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Charles Grace Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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Hope College
Polar Bear Oral History Project

Mr. Charles W. Grace

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
September 18, 1979



Mr. Charles W. Grace

GRACE, CHARLES W.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles W. Grace was born in St. Clair, Michigan on April 9, 1890 to Charles F. and Jennette C. Grace. He attended St. Clair High School until around 1908. At nineteen, he entered in to a grocery partnership. He went to Michigan Agricultural College in East Lansing for a year until illness in his family necessitated his return home. Two years later, he went to Detroit, where he was hired by the H. J. Heinz Company as a salesman, a position he held until enlisting in the army on September 5, 1917.

He began training at Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, Michigan, where he was detailed as mess sergeant for Company "D" of the 339th Infantry. On July 14, 1918, the regiment was transferred to Camp Mills on Long Island, New York until July 21, 1918. The next day, his company sailed for England to continue their training. They arrived at Liverpool in early August and immediately left for Stoney Castle, where they remained until the twenty-fifth of August. The next day they sailed for North Russia on the H.M.T. Nagoya, and landed in Archangel on September 5, 1918.

After their arrival in Russia, the First Battalion, which included Company "D", left immediately for the front on the Divina River. About a month later, Sergeant Grace was taken ill with double pneumonia and was sent to a British hospital to recuperate. After his recovery, he remained in Archangel for the duration of the expedition as the head cook at the Convalescent Hospital there.

After Mr. Grace's discharge from the army on July 18, 1919, he was employed by the Bake-Rite Company in Detroit for two years. On June 30, 1920, he married Jean B. Hanning. Their daughter, Janet Ellen Grace Sass, was born the following year. Around this time, he and his wife began a bakery business in Detroit which they operated until 1942. They then moved back to St. Clair and opened another bakery. He retired there in 1954, and enjoys visiting with his daughter and her family, who also reside in St. Clair.

JOHNSON: First of all, were you drafted or did you enlist for World War I?

GRACE: Well, I would have been drafted. I went in in September, and my number would have been called about in February. That's one time in my life I think I could have used a pull. In other words, Governor Sleeper was governor of Michigan at that time, and Major Duff was from St. Clair, and I met him in Lansing a few months before I went in. And I talked to Mr. Duff, and he introduced me to Colonel Berstey the next morning. And Berstey wanted to enlist me right then, see, but I went back and my mother was opposed to it. So held out for a short time. When I could see I would be called in anyway in February, I went in in September.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about enlisting in the army?

GRACE: Well, any good American should do that when our country's at war. I don't like the army, between you and I. It's a different life that I'd ever want to live. On the way back from Russia, there's quite a few of the boys that I knew very well, and some of them said they were going to re-enlist. And I said, "You can have it." But I think in a time of war you should do it. I mean, the country we live in, you just can't beat it. And the part I always can't understand about a war is, the countries get at war, and then eventually they have to sit around the table and discuss it anyway. It's too bad they can't do it at first.

JOHNSON: What was your training experience at Camp Custer like?

GRACE: Well, to be honest with you, the officers took us out the next morning and just give us that "squads right and left". And I knew it I think better than the lieutenant did because I had been in the R.O.T.C. at M.S.U., then called Michigan Agriculture College. So he stopped and started to talk to me. And the captain came around and said, "Why aren't you drilling them?" And he says, "Well, he knows it better than I." And so he says, "Well, I'll take him, and you take these." And so I got a chance to talk to Captain Taylor. He was transferred from the company later. He was a professor at Madison, Wisconsin. But he got talking to me and he asked what I had done. I told him I'd been in the food line since I was about thirteen years old, and I was twenty-seven or better when I went in the army. So he says, "You're going in the kitchen tomorrow morning. We've got a civilian cook there. I'll talk to him." Well, in other words, in a very few days I was appointed Acting Sergeant. And a few days after that I was detailed as a sergeant. But Captain Taylor was too big a man for a line company, and they just switched the captains and sent the captain from the headquarters over to our company, and he went to headquarters.

But that's all I ever did all the time I was in the army, pretty near, was look after and feed men. Now the ration at that time was about forty-nine to fifty-one cents a month. I mean, it figured every month, you see. And it was figured on fourteen different items, like potatoes, and meat, and so on. And certain quantities,

like fourteen ounces of potatoes, and so on. Well, I studied that ration pretty careful, and I could see that if I watched the meat, why, I wouldn't have to worry much about the other, because the meat would run about fifty percent of the ration. So I watched that careful. For illustration, if I was going to give them chops, I'd buy half a pound per man. And if it was roast beef, I'd only buy a third of a pound per man. And by studying that ration, it made it quite easy, because I didn't run a lot of money ahead each month, and I didn't intend to because the government paid so much to feed a man. But it made it much easier for me after I went to work on that ration and figured it out pretty careful.

JOHNSON: What did you think your orders would be after you finished training at Camp Custer?

GRACE: When we left Camp Custer overseas? Oh, that's a nice one. My oldest sister and Jean--I was keeping company with her then--I don't know how they did it but they wanted me to tell after we got overseas where we thought we were going. And they had worked up a word, like for illustration "Siberia," and like the first word of the second line would be the "S" and so on. But anyway, I spent a Sunday afternoon in England trying to write a letter home of two lines and get those letters in. But they figured it out. But it didn't work out that way. The reason I said that was, when we arrived in England, they picked up our rifles, and they gave us another rifle, and the bayonet was entirely different. The bayonet on the rifle they issued to us was, well, it reminded you of a screwdriver; and the regular American bayonet would be twice my

fingers in width, and maybe more. So I knew we weren't going to France, and I figured that right away. But I did think we were going to Siberia. Instead of that, we went to North Russia. Now, I'm glad we didn't go to Siberia because the American boys that did go there were out there a lot longer than we were, see. Another six or eight months, or maybe a year.

