

Silas Gross
Petty Officer, 3d Class, United States Navy/Retired
Served in World War II, Pacific Theater
aboard the *USS Comstock*, *USS Stone County*, *USS Hancock*
and in various land assignments, 1943-1966

Dorothy Gross McCray and Allen Gross, two of Mr. Gross' children, were present during the videotaping of this conversation.

Interviewed on July 23, 2012 by Rick Appleton
at the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center, San Diego

Appleton: This is a conversation with Silas Gross and I'm Rick Appleton, an oral history volunteer at the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center of San Diego. Today is Monday, July 23, 2012, and this conversation is taking place at the Veterans Museum as part of the Oral History Program of the museum, and the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

For the record Mr. Gross served in the United States Navy in food services and in various assignments throughout his career in the Armed Forces, and retired at the rank of 3rd Class Petty Officer.

Why don't we just start out by you stating your name and the year when you were born, not the date, but just the year?



Silas in 1942

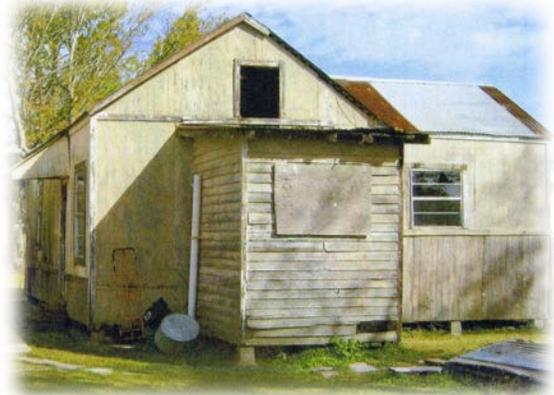
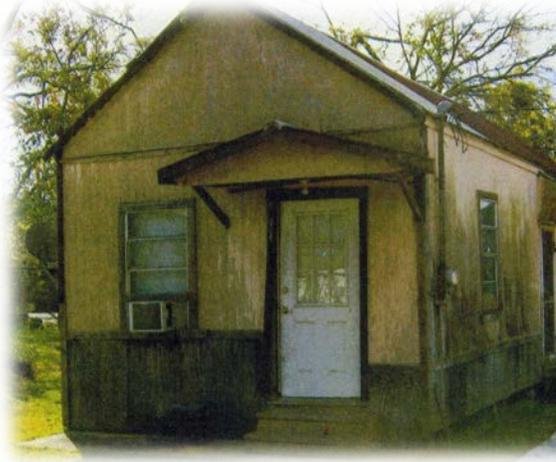


Silas in 2012 during the interview

Gross: My name is Silas Gross and I born in 1921.

Appleton: Okay. Can you start out by telling a little bit about where you grew up and

about your family?



*The house where Silas grew up (front and back views)
is still standing in Lutcher, Louisiana.*

Gross: I grew up in Lutcher, Louisiana, which is 45 miles from New Orleans, and Lutcher would be in the St. James Parish. And I met my wife, Miss Dorothy Gross in 1940, and we fell in love. I met her at the church. We fell in love, 'cause I used to sing all the time in church. She might have liked my singing (chuckle), so we fell in love and we got married.

Silas' wife, Dorothy Gross, in 1993



Appleton: (Laughing) Well, good!

Gross: And when we got married we had our first child, Miss McCray, Dorothy McCray. I spoiled her.

Appleton: And for the record, she's sitting here at this table.

Gross: Right. And I was workin' . . . Social Security just had came up when I was workin' at the moss gin in Lutcher. I used to work at the moss gin in Lutcher. We went across the river in Vacherie, Louisiana, and we stayed with some of our in-laws. I got a job over there in Vacherie on the Ozone Plantation. And I worked over there on the Ozone Plantation.

The Mississippi River as it now appears in Vacherie, Louisiana where Silas went to work on the Ozone Plantation

From Wikimedia by Roy Luck, with permission



Vacherie, Louisiana, the red dot (lower right) on the map

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And [on] December the 7th, 1941, I had a little radio, a little battery radio and they say, “The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor.”

Appleton: Now where . . . you were out . . .

Gross: I was . . .

Appleton: . . . out in the shed listening to the radio?

Gross: I was out on the outside . . . my wife's brother-in-law had the radio 'cause I couldn't afford, but he had a little battery radio. And December 7th, 1941 the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. And they said, “The President will speak in a few minutes.” President Roosevelt. And he spoke. He said, “People of the United States, the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor, and this is a act of war! So from now on, as of today, the United States have declared war on Japan and its allies.”

*Attack at Pearl Harbor,
the sinking of the USS Arizona*

*From Wikimedia, official US
Navy photograph from the
National Archives and Records
Administration, in the public
domain*



Appleton: And what was everybody's reaction around you?

Gross: Well, everybody's reaction . . . they were surprised! They didn't know where Pearl Harbor was! They were surprised. And so Higgins opened up the shipyard over there for the Defense [Department] in New Orleans, City Park Avenue. And my brother-in-law, he had a job over there building the Navy hospital. They started building hospitals and everything else, and my brother-in-law came to where I was working at in the St. James Parish on the Ozone Plantation and he says, "Brother-in-law, you're sittin' down here makin' peanuts while you could be makin' *big* money in New Orleans! You could be makin' 75 dollars *a week!*"

I said, "What?" I said, "Well, let me get my family and leave." But then I had another baby came along . . . which had been born . . . which is called Lucy.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And so I had two kids. Two girls. And I packed up . . . my mother-in-law had told me, "Oh, no, don't you go down to New Orleans?"

I said, "Well, I'm goin' where the money is Mama."

So she said, "Well see, Grandma talked about all the sportin' women in New Orleans." New Orleans is a good time place, you see.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: So I said, "No. No. I'm goin' down there, and I'm gonna leave my wife here, and I'm goin' down and get me a job and get me a place. Then I'll move my family back over there." So I left.

Appleton: So you left, yes.

Gross: And then I asked my wife . . . I said, "What you think about it?"

She said, "Well, I'll hate to see you go."

I said, "Yes but, honey, but we ain't makin' no money here. I'm goin' to New Orleans and makin' money and makin' all this overtime, and the defense plants openin' up, and Higgins Shipyard gonna open up . . . makin' these Higgins boats, landin' barges, And Deschutes, they open up a big factory, puttin' up these LST's, too."



*Higgins Shipyard, New Orleans in 1943, showing both Higgins troop landing boats and a few PT boats
(PT – Patrol Torpedo boat)*

From Wikimedia by John Vachon from the Library of Congress, in the public domain

Appleton: Were women working in these factories, too?

Gross: Ohhh, yes, sir. They had women.

Appleton: And did your wife then work in one?

Gross: No, no. She had a baby to take care of.

Appleton: She took care of the little one.

Gross: Yes, my other little girl.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: Yes. So I came on down and I stayed with my sister Helen. We moved in with her. And Paul told me, which was my brother-in-law, he said, "Emile is a foreman over there. He gonna give you a button to wear, because you gotta belong to the union."

You have to belong to the union. We're gonna give you a union button to put on your cap, and when you get in line and apply for a job, they ask you, 'You belong to the union?'" You tell 'em, "Yes." They take a look at your cap . . . "Oh, yes, he belongs . . ."

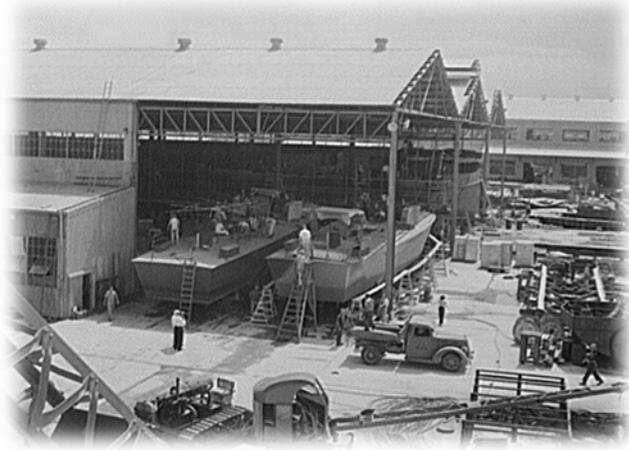
I got hired right away!

Appleton: (Chuckling) Well, good!

Gross: And I got hired and building the Tulane Hospital in New Orleans, on the lake front. So I stayed there for about pretty close to two years workin'. And then we finished the hospital. It was complete. Then I went over to Higgins shipyard.

*Higgins Boatyard in 1943
with PT boats under construction,
made of plywood*

*From Wikimedia by John Vachon
from the Library of Congress, in
the public domain*



Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And I got hired there. And they were buildin' these torpedo boats and landin' barges. They was puttin' about pretty close to 50 landin' barges a day. You know, just put them . . . 'cause they are made out of plywood. The landin' barges were made out of plywood, and part of these torpedo boats, too, was made out of plywood.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: But it was fast, and they had two Cadillac motors . . . the torpedo boat had two Cadillac motors in 'em. They was fast.

Appleton: Uh-hm, Yes.

Gross: And I stayed there, and I got me a place. They had a place open next to my sister. It was 9311 Forsche. So I rented that place out and I moved my wife. Me and my wife went and bought some furniture and furnished it all. We had our own place.

Appleton: How nice.

Gross: And after we had our own place I was still workin' at Higgins. And what made it so good . . . Forsche Street was not too far from City Park Avenue, where I worked at. It was pretty close . . . about two miles on a lakefront. And I used to go to work every mornin'. Sometime I'd come home 11 o'clock at night and makin' this overtime. My wife would say, "Honey, you're late again."



Silas in the early 1940s

I said, "Yes, I'm makin' this overtime, girl." So my paycheck was . . . we was doin' good.

Appleton: It was more than \$75 a week then when you were doing overtime!

Gross: Yes. Overtime, yes.

Appleton: How nice. Good for you!

Gross: It was \$200 and somethin'.

Appleton: Oh, my!



Gross: I said, "Man! We can make all the overtime we want!" 'Cause they were gettin' these . . . this war, you know . . . and they had the women workin' on them too, you know . . . the shipyards, same as Rosie the Riveter.

"Rosie the Riveter" poster from the War Production Coordinating Committee in World War II

From Wikimedia by J. Howard Miller and the National Museum and American History, Smithsonian Institution, in the public domain

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And one day in '43 old man Higgins . . . he's boss . . . Mr. Higgins . . . he come over the microphone . . . "Silas Gross, report to the office!"

I said, "I wonder what happened now?" That's the first thing you get in your mind, you know . . .

Appleton: For sure.

Gross: . . . when they come over the phone . . . so I went to the office. He said, "Mr. Gross, I got a letter from the local [Draft] Board."

See, I was drafted. I was drafted. Like my brother was.

He said, "I got a letter from the local board. They want you to report Monday mornin' ." It was on a Thursday he called me into his office . "They want to report Monday mornin' to the local board on Dried Street. You know where that is?"

I said, "Yes, sir. I know where that is, at the Induction Center."

And he said, "You could take off now and you'll get paid." That's what he said, and I said, "Thank you, sir."

"You can take off. And whenever you come back to Higgins, your job is open for you." That's what he told me, "Your job is open for you."

So I went home and told my wife, and Monday mornin' . . . and my wife said, "Ohhh, I think you're gonna be gone overseas."

So Monday mornin' I went to the Induction Office, and they had the Army guys settin' there. My brother was already in the Army. They got him in the Army right quick 'cause they drafted him quick. He was in the Buffalo Division. They was takin' the train to Fort Wachuka, Arizona, the Buffalo [Division], all buffalo. Yes, that was the black division. But the Indians used to call 'em 'buffalo soldiers' because the reason why they called 'em 'buffalo soldiers' . . . because their hair was just like buffalo. The Indians give 'em that name, 'buffalo soldiers.'

'Buffalo soldiers' in a World War I parade

*From Wikimedia and
The National Archives and Records
Administration, in the public domain*



Appleton: Really?

Gross: Oh, Yes. Yes.

Appleton: Well, there were buffalo soldiers even after the Civil War, I understand, too.

Gross: Yes. The Indians give 'em that name . . . buffalo soldiers.

