

**Rudy Aittama Interview by Andrea Raby and Anna Schaffer**

**AS: Okay Rudy we're going to start are you ready.**

RA: Okay should I give my name first.

Rudy Aittama.

**And how old are you Rudy?**

96.

**And you had a birthday recently didn't you?**

Just had a birthday in September.

**And you had a birthday party?**

Very nice birthday party, right in my room.

**Did a lot of people come?**

We had sixteen of my relatives, nephews and nieces.

**Sounds fun, so you have lived a very long life.**

My wife and I were going on 66 years of lovely married life.

**Want to tell me about your wife?**

Well I'll tell you about the most perfect gal in the world. She worked at American Telephone and telegraph and she after 35 years she retired she was a supervisor at AT&T and she was just was such a wonderful gal, you know.

**How'd you guys meet?**

Pardon?

### **How did you meet her?**

Oh now that's a nice story. I used to be what they called a butcher boy after they discharged I was delivering groceries up in my hometown and uh I was out going to the grocery store and she worked in the JJ Newberry, it was a dime store, She was working there and occasionally I would go in there and I noticed her there and I kept my eye on her and don't you know some way I got a little picture of her that I put in my wallet and that picture went all through with me in the battle of the bulge. She was always with me and we corresponded for three years, never had a date. She was on this side and I was on that side and we corresponded and I had all those letters she saved in the box that I wrote to her from wherever I was. And then, when I got discharged I finally made my way to go to Detroit and meet her and from then on it was roses. (laughs) Yes.

Very good. So do you want to tell me a little bit about your childhood? I know you lived up north...

Oh yeah I can tell you about my childhood. I was born in town in 1918, I have that picture right there that I, it was when I was 1 year old. You know that picture was put in our last month's newsletter at American \_\_\_\_ (?) and they wanted people to guess who that was. And I don't think very many guessed by finally in this newsletter they said that he baby is Rudy (laughs) so that, and then we after we came fro the town, my dad bought a farm and we moved to the farm on Lake Linden. I lived on that farm until I went into the service in 1943 and uh, we had, I had uh 11 sisters and brothers and we all were the most happy family all wonderful people and then my life changed after I got drafted.

### **I know you went to, you had to walk a little bit to school, right?**

Oh the school house, I got a picture of the school house up there too. Right there it's uh right on our farm so we never left our farm because the schoolhouse was on our farm. So when we had about 200 yards to go to school. The best part was the teacher stayed at our house, she boarded at our house. We had no way of escaping being educated (laughs).

### **High school was a little farther, wasn't it?**

Well I finished 8th grade in the one room school house and I was 12 years old. And it was five miles to go to the high school. Five mile walk, there were no busses. And in the morning of

going to the high school I had a choice, walk the five miles or go in the field and get the cows and milk the cows. I went and got the cows.

**But then you went to school, didn't you?**

After we were married that was, I don't know how many years we were married, I went to Redford High School, nights. I went through the whole course. I don't know how many years I went every night and I got my diploma from Redford High School. That bothered me until I got that, until I graduated from High School because anybody I met, I knew they were High School graduates, even in the army. They were so much better than me. They got so much more education. But anyway, it wound up I finally got it.

**How old were you?**

Uhh, when I went to high school? Well I had to be about late 30's. Yeah, late 30's because I made it by doing my work and in the meantime going to high school at night and uh, that's the way it worked out.