JOHNSON: Did they ever tell you that you would be going to Northern Russia?

GRACE: No, they don't tell you nothing in the army. (laughter)

JOHNSON: So you told your girlfriend that you would be going to Siberia?

GRACE: Yes, I wrote the letter home, see, and they figured it out from it.

JOHNSON: What did you know about Russia when you landed there?

GRACE: I didn't know a thing about Russia, no. In fact, in the past, I had heard a lot of other little things about the Russian people. I dealt with them, and I got so they trusted me, and I trusted them.

For illustration, if they came in and wanted to make an exchange, many times, many times, I wouldn't even call interpreter, because I had seen their face several times, and I knew that they had vegetables --potatoes, or carrots, or something. I'd ask them in Russian a fund, that's like a bushel in our country. But the Russian fund is thirty-six pounds, and of course a bushel in America is sixty. But I'd ask them "a fund," you see, and they tell me what it was, and I knew then. Now, they were very anxious to make an exchange

with us for this reason: what they had, they wanted to get rid of, and we needed it. And in return, what we could give them, for illustration, like split peas, or different things like that, they could hide that, don't you know what I mean? And if a Bolo did come in their section, why, different ones told me that they hid it under a house or something of that kind, see. And of course, it would keep, see. It would dry and keep under their house, or it would dry there.

I'd just like to say here that though there was hardships in the army--I'll admit that--nevertheless, I'm often glad that I was in the army, and I did go out to Russia. Because I not only saw a little of England, I saw a little of France, and a lot of Russia while I was out there, see. And those three countries I probably would have never seen had I not been in the service, don't you know.

JOHNSON: Did you know anything of Bolshevism?

GRACE: No, no. I knew the Tsar had been overthrown, but I knew nothing about Bolshevism.

I might say this: that I'll always think that the number of Bolsheviks that there were there--if they'd have wanted to, there wouldn't have been any (Americans) come back, don't you know. We were so outnumbered, see, it was a terrible expedition for the American government to send out, see. Fifty-five hundred, six thousand combat troops to fight I don't know how many. Millions of them, maybe. An awful, terrible number. The casualties were high out there, between frostbites and killing, and so on and so forth--about twenty percent, compared to France where it was only about three percent.

JOHNSON: Were you given any lectures or information about Bolshevism, or about why you were in Russia?

GRACE: No. No lectures or information about Russia were given. Almost every evening I would go to some Russian home. Now, I knew two Russians up there very, very well. And the reason I went to their homes was, their father had been in the lumber business, and they had shipped lumber to England, see. And they spoke English. And I'd go to their home, and they'd often tell me where I might be able to make an exchange for something that I had because it was all bartering. That's the only way you could get it. And so by going to those homes, I got quite well-acquainted with them. And since they spoke English, I could come home with them, spending a nice evening, you know, and learning quite a bit about Russia, Russian people. Now, the Russian people, I personally feel, and I always will, that we would never have any trouble with, see. It's the Kremlin. That's the stick that sometimes happens in our own country, too, the government, not the people themselves.

JOHNSON: Why did you think you were in Russia?

GRACE: We smelled a rat when we were in England, but we thought it would be Siberia.

JOHNSON: What ship did you sail from Newcastle on?

GRACE: Ship? Oh, gee. I don't think that I--I will say that they were Japanese boats that the English government had taken over; I don't remember the name.

JOHNSON: The Nagoya?

GRACE: I think its the name, yes.

JOHNSON: Did many soldiers on that ship get the Spanish flu?

GRACE: We went out in a convoy, you know. Now I don't know where those Italians went--there wasn't too many of them, I don't think--but they had been on the boat maybe a month before we got aboard. And they passed on something. In other words, they all get in line at high noon, see, and the ones that passed on might go over the side, don't you know. I stood and watched a lot of times; you could see an awful lot of boys, Italians, that were--more so than the Yanks. I don't know whether--how many Yanks, but we had quite a few on the boat when we arrived in Archangel--bodies. And Don Chan--did you meet him out there? (at Polar Bear ceremonies, May 30, 1977)

JOHNSON: No.

GRACE: Well, there weren't too many there, anyway, as far as that goes. I was surprised the last--in other words, when Jean was in the living, why, I didn't feel I should be away holiday like that, and I'd stay. But there's no reason to keep me here now, and I'll attend other meetings, don't you know.

But Don Chan was stationed at the hospital too. But his job, more than--well, it wasn't mine at all, hardly. But he'd often come through and he'd say, "Listen, come on Sarge and help me." He had to get a body ready for burial, see. And there's a little building between the Red Cross Hospital--American Red, or American Soldiers', and the Convalescent, a small building. And then when the bodies come back from the railroad front or the river front, why they are put in there, and of course I--a good many times I helped Don put

bodies in boxes. I can think back now how we could have made it much easier. In other words, some of those boys that came back, well, two or three of them had their helmets on yet, froze right on there too. And we put them in the box helmet and all--its the only thing you can do, see. And some of them, their limbs would be spread, and you'd do your best to push them together enough to get them in the box, and put the cover on with three or four, four or five screws. I hate to tell this--

I attended the memorial service in Russia, and General Ironside spoke; and he as much as said that the Yanks had failed; the English were going out and take over you know--additional English, and so on and so forth. But, the part that hurt me was--you see, in Russia, September is a rainy month. And October on, you get some snow every day. By the time Spring comes, May or June, there's an awful lot of it, see. And this particular lot where they buried these boys, well it was in Archangel where the sewage was very poor. And, as a result, there was water standing all over that property, you know, where those bodies had--where those boys had been buried, see. And to stand there and listen to that service and look at that: you know, American boys, gone out there and fight, and then--body used that way, don't you know. But, of course, most of those are now at White Chapel; they were brought back, see.