Appleton: Interesting. Yes. Well, before we go into your . . . you're actually *into* the military . . . can you tell a little bit about what it was like growing up in . . . you grew up in Lutcher?

Gross: In Lutcher.



Silas' father, Dennis Gross, was born in Vacherie in 1887 and moved to Lutcher in his early teens. He died in Lutcher in 1970.

Appleton: What did your parents, your father and mother do? What kind of work did your father do?

Gross: Well, my father . . . he was workin' . . . he was a swamp man. And then he used to pick moss. Of course, you don't see that no more. Moss . . . they would send all that moss to Ford Motor Company, and they put it in automobiles.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: Moss. Make the pad and everything, you know.

Appleton: Oh! For padding!

Gross: Yes, for padding.

Appleton: Really! Yes, okay.

Gross: And after he worked there . . . my daddy worked there. And my mother, she died when I was . . . I remember her a little bit, but my baby sister, Irene, she never did remember my mother. My mother died in childbirth when I was five years old. My baby sister was two years old.

In them days they had no washin' machine and drier. They had them old lines. And she was pregnant, hangin' up clothes, and the doctors told my daddy the navel string got tied around the baby's neck, and she got 'mortified in her' and, of course, she started feelin' bad what the people . . . you know . . . they thought it was a stomach ache or somethin'. But the only doctor you could go to . . .

Now we lived 45 miles from New Orleans. The only doctor you could go to was these little country doctors, Dr. Isadore and Dr. Johnson. Now the charity hospital was 45 miles from Lutcher in New Orleans, so we brought 'em down to the charity hospital, my daddy did. And they examined her and the doctor say, "You know what? I think you brought her too late 'cause the baby is mortified, poisoned her whole system."

And she died. My mother died.

*Dennis Gross later remarried
Silas' stepmother, Corinne Ward.
The photo was taken in Lutcher.*



Appleton: Oh, my.

Gross: But anyhow, my grandmother . . . she helped raise us, and also my daddy . . . he'd taken another wife, you know . . . yes.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Well now, did you go to school in Lutchter?

Gross: I went to school in Lutchter.

Appleton: Now, was this a segregated school?



Typical Negro segregated school, wood construction and out of town

From Wikimedia, National Archives and Records Administration, in the public domain

Gross: Oh, Yes! The books that the white children that pass over . . . they give it to the black children.

Appleton: Oh, my. Yes. Wow.

Gross: And that old school what the white had . . . they build the white a brand new brick school, and give the old school to the . . . I'll never forget . . . they moved the old school out with logs and everything . . . tractors . . . for the black.



The nice, brick school was for the whites. This school shown is in Topeka, Kansas, made famous by the Brown v. Board of Education decision of the Supreme Court in 1954.

From Wikimedia and the National Parks Service, in the public domain

Appleton: On the same . . .

Gross: Parish.

Appleton: . . . same campus?

Gross: No.

Appleton: Same plot of ground? Or just . . .

Gross: Oh, it was about . . . say about four miles from the white school.

Appleton: Oh, my, my, my.

Gross: And for sports we used to go look at the white children playin' football. You couldn't go in, but you stand way out and look and 'em playin' football.

Some stores had different doors for 'Colored' and 'Whites'.

From Wikimedia, by the US Farm Security Administration, in the public domain



Appleton: Oh, my.

Gross: It was segregated.

Appleton: They must not have had a very good football teams if they didn't have any black guys (laughing) on their team.



Gross: And if ever walkin' . . . goin' to the post office . . . the white section . . .

And the public drinking fountains . . .

From Wikimedia by John Vachon, US Farm Security Administration, in the public domain

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: . . . and if a white lady be walkin' on the street, you have to get off the street and let her pass first.

Appleton: Really?

Gross: Yes. Then you get back on 'cause I remember one of my friends . . . you know, we went to school together . . . well, he was on the other side of the street walkin' and the white lady was comin', and he didn't get off the sidewalk. She told him . . . she said the 'n' word, you know . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: “When you see me comin', you gotta learn how to get off the sidewalk!”

So he told her . . . he said, “There's enough room for me and you to pass.”

And she told him . . . she said, “All I gotta do is holler, and you're a dead 'n', you know. Ohhh!

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gross: He kept walkin'. See, he got away with that that time, see, but that's how it was. But we made it.

Appleton: Did you have enough food? I mean, was your father able to work all through the Depression?

Gross: Oh, Yes. Well, durin' the Depression time . . .

Appleton: Yes, 'cause you would have been about 8 or 9, 10 years old.

Gross: Yes. People in the city they had it bad. They had it hard.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: 'Cause we, in the country, we could go in the field and pick up all kinds of turnips, cabbage, and go to the packin' house. If they got a little bruise on the cabbage they'd throw 'em in the bin. And my daddy would take them cabbages and cut 'em up and make sauerkraut out of 'em.

Appleton: Sure. And they didn't mind for people to come in and pick up the bruised cabbage?

Gross: No. They was glad for you to get 'em.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: Turnips and all kinds of vegetables. And then while it was killin' these beef for meat . . . these butchers . . . you go there and they'd give you all the tripes.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Yes. All that tripe. They see you buy in the store and they give that to you. They didn't want it. No.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: We used to get tubs of tripe. My mother said, "We'll get tubs of tripe."

Appleton: Life is different these days.

Gross: Yes. Life is different.

Appleton: Well then, you went to elementary school and then into high school also?

Gross: Yes. Well, I went to Lutcher High School, but I didn't finish because I went over there . . . after I got married . . . when I went over to Vacherie. Then I went over to New Orleans. But when I came back here I finished up my education. I went to Bell.

Appleton: Yes. Now was Lutcher High School a segregated high school also?

Gross: Oh, yes. Just blacks, no whites. Blacks. The whites wouldn't go there. No way. Just black.

Appleton: This was the time before any integration took place.

Gross: Yes. See, the white had their fine brick school, and they even hired a janitor to put heat . . . to turn the heat on, you know. See, the black . . . we got paid . . . we got paid by [a] Mary Bethune [scholarship]. She was givin' these under-privileged kids . . . you go pull up the flag and make the fire . . . you get \$50 a month. That was big money! Yes. Me and Benjamin used to do it. \$50 between us. Our old man would load on with groceries. (Laughing) Yes. A sack of rice would cost you about . . . in these days a sack of rice would cost you about seventy five dollars, a big sack of rice like that. A sack of flour like that cost you thirty-five cents.

Dorothy McCray: Did you say seventy five dollars or seventy five cents?

Gross: Oh, seventy five cents, and we used to get that large . . . it was a can . . . a big can of lard. You could get that Leaf, that fine lard and that was 75 cents, a big can

full. And a shoulder of meat would cost you about 50 cents! My daddy used to take \$10 and hook up a wagon and get a whole wagon loaded up with groceries! Ten dollars!

Appleton: Wow!

Gross: That's why he was so mad when I lost that money at bank night. Had bank night at Lucher, you know.

Appleton: You lost 25 dollars?

Gross: 25 dollars. They called my name, and I was sittin' on a stool eatin' ginger cake and cheese. They give us a dime to go to the movies. Movies was ten cents. And peanuts was two bags for five. They had no sound like they have now in the movies. So when my daddy give me a dime, gave Irene a dime, gave Helen a dime. "Okay. You all go to the movies." He used to cut rice, you know, my daddy started cuttin' rice. Uh-huh. Workin' in the rice land, and plowin' rice land. He was makin' a dollar a day! From 6 to 5! One dollar!



Irene, Silas' youngest sister in New Orleans (left) years later in September 1955, and again (above, right) Irene Gross Dorsey, who died in December 2012 at age 89 years.



Silas's older sister, Helen Gross Landry, died October 2012 at age 94 years. The photo was taken in New Orleans.

And I told my sisters, "I ain't goin' to no movie. I'm gonna get me some ginger cake and cheese."

Well, two ginger cakes was that big (laughing) . . . and then the Italian man would give you a big old hunk of cheese! And I was sittin' down there eatin' ginger cake and cheese when they came back, and my sister say, "You gonna get it!"

I said, "What?"

"Yes, they called your name tonight."

And I recalled it was bank night, and they had 25 dollars. They says, "We go tell Papa."

I just knew they were gonna tell 'cause they couldn't hold nothin' in their stomach. They told him. And my old man was makin' a d-o-l-l-a-r a day, and look what he could have do with that 25 dollars! Ohhh, boy. He took his belt. Walked me out. The dog started hollerin' and the cat started to mew . . . (laughing) and my sisters they started cryin'. "Oh, Papa! Papa that's enough! That's nothin'."

And my dad would say, "You mean to tell me I done give you a dime to go see the movie, you and your sisters, and you sittin' back at Tony's eatin' ginger cake and cheese!"

I said nothin'.

Appleton: So if you had gone to the movie you would have gotten . . . ?

Gross: I would've gotten that 25 dollars.

Appleton: . . . you would have gotten the 25 dollars!

Gross: 'Cause they called my name three times!

Appleton: Ohhh! Yes. So you won the lottery that night, but you weren't there to pick it up! (Laughing)

Gross: Weren't there to pick it up.

Appleton: 25 dollars. (Laughing) Well, that's a different reason for gettin' a whippin' for something you didn't do. (Laughing) Ohhh, that's amazing! Well then, you said you didn't graduate from . . .

Gross: No, I didn't graduate.

Appleton: . . . from Lutchter High School. You went to work then . . .

Gross: Yes, I went to work. I went to work in the rice field, and I went to work in the sugar cane field, sugar cane and rice.

*Cutting sugar cane in
Louisiana*

*From Wikimedia and
the Library of
Congress, in the public
domain*



Appleton: Yes. Well, that's hard work!

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: I mean, you're out there ... and this is with machinery or by hand?

Gross: No. Your hand. You cut rice with a reap hook. Cut that rice. So many acres.

Appleton: Yes. And the sugar cane?

Gross: Sugar can with a cane knife.

Appleton: With a cane knife.

Gross: Just cut it down.

Appleton: Slashing knife.

Gross: You don't see that no more. They got machines doin' all that.

Appleton: Well, you don't see it in Louisiana.

Gross: No.

Appleton: You might see it in some other country somewhere.

Gross: Yes. Some other country, yes. Because they got machines now cut more rice, and then they cut it, tie and bundle it up, shuckin' it up and everything else. They

got a guy there holdin' the sack, and sackin' it up. The same with sugar cane . . . they got machines there . . . they cut more sugar cane in the daytime than you can cut in a whole three or four months!

Appleton: Months, yes. Yes. Well, life has changed . . . which is good. Well, okay. Are there any particularly memorable experiences from your high school years that stand out in your mind?

Gross: Well, that's about all in my high school years that stand out in my mind in the segregation days because Lutchter . . . it was segregated. Yes. I mean, because you couldn't . . . like I told you, my friend . . . if you see a white lady pass on this side, you gotta' get off the sidewalk and let her pass. Like my friend, he stayed on the sidewalk, and she told him when he said, you know, why he didn't get off the sidewalk . . ."Well, they got enough room for me to pass." She told him, "Don't be too smart 'cause you know all I gotta do is holler and you're gone."

Appleton: Did you ever know anybody that was just taken away and you never saw 'em again?

Gross: No. No.

Appleton: That's good.

Gross: I've never known anybody.

Appleton: But there was always that threat.

Gross: Always that threat, uh-huh. See, the black was the last hired and the first fired.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Sometimes you have it here now. Last hired and the first fired. But things have changed.

Appleton: Sure. Let's stop just a minute so we can add a couple of things here.

So, before we go any further, can you tell about your family? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Gross: My mother had eight children. And I was the youngest boy. And my sisters . . . she had three girls and the rest was boys. And I was the baby boy. I was the baby. And then one of my brothers . . . my oldest brother which we called 'Bud' . . . the one that went into the Army. His sport was huntin'. He loved to hunt, so my mother bought him a gun.

Appleton: Yes.



Rogers "Bud" Gross poses for this portrait as an Army private, about 1943.