**Can you tell me about some of the jobs you've had?**

Oh yes, I can tell you uh, the first job I ever ever had that I got paid I was 14 years old and I was substitute mail man because where we lived up there in the wintertime there were no open roads, the mailman had to come with a horse and a toboggan with the mail sacks on it and I met him a half a mile everyday out from the main road and I delivered the mail in our vicinity, off of all the farmers. And I did that uh for a few months while the weather was fierce. I used snowshoes and skis and then I got another job uh, I used to go with the neighbors and I used to go bailing hay. I worked on the hay baler, with them. Those were the kind of jobs we had. And then I got to be uh, 21 years old, I went in a lumber camp and I was uh teamster at uh, driving a pair of horses and pulling logs out of the woods and that was, I worked that winter and uh, then when I used to cash my checks, I used to go to this grocery store and uh the owner says why don't you come to work for me. So I did, and that's how I became the butcher boy. I worked for three years for uh, him delivering groceries. Then I got drafted and then I'll have to tell you a story that comes after I got discharged. I had to go back to that job I had because they wouldn't allow me, we used to get 20 dollars a week for 50 weeks as a GI in general discharge GI. But the man that was at the uh, unemployment office was my boss's buddy. So he told him get him back to work and don't you know instead of getting 20 dollars a week I got 16 dollars and 20 a week, that was just they pay they gave. So a miracle happened my brother told me we got a

chance to go herring fishing on Lake Superior so I went with him. We went out on Lake Superior way out in the lake with Herring nets and they called it choking Herring. You had to squeeze the Herring out of the net. If you worked 10 days you got 10 dollars a day and if you worked 9 days you got five dollars a day. So I worked 10 days, I got 100 dollars and the next thing I did was jumped in a car and that's how I came to Detroit.

**Very cool. So do you can you tell me a little bit about your time in the service after you got drafted?**

After I got drafted? Well I first went to fort jackson South Carolina and when we had our basic training we were moved up to camp adabury in Indiana for reassignment and then from there uh, we did, we were shipped overseas and I have a, from before I went overseas, I went to cavalry school in Kansas City, Fort oh what the heck, my memory....but anyway, Fort Riley, jeeze. I got this, I graduated from Communications school so I was a radio operation going in to service. And uh, now I'm going to tell you about doing into service, uh. We shipped out to England. From England we shipped to France. From France we drove, we were a cavalry. We drove to belgium and from belgium we drove right to Germany to the Seigfried line. And we were involved, we were the first ones in the battle of the buldge. We had just started on Decemeber 16th at 6 o'clock in the morning. And well, we fought for two days. I did anyway. We were in fierce fierce combat, and I was, me and my buddy had the bazooka, this is a big long tube that fires rockets. We did that two days and uh, then the second day a big shell fell by me and ripped back my thigh off and so next thing you know then I got captured. I was put in the barn and uh, I was the barn was just right full of injured men. And I was put uh in a spot where my buddy was on my left and he was shot right through the adams apple. And every breath was just spurt of blood, spurt of blood. On my right was a german soldier. He was riddled with the bullets. And he was crying for a cigarette. So I lit a cigarette, put it in his mouth and I think he expiered. And then my two buddies came and picked me up and carried me and we started marching. We had orders to march back to the prision camp, but in the mean time, a german solider took me out of the lineup and we went down down down steel steps underneath the ground to their command post. The germans command post. And there the officers were, all drinking, that's all my guard just went down there for a drink. I thought maybe they'd shoot me, but they didn't and up the stairs we come again and my leg is just wide open and so then he throws me on the horse drawn supply wagon to go back to the stall log and uh it was so cold this was in the end of December, it was so cold I knew I'd freeze to death, I had only a jacket and pants and so I crawled off of that wagon and started marching, in the meantime I lost all my buddies because they were gone ahead. So I just kept marching, marching, marching four days, I marched and then we finally reached the prison camp and so in that time I saw one german