I might add this: that when I came out of the army, Jean, my wife, said to me, "Mike, you're entirely different than when you went in the service." I: "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, I don't know, but you are." I said, "Well, Jean if the service wouldn't change you, nothing would." And, you know, because you got to watch out for yourself in the army, see. You never know what's

going to happen. You've got to be right out on the alert and I was, too. But some of the things I was asked to do were bound to change you.

JOHNSON: Did General Ironside say that the American soldiers had failed?

GRACE: The English were of that type, see. And I--my personal opinion--I don't think the English were the fighters that the French and Germans were, you know, and the Belgians were, and so on and so forth, see. I had some nice things done for me by English. I was carried in--they called it a hospital--but it was just a building you might call it, up at the front. I was there several days before I was brought back to Archangel. And there was an English hospital--supposed to be--

JOHNSON: Was this when you had double pneumonia?

GRACE: Yes. This English sergeant came up and talked to me a couple of times. And he said, "Listen, Sarge, several boys have gone." And he said--In other words, different members of the companies would go out and try to get a few eggs from the peasants and so forth, and bring them too--and I had three or four eggs along there. And he said, "Here's three or four more. The boys are gone and they're Americans. I feel you're entitled to it; you need them." Later, when I got back to Archangel--in other words at the hospital, that same sergeant came in there as a convalescent. And he said, "I don't know why I'm here; I'm an Englishman." And I said, "I don't either. I don't have nothing to do with that. But let me tell you something: when you're here, I'll take care of you." And I did just that for him, too.

JOHNSON: Getting back to Ironside, why do you think he said that the Americans had failed?

GRACE: Well, all in a nutshell, we were too outnumbered. As I have been told, in the beginning they intended to send a division of Americans to Russia. But they cut it down to a regiment, see. And it'd been quite different if there'd been seventy, eighty, ninety thousand men, sent out there, don't you know. It was a terrible expedition. Really, I don't know, but I've been told from different sources that it's never been written into American history. I hope it has, but I wouldn't blame them if they didn't because I think it was disgraceful on the part of the American government, to send just a handful of men out there.

JOHNSON: Do you think they should have sent more men or--

GRACE: Oh, yes. And better equipment, see. We didn't have any artillery, see, just infantry.

LENNING: When did you land at Archangel?

GRACE: We land there? I went in the service on the fifth of September, at Custer, and we landed in the harbor on the fifth of September, only a year later. I don't know why we were out there, anchored out there, for a day or two before we came into the docks. I don't know why, but they were.

LENNING: Did you go up the Dvina River with Company "D" after you landed?

GRACE: Yes. You see, when we arrived in Russia, one battalion--

about four companies--went up the river. And then we went up on scows, like, they were pulled by some kind of a boat. But anyway, there was about five hundred boys on each one of these scows, see, and there was two boats. But the railroad--another battalion, they went up on the railroad, see. But the railroad boys, they always said, weren't as far away from Archangel as the river boys were. And I was of course in the river--First Battalion.

LENNING: What were your activities as you went up the river?

GRACE: What did we do? Well, we were only on the boat two or three days. I think we got out on a Sunday, if I remember rightly, and I think we got off the next Thursday morning. Now, on the river front, the first company of the battalion would kind of scour the small towns, try and find if there was any Bolsheviks laying around there. And the other three companies would march on, see. They were only just little villages, that's all they were. It was away from Archangel, and Archangel's a nice town. But otherwise, it was just, oh, maybe, twenty or thirty houses--small groups.

LENNING: Were you with Company "D" when they fought at Seltskoe?

GRACE: No.

LENNING: When did you first fight the Bolsheviks?

GRACE: Well, I suppose there was alot of them up around Shenkurst. I suppose it was probably about two weeks after that. We had driven a good wedge into the Bolsheviks, but, then, they counter-attacked it, and got a lot of Yanks then, too.

LENNING: How long were you on the river front before you were taken ill?

GRACE: Not very long. Maybe a month, something of that kind.

JOHNSON: Had you ever had the Spanish flu before the double pneumonia?

GRACE: No.

JOHNSON: You only had the double pneumonia?

GRACE: Double pneumonia, that's right. In other words, I was examined by the Allied board, and Captain Greenleaf said, "You've got a little double pneumonia." I don't know. But anyway, I asked the Lord humbly when I went aboard the boat, going over, someday I might return. And though I had a very, very, close call, I did return. And since I've been out of the service, I've enjoyed wonderful health, see.

LENNING: How long were you ill with double pneumonia?

GRACE: Well, I came back to Archangel on a hospital boat, and I went up to an English hospital, the 53rd Hospital. But, I think I was probably a hard patient to handle. Every time I would see English doctors on the floor, I'd ask them when I was going to be discharged. I was only in the hospital, oh, maybe a week or two. And I guess they were glad to send me down to Headquarters Company.

LENNING: What was it like?

GRACE: The hospital?

LENNING: Yes.

GRACE: Well, the cots weren't bad. It was a pretty good building, but the food was terrible. And for illustration, if you wanted a piece of bread for lunch, you'd better get it in the morning, and tuck it underneath your pillow if you wanted to have a piece of bread to eat with your lunch, 'cause they just didn't serve any bread, and things like that, you know. I wasn't used to that, see. I'm not fussy about eating, and Jean always said that whatever was put in front of me I ate, and I guess I do, and did. But I think there should be a little bit in the way of some kind of system, don't you know. And the English didn't seem to have that. Maybe it was because they were short of help, or, I don't know, things of that kind.