Gross: The gun was made in Germany. He had a double-barrel shotgun. He used to go out and kill rabbits, squirrels, ducks, and that was his sport, my brother Bud. But my other brother, which was next to him, they called Alonzo. He used to work in the refinery . . . sugar refinery, Cocheare Refinery which was a mile from Lutcher. What he used to do, he was the engineer in there. He used to take that brown sugar which come from Cuba . . . they used to send all that sugar from Cuba . . . and all that cane we cut to make molasses out of it. He would send it to that place, Cocheare Refinery, and he would take that brown sugar. He would tell me sometimes . . . he called me little brother, you know . . . he'd say, "Little brother, you know anything about that sugar? Sugar is a nasty thing!"

I say, "How you say that?"

He say, "I works here. I take care of it." He said, "They spit in it. They empty their shoes in it. But it gotta pass through so many processes. Acid.

Appleton: Oh, my.

Gross: Then that sugar gotta pass through acid processing and 'bluein' process; and when he finish with that sugar, the sugar's white and ready for the table. That was his job.

Appleton: (Laughing) Yes. Well, that's good.

Gross: Yes. He was 25 years old. And you know, I used to bring his dinner to him all the time, and he'd put his jumper on, you know, and come out, 'cause when you're workin' in that sugar, it's HOT! It's very hot.

And *one* day he left his jumper in the place and didn't put it on. And when he came home that night, he told my daddy he was runnin' a temperature. And my daddy gave him some '366,' an old remedy, Dorothy. You remember that Dorothy? Your

mother used to give it to you all, that . . . , (Laughing) . . . well, he still was runnin' a temperature. The next mornin' my daddy told me, he said, "Well, you better call the doctor, yes."

No, you couldn't call because you had no telephone. Didn't know what it was, unless you go to the corner store. Well, anyhow, he told him you better stay home. Send word that you're kinda . . . you're sick.

So my daddy got Dr. Johnson, you know, the country doctor, and Dr. Johnson come and check him over, and said, "Yes, he got pneumonia. He got pneumonia."

Well, in them days they didn't know how to cure that. But now they can knock it out. You get pneumonia now, they give you a shot, and they knock it right out.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: That's how our science has advanced. But the doctor kept comin', and he told my dad, he say he got pneumonia in both sides. [The doctor said], I'm gonna do the best I can." You know, no antibiotics. But anyhow, I went to his room one mornin'. I asked him, I said, "Alonzo, how you feel?" His name was Alonzo. I said, "Alonzo, how you feel?"

And he used to tell me, you know, "Oh, I'm feelin' a little better." Well, that mornin' when I went to his room, he had a smile on his face. And my aunt and them was drinkin' coffee in the kitchen, you know, in the kitchen, 'cause you had to get 'em their coffee first, you understand. So I went back in the room and asked him how he was feelin'. He didn't say nothin' but he had a smile on his face . . . just like your mother . . . when she died.

And I went back and told the old folks . . . I said, "Alonzo . . . I asked Alonzo how you're feelin'," but he didn't say anything, so they rushed back . . . they rushed in and they started talkin' some of that Creole, you know. "*Parle vous Francaise*" and all that. And, meaning that he was dead. Not only that, but he had a smile on his face, because my sister used to sleep next to him, and he told my sister, he said, "You better go see him, and you gotta make these old people coffee. You better go on out there and make it." I guess he figured to leave then 'cause he sent her out. My sister Helen always talks about that.

But anyhow, he passed away with a smile on his face when we buried him. But not the other brother . . . they call him 'Uncle Babe' . . . when the war broke out he took a wife with about eight kids. He was a sicko! He took a wife with eight kids! (Laughing) Ethel. And they wasn't puttin' nobody . . . if you got children like that, they wasn't takin' you. You only had to have one or two kids. But they wasn't takin' you.

Appleton: But they took him anyway.

Gross: No, they didn't took him.

Appleton: Oh, they didn't?

Gross: No, he had too many kids.

Appleton: Oh, okay!

Gross: Yes, he had too many kids. He registered all them kids . . .

Appleton: Yes. The military didn't want to have to pay for those . . . yes. They said, "No, we don't want you." Well, so then, by the time December 7th rolls around and you're workin' there in New Orleans . . .

Gross: Yes. Higgins shipyard.

Appleton: . . . did you get drafted or did you enlist?

Gross: No. They sent me my draft . . . they sent me my card. I was classified as 1A.

REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE
This is to certify that in accordance with the
Selective Service Proclamation of the President of the United States

EDDIE AUGUST SCHNEIDER
(First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

3250 93 ST JACKSON HIGHTS QUEEN
(No. and street or R. F. D. No.; city or town, county and State)

has been duly registered this 16 day of OCT, 1940
N.Y.

Elizabeth F. Cantwell
(Signature of registrar)

Registrar for 3 J 24 QUEENS N.Y.
(Precinct) (Ward) (City or county) (State)

BE ALERT { Keep in touch with your Local Board.
Notify Local Board immediately of change of address.

CARRY THIS CARD WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES

D. S. S. Form 2 . 16-17165

*Typical World War II
Draft Card (not Silas' card)*

*From Wikimedia,
In the public domain*

Appleton: 1-A. So in effect you were drafted.

Gross: Yes, I was drafted.

Appleton: You were drafted.

Gross: Yes. 1A.

Appleton: But how about your brother? Did he enlist?

Gross: My brother? They didn't touch him.

Appleton: Oh, they didn't. Okay.

Gross: But my oldest brother . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: . . . Rogers, the one who used to hunt all the time, he was drafted in the Army.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: In the Buffalo Unit.

Appleton: Yes. Right. You mentioned that. Okay.

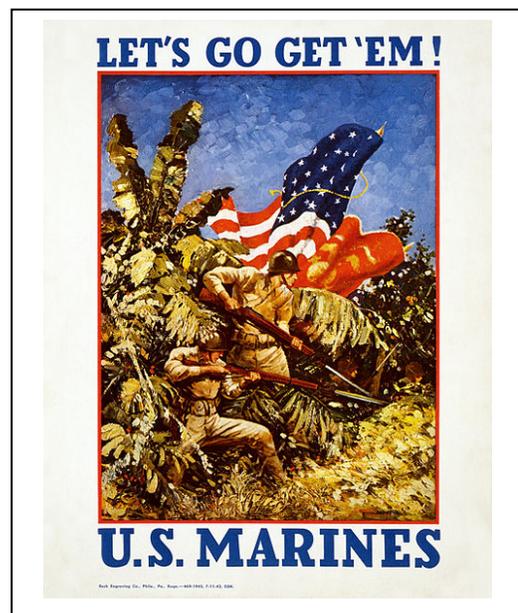
Gross: And I tried all I could to get into the Army. I tried. I tried. When I got inducted.

Appleton: Why couldn't you get in the Army?

Gross: I don't . . . I was standing there. We had a Navy man there. They had a Marine there, and they had the Army guy there. And the guy that drafted me . . . when I got sworn in . . . they say, "Go to this fellow right here," which was the Army. And the Marine says, "Not a Marine," he hollered, "let him come to us." Before they wasn't takin' no blacks in the Marines. No. The Marines wasn't takin' no blacks. I tried to get in the Marines a long time 'cause I've got a copy out of the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans. It says, "Join the Marines." And we sent . . . me and my friend was . . . I was goin' to Lutchter High School, and me and my friend . . . and they said, "James . . . let's send this in. See what they're gonna do."

*United States Marines recruitment
poster in World War II*

*From Wikimedia and
the Library of Congress,
in the public domain*



So we had to fill it out and we put our race and everything, but they sent us a nice letter back. They told us that they're sorry but the Marines is not takin' in any Negroes.

Appleton: At least it was polite.

Gross: Yes. Just a polite letter.

Appleton: Well, they did later in the war, but not that early.

Gross: Yes. They did later in the war. I remember that when they did that later. 'Cause the first batch . . . the first blacks that went . . . I think they went on Okinawa.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Or Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima or Okinawa.

Appleton: Yes. They used to call them the Montfort Marines. They were trained down in Parris Island.

Gross: Parris Island.

Appleton: In a special section which was segregated then, too.

Gross: Right.

*Official US Navy
recruiting poster,
from Wikimedia
in the public domain*



Appleton: So you then joined the Navy.

Gross: So this Navy guy told this Marine and Army guy . . . they had a graph, you know . . . like a graph . . .

Appleton: Like a graph?

Gross: Yes, a graph and the Navy one was way down, and the Army one was up and the Marine one was up. And the Navy guy say . . . I don't know what he was . . . a chief . . . but I knew he was the Navy 'cause he had his uniform on . . . now I know . . . but anyhow, (chuckle) he said, "Let him come to me! Look at you guys graph. Look at that. You all is way up! Look, I'm way down. I've gotta catch up! I have to catch up."

And they say, "All right. You could have him." So they said, "Go to this boy . . . the fella in blue right there. He's a chief [petty officer]."

So when I got inducted. So I went and joined the Navy. I got into the Navy. You're in the United States Navy. Well I got inducted. And they said, "Tomorrow, have your bag and things packed because you're gonna get on the train and goin' to Bainbridge, Maryland [Naval Training Center]."



Silas went through boot camp at the Bainbridge Naval Training Center, Bainbridge, Maryland in 1943. This photo is a current view of the main gate. from Wikimedia by the Bainbridge Association, in the public domain.

And going to Bainbridge, Maryland. I told my wife. My wife said, "I've got two little babies . . . Daddy, Daddy, where you goin'?"

I say, "Daddy's goin' to off to the war, baby."

Appleton: So you had two children by that time?

Gross: Yes. Two.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: The next day my wife came up. I had to be there on time. You gotta be there on time, you know . . . the train. And that guy told us, "You better be on time." And I say, "Don't worry. I'll be on time."

So I got on the train . . . the troop train . . . no, it wasn't no troop train . . . it was a regular passenger train . . . 'cause they were stoppin' in Mississippi, Alabama. That was the first I ever seen the all black flyin' squad. Tuskegee.

The famed Tuskegee Airmen at work discussing their strategy for their next mission in Europe

From Wikimedia by Toni Frisell, in the public domain



Appleton: Uh-hmm. The Tuskegee [Airmen].

Gross: Yes. Some of 'em were goin' home for Christmas, you know, takin' their vacation, and they had a string tied in the train. Black go on this side, white on that side. But when the Tuskegee boys . . . they was goin' to New York and some of 'em were goin' to Chicago. Well, you know, for their vacation.

When the fliers got on and they said, "Oh, I'll be glad when I get to the United States of America." (Laughing) I'll never forget them boys. They said, "I'll be glad when I get to the United States of America" 'cause they were goin' to New York, see, some of 'em goin' to Chicago.

Yes, and one lady, or someone out there . . . the MP was walkin' through and through the train, you know . . . "Can you make them cut that noise out?" So the MP's just kept on walkin'. "Take it easy fellas. Take it easy fellas." He just kept walkin'.

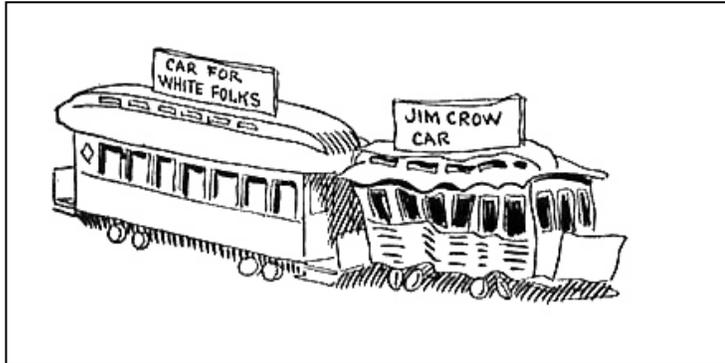
Appleton: Now when you say they had a string right down the middle of the car?

Gross: Yes. Right in the middle . . . yes, cross ways. They had a big sign on the string, "Colored on this side."

Appleton: On one side.

Gross: Whites on that side.

Appleton: Isn't that amazing.



'Jim Crow' segregation on public transportation took on many insulting forms.

From Wikimedia by John T. McCutcheon, in the public domain

Gross: And when them fliers got on there . . . the Tuskegee boys got on there . . . they said, "I'll be glad when I get to the United States," 'cause we stopped in Tuskegee to pick up a lot of 'em. I was on my way then to Bainbridge, Maryland. They said, "Oh, I'll be glad when I get to the United States of America." 'cause they don't see that in New York, you know. There wasn't no segregation there or Chicago. They went through h-e-l-l, too.