doctor and he put a bandage on my leg and it was about paper. And it only lasted a little while because when it got wet it fell off. And that was the last treatment of my leg, I'll tell you how long after. So we got to this camp and we did the camp was too many soldiers, overloaded, so they put us in the barn again. And so we slept on a cement floor until we could get into the real stallog, but it happened to be Christmas Eve and we were all there. And we had very little food, a slice of bread a day if they gave it to us. And we were there lying on the cement floor christmas eve, thinking about our days before, but we were really desperate then, not knowing what tomorrow would bring. And so all of the sudden, one voice, another voice, the entire barn was singing silent night, holy night. Every nationality just singing away. So that fueled us up again. And so the next day, they gave us sauerkraut soup for christmas dinner. So anyway we go into that camp for awhile and they had to unload onto, there were so many prisoners coming. So there was, they would load up every evening men soldiers, our prisoners in box cars. They would go up to about 50 in a box car. The box cars are much smaller than ours. And you had to sit with your knees up to your chin and the box car would fill up. So we sat 26 hours first of all to be under air-raid, because the allies choose to want to bomb the rail roads, so we sat there 26 hours under a general bomb scare and finally the train moved and we went four days in the box car. And then once a day, they opened up the door and would give you a slice, 1/10 of a loaf of black bread. And we made it to uh, Stargard, Poland and when we got out, there was an ice storm and we had to walk on the icy road after with our knee's up to our chin. Once being in the box car I was sitting to another soldier he was not from our outfit, he was from another outfit but he was right next to me and I told him, now don't sleep just rub your legs or we're not going to have legs. So we just kept rubbing our legs, rubbing our legs and then at that bunch of soldiers there about half of them lost their legs they froze black, it was so cold in those box cars. Fortunately I kept rubbing mine and I told him to rub his. And then when we got to that camp, that camp was worse than the other and it was the same thing, and once and awhile, they'd have a little can of soup. If you found a can in the trash you held on to that otherwise you wouldn't get any soup. So we were there for awhile, every morning we just slept in the same clothes, same jacket, same everything. I had leather shoes, and my shoes were, my feet were small and germans didn't steal my shoes but the fellows that had larger sizes they took their shoes and they had wrapped their feet in rags. So anyway, that's just what we were doing there, every morning out for roll call. Stay out there for an hour in the cold, we almost shivered all our skin off. And we put back in, and then all of the sudden one day, everybody out and doggone, we start marching, we'd sleep on the ground at night, the first day we marched 25 miles and we'd sleep on the ground or in barns. And it was the same thing with the food, same thing with the food. And so after 12 days we arrived in New Brandenburg, that was just near Berlin and that's where we were, set there for awhile in, we got to be in some kind of a camp but they dug trenches all around the camp because there was so many air raids. All of the sudden this one

time the russians advanced from the east, and they lobbed shells over, over our heads, everybody jumped through the windows into the trench on the side. Well I was in there with another GI and uh, I told him - the kids, they were all kids only 18 or 19 years old- they were all praying praying praying out loud. I told him, you know, let's crawl back, we'll go nuts here. So we did, we crawled back and just hat comes what comes, and then in the morning we were free as a bird, the russians had taken that town during the night, the bombed the heck out of it and we woke up and we could go outside and we, there were no germans around anymore. So then we stayed in that camp for awhile, the Russians didn't have much more food than the Germans but we did get some food. And finally the Russian's moved us into the German condos, the were just like condo's and we could have water, running water. We could take a bath, the first bath we had in five months. We washed our clothes, the first time we washed out clothes for 5 months. We stayed there in the better surroundings until the Americans met the russians at that point. Well, the russians took us in the grove, a big grove and they had tables set there with white table clothes, now this is like a dream and people might think I was dreaming, but it wasn't, it was real. And there were these russian girls waiting on tables, and the full field was full of the tables. And they brought a big pot of stew to each one of us. that was the first food we had for five months, a big pot of stew. It was so wonderful. And from then on, we were in American hands. And they start changing our uniform because we were so loaded with lice. We had to change uniforms every few days because it was loaded with lice, in Poland my wound was so bad it had maggots in it and it was like sleeping with a dead dog. That's how it smelled and you know, I still grab my leg right now, it took about well I got wounded in December, on December 17th of 44' and in July of 45' I was still being dressed. My wound was still being dressed it wasn't healed yet. So that's they way the uh, it was, you know with my service.

Oh there's a good thing, when we went into combat, we got paid the day before and in American cash and when we got to be in the prison camp there, in Limberg, there of course were no toilets, it was just trenched in the field and there was no toilet paper of course so we used our currency for toilet paper so we knew there was no tomorrow so anyway that was another thing that was part of my experience

Do you want me to go on from?