LENNING: What happened after you were discharged from the 53rd Stationary Hospital?

GRACE: Well, I went to Headquarters Company, and the next morning, I . . .

LENNING: Was that in Archangel?

GRACE: Yes, at the other end of the town. The next morning I was transferred to the Convalescent Hospital. In other words, I was examined again there, and they transferred me to the Convalescent Hospital, and that's when I came under Captain Greenleaf.

LENNING: Why did the British send you to Headquarters?

GRACE: In Archangel?

LENNING: Yes. Why did the British send you away from their hospital?

GRACE: Well, I rather think it was my own fault probably, because I was fed up on it--the way they handled it, see, and I wanted to get out of there.

LENNING: Did you request to be put into an American hospital?

GRACE: Oh, yes. I asked as soon as I--I says, "I know I'll be better off when I get down to Headquarters Company."

LENNING: And were you?

GRACE: Yes, I was.

LENNING: How did the food in the Convalescent Hospital compare to the food in the British hospital?

GRACE: Well, it wasn't much when I went in there. Captain Greenleaf talked to me. I said, "Captain Greenleaf, I wouldn't exchange one thing unless I had a letter from you authorizing me to do it." And so he wrote me a letter allowing me to trade as I saw fit, see, with the peasants.

LENNING: So that's when you started working with Captain Greenleaf?

GRACE: Yes. And he was very fair with me. Any time any convalescents was leaving Russia, why he always told me. About every three weeks, or so on, they'd send those boats back. You see, we sent a lot of them back, but we had quite a few troops from France, and some come out there. In other words, replacement troops, see, to bring up the army, or the regiment, up to standard again.

LENNING: What were your first impressions of Archangel?

GRACE: Well, it's an entirely different city than ours is. In

the first place, the sewage system was just terrible then. And then of course, I was told while I was out there that a lot of-- especially young people--had left Southern Russian feeling that they were protected more there than around the southern part. And as a result Archangel was supposed to be about sixty thousand-- it may have been a hundred thousand; awfully overcrowded, see. A lot of them slept on practically a straw tick or something like that on the floor. They lived different.

LENNING: What did you know about the political situation there?

GRACE: Only all I knew was they had overthrown the Tsar, and so on, and they hadn't any stable government. And, well, they said the ruble's worth a dime--I don't think it was worth much because on account of the government being overthrown.

LENNING: Did you know that there had been a revolution..there the very night before you landed?

GRACE: No, I didn't know anything about this. And the Russians I knew never spoke of it. That's why I often wondered why we troops were sent out there. I would say that that expedition was really a disgrace to the American government.

LENNING: You said before that you got to know some of the Archangel residents fairly well.

GRACE: Yes.

LENNING: What do you think about their position in the Civil War? Did they sympathize with the Allies or the Bolsheviks?

GRACE: To be honest truthfully about it, the ones that I knew very well were very closed-mouthd. Because they felt something might leak out and something would happen to them, don't you know. It was awful to live a life like that.

LENNING: When did you find out that the armistice had been signed?

GRACE: Oh, we found out that. But of course, that's about the time our fighting started. I think they had a kind of bulletin board at the Convalescent and kept telling how things were going over in France, and so on. But we thought that after the Armistice was signed, why shortly we'd be getting out of there. But that wasn't it. Most of the fighting was after the armistice was signed. We were there till the next June, I think about the fourteenth or sixteenth of June the next year, fighting all winter. (chuckles)

LENNING: What was the effect on the morale of the men?

GRACE: Well, they were wondering when they were coming home. Yes, that's all they were thinking about. But, I don't know, the American government didn't agree on that for some reason.

JOHNSON: What was the quality of the medical care in the hospital?

GRACE: Very good. American, very good. We only had two American nurses at the Red Cross hospital, but those two ladies were excellent, you know.

JOHNSON: Were they assisted by Russian women at all?

GRACE: Oh, they had Russian help there.

LENNING: Before the other side of the tape ended, you were talking about Major Longley.

GRACE: Major Longley. Yes, a medical major. They sent the 327th Ambulance Corps out there--medical--and the 310th, oh what would it be?

JOHNSON: The Engineers?

GRACE: Major Longley was at the head of it. He was in charge--over at the Red Cross hospital. I got pretty well acquainted with Major Longley. He talked to me one time, he says, "I can't figure it out, Sergeant, how you're improving that food so much." I said, "Well, I couldn't do it if I didn't have the help, and if I didn't make the exchanges and so on with the peasants." Then he said, "Do you have any extra time?" I said, "What do you mean, Major?" He said, "Oh, " he said, "We've got some surplusses over there. I thought maybe we'd send them over and maybe you could get rid of them for us." And I did.

The Red Cross had a building in Archangel. And, I think his name is Major Lively--in charge of it. And if I dropped in there, why, he'd always come down and talk to me. And he asked me if I was short of, for illustration, canned milk. And I said, "Well, we're not short, Major, but we could always use a little extra." He said, "Oh, you can have it." And he was very nice to me.

I let one cook go (laughter) up there because he took things from the stockroom.

LENNING: Was he an American?

GRACE: Yes, American cook. I guess he came back to the States-- I don't know what happened to him. I've always tried to be honest,

see. And I just can't work with anybody unless they are that way.

JOHNSON: So would you say that there were adequate food and medical supplies in the hospital?

GRACE: Oh yes. They were pretty well taken care of.

JOHNSON: Much more so than the British?

GRACE: Yes.

LENNING: What about the number of doctors?

GRACE: Well, they only used two or three doctors out there.

LENNING: Total?

GRACE: I don't know how many, but there weren't too many. But they were willing to work.

JOHNSON: Then you never witnessed any cases where the doctors neglected the patients or stole supplies?