Appleton: Yes, they did. They were given tough duty. And those [white bomber] pilots were glad when those Red Tails showed up. Though. They were glad.

Gross: Yes, they were glad.

Appleton: (Laughing) They were glad!

Tuskegee pilots gather before takeoff to protect bombing missions over Europe.

From Wikimedia, official US Army photograph in the public domain



Gross: They told all them pilots to say, "Now we got this all black squadron over

here, and you can take any squadron you want to escort you over to Germany 'cause we're gonna bomb Germany!" We're goin' over Germany, the biggest raid. And the Captain got on, he said, "Sir, if it's all right with you, I'd rather take the Tuskegee. I'd rather take this all black squadron 'cause I wanna get back home again."

Appleton: Yes, they had a great reputation.

Gross: They brought 'em back home, too.

Appleton: They did. Well, so back to your story. Did you do basic training then in Maryland? Bainbridge?

Gross: Yes. Yes. Yes. In Bainbridge. Cooks and bakers.

Appleton: Cook.

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: Why cooks and bakers?

Gross: That's the only thing blacks . . . that they'd put you in.

Appleton: That's the only thing they let you do?

Gross: Yes, you couldn't be no seaman.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: No, you couldn't be no seaman. You couldn't fly . . . you couldn't get on . . . you had no . . . you know one thing . . . the only time a black had a battle station . . . when Dorie Miller . . . you heard talk about Dorie Miller?

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: He was a cook down in the galley, and washing pots and pans . . . but that's why I say, you can learn by lookin', you know. He used to go . . . every time the boys would have, the white boys would have a gun practice, he would go out there and look at 'em. He would go out and look. But ohhhh, one day it paid off. December the 7th, '41. You hear all that shootin' down on topside . . . and you know they ain't got no gun practice . . . not today . . .

Appleton: And he learned just by watching.

Gross: Just by watching. Just by lookin' at 'em. He watched.

Appleton: Yes.



Dorie Miller, a ship's cook, earned the Navy Cross for his heroics with a machine gun in fighting off the attack on Pearl Harbor.

From Wikimedia, official US Navy photograph in the public domain

Gross: He got up there and he shot on 7 Japanese planes! Got in that gun belt. Yes. And the Navy . . . you know what . . . the Navy got jealous! You know what the Navy say? "All mess attendants they have battle stations." Yes. We all had battle stations.

Appleton: Well, tell about your basic training now.

Gross: Well, my basic training . . . after I was in Bainbridge, Maryland and they had a . . . one of my buddies was from . . . I was in Company X-110 . . . Yes, X-110 . . . and one of my buddies was a professor from Fisk University. He used to teach history. Now, if he would have been white, he'd have had me as a full commander . . . but by him bein' black, he came in as, you know, a mess attendant . . . professor from Fisk University! When they finally got ashamed and give him a chief cook [assignment]. His name was Eisen. We used to call him Professor Eisen. Yes. he was the history teacher at Fisk University.

But after my basic training, they had all of us sailors in line. They said, "Well, you all have finished your boot [camp], and we're tryin' to get some submarine guy to go on a submarine. Who all wanna go on a submarine, jump in this line."

Appleton: Submarine?

Gross: Yes. I say to myself, "If I wanna meet my Maker I'm gonna meet him on topside."

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: No way! I said, "No way! If I'm gonna meet my Maker, I'm gonna meet him topside. I'm not goin' to this submarines." So I didn't go in the submarine.

But, we had finished our training, see, in boot camp, and we were off for the war

zone.

Appleton: How long was your training? A month . . .

Gross: Our training was about . . .

Appleton: . . . more or less.

Gross: . . . ohhh, it was about six weeks.

Appleton: About six weeks. But it was basic training in terms of cooking and food preparation.

Gross: Yes. Food preparation. Yes. 'Cause we had some chief cooks came aboard to school us, too. But he was on the [*USS Hornet*] when it went down in *Guadalcanal*. They had a sign, "Sailors, take your training seriously." 'Cause he said, they had a guard on board ship. He was a rugged guy, you know, and he was a black guy. But he was rugged. And see, when a torpedo hit the ship all the lights go out. We ain't got no back-up lights. That's it. And you've got to learn yourself, see if you be to the bottom you gotta learn how to get back on top.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: That's why they say, "Sailors, learn your ship. Don't stay in that bunk. Learn your ship in and out." And he said . . . whole ship . . . when the ship went down he jumped off. The Captain telled, "Abandon ship." He hit the water.

Appleton: He knew how to get off.

Gross: Yes. But he said . . . all them lights . . . he feel to the top . . . feel his way. That's why they say, "Learn your ship." Some of the guys didn't make it. So on that . . . Bainbridge . . . we got in the draft. They called us on that draft. And they said, "You're goin' to go . . . your orders goin' to California, [Camp] Shoemaker, California.

Appleton: Where in California?

Gross: [Camp] Shoemaker.

Appleton: Oh. Okay.

Gross: And I passed through every state, just like in the United States, and it was cold. They had to put a snow plow to the train . . . the troop train, you know. Some of them places. It took us six days to get to California!

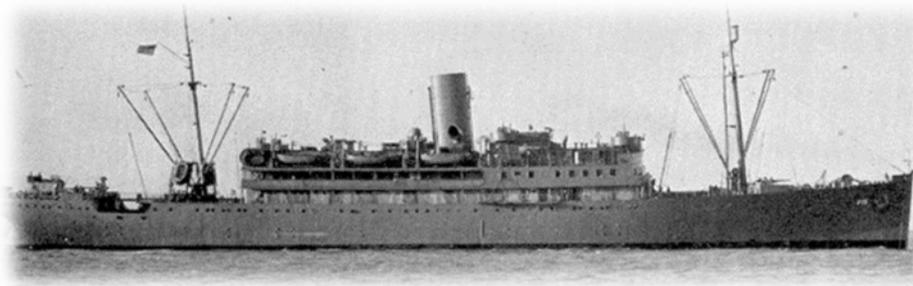
And when we got to California, Shoemaker, we was placed in a OGU barracks. OGU means Outgoing Unit. You could be goin' anytime. So I hung around there until

about a couple of weeks. That's where I got that big picture made out over there. Shoemaker, California.



The framed memento which Silas had made while assigned to the OGU a Camp Shoemaker, California in 1942

And the ship I got on was the *USS Talamaca*. It was an Italian troop ship, captured from the Italians . . . and they used it for troops for the transport. Everybody thought it was goin' to Hawaii, but they was fooled. We got off on New Caledonia. It was a French island. That's where the Frenchmen used to take all their prisoners and put 'em over there. And then they had a leprosy colony there. The only chance you could see the city was if you're goin' to a workin' party to bring supplies back to the barracks, you know. But they didn't allow you to make *no* liberty. Liberty was restricted.



USS Talamaca AF-15, Silas first ship assignment

From Wikimedia, official US Navy photograph in the public domain

I went on a workin' unit one time over there to deliver some supplies to the barracks, and it had a chief in there. He was guardin', and they had a cat in there, and they had a big rat in there. The cat and the rat was eatin' the cheese!

Appleton: (Laughing) Together, huh.

Gross: The chief was sleepin', you know. We knocked on the door again.
(laughing) So the head man say, "Chief! Do you know your cat and that rat eatin' cheese again?"

"What?"

Appleton: (Laughing) Not well trained.

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: Tell me . . . when you were working on this . . . or going on the *USS Talamaca*, did you run into problems of segregation then as well?

Gross: Uhhh, you know what? Yes. They had the segregation on the ship, too.

Appleton: On shipboard.

Gross: Uh-hmm.

Appleton: In quarters?

Gross: Yes, quarters. You had your own quarters, Yes. For the blacks and for . . .

Appleton: And your commanding officers? Were they black or white?

Gross: **Noooo**, they was white, yes . . .

Appleton: No black commanding officers?

Gross: . . . 'cause we was goin' to a unit . . . didn't know why they was shippin' us all . . . we was goin' to a unit they called PACSU-13. PACSU-13 means Pacific Aircraft Service Unit. We was goin' to a unit that would service aircraft, a steppin' stone to Japan, to bomb these places.

But anyhow, we got off in New Caledonia, and I stayed in New Caledonia for about three weeks. Then they call our draft again, and we went to New Hebrides. That's another one. That's where they got the head on us. New Hebrides', an island. The natives used to eat their own people there! Until they got educated about the . . .

Appleton: Yes. That wasn't happening when you were there though.

Gross: No, no. No. But you know they told us "Don't go in them bushes by yourself. Or don't try to go over there."

Appleton: Just in case.

Gross: Just in case. Yes. And they had coconuts. One coconut fell and hit a Marine in the head, and they had to carry him to the hospital. So the Captain gave out a sign, "Wear your helmet! You better wear your helmet!" A steel helmet . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: . . . 'cause they had coconuts on that island. They're fallin' outta the tree, you know. So I stayed there for about two-an'-a-half weeks. We was on work detail and everything. Movin' coconuts. Doin' other things . . . doin' odd jobs. Movin' portable toilets, and they put us aboard a ship. A ship, at the dock. We loaded aboard the boat . . . I forgot the ship's name, but anyhow . . .

Appleton: What kind of a ship was it?

Gross: It was a transport.

Appleton: Transport, okay.

Gross: A troop transport.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And when they put us aboard that ship, they said that, "You gonna go to a unit. You all is goin' to a unit." They had about ten of us, and we hit Guadalcanal. And here come that Higgins landin' barge.

*Higgins landing barges
loading up*

*From Wikimedia, official
US Navy photograph in the
public domain*



Appleton: You were on the Higgins landing . . .

Gross: No, I was on the troop ship.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And they tol' us . . . "Load up!" Take your sea bag. . ." You had to put your sea bag on your shoulders" . . . and get in the Higgins landing barge." We got in, and I said, "Heck! I used to build these!"

Appleton: Good for you. Did you see your name on there anywhere? (Laughing)

Gross: That old boy sure looked familiar. (Laughing) Might have been one I built, you know. Yes, we got in the Higgins landing barge, and the Higgins landing barge brought us to Guadalcanal Island. And they had the Seabees on one side. The Seabees were workin', fightin', fight and work. The Japanese had an island on Guadalcanal. They called it Kona Island. I don't know if you ever heard about Kona. You had the Japanese takin' off on one end and the American takin' off on [the other] end.

Appleton: Yes. I heard that.

Gross: But anyhow . . . and the first thing they tell ya when you got on Guadalcanal, [and they told us,] "Dig, dig, dig," meaning dig your foxhole. And you carry your rifle with you at all time. Keep that gun clean 'cause that's your life, and dig your foxhole. That's why I sent you all that picture of me on Guadalcanal, and I had my own foxhole. And I stayed on Guadalcanal . . . we secured Guadalcanal. We secured it. Marines secured Guadalcanal.



Silas stands while holding his rifle, ready for combat if necessary on Guadalcanal Island in 1944.

Appleton: Now were you actually involved in the fighting?

Gross: No. No. No.

Appleton: You were back . . .

Gross: The Japanese bombers used to come over so many times, I just dived right in to the foxhole.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: Because you could tell when it . . . here come 'Washing Machine Charlie.' That's what they called a Japanese plane up there, you know. And you could tell when they're comin' over 'cause the sound, you know. And the guns. And they sound their alarm to let you know that you get in your foxhole.

Then we stayed there. Then they put us on another ship.

Appleton: Were you doing food preparation then there in Guadalcanal?

Gross: Yes. Then, yes, to take care of our commanding officers there, yes.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And on Guadalcanal . . . we secured Guadalcanal. And the Marines secured Bougainville and Okinawa. That's where the black Marines come in. Okinawa.

*Marines landing on Okinawa
In March of 1945*

*From Wikimedia, official US
Army photograph in the public
domain*



Appleton: Yes. When you're doing your food preparation out in the field, did you have enough equipment?

Gross: Oh, we had enough equipment, yes.

Appleton: . . . you had all the stuff you needed?

Gross: And you gotta know how to build a field kitchen too, you know.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Field kitchen. Dig a hole.

Appleton: You had all that and the supplies [you needed]?