**Yeah if you have more to talk about..**

Well then we were the uh you know released from the Russians into american hands after that nice little stew, and the Americans loaded us on the plane. We were given english uniforms because we just changed uniforms because they were so full of lice. And then we had English

uniforms and we got on the plane and we flew to brussels belgium. There they put us up in a hotel and uh, there we had another set of american uniforms. So they finally got rid of the lice, and uh, we were in a beautiful hotel in Brussels and they said go down to the bar, and get a bottle of beer. But that will be your last drink of that type because your stomachs are so bad, but we want you to know that you're back in American hands. So then in Brussels afters that we got on a train and went to france. We went to see Valerie, France. That was a camp where they had all the GI's before they would go back to the US, it was called camp lucky strike and you could have milkshakes and that anytime, anytime you wanted because for our stomachs you know, just go and get one whenever you feel like. And then we started building up our stomachs. I lost 50 pounds, I lost 50 pounds and I can show it after. Here's an example, this man was in the same prison camp as I was. And he came back to Ohio and the picture on the bottom is what he looked like afterwards. He was 98 pounds in the prison camp. Now that was wild, yeah.

### **And they wrote a letter home to your parents, right?**

I used to try to send out something but it never got received but I was missing in action for awhile and then finally a telegram got through to tell them I was still alive. So yeah, they were pretty happy.

Oh by the way, I got the day we got liberated by the Russians, all the german offices were vacant, they were all gone and I went in the office and found this book. One of their ledgers and I stamped it with all the solid stamps and I kept a diary until I got to go to the US so I've had that since 1945.

And then I've got to tell you, then my buddy, when we were back in the states, he took it upon him to write about the entire battle the whole, he's got everything men and all, and I'm in four places where it was in combat. You know this is quite a book, you know it's very rare and of course we got our pictures in that, he's got all of our pictures. This is a treasure, I treasure it. It was our whole battle, and then I have a picture of our, when I was in cavalry school. When I was going to communications school. So as I say, I went into the service as a radio operator but I never touched a radio in germany. All I had was a gun. Because they had cut all the communications. The Germans cut everything.

That was, ohh and I've got one more. Then another one of my, at one time I belonged to our club, association of the 106 division, and I wrote, they put one of my stories in the book. Not in this book but in the regular. This man read that story and he wrote this book and sent it to me. He said I was in the same camps as you, all the time, of course we didn't know. He was a

different outfit but he was in the same camps at the same time with me. So he wrote this book called Cold and Starving all about prisoner of war life. I got that. So that's a treasure too.

Now, I had oh well anyway, I had a, my commanding officer of our troop, I received a Christmas card from him after 70 years. The commander of our troop sent me a Christmas card. Now if that isn't something...and now this is the officer of our platoon. He wrote the battle experience also and sent me a Christmas card. I must have been very popular (laughs)

**What are some important lessons you've learned throughout your life?**

Lessons?

**Yeah, you've lived a long time, I bet you've learned some good stuff**

I don't know, the people I've met all throughout my life were all, you know friendly people all the time. And uh I can talk about my church experience. I had as we bought homes we moved to this church near, we didn't want to have a long commute and so I was in four churches and I taught Sunday school in each one of them and my wife was in the choir. And our last church was just such a wonderful church that I still, I had fifth and sixth graders, I taught Sunday school, I was the head usher all the time. I cleaned all the bathrooms every Friday at the church. Which I volunteered and enjoyed. I got a bunch of men, up to 14 and I said I would fix the coffee and I would get some treats you know and we kept that going for 25 years and uh, now I feel so bad, our church on 8 mile and Farmington is closed. No more services, people just cut out coming and so they had to close. So I feel so bad, we had such a - my wife and I

<phone rings>

<solicitors, oh my god>

and then my wife happened to be the cook in the church. Whenever we had big doings she was always there, good to cook. And then my wife and I happened to be the head of the Pasty Detail. We made pasties once a month, we were the head of that, we secured all the ingredients and we got everything and got everything ready. And we did that for 20 years. And my wife was always, on the day we made pasties, she always had a big buffet ready for all the workers and that's the way she just enjoyed, she enjoyed just working like that and we just took that as just nothing. You know, we enjoyed just doing something together. Yes. Yeah.