GRACE: Oh, no. No.

JOHNSON: Could you tell us about the clothing you wore on the front?

GRACE: The clothing? Well, we were well-clothed, I think--about as much as anyone could wear. But the temperature was so that it would get through. I would go over to make an exchange, maybe in an evening. I dressed warm and I would only get a short distance. Those heavy coats were sheeplined. And you'd start to hear that darned stuff crack. You think we had a cold winter here last one? (laughter)

JOHNSON: Was frostbite common?

GRACE: Frostbite? Oh, very much. Quite a few came into Convalescent Hospital with frostbite, and some of them were pretty severe.

JOHNSON: Did the severe cases result from someone losing an article of clothing?

GRACE: Well, no, I don't know. Either our equipment wasn't the right equipment for that severe a cold, or something, I don't know. But frostbites were pretty common up there.

JOHNSON: What were the sanitary conditions at the hospital like?

GRACE: Well, the Red Cross Hospital was much better. It was a newer building. The Convalescent Hospital was a very suitable building for the convalescents. But they had no way of heating water at the Convalescent Hospital when I went there, see. And the American Engineers installed a heating system so that--have hot water and so on.

LENNING: How many buildings had modern plumbing?

GRACE: Oh, I think the Red Cross was better than the Convalescent was, as a whole.

JOHNSON: Did the British hospital have modern plumbing?

GRACE: Oh, that was a very good building too, for that--sanitary.

JOHNSON: Were the buildings well-heated and well-ventilated?

GRACE: Well, no. Not too well-heated, but the Russian people don't believe in much heat, between you and I. In Archangel there I often went to buildings in the evening, and I didn't even take off my--and I knew them well, very well-acquainted with them, but I just probably leave my overcoat on, see, because it wasn't too warm in there.

(laughter) (Remarks concerning temperature of the house follow.)

JOHNSON: Was the hospital well-heated?

GRACE: Well, the Convalescent wasn't. In Russia, they're almost all brick, and they build them in the corner like that. And then they put wood in there, why they pull that fire out, see, and let it drop down underneath. And the Yanks, they overfired them sometimes, and then they'd start these two-by-fours smoking in the walls. The fire department would come, but it wasn't much; they'd probably only come with a barrel of water or something of that kind. It was enough to put the darn thing out, but they'd have to tear part of it out there. When I heard there was a fire in the building, I used to get up. But they got to be quite common. In other words, at the Convalescent Hospital, we kept a Russian all the time, and that's about all he did, was rebuild those in different rooms, you know, where they'd gotten too hot and burned the two-by-fours.

JOHNSON: That happened in the hospital?

GRACE: Yes.

JOHNSON: Were the patients usually comfortable?

GRACE: They--we just stayed there, until they pulled the brick out, and dump a few pails of water or something on it, and that was it.

JOHNSON: You said earlier that you had Russian friends. How do you think the Russians as a whole reacted to the American troops?

GRACE: Very good. I rather enjoyed going to several homes.

At Eastertime, the Russians do as well as they can in the way of food for on a table, but they'd leave it. You can go there and enjoy

whatever they've got there, and then move to another home. And this particular family wanted me to go with them on an Easter morning, see, and I did. And though you didn't see any of the people usually lived there because they were at some other home, they made you at home. I got quite a kick out of that morning. It's quite different than back here, don't you know. And if you'd invite someone in, why, you'd want to be there to meet them, don't you know. They weren't there, see. But I rather liked the Russian people, and I got along with them fine. And I guess they thought something of me, too, I don't know.

JOHNSON: Did they like most of the American soldiers?

GRACE: Oh yes. Yes.

JOHNSON: Did that change while you were in Archangel? Did they become less friendly?

GRACE: The Russians hated to see the Yanks leave. They became more friendly the longer we stayed. They used to have things to entertain the convalescents. You'd have dances and the Convalescence and so forth and so on. And of course, Russian girls came, see. And they-- there was always plenty of young people there to satisfy the patients that wanted to dance, see.

JOHNSON: Did you notice any difference about the Russians' reaction to the Americans and their reaction to the other Allies?

GRACE: I think the Yanks got along better with them; I really do. Yes. I think so. As a whole, I think that the Yanks fitted in pretty well.

JOHNSON: Were there ever any hostilities between the British and the Russians?

GRACE: Well, I don't think the British got along with the Russians at all, myself. I had talked to Russians and asked them what. They seemed perfectly satisfied to have the Yank around, but I guess they'd have like to see the British get out.

LENNING: Getting back to the hospital, how long were the patients allowed to convalesce?

GRACE: To convalesce? Well, of course they were examined every so often, see. And of course if they were stronger, why many times they were sent back to the front, don't you know. And some of them that did not, why they were permanently on the convalescent list, and they were sent home.

LENNING: Did you ever hear of any cases when a patient was prematurely sent back to the front?

GRACE: No, I did not because they were spread all over, and they came back, don't you know, went here and there, and so on. You see, being out to Custer about ten months, and being more like a depot brigade, we didn't keep our same boys, you know what I mean, we originally had. We might get 180, 200 boys assigned to a company, and maybe in three or four weeks they were transferred out, see, to some other division that was going overseas, see. In other words, Custer was like a depot brigade for almost all the time I was there. And as a result, a lot of boys that was even in our own company, were only with us two or three weeks before we went overseas, see. And they were very poorly trained, I mean the late troops. But when

they got out of the service they went here and there to their homes. You didn't hear much of them after that. The 339th they said had quite a few of the toops from Michigan, of course, and Wisconsin. And we had quite a lot of troops in our own company that was from the South, transferred from Camp Taylor to Custer, you know.