Gross: Oh, Yes. We had good eatin' 'cause we had all the steak come from Australia. Australia was sendin' us a whole lot of food, and we was takin' care of Australia, you know.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: Keep the Japanese from goin' to Australia 'cause the Japanese had ideas of takin' over Australia.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: But we turned them back.

Appleton: Alright. So you left Guadalcanal and went on board a particular ship? Or do you remember that?

Gross: Yes. We got on a troop ship.

Appleton: Okay. And where were you headed then?

Gross: It took us about a month-and-a-half on that water. We was on the water about a month-and-a-half before General MacArthur gave the orders to invade the Philippines. So in a month-and-a-half we stayed on a ship, and when the Marines invaded the Philippines, General MacArthur . . . they picked him up and set him on this much water from the land.

And he said, "People of the Philippines, I have now returned! This is General MacArthur. Come out fightin' wherever you are! All you guerillas! This is General MacArthur. Come out fightin'! I have returned."

And they was comin' out by droves! Fightin' Japanese . . . they was comin' out, the [Filipino] guerilla [fighters].

Appleton: Well, were you on shipboard? Did you go on the land . . .

Gross: I was on Leyte [Island].

Appleton: On Leyte, yes.

Gross: Yes, Leyte. Made that landing on Leyte.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And we got off in Leyte . . .

Appleton: Could you see MacArthur wading across the water? Were you right close by?



General MacArthur waded ashore with other American military officers and President Sergio Osmeña (behind MacArthur with helmet) in October of 1944.

From Wikimedia, official US Army photograph in the public domain

Gross: Yes, right close by when they put him in the water.

Appleton: That famous picture. He's charging along with the President of the Philippines and up to the beach. I understand that he had to do that twice.

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: The first time it didn't look good [for the cameras], so he went back and they did it a second time. (Laughing)

Gross: Yes. But they set him in that water, you know.

Appleton: Yes. Right.

Gross: Set him in there. It looked like he walked in there, but no. Uh-uh. No. They set him in there. They picked him up and set him in there. And he got ahold of that [mega]phone and he started sayin' . . . "People of the Philippines . . ." you could hear it all over . . . short wave and everything else . . . "I have now returned. This is General MacArthur. Come out fightin'!"

Appleton: Did people actually come up . . .

Gross: Ohhhhh, they came out! Them guerillas was comin' out them hills in the mountain.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And they came out. And I saw one Japanese plane, kamikaze, ran into a transport. I said, "Oh, Lord, thank God it ain't this one!" Yes. Just one! Man! Before the Japanese we ain't seein' nothin'! Just one plane. But anyhow, the Marines were goin' up to that hill . . . that mountain . . . drivin' the Japanese [back]. And when we unloaded on Leyte, and we were gonna take . . . head towards Clark Field . . . to take over Clark Field.

*Japanese Kamikaze plane
(upper left hand corner)
attempted a crash into the
battleship USS Missouri in the
Battle of Okinawa in March of
1945. Only minor damage
resulted.*

*By Seaman Ken Schmidt from
Wikimedia in the public domain*



Appleton: That's up north of Manila.

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: Right. Yes.

Gross: It's 50 miles from Manila.

Appleton: Right.

Gross: And we're headin' to Clark Field. And we took Clark Field. And they sent word to us . . . you see, I was in PACU 13 . . . Pacific Aircraft Service Unit. That's the servicing of Marine planes . . . they come in, you know . . . all these planes. Them mechanics was servicin' them planes, you know. Fixed the plane and sent 'em right out. Put spark plugs and everything in 'em. That's what PACU 13 means.

Then we had another group that came on, that was with us, but they was a different group. They called it ACOM 8 . . . ACOM 8. They service Marine planes but different parts. Aircraft Company Service Unit. ACOM 8. They lost a couple of men, too.

Appleton: Ohhh, okay.

Gross: ACOM 8.

Appleton: So ACOM 8 is an acronym for . . . ?

Gross: Yes. They lost a couple of men in the foxhole. See, when them Japanese come and bomb like that, they can see a cigarette light, you know. That's why they say, "No smokin' whatsoever. All the lights is out. All the lights are out." But them boys had their foxholes built . . . they could jump in there, and one of 'em forgot to turn the light out. And that was their graveyard.

Appleton: Oh, my. Yes. So, as the units were moving forward you were taking your field kitchens right along?

Gross: Yes. We set 'em up, our field kitchen. Yes. And the Seabees were buildin' them Quonset huts. And they sent word for us, PACU 13, to come on to Clark Field. "We have secured Clark Field." And we packed up e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g . . . unit and everything to go to Clark Field. And they're to send word again back to us "Hold! Don't come! Don't come! Because the Japanese had broken through."

And what we had to do . . . see, the Japanese had came off that hill, and was breakin' through to retake Clark Field . . . that big airbase, and we had to send to get the *USS Missouri* . . . put it on Subic Bay. And ol' 'Big Boy' was hittin' that rock so fast . . . (chuckle) . . . all you could see was rock flyin'! Drove the Japanese back! We had to send, 'Get the *USS Missouri*. Put it into Subic Bay.'

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my.

Gross: That *Missouri* was a heck fine ship!

Appleton: Well, those battleships were big ones.

Gross: All you could see the big piece of rock flyin'. And they send word for us again the next day, "Secure! Secure! Come on to Clark Field." That was when we set up the thing in Clark Field.

Appleton: So did you stay at Clark Field for a period of time then?

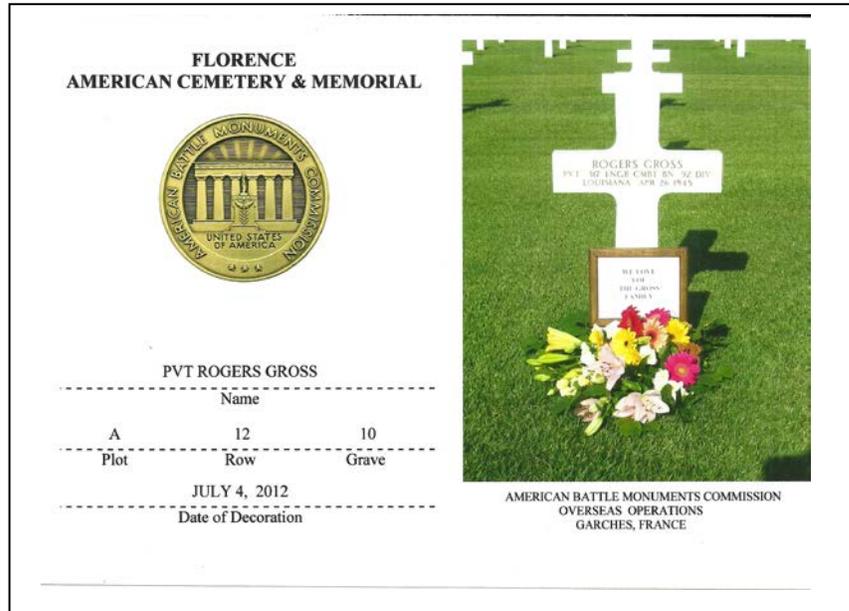
Gross: Oh, yes, sir. I stayed in Clark Field about pretty close to four months. That's why I wrote my brother, Bud, you know, in Italy. Me and him used to keep in contact.

Appleton: Sure! Did you get letters back and forth?

Gross: Back and forth. But one time my letters stopped comin'. They sent it back to me. It said, "Address unknown."

Appleton: Ooops!

Gross: I said, “Oh, oh, somethin's wrong here somewhere. You can ask your mother. And your mother wrote and told me that my sister, Helen, wasn't gettin' a letter from him. But my sister told my wife that he'd moved to a different place in Italy, where the boy was dead. He got killed somewhere in Italy. He had the Purple Heart and the Oak Leaf Cluster.



Bud's burial certificate with the memorial decoration provided by the Gross family

Appleton: Yes. So your letters back and forth they stopped coming . . .

Gross: They stopped and come back to me and they say, “Address unknown.”

Appleton: You found out later.

Gross: Yes. You know when I found out?

Appleton: You must have wondered though.

Gross: Yes, I wondered. But the day I find out, it was the day the war was over.

Appleton: Oh, really.

Gross: I got back home when the war was over and I had to hitch-hike. They give you orders that your time is up, and you catch a ride. I caught a hop all the way to Hawaii. Oh, Yes. Obey your orders.

Appleton: By plane or on a ship?

Gross: By plane.

Appleton: By plane. Oh, that's nice.

Gross: But see, when I got to Hawaii the man say, "Yes, I'm goin' right to Hawaii." Then I said, "Can I get a hop?"

"Yes, come on aboard. I'm goin' right to Hawaii."

I said, "Well, you my man." (Laughing)

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: I got to Hawaii and I checked in. You know, at that Receiving Station. And they told me, "We got a ship leavin' out two days from now, direct to Alameda, California. And I got aboard that ship two days from then, [and] I went to Alameda, California.

Dorothy McCray: How long did it take?

Gross: It took about six days. And when I got there I say, "Well, I'm on my way to end this here. You're on your way to New Orleans, and when your leave is up report to Algiers [Navy Yard in New Orleans]."

And I went there.

Appleton: You report to what?

Gross: Algiers, the Navy Yard.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: So I got to New Orleans. And when I got there they say, "Gross. You know what? People hollerin'. Everybody was hollerin'. The whole city looked like it was hollerin' . . . the people were hollerin'. The war is over!"

I say, "You mean to tell me I'm getting' back on VJ Day?" And my sisters, and my wife, they started to cryin'. You see, before I went in my sister's bureau drawer, and I saw the Purple Heart . . . two Purple Hearts and the Oak Leaf Cluster in there, and I say . . . I know her good and well . . . I said, "Who this Purple Heart belong to?"

But her husband was in the military. He was in the Signal Corps. And he said, "Oh, some real good friend gave that to him."

But when they started playin' the Star Spangled Banner, and they started to holler and cryin', "Oh, poor Bud, he'll never be home." And I got mad with them, see. I got mad with them . . . for holdin' it up.

Appleton: They didn't tell you?

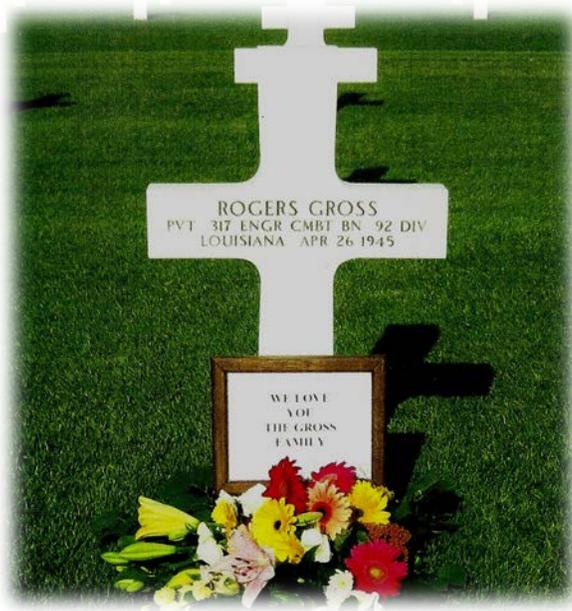
Gross: No.

Appleton: So how did you find out?

Gross: When they started hollerin' and cryin'. When the radio came on, "The War is over!" The war is over! Japan has surrendered!" When they dropped the atomic bomb. Japan has surrendered.

Appleton: Yes. And that's when you found out that your brother . . . it was his Purple Heart.

Gross: Yes. I sent flowers to his grave.



A close-up view of Bud's grave in Italy with the flowers sent to his grave by the Gross family

Allen Gross: Florence, Italy. Allen, my son . . . he went to his grave in Italy.

Appleton: Yes. Yes. They dropped the atomic bomb. Did anybody talk about that?

Gross: Ohhh, the atomic bomb. I went to Nagasaki . . . when I went to Japan I went to Nagasaki and Hiroshima. They show you the pictures of the city. How it looked. Beautiful. Then they show you the pictures where the bomb hit. It looked like a graveyard.

But the atomic bomb is a fire cracker to what we have now. But I'm not gonna give the detail on that. But I'm gonna tell you about it. 'Cause I went . . . when Operation Dominic . . . we tested the hydrogen bomb.