### **Do you have any tips on staying healthy?**

Or saying happy?

Everything worked well for me, and uh I have to tell you that I am in this place now, I like it but if I hadn't had the five months experience in the prison camp it would be difficult for me to see uh, here I am because of my bad knee condition. I'm under pill every now and then because I get constipated and all that. But in the prison camp we had nothing to eat so I never was constipated so that was a plus (laughs).

So anyway, it helped me because I was, we never had a buddy. We never had a buddy because their mind wasn't in their stomach. They didn't give a darn if they didn't have a buddy. When the stomach is wanting, everything else shuts down. So anyway, uh that's the way it went and now I'm here, it's similar. I get three meals a day, but I only go once at noon time because you can't sit down and have three meals a day. But I got to this dining room and what do I see? All disabled people you know there's nobody to enlighten you to see that life, so you look across, you look at, you know that one times there were heads above wonderful families and now the kids drop em off here and uh you see them there, their in rough shape with a walker like I am, and we look like a bunch of penguins so that's but I'm not you know griping because I have a good life. I have a good life and the best part is I have a good head yet. You know a lot of people had a lot of difficulties but I'm blessed with that. So I don't know what else I could say.

### **What are some things to stay happy? I know you like to tell jokes, right?**

Yeah I like to tell jokes, I can tell you this one now, it's a clean one because you're a nice young girl. The three boy scouts went to their leaders and said we did a good deed today and he said what'd you do? We helped an old lady across the street. He said how come it took three of you? She didn't want to go...

**That's a good one (laughing)...**

### **So what are some of your favorite memories from your life?**

Well I've got lots of them, I don't know what to favorite, well I'll tell you, when I was all through grade school at twelve I stayed home on the farm with until I was 18. So I was with my mother those six years and my brothers and all them were out working and I was left behind to do the work on the farm but I was with my mother all those times and my mother was she had lived to

be 94, without any obstacles. But anyway, my mother was from Finland but she was Swedish. My dad was from Sweden and he was Finish. So my mother used to sing Swedish songs all the time. And you know, I can sing a few of them, uh now with all the words because they were my good memories. She was always singing, I think that made our life like it is. We were all nice and healthy bunch you know. Yeah and we had a good father too. Wow, so actually my father was from Finland, he had three years of schooling and when he came in those days for immigration you had to have a job in America before they would let you cross. So my mother was a domestic and they needed all the big bosses with all the big homes and they needed all the domestics. My dad was a carpenter and he came and always had a job.

Oh I got to tell you a little story, that was nice, when they came to this country, they were 17 and 19 and didn't know a soul, but my mothers sister was the wife of the salvation Army captain. So my mother used to go there be cause her sisters congregated at the salvation army and lo and behold my dad's started joining in and he met my mother and that's how they started and this uh, my mothers sister used to, there were a lot of bars and my mothers sister used to be the one going with the cops to all the drunks in all the bars to get money for salvation army, that's the stories I heard. But at least, my dad met my mother in that salvation army wasn't a bad place.