LENNING: So they were shifting everybody around a lot?

GRACE: Yes.

LENNING: Were you kept pretty well informed about conditions on the front?

GRACE: The troops? Yes, well, of course, we were anxious to hear how they were getting along up there, don't you know what I mean. The American ration at the front was terrible, see. You'd get that old iron ration: corned beef and hardtack, and so on. Many boys told me that in the cold weather they'd put the hardtack in a sleeping bag, like, at night so then put some SNOW in the kit with the hardtack so it's be a little bit soft in the morning to eat, don't you know.

LENNING: How did you feel about the Americans fighting the Bolsheviks in Russia?

GRACE: Well, that's about the only thing--I'll never understand why the Yanks were ever sent out there.

LENNING: Did you feel at the time as though you were helping the Russians or not?

GRACE: Well, I don't see how any way we were helping them. The Russian people could get along on a lot less than the Yanks can. The

Yanks have been used to more, don't you know what I mean.

LENNING: The Russians could get by with less?

GRACE: Oh yes. Oh yes. I often wondered in Northern Russia--in other words, when we first went there, there wasn't a store in Archangel. There was just a jewelry store. Now there had been, but they'd all gone, see, closed up and gone home or somewhere. But there was quite a few more business places when we left there than there was when we first went out there. A lot of things--they had no streetcars running when we first went to Archangel; American engineers got a lot of those streetcars back on, running again, don't you know, and things like that. But they didn't have the transportation, nothing compared to what we have back here to work with.

LENNING: How did the people in Archangel feel about the Engineers helping with the streetcars?

GRACE: Well, they were grateful for that.

LENNING: They were grateful?

GRACE: Yes, Yes. It may have been that, I don't know, we was able to get some parts out there or something they could work with to repair those cars, I don't know. But they were just laying idle, that's all, 'til the American engineers got them running again--a lot of them, maybe not all, but a lot of them.

LENNING: How did the British direction of the expedition affect the morale of the troops?

GRACE: British and Yanks began having trouble getting along in England. Then on the boat to Russia the food the British prepared

was so bad and so meager that this made matters worse. British charged 80 cents per man per day for rations, and it cost us 49 or 50 cents to feed a man.

LENNING: What kind of Bolshevik propaganda did you encounter?

GRACE: Oh, not too much.

LENNING: How about the British? Did they use any propaganda?

GRACE: I wouldn't say so.

LENNING: What kind of treatment did the Bolshevik prisoners receive?

GRACE: Terrible. The Russians had a Russian prison right in Archangel there. And I saw several convoys of--and it looked like the poor birds should have been in a hospital, and instead of that, they were trying to drive a sleigh, maybe two or three other prisoners in the sleigh with them. And the convoy--and of course there was Russians going along on Russian horses, convoying them down, see, and they'd take them to that Russian prison. That was a terrible place. We used to get a detail from the Russian prison there very day, and they cut wood and so on for us and so on. And . . .

LENNING: So they were Bolshevik prisoners?

GRACE: No--they were, yes.

LENNING: Did you ever talk to them?

GRACE: Well, they couldn't--didn't speak much English, don't you know. There was one man in particular, he was a prisoner, but he spoke English. And I talked to him several times. They cut the wood in the same yard right where the Convalescent Hospital was.

And he liked to get on the detail to carry wood in to the kitchen. He'd bring a lot of wood in there. There'd be two or three prisoners. They carried this wood on outfits on their backs. And this particular boy, he says, "I'll come as often as I can in here." And of course, the cooks and I give him something, don't you know. Likeable fellow too.

LENNING: Were the British in charge of these prisons?

GRACE: No, the Russians someway, somehow, were in charge of that Russian prison. There may have been British over there, too.

LENNING: How well were the prisoners fed?

GRACE: Oh, terrible. This boy that used to bring them over--Schroeder was his name--they used to want to send something with him, see. And I said, "Schroeder, look in the bag, before you bring them. If it's old fish or anything of that kind, just leave it. Don't bring it. We'll feed them." And I think that's one reason they liked to come to Convalescent--because they got better meals, don't you know.

LENNING: Did he ever talk to you about Bolshevism or Socialism?

GRACE: Schroeder?

LENNING: The Bolshevik prisoners that chopped wood for you.

GRACE: On, no. They, as I say--of course they didn't have much time because they were just carrying wood and doing this and that, don't you know. And, in as much as a lot of them couldn't speak English, you couldn't talk to them.

JOHNSON: Were any of the prisoners ever physically abused?

GRACE: Well, very seldom. Schroeder was a --I'll tell you, before he went in the army, he trained animals, you know. In other words, he was the right type to handle men of that kind because he had patience with them, don't you know.

LENNING: Was Schroeder American?

GRACE: Yes. I think that's probably the reason why he was selected for that job, because of what he had done in civilian life.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive letters from home mentioning news reports of the expedition?

GRACE: Well, the trouble is, in the army, you can't write much, because they'll blot it out on you. The government will, or something of that kind, you know what I mean. You can--in fact, to be honest with you, I sent quite a lot of cablegrams home. I didn't smoke, and for my forty cigarettes I could get forty rubles. And I'd go down, send a cable out. And they appreciate those cable grams I think much more than a letter because a letter took three weeks to get it back here. And that cablegram, they'd have it within a day or two after you sent it. And that's the trouble with the army--things you'd like to write but wouldn't dare write because they'd maybe blot it out.

JOHNSON: What happened if the army didn't approve of something you had written in a letter? Would they reprimand you or call you to account for it?

GRACE: On, no. They'd just blot it out, just blot out what they didn't want you to have, and that's all you'd hear of it. But Jean

often said that she thinks that only once or twice little things in my letters had been blotted out.