The hydrogen bomb test at Eniwetok Atoll took place on October 31, 1952.

From Wikimedia by US Department of Energy and the National Archives and Records Administration, in the public domain

Appleton: Yes. Were you one of the ones that was watching . . .

Gross: I was participating, yes.

Appleton: Participating.

Gross: The hydrogen bomb.

Appleton: How did they protect you?

Gross: We had glasses on. And we had to mess with them glass . . . I was on the *USS Comstock*.

Appleton: Okay. And that's when you were on the *[USS] Comstock*.

Gross: And our ship looked like a Buck Rogers ship 'cause they had all kinds of

scientists there. We had scientists from the General Dynamics. We had scientists from Philco, RCA . . . ohhhh, geeze! We had scientists from all these electronic places. Then we had the weather bureau . . . God bless their heart! They were pretty good guys. They gave you a good tip, you know, when you served 'em. The weather bureau for the boat . . . from Washington, D.C . . . the Bureau of Weather . . . because you can't get that bomb off unless knowing you got orders from the weather bureau. Because you gotta know which way the wind's blowin' and everything, 'cause that bomb . . . if you get it off and the wind's blowin' in a different direction, goin' on an island, and kill everybody on the island.

Appleton: About when was this when they were testing the hydrogen bomb when you were . . .

Gross: Oh, Yes. They called it Operation Dominic.

Appleton: Yes. And about when was it? Do you remember more or less what year it was?

Gross: Oh, Yes. Was in '60 . . .

Appleton: So you had eye protection?

Gross: I had eye protection. And them glasses . . . which you had on . . . you look at the sun and it looked like a little cigarette. But when that bomb went off . . . see, when that bomb went off, and they had to count down. They gave me the count down, you see. We get a count down on the ship, and they said, "Put on glasses! Put on glasses!" And they had . . . it looked like about pretty close to over 200 ships out there. Oh, boy!

Appleton: How close were you do you think?

Gross: It was fifty miles.

Appleton: You were fifty miles away!

Gross: And when we detonated that bomb . . . 'cause the bomb had fell one time they did it . . . the rocket had capsized and the whole bomb fell. And everybody got excited on the ship. And the scientists said . . . "There is no harm." 'Cause I was talking with some of them scientists. "There's no harm." Because it goes off by radio wave.

Appleton: Yes. Was that protection enough for your eyes as far as you could tell? Or were you kind of blinded by it?

Gross: When that bomb went off, and I had my glasses on, and I could count every ship at sea! (Laughing) It looked just like the sun was shinin' out there.



*The nighttime sky was
like daylight.*

*From Wikimedia by US
Department of Energy, in
the public domain*

Appleton: Oh, it was at nighttime.

Gross: It was night. 11 o'clock at night.

Appleton: Oh, my gosh!

Gross: And it was a different day! Like the sunshine out there. That's how bright it was.

Appleton: Did you hear any sound?

Gross: Urrrrrrhhhh . . . up!

Appleton: You could just hear a roaring?

Gross: Yes. And I could count all the ships that I see, and ehhhh . . . it was another day! It was another sound. Another sunshine. But don't let nobody fool you.

Appleton: How long did that last?

Gross: It lasted about five minutes.

Appleton: Really?

Gross: Yes. Then it began to disappear.

Appleton: And then it started darkening again?

Gross: Yes. You know what I said? I got on my knees, and I said, "Lord, don't let NO nation use this awful weapon!!!" Oh, you talk about awful weapon. Don't let

nobody fool you. That's why if they have an atomic war, nobody gonna win because . . .

Appleton: Well, sure.

Gross: . . . nobody will win. Well, what'cha gonna do if the landing will be no good? What'cha you gonna do with it?

Appleton: Well, of course. Well, did you *feel* anything from the . . .

Gross: Yes. The whole ship just rocked.

Appleton: You had a shaking?

Gross: A shake.

Appleton: A shaking, and it just . . .

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: Wow!

Gross: It was another day. Another sun.

Appleton: And, of course, that was bigger than the Hiroshima bomb.

Gross: Bigger than the atomic . . . , yes.

Appleton: Did you feel the same way when you heard about the bomb at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, [or] did you feel that that was not a good thing?

Gross: Yes. I figured it wasn't a good thing. It wasn't a good thing, but that's just a firecracker. But what we was testin' . . . we was testin' . . . if the Russians would come over, will they knock out our communication. And we couldn't get no answer from the United States. We couldn't get no answer from Australia, and none of these places. But you don't set that bomb off until you get orders from the Weather Bureau.

Appleton: Sure.

Gross: We put that weather bureau off on an island, and it took about three days for 'em to get back to us. Yes. And which way is the wind blowin' because you can't fool with . . .

Appleton: I'm not sure which island that was set off on. Kwajalein is one. There were a couple of islands that were used out in the Pacific for that particular test.

Gross: Yes, Kwajalein is an island. We test all these missiles. We send a missile

from Vandenberg Airport Base. We have 'em on Kwajalein. We had that 'Hound Dog' waitin' on it. And they said, "Missile has left Vandenberg," and they sent that 'Hound Dog' on it. And all you can see is the big explosion up in the air.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Yes. Knock it out.

Dorothy McCray: What island was it when you guys tested the hydrogen bomb?

Gross: Well, it was on Johnson Island.

Appleton: It's on Johnson?

Gross: Yes, Johnson Island, which was 50 miles from Hawaii. And Hawaii . . . you coulda read a newspaper.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: They read a newspaper. 11 o'clock.

Appleton: Right there in the middle of the night. Yes. So you were on the *USS Comstock*.

Gross: Uh-huh.

Appleton: Did you stay then on that ship for a long time?

Gross: Yes. I stayed there on the *Comstock* until I got ready to retire. The ship went over in Long Beach . . .

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: . . . when it went to dry dock and I retired right over there.

Appleton: Really. Yes. But before that, you had been on the *Hancock*. Is that right? The *USS Hancock*?

Gross: Yes, the *Hancock*, uh-huh.

Appleton: When was that service?

Gross: The *Hancock* was a carrier.

*USS Hancock CV-19,
official US Navy photograph,
from Wikimedia in the public
domain*



Appleton: Yes.

Gross: CVA-19.

Appleton: Yes. And when were you on that?

Gross: Oh, I stayed aboard that . . . let me see . . . I stayed aboard on the *Hancock* . . . we were livin' in Coronado.

Dorothy McCray: It was in the early '50's.

Appleton: But it was after . . . it was after the end of World War II.

Gross: Yes, after the end of World War II, Yes.

Appleton: And again you were working in the . . . ?

Gross: In the mess.

Appleton: . . . in the mess. In the ship's mess.

Gross: Yes. Officer's mess.

Appleton: And you were advancing in rank then in that period of time?

Gross: Well, you know, I passed the test eight times.

Appleton: Eight times?

Gross: Eight times. But they were 'quotaed'. They had so many quotaed out.

Appleton: Oh, Yes.

Gross: But the captain wanted me to stay in, you see.



For a while in the 1950s Silas was assigned to the USS Stone County, LST 1141.

Official US Navy photo from the US Naval Historical Center and Wikimedia, in the public domain



Silas inspecting the commemorative tile of the USS Stone County LST 1141 displayed at the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center, San Diego

Appleton: Oh, okay.

Gross: He wanted me to stay in. But my wife told me . . . “Them boys is so bad! It’s either you or me?”

Dorothy McCray: ‘Cause you were the admiral's cook though for a long time. The Admiral's cook . . .

Appleton: Were you the admiral's cook?

Gross: No. No. No, no, no, no. See, on these carriers when any ship that's flyin' an American flag, it's a flag ship.

Appleton: Yes. Right.

Gross: And we was a flag ship. We got to be the flag ship, but the admiral when he come aboard he bring his own cook. See, you got on a carrier, you have four, five messes.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. That's a big ship!

Gross: Yes. See, the admiral got his own staff. The admiral brings his own people.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Dorothy McCray: Yes. Who's cook were you? You were with somebody.

Gross: And the admiral brings his own cook. Then we got the commanding officer . . . he got his own galley. He got his own cook.

Appleton: Wow. (Chuckle)

Gross: Alright. Then we take care of the staff, the flags.

Appleton: Yes. Right.

Gross: Then you got the chief mess.

Appleton: Yes, right.

Gross: Chief mess.

Appleton: And then you've got the rest of the enlisted mess, right?

Gross: Yes, the enlisted mess.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: When we went on the *Hancock* we was patrollin' the China Sea keepin' the Chinese from invading Formosa.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And I asked the division officer . . . he used to take care of the supply . . . the supply, I asked him. I say, "How much it cost a day to take care of this carrier?" He look at me and laughs. He said, "Gross, it costs **ten thousand dollars a day!**" On the *Hancock*, I ain't talkin' about the payroll or nothin'.

Appleton: (Laughing) Yes.

Gross: Me and him was close. He was, you know, a pretty nice guy, Commander Shepherd.

Appleton: Tell me . . . you were in the military after World War II, and in 1947

President Truman, I believe, was when he issued the desegregation orders for the military.

Gross: Yes. orders, Yes for the military.

Appleton: Where were you assigned? And what changed when that happened?

Gross: Well, when President Truman signed . . . did away with the segregation they start to takin' seamen. A black can get any kind of rank they want. They go up for it, see? They go up for it.

Rick; Did that happen then?

Gross: Yes. That did happen.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And Great Lakes was on the place. Great Lakes [Naval Training Center]. Great Lakes was turnin' out blacks. And then blacks could go up a rank as commanders, lieutenants, commanders. Some even made admiral.

*Great Lakes Naval
Training Center
today*

*From Wikimedia in
the public domain*



Appleton: But you were in the military. What happened? Were you able then to advance in rank after that?

Gross: We was quotaed.

Appleton: But you were kept back . . .

Gross: But the captain . . . see, before I got out the exec had wanted to keep me. The exec said, "Gross, so, you got such a good record. I'd like for you to stay in thirty years."

I say: "Yes, but my wife told me, uhuh . . . 'cause I wanna change my rate over to radio, you know.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Yes, radioman. Yes. But I got out. I listened to her. She say, "Them boys are givin' me a headache." And they had her runnin' all kind a way.

Appleton: Now you're talking about those boys. Your family, you mean?

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: The boys of your family.

Gross: I had a couple of bad boys. She was runnin', chasin' them.

Appleton: Some bad boys needed some good parenting, huh? (Laughing)

Gross: Yes. I told the commander and he said, "Well, Yes, I know how it is, but I would like for you to stay in thirty years. But, listen to your wife."

I said, "Yes I got some bad boys, bad and runnin' around." My wife was mad, you know.

Appleton: How many children then did you have?

Gross: Oh, I had eleven kids.

Appleton: Eleven children.

Dorothy McCray: Seven boys and four girls.

Gross: Yes, eleven children.

Appleton: Okay. (Laughing) So, how many girls? How many boys in the family then?

Gross: How many boys?

Appleton: Yes.

Dorothy McCray: Seven boys.

Gross: Seven boys.

Appleton: Seven boys.

Gross: Uh-huh.

Appleton: And four girls.

Gross: Four girls.

Appleton: Yes. Okay. So you weren't able to do your thirty years.

Gross: No.

Appleton: You did your twenty years.

Gross: Yes, I did my twenty years.

Allen Gross: (Inaudible)

Gross: I did twenty-three years. Twenty-two. Twenty-three years, six months and thirteen days .

Appleton: You got it down to . . .

Gross: . . . six months and thirteen days.

Appleton: So you got it down to the days. Well, did the integration then in the Service. . . in the Navy . . . did that come slowly or did it move pretty quickly after the order came down?

Gross: It came slowly.

Appleton: Slowly.

Gross: Yes. But when the order came out everybody . . . if you make it, make it . . . so they would all 'cause . . .

Appleton: But there were still . . .

Gross: . . . 'cause my neighbor 's husband, Mickey, Mrs. Louis' son-in-law . . . he was a full commander, four stripes. I told him, I say, "You know what? We paved the way for you."

He said, "Yes, you all did. You all did."

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: I say, "When I came you didn't see no black officers." This man was a high school . . . he was a college professor, Eisen. He was a history teacher at Fisk University. He was in my boot camp. Now, if he would of been white, he would have been a commander.

