car, we went to Lernerville one night. A week [prior], the main race had been rained out. When that happens, the money's in the hopper and you have to run a race to determine who gets the money. So, they put the last week's feature up front. We were in that situation and Kenny was driving and he got out on the opening lap. They just waved the green flag.

Everybody jumped on the gas pedal and somebody got swirly up front and the guy right in front of Kenny he got turned completely around—Bam!—[JH slams his fist into his palm]—bent the other guy's frame down into the mud. Our front end was up like this. The radiator was done. The fan was done. The water pump was done. The belts were done. So the tow truck picked it up by the front and brought it into the pit and we laid the tracks down for the trailer.

And I said, How about backing it right on to the trailer?

So he said, Okay, I'll do that. And he backed it on.

And we were starting to chain it down [when] another guy came over and he said, What are you going to do?

I said, What can you do? We'll go home, fix it, and come back next week.

He says, Well, I just blew my engine. If you want to use parts off of my car, be my guest.

Well, our head mechanic, that's all he needed to hear. He says,

Go get em!

So two or three guys started in...[and this is another thing about racing]: all the guys around you—if you need help—they're in there helping—even though they're competitors when you're on the track. So two or three guys started stripping our car. Two or three more went over to his car and started stripping it, brought the parts back, went to work on it. We knew we had to get into a consolation race and finish fourth or better to qualify for the night's feature. The track announcer was starting to call,

Bring your cars up for the consolation....

Our guys got done, jumped out of the way.... In the meantime I told Kenny, Go on get in there and get belted in; get ready to go. They jumped out of the way. He shot off just as they were starting to close the gate. They saw him coming; they opened the gate; and let him tack on the tail end of twelve cars. In eight laps he had to get to fourth or better and he just got to fourth on the last lap.

bc: How have Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania changed over the years?

JH: Changed greatly.

bc: For the better or the worse?

JH: I'd say for the better.

The streetcars are gone and the tracks are gone. I think [there's been progress and that's been good.]