JOHNSON: What kind of things did they censor?

GRACE: Anything they didn't want to get out about the government.

JOHNSON: Did they only censor government affairs or also those dealing with conditions?

GRACE: No, government, mostly.

JOHNSON: Would they censor a statement like, "I don't know why we're here?"

GRACE: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did you ever get any letters from the States telling you that they had newspaper reports of the expedition?

GRACE: No.

JOHNSON: Did the people you received letters from know what you were doing in Russia?

GRACE: Oh, they probably did. They probably--the newspapers and so on of that time....

JOHNSON: But when they wrote they never referred to a newspaper article that they had read?

GRACE: No.

JOHNSON: Did you every had any dealing with the Red Cross organization besides at the hospital?

GRACE: Well, the Red Cross--that's where I used to get extra supplies from Major Lively--a fine, fine man. And if I went in there, he'd do his best to give me what he could spare. To be honest, when I went into the Convalescent Hospital, they were only feeding about sixty patients there then. And Captain Greenleaf said, "You know," he said, "It keep increasing." He said, "How are you going to handle them, sergeant?" I said, "That's my job, Captain. Leave it with me."

Now, out at Custer we had three U.S. ranges to work with. And up in Russia I had just one stove, see. But in as much as we only were feeding about sixty in the beginning, and then gradually come up, see, you seemed to take them on, that few extra. It didn't seem to be too hard for you to handle, don't you know. Even with one stove, see. But you had to plan pretty well to....

LENNING: Who had control over the supplies?

GRACE: The British. Yes, we drew rations from the British.

LENNING: Were they very generous?

GRACE: No, they were tricky. Well, there was a little sergeant from the Ambulance Company that drew the rations, and of course I knew exactly what should be coming in--I mean in the way of quantities. And I told him in plain English, I says, "Now I realize that from time to time probably they might be short of this or that. But, be sure to pick up a memo or something from them if they haven't delivered that much." And the minute they got it in, we got ours! (laughs) Oh, the British sure could, oh...

On the boat coming back to France, there was an American officer came in one day. And he says, "Sergeant, would you take charge of the galleys coming home?" In other words, the Americans just about refused to go aboard the boat unless the Americans were in charge of the galley, see, 'cause it was terrible going out to Russia. Terrible--the British were in charge. There was fourteen men that sat at a table, and I think any four or five Yanks could have eaten all that they sent up for fourteen, see. Well, I did take over the galley.

LENNING: Did you cook for the patients at the Hospital?

GRACE: Yes, the convalescents.

LENNING: Did you ever cook for officers?

GRACE: No.

LENNING: Did they complain about the diet being monotonous?

GRACE: Well, they did everything they could, but, of course, it did get--it was.

LENNING: They still grumbled?

GRACE: Oh, yes. They were wondering why we weren't coming home, you know, and so on and so forth. The trouble is, with troops laying around like that, they have nothing to do, you know, only to--you might say, think--don't you know what I mean. And they'd get all knotted up and wanting to get out of there. But we didn't get out until the next June.

JOHNSON: Did you ever see American Sentinel while you were over there?

GRACE: Oh yes! Those were printed out there.

JOHNSON: Do you know if the Sentinel was ever censored?

GRACE: I don't think they were ever censored. This Sergeant Knight, he printed them, see. And he'd drop one off at the Convalescence every week, see.

LENNING: So, the British didn't have any control over this paper?

GRACE: No, no.

JOHNSON: How did you spend holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas while you were in Russia?

GRACE: Christmas they did pretty well. I didn't have much to work with, but by George, they'd trim a tree someway, somehow. (laughter) Thanksgiving of course, you didn't--as a comparison, I had boys tell me at Custer that they thought they had enjoyed their dinner and so on and so forth just as much had they been home, see. But not so out in Russia 'cause you didn't have things to work with.

JOHNSON: What was the relationship between the British soldiers and the American soldiers?

GRACE: Well, I don't think they were too friendly. Exceptions to it, but I mean as a whole. I knew several British boys out there, and--but as a whole, I don't think they got along very well.

JOHNSON: Were there many conflicts with the British?

GRACE: Oh, just from time to time.

JOHNSON: Did the conflicts between the British and the American

soldiers ever take a violent form?

GRACE: No, I wouldn't say that. But they just kept away from each other, that's all.

JOHNSON: So there were never any real outbreaks of violence?

GRACE: No. I wouldn't go too far, but--of course, the French had been in the war a long time over there, long before we got in it. But the French were disgraceful out in Russia, especially with the female sex, don't you know, and so on and so forth. I never thought anyone would be as, get as, low as they did. But they did.

JOHNSON: Do you mean that they were immoral in their conduct?

GRACE: Yes, especially the French. I didn't see too much of that with the British.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about the Canadian soldiers?

GRACE: The Canadians were good soldiers and good nice boys, too.

LENNING: What opportunities did you have for recreation?

GRACE: Not very much. No, there was very little.

JOHNSON: Did the officers who remained in Archangel and never went to the front have an easy life in Archangel?

GRACE: Oh yes. I knew a couple of boys who were stationed with British officers. As a whole, I think it's the Yank likes to live, and so on, and eat and this and that much more than the British. 'Cause they're--you know, if they have their tea and a bun or something like that, they were all right. (laughter)

JOHNSON: Did they have a pretty easy life there though?

GRACE: Oh yes. They don't like fighting. (laughter) No, they'll push the fighting off on someone if they can.

LENNING: When did you first find out that you were going home?

GRACE: Well, it was early spring; probably around Memorial Day. Along in there, see--maybe a little earlier than that.

LENNING: How did you find out?