Appleton: And instead he was what?

Gross: He was a mess attendant.

Appleton: A mess attendant, yes.

Gross: Cook.

Appleton: A cook with a Ph.D.

Gross: Yes, with a Ph.D.

Appleton: Yes. Well, fortunately those things have changed.

Gross: Yes, things have changed.

Appleton: So, what then finally encouraged you . . . or caused you to retire from the Navy then was your wife finally said, "This is the law. You gotta come home."

Gross: Yes. "You gotta come home. The boys are raisin', given' me a faint."

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: So I told the commander . . . I was on the *Comstock*, you know . . . the ship, you know. He was the commander. He was in charge.

Appleton: You were on the *Comstock* at that point.

Gross: "Surely," he said. He was lookin' at my record . . . he say, "You got a *g-o-o-d* record! But anyhow, he say, "Follow your wife. I don't blame her."

Appleton: Sure. Of course. Well, as you look back at your career, having to live through those early years of being held back because of the segregation in the Navy, and then to see it change, as you said, paved the way for the men and women that came later. How did that feel? I mean to see that those changes take place?

Gross: Well, I felt good about it. And when I came in durin' the segregation time, I went in to serve my country. But what I was doin', mess attendant. I was still servin' my country. And I didn't have no remorse against that. But when it changed, then I felt better. I said, "Well, the boys are finally get a break in 'em."

Appleton: Yes. But when you came home in 1945 you came back to a segregated Louisiana.

Gross: Oh, yes. Louisiana was segregated.

Appleton: And how did *that* feel? I mean, here you put your life on the line in Guadalcanal, and into the foxholes, and then you come back and be treated that way. It must have been hard.

Gross: You know, the same thing was . . . when I came back . . . like New Orleans, yes, it was segregated and everything. 'Cause a lot of soldiers used to get on the street car and they had a sign there on the street car, "Colored on this side. White on this side." Some of them soldiers, they get the sign . . . "I'm gonna throw it out the window!" But the man never said nothin'. They just keep on ridin'.

Appleton: Well, yes. It was a little while later that Rosa Parks got on the bus, she was tired.



The bus Rosa Parks sat on which began the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1955.

From Wikimedia by rmhermen by permission under GNU Free Documentation License

Gross: Yes. Rosa Parks got on the bus, and she was tired, too

Appleton: But still . . . she was about ten years after that. Still . . .

Gross: Yes. She was tired. She sat in the first seat available. I'm tired and lookin' out.

Appleton: Of course. So there were servicemen that came back that would take those signs those signs and throw them out the window.

Gross: Yes, and throw 'em out the window.

Appleton: And the drivers . . . nobody . . .

*Many signs such as this one were sometimes
ignored and finally disappeared
when segregation ended.*

*From Wikimedia by Esther Bublely,
in the public domain*



Gross: No, he just kept on drivin'.

Appleton: They wouldn't do anything.

Gross: No.

Appleton: Yes. That's good. Well you were with some brave people then. Did you do that too? Did you throw the signs out? Or were you a little more cautious?

Gross: I was a little more cautious.

Appleton: (Laughing) A little more cautious. Yes.

Gross: I passed through the storm. I was a little more cautious.

Appleton: Well, some people take more chances.

Gross: Right.

Appleton: So did you regret then not staying in longer? Did you . . . when you finally retired?

Gross: Well, no. No. After I listened to my wife and followed her, you know. If I were her, I didn't regret it 'cause me an' her was runnin' neck an' neck with the boys, you know.

Appleton: And how did that turn out? Were you able to straighten them up?

Gross: Yes. I straightened them up. I straightened them up.

Appleton: A little military discipline there?

Gross: Yes.

Dorothy McCray: Didn't she tell you to go back to school?

Gross: Yes, then I went back to school.

Appleton: Okay. Let's talk about that.

Gross: Alright. When I got retired outta the military I went back to school to finish my education. I went to Bell . . .

Appleton: Now, was that to finish high school?

Gross: Yes, to finish high school.

Appleton: And then did you go on from there?

Gross: I went on . . . finished my high school at Bell, and I got graduated from Lincoln. Then from Bell and Lincoln, and I went to the G.I. Bill I went to college.

Appleton: I was going to ask you about that.

Gross: I went to college, [San Diego] City College.



San Diego City College

*From Wikimedia in the
public domain*

Appleton: What college was that?

Gross: City College.

Appleton: City College. Where?

Dorothy McCray: San Diego.

Gross: San Diego.

Appleton: In San Diego, okay. Yes.

Gross: And I was takin' up air conditioning and refrigeration, and appliance.

Appleton: Oh-hmm. And then did you get a certificate in that?

Gross: Yes. And I graduated from that. Then I went to the Union Tribune [newspaper] because I didn't have a job. First I went to Higgins. . . not Higgins. . . to Rohr Aircraft. I went to Rohr Aircraft. I worked there for about two years.

Appleton: What kind of work did you do?

Gross: I was sheet metal . . . a riveter.

Appleton: No more pots and pans or kitchen stuff anymore. You were away from that.

Gross: Rohr hired about a hundred men a day.

Appleton: Really! Yes.

Gross: And the next day they'd lay off about two hundred.

Appleton: (Laughing)

Gross: So I stayed at the Rohr's about two years. And that big lay-off came, and I was in it. I said, "Well . . ." And I still got my union card from the aircraft union. I belong to that union.

Appleton: And you were really in the union this time. (Laughing)

Gross: At Rohr I got the big lay-off. I say, "You know what? I'm finished with aircraft." So I look in the paper, and they had a sign up that said, "Union Tribune need custodians." So I went down there and applied for it, and I got hired the same day! I said, "What do you know!" I went to the Union Tribune and the lady say, "Can you come to work tonight?"

I say, "I'll check with my wife. Oh, Yes, I'll come to work." So we didn't have no formal reason. You and Lucy was formin' . . . she was livin' with Buster at that time.

Gross: So, anyhow, I went to the Union Tribune, and I stayed twenty-three years.

Appleton: How long?

Gross: Twenty-three years.

Appleton: You must have been practically in management by the time you finished.

Gross: Oh, Yes. Twenty-three years I stayed with the Union Tribune.

Appleton: Were you the head man then in that department?

Gross: Well, I was very close.

Appleton: Well, good for you.

Gross: And I stayed with the Union Tribune twenty-three years, and my wife she . . . see, I didn't drive, and my wife used to pick me up every night about 2 o'clock in the mornin'.

Appleton: Oh, my!

Gross: One day she say, "You know what I think, honey?"

I say, "What."

She say, "I'm gettin' about tired of pickin' you up . . . "

(Everybody is laughing.)

Appleton: She helped you retire again, huh?

Gross: Yes. She say, "I think you better prepare for your retirement."

I say, "Well, that I will do." So I put in for my retirement.

Appleton: So now, you got retirement then from the Navy because you . . .

Gross: I got retirement from the navy and I got retirement . . .

Appleton: . . . still, and you still . . .

Gross: . . . from the Union Tribune.

Appleton: . . . from the Union Tribune, Yes. Good for you! For somebody who didn't graduate from high school right away . . .

Gross: Right away.

Appleton: . . . you moved yourself a long way.

Gross: A long way.

Appleton: You really did. That's wonderful. Are there any other special stories that you haven't told about either after you left the Service, or while you were still in that we haven't talked about?

Allen Gross: You were stationed in Alaska.

Gross: I was stationed in Alaska. I was in VJ-61. We used to patrol in Alaska. We had photographic camera on that plane that they could take a golf ball with a picture. So many thousands of miles up. And we were photographin' the Russian boundaries.

Appleton: Yes. Now, were you part of the . . .

Gross: No, I was a cook.

Appleton: Oh, you were still working as a mess attendant?

Gross: Yes, still workin' the galley. But I was with the unit.

Appleton: Right.

Gross: Yes, with the unit. And we got there . . . we stayed in Kodiak, Alaska for about two months. Then we'd fly down to San Diego and stayed two months, and then when we leave, we go to Panama.

Appleton: Okay. Yes. So this was a photographic unit that you were working with?

Gross: Yes. VJ-61.

Dorothy McCray: You were stationed at Port Hueneme.

Gross: I was in VJ-61.

Dorothy McCray: Oh, that was VJ Day.

Gross: Oh, Yes. I went there. And I left VJ-61 . . . got transferred and went to Port Hueneme, California.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And that's where the Seabees . . . Port Hueneme. Seabees regiment went.

Appleton: And that's up north of Santa Barbara near Vandenberg [Air Force Base].

Dorothy McCray: Right.

Appleton: . . . yes. Well, tell a little bit about your wife. She's obviously a very strong woman.

Gross: Oh, yes indeed. Yes indeed. She was very strong durin' the war too, you know. See, all these Navy wives . . . servicemen wives . . . they all penny-pinchers. They

had to be. Because they know how to stretch their dollar 'cause a serviceman wasn't gettin' very much.



Silas' wife, Dorothy, in 1993 in San Diego

Appleton: Right.

Gross: And then went through the storm.

Appleton: How much were you making in World War II? More or less.

Gross: Oh, World War II . . . lemme see. My wife used to get 250 dollars, I think.

Appleton: Oh, my! And so she had to raise the family on that. Of course, as you improved in rank you . . .

Dorothy McCray: That was the allotment.

Gross: Yes. Allotment, 250 dollars.

Appleton: As you improved in rank then you . . . of course, your pay increased.

Gross: Yes. Then my wife worked, too.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: She worked at the Hotel del Coronado in the laundry department.

Appleton: Okay. Yes, now was that after the children were grown?

Dorothy McCray: No . . .

Appleton: Or at the same time?

Gross: No. They were at same time. They was . . .

*Silas and Dorothy celebrate their 50th
wedding anniversary in 1990
in San Diego. Officiating at the occasion
was Pastor Sidney A. Buggs, III.*



Appleton: Okay. And then she finally retired from the Hotel del Coronado. Well, it sounds like you've had a great career, and then certainly a life of improvement all the way along.

Gross: Right.

Appleton: I can't say that it was easy. It must have been hard.

Gross: Yes, it was hard. Yes.

Appleton: It was hard. Growing up in Louisiana had to be tough.

Gross: Oh, it was tough.

Appleton: You had to be strong just to survive all that.

Gross: Yes, you had to be strong to survive. Right.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And Mississippi was worse.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Mississippi and Alabama was worsen.

Appleton: Yes. I guess if you had to be thankful for anything, you were thankful you weren't in Mississippi and Alabama.

Gross: My uncle used to tell me . . . he use to hobo. My uncle used to hobo.

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my.

Gross: (Laughing) He told me he use to stop in Mississippi, and they had a sign in Mississippi, "If you can read, run. And if you can't read, run anyhow."

Appleton: Oh, my heavens.

Gross: On that sign in this town.

Rick Terrible. I don't think people can understand unless they lived through it.

Gross: Yes, you have to live through it.

Appleton: Yes. The humiliation . . .

Gross: My uncle used to tell me that all the time. If you get off in Mississippi . . . all . . . they had the signs over there, "If you can read, run. If you can't read, run anyhow."

Appleton: When you went by train, did you ever go through Mississippi?

Gross: Yes. I went through . . .

Gross: . . . Mississippi and they had the same signs. You pick up passengers. When we got to Tuskegee, that's where we pick up these [Tuskegee] Airmen, and some of 'em . . . you know, and they had a sign like that, and they say they'll be glad when they get to the United States of America.

Appleton: So that's what they meant by that . . . to get out of Mississippi, or Tuskegee is in Alabama 'cause when they get out of Alabama, they'll be glad they get to the United States.

Gross: The United States of America.

Appleton: I should have asked you when you said that, what you meant by that.

Gross: Yes, because a lot of 'em was goin' to New York for the vacation, and some

were goin' to Chicago, Illinois for their vacation.

Appleton: Yes. Well obviously Chicago, New York was more the United States than Alabama and Mississippi was. Oh, my.

Dorothy McCray: Did you say anything on Pearl Harbor. Weren't you in Pearl Harbor?

Gross: After the war?

Dorothy McCray: Yes.