**So what job did you have after you came back from the service? What job did you do for most of your life?**

I'll tell you, the first job, I was a butcher boy, and then I was a herring choker and then I came to the city and I worked at the dodge factory, in Hamtramck, I worked at a Essic wire in detroit after that and I worked at uh, no then I went to uh, western Michigan to school of horology, that's watchmaking, so I went there for four or five months and traveled Monday and came back Friday and we were married. I went there and lo and behold, I finished there and I was a watchmaker. When I stayed at Western Michigan, we couldn't stay in the dorms, so they had cottages for the GI's, this was a program for the GI's I was in the cottage with 7 other GI's and I was the only one with two legs, the rest of them took their legs off at night. This was beautiful for me, so anyway that proved pretty good, I got a job in uh, Detroit at a jewelers it was called, Gerringa, you're too young to know there was a ball player called Charlie Gerringa. I worked for his cousin, I worked 15 years fixing watches and jewelry. And uh, this ball player used to come in with all his award watched and put them on my bench and say fix them! And I fixed his watches but then I went to give..this is a good story...I went to give blood and doggone-it, the nurse told me you've got tired blood, go home and sleep, and so I was so insulted so I asked my wife, I said, could I quit my job? Now I had 15 years and went to worked dressed up all the

time and she said okay, so I did, I just like that quit, and then I had a stroll around again looking for work. I saw an ad in the paper for an instrument maker. I got in this long line downtown and low and behold they choose me. I had the best doggone job I worked there for six months, we're making instruments for the oil field. We did every operation ourself. It was such a wonderful job and they paid well so I was satisfied with that but we happened to be close to the post office in Detroit and on my lunch hour I'd go there and he'd hand out applications. Come out and work, and so I'd fill them out everyday and bring them in and I kept filling them out and he finally says come for a physical, I went to the physical and next time he says come to work. I gave up my good paying job to go to the post office for 2.25 an hour but what had happened at that place, I was in a good paying job but I was 45 years old and a miracle happened and says you don't have any pension, so I went and I took the post office job and at that break when I was driving, I was driving a truck for 8 years and I worked 10 hours a day so I was getting 20 a day, I was doing pretty good, so I kept on that for 17 years and uh, I've been taking a pension now 38 years (laughs). See, my little miracles always work for me.

**Do you have any regrets from your life?**

Have what?

**Any regrets?**

Nooooo. No No. How could I? I was so so blessed in the prison camp to still have my leg. After all that nobody would hardly get, after keeping my leg going after so many months and the maggots. And the reason the maggots left my legs was for the 12 day march because of the cold. They did the job of getting the infection out. So no I have no regrets oh god, everybody is so, everybody is so good to me. All the people I meet are so wonderful yeah,

**Rudy, what are some things that make you happy?**

That make me happy?

**Either now or throughout your life?**

I don't know, it's just a normal thing for me to be happy. I guess all the memories are so good. You know I can't help but, you know, I go to bed at night and gee I just think of all the of things I went through in my 96 years. Yeah, everything, everything is just fine. We had, now this is a funny place, I'm here and look how many neighbors I've got, about 148 people here and I walk

the halls to get some exercise. You can walk how many days and don't see a soul. So that's the difference here, when I lived up north, we knew everybody from all the towns and all the farms and everything we knew everybody. Everybody would say hi, but here, see you can't latch on to a good uh, companion even because well my companion at the dinner table is 100 years old and I do get some conversation with him and uh, my other, the other couple that I sit with, well he's got a speech impediment you know, so it's hard to get a good conversation going. It would be nice you know, and then the other ones, can't hear, the other ones can't see, it's really really uh something different for me to be here and I'm taking it, you know. It's just a new phase in my life, yeah. And you have to be adjusted to everything that comes your way, yep, you can't fight it.

**How long were you and your wife married?**

Just about a couple months shy of 66 years. Yeah.

**What year did you get married?**

We were married in 1947. The wedding uh, cost me about 88 dollars buying her dress and ring and everything. And reception and we had a week of a honeymoon, all in the money, oh the reception was in my bfw hall, they gave that to me for free. The honeymoon was on a cottage on the lake, for a week, and they gave that to me for free. We just have perfect memories I tell ya.

**You and your wife liked to travel didn't you?**

Well we did go to Switzerland. That was our big thing, we went for 10 days in Switzerland, boy that was just great, wonderful. Then we uh, went on to my reunions.

Just a minute I got to get a picture. Oh no am I tied up to the chair.