GRACE: Well, just little things. We heard the British troops coming in to replace the Yanks; why, you'd put two and two together. You see, these two--the Convalescent and the Red Cross Hospital were right on the bank of the Dvina River, and they could see any boats coming down, you know, and so on. Curiosity killed the cat, you know. They wanted to know what--who was coming in on them.

LENNING: How did you feel about going home?

GRACE: I wanted to. I wanted to come home.

LENNING: Did you feel as though the Americans were leaving without really having finished what they had started?

GRACE: No, because I think the Yanks would have completed it all right if they had troops enough. But five thousand, six thousand troops.

LENNING: Just not enough?

GRACE: Nothing, compared to the job that had to be done.

LENNING: What kind of reception did you have when you got home?

GRACE: (chuckles) Not very good either. We came back in two groups; I was in the last group. When the first group returned to Detroit, they paraded them at Belle Isle. They paraded in July in winter outfits--there was snow on the ground when we left Russia. It was too much for a great many of them and they fell out of the parade. You see, after the Armistice in our country, the troops had probably gotten back here and discharged, don't you know, and so on and so forth. And so they kind of forgot about the North Russian boys, I guess.

We got off of that boat in Boston. We were stationed out in Camp Devon for a day or two days, I think, before we came on to Custer. And they again at Camp Devon, the quartermaster issued what we called iron ration--corned beef and so on and so forth. And they had been eating that all winter up there in Russia, and you know what they did to them? They just broke every car window that was on the train, see. Just threw them right through the window. Yes, they may have needed them for food but they were disgusted to think (laughter)

LENNING: When you returned, did you find that your family and friends knew what the expedition had been about?

GRACE: Well, in my case, there was quite a few of my family that were down at the train. And I had a brother-in-law that was in the Spanish-American War, and he was right over when the train pulled in. I think I was out on the platform, and he spotted me. And he said, "Come on Mike. We're all down here." I think everybody except my mother--my mother of course had a stiff knee, and she couldn't get

around a place like that, see. But otherwise, my sister and so on--different ones were all down there--brother-in-laws and this and that. And, you know little Honeybee, that goes to Hope College, Jane's daughter?

JOHNSON: Jen.

GRACE: Jen, yes.

JOHNSON: Yes, I know her.

GRACE: Well, her mother, Jane was there, only she was a little bit of a tot. And they had taught her that Uncle Mike had been fighting Bolsheviks, see. And she repeated it to them. (laughter)

LENNING: Were your family members suprised at the stories of your experiences?

GRACE: To be honest with you, I think I've talked to you two girls more than I ever talked before to anybody. I've never gone too much into detail. Now, Chuck was here the other day, and--Jane's husband --he sat here and talked to me a few minutes. And he said, "You know, I never realized what you were in up there until you girls wanted some information and so on and so forth. You never talked much about it." "No, I don't. The way I look at it," I said, "I sometimes think that people don't want to hear those kinds of things, don't you know." But you've asked a question and I tried my best to answer them, its quite different. But just to carry on a conversation about Russia, I don't do it, see. They might be interested, I don't know. If they ask, I'll tell them all I know.

LENNING: How did your experiences in North Russia affect you? You

said before that your girlfriend had said that you'd changed a lot when you returned.

GRACE: In the army you've got to watch out for yourself a lot more than you do in civilian life, different ways. Of course, I had known Jean about a year before I went in the army, and we had understood that I didn't think it was right to go in the army, and possibly something might happen and so on and so forth.

LENNING: So, do you think that that experience in Russian greatly affected you?

GRACE: Well, it probably did for a while, any way. Maybe some. I hope it hasn't down through the years, because I grew up in a nice home and--not a rich home or anything like that--but we were very thoughtful about the remainder of the family, don't you know, and so on.

LENNING: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about?

GRACE: Oh, I suppose there's a lot of things.

LENNING: Any favorite stories?

GRACE: In October the Russians laid ties on the Divina River and let them freeze in. About Christmas they put rails on them and ran three or four box cars and an engine on them.

The women scrubbed clothes at home on a scrub board in the bottom of wooden tubs. Then they took the clothes to the Divina, cracked a hole in the ice, and finished rinsing them there.

I visited at Dr. Papauf's home. He was the doctor at the Russian hospital. They had a green house they hadn't used for several

years. I had my family send garden seeds in letter. I took these to Mrs. Papauf. She grew lettuce, etc. and gave me some.

When I was a boy I worked at a grocery store in St. Clair. In the winter they sold mackeral from big kegs. When I was in Russia I found that Russian fishermen fished all summer in the White Sea for mackeral, prepared them, salted them, and they were kept in the hold, probably frozen all winter. In the spring I saw them unload these mackeral on the dock at the Divina, rinse them in the Divina, and repack them in kegs for shipment. What impressed me was that these kegs looked exactly like the ones we had at Moore's store in St. Clair. I often wondered if that was where our mackeral came from.

Lots of reindeer were raised in Lapland. I would see every day convoys of sleighs all tied together, each pulled by two reindeer, the sleds piled high with reindeer hides. The lead sled had no hides, just the driver who directed the reindeer with a long pole--no lines on the reindeer.

I brought back from Russia: two white fox furs, 48 ermine, eight beaver skins, mink skins, and red squirrel skins, a rectangular silver purse with a design engraved on the outside (lady's purse with a chain), two or three Russian pocket knives--larger and heavier than American pocket knives, a fork and knife that fit right into each other like a case, a diamond ring I had remounted for my wife's engagement ring, garnet beads and garnet stones.

One of the prettiest sights I've ever seen is the seals playing on the ice in the White Sea. I watched this from the boat when we were spreading the ice as we came home (When we arrived, there had been no ice; I arrived in Archangel harbor on September 5, exactly one year to the day when I went into the army).