Gross: Yes, but Paul went there to work for Pearl Harbor, you know. And my Aunt Helen and her husband went to work for Pearl Harbor.

Appleton: Well, this is a question that I wanted to ask, did your wife with the children always stay in Louisiana? Or did you finally get billets in some of the places where your ship was assigned?

Gross: No. I stayed in Louisiana a while; and then when I got to California, I sent for my whole family.

Appleton: And your whole family then came out here?

Gross: And my wife loved the San Diego weather so much. She said, "I ain't goin' back to Louisiana."

Appleton: (Laughing)

Dorothy McCray: We grew up here.

Gross: Yes, they grew up here.

Appleton: So the children, the family . . .

Gross: Yes, they moved to California.

Appleton: . . . grew up mostly in California.

Gross: 'Cause with my daughters and them, they went back to Louisiana.

Dorothy McCray: I was eight years old . . .

Gross: . . . Louisiana, and they would sit in front of the bus.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: . . . and the lady kept beckonin' to you all to come on back to the back of the bus, and you all still sit down in the front.

Dorothy McCray: Yes, we wanted them to just leave us alone.

Appleton: Yes.

Dorothy McCray: That was before Rosa Parks. (Laughing)

Appleton: Yes. Oh, my.

Dorothy McCray: That was right about the time television came out.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Yes, television.

Appleton: Right.

Allen Gross: You were also stationed at Miramar Air Base when there was a dirt road there.

Gross: Yes. That's where you born in . . . Balboa Hospital instead of a hospital.

Appleton: You were stationed at Miramar then?

Gross: Yes, I was stationed at Miramar.

Appleton: And what was your responsibility there?

Gross: Well, I was workin' at the BOQ.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Bachelors Officers Quarters, and my wife was carryin' my son then. This young man right here. And I had a car . . . a 1955, yes, and I had a car and on Miramar Road. My wife told me that . . . my wife told me about 9 o'clock. She say, "Honey, I think you better drive me to the hospital."

I said, "What?"

She said, "Because I'm gettin' these pains."

Appleton: Getting ready to deliver, right?

Gross: Yes. I said, "Let me get your suitcase." Of course, she had everything

packed.

Appleton: Oh, Yes. And what hospital did you go to?

Gross: And I put her in the car. I had an old car. And darn! At Miramar Road, generally packed with cars. I ain't see no car! Not a one!

Allen Gross: On your way to the hospital.

Gross: On the way to the hospital, and I got on that highway . . .

Allen Gross: 101.

Gross: . . . 101 comin' to the Balboa Hospital I see but two cars. I say, "Well, I'll be dog-garned. Wish my luck."

She say, "You better hurry!" And I had it the floor. She was tellin' me, "You better hurry, you better hurry!"

I say, "Yeeeeahhh. And I was gone! And when I got to the ramp up here, I crossed that ramp and went over to Balboa and I told the guard . . . I said, "My wife's gonna have a baby."



Balboa Naval Hospital as it appeared in 1955, where Allen Gross was born

From Wikimedia by Adam by permission under CCA-SA Generic License

He say, "Get," . . . just like that . . . he say, "Go on through." And I brought her to the waitin' room.

Appleton: So you came then to the hospital here . . .

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: . . . where this museum is located . . . well, it was a church then . . .

Gross: Yes.

Appleton: . . . and the guard just said, "Go right on in."

Gross: Yes. "My wife's gonna have a baby."

Appleton: There you go.

Gross: And I brought her to the receivin' desk, and the nurse took her right away and put her on the elevator. And I was waitin'. Darn, I couldn't go up there.

Appleton: You were still signing the papers when he was born. (Laughing)

Gross: Right. And the corpsman came down and say, "You know you got her here just in time 'cause the water broke at the time we got off the elevator." Whoa!

Gross: And I said, "Thank you, Jesus!" He say, "You got a big old fine boy!" And that was Allen.

Appleton: (Laughing) But he wasn't born in the elevator. They were able to get your wife into the delivery room.

Gross: Yes, they got her to the receiving room.

Appleton: Well, that's quite a story.

Gross: The corpsman came by and tell me . . . he say, "You know . . . you got her here just in time because her water broke when we got off the elevator."

Dorothy McCray: Where were you stationed when we were living in Torrey Pines?

Gross: Huh?

Dorothy McCray: Where were you stationed at when we were living in Torrey Pines? Were you at Miramar?

Gross: Yes. That's where I bought that first car I had. And I couldn't drive it, not a lick.

Appleton: Now, what kind of a car was that?

Gross: Well, it was . . . that guy I was workin' with, he had that car.

Appleton: It was what?

Gross: He sold it for 50 dollars.

Appleton: Okay.

Gross: And he had that car and he told me . . . he said, “Gross, I wanna get rid of my . . . I wanna sell my car. You need a car?” He say, “I think you need a car.”

I say, “I walk from my work, you know, from Torrey Pines to Miramar on Torrey Pine Road to go to my job.

Appleton: Yes. It's a pretty good walk.

Gross: He say, “I'll sell you this car here for 50 dollars.”

Dorothy McCray: '48 Chevy.

*A '48 Chevy like the car
which Silas bought and
drove.*

*From Wikimedia by Sicnag
by permission under CCA
2.0 Generic License*



Appleton: Now it was a V8, '48 Chevy?

Gross: Uh-hmm. So I told him . . . I said, “Okay.”

Appleton: Well, lucky it was a V8 otherwise you wouldn't have gotten here to the hospital on time.

Gross: No. So I went to the exec . . . you gotta be a witness, you know, if you sellin' a car.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: So I promised to pay him 20 dollars a pay day 'til I paid him that 50 dollars. And the exec witnessed. And he say, “All right. I'm a witness. You can transact the deal.”

And we transact the deal right in the exec's place, and he gave me the keys. And I say, “How you start this thing off?” (Everybody is laughing) So he say, “All you have to do is start it off, and you don't have to shift it. It's a fluid drive, so you don't have to

shift it.”

I say, “What?” So when I finished . . . he has parked it and I had the keys . . . when I finish work and I got in it and turned it on, and I went . . . they had that red light . . . had the red light along Miramar Road, and the red light came on. But it must have been on a good while because the orange light came on, and I kept on drivin'. I went off across (everybody is laughing) and came on to the house.

Gross: And I ain't never shift the car . . . them children ran out . . . “Oh! Daddy got a car! Daddy got a car!”

Appleton: Now, had you had any training driving anything before?

Gross: Never did.

Appleton: So this was on the job training . . .

Gross: On the job training.

Appleton: . . . right out . . .

Gross: Out of the blue. I just jumped in and turned it on from Miramar Road going to Torrey Pines. I crossed that red light, and I said “I know I'm going to make it now.”

Appleton: Oh, dear! And so then your wife took over the driving chores from then on.

Gross: Yes. She didn't believe I could . . . and you know what . . . I got so good at it I learned my kids . . . I learned them how to drive. I learned them.

Appleton: (Laughing) That's wonderful. And how long did you keep that car?

Gross: Oh, lemme see. We went to 'til I went to Coronado.

Appleton: Kept it a while, huh?

Gross: Yes. We moved to Coronado. And we went to Laguna Mountains to see snow. We brought back some snow.

Appleton: Yes. Wonderful.

Gross: Yes, we brought back some snow.

Appleton: Looking back on your military career, what do you take away from that? What did you take away from your service in the military that was important to you and

your family?

Gross: Well, I met some good people when I was in the military, and, of course, you know you're gonna meet bad bunches, too. But, the first thing I advise him. "Don't mix with the bad bunches 'cause it'll get you in a lot of trouble.

Appleton: Sure.

Gross: And I learned how to stay away from the bad bunch 'cause we had boys on our ship. They go to Captain's Mast 'cause I had a friend of mine. He was 1st Class and he was goin' up for chief aboard the *Hancock* and the captain had a sign on the ship, "There will be no gamblin' aboard this ship."

Appleton: No what?

Gross: No gamblin'.

Appleton: No gambling. Yes.

Gross: And them guys read that sign. They was cooks. They read signs. They know . . . and he was gonna go up for chief 'cause he was 1st class. And nothin' he did . . . he went on down there and started shootin' dice 'cause they had big money on that ship. Them guys were goin' in to Japan . . . knew they had big money. And the captain had a shore patrol goin' around to enforce this law. And the shore patrol caught 'em!

Appleton: Whoops!

Gross: And took 'em all to the captain.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: And he went before the captain. They broke him down all the way to seaman.

Appleton: Oh, my. Yes. Tough discipline.

Gross: Yes. Well, he was telling us he'd rather get on out. Say, when he get back.

Appleton: So you learned a lot of good lessons then.

Gross: A lot of good lessons 'cause they had signs. The Captain had the sign, "There will be no gamblin' aboard this ship." Aboard the *Hancock*. No gambling. They were shootin' dice . . . b-i-g money.

Appleton: Follow directions and follow the rules. Yes.

Gross: True.

Appleton: Yes.

Allen Gross: First Aid and it was a big thing to him

Appleton: You learned First Aid [on the *Hancock*]?

Gross: You go aboard ship that's the first thing they're gonna do is learn you First Aid.

Appleton: And have you used that skill?

Gross: Well, they give you the trainin' because like on a burn . . . they got see . . . different kind of burn, you got first degree, second degree and third degree burns, and some of them burns be from powder casing or the shell will blow up. And the sailor get burnt so bad, you can't take his clothes off, because you'll take all his skin off.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: Wrap him up in the first thing you find. A blanket or anything. And give him a solution of salt water. A solution of salt water.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: So you gotta wrap him with his clothes on and everything 'til you get him to the burn center. Don't take his clothes off because you'll take off all his skin. All his skin will peel off the meat. Because when you fire them guns, some of them guns you have heard talk of the case where the whole turret blow up. And them boys be burned so bad, it be a pity. And some of 'em die from it. But the first thing you wanna do . . . see, they got first degree, second degree and third degree burns . . . don't take the . . . if a person gets burned so bad, don't take his clothes off. Wrap him up in a blanket, a sheet, anything, and get him in a solution of salt water, a solution of salt water. Yes, you got to wrap him in his clothes and everything. Until you get him to the burn center. Don't take his clothes off.

Appleton: Yes. And so you were able to use those skills both in the Navy and afterwards I suppose, as a civilian.

Gross: Yes and they show you. They give you first aid on ships. One thing about it . . . you gonna get that first aid.

Allen Gross: . . . working hard and being honest. What the Navy has taught you is discipline.

Gross: Discipline. Yes. I got two Conduct Medals, Good Conduct Medals.

That's why they wanted me to stay in because my record was so good. I got two Conduct Medals. Good Conduct Medals.

Appleton: Yes. Good Conduct Medals.

Gross: And my medals what I got in the military service during the World War II . . . American Defense was the first medal they give you. And if you're in the Pacific, the Asiatic Pacific Medal.

Appleton: Yes.

Gross: They give you that. And then Liberation of the Philippines. I got that.

Appleton: Uh-hmm. Yes. Well, those are important awards.

Gross: I got the Good Conduct Medal.

Appleton: Probably the Good Conduct Medal was the most important.

Gross: I had a Good Conduct. Not many people get the Good Conduct.

Appleton: Where did you learn the good conduct . . . the mindset not to go out with all the bad guys and to, you know, to have the kind of behavior that gave you that Good Conduct Medal? Where did you learn that?

Gross: Well, you know, you got some old chiefs been in the navy many, many years too, and they'll tell us, just like these chief came at boot camp and told us, "Sailors, learn your ship. Don't sit in the bunk and read. Don't sit in the bunk and go to sleep. Get aboard your ship and go all over it. Top to bottom. Learn it from top to bottom.

Appleton: Yes. How about from your parents? Did you learn . . .

Gross: He said they had a guy aboard his ship. They coulda woke him up but they didn't. 'Cause then he went down with the ship. Yes. He say they coulda woke him up but they didn't.

Gross: Oh, yes. Oh, my father. Yes.

Appleton: Didn't you learn some of this from your parents, too?

Gross: Yes. From my parents. That's where I learned from. My parents was the type of parents . . . I came up in the type of raisin' that any old people you see walkin' in the street . . . and you doin' somethin' you ain't got no business . . . they would take a belt off and strap you with it.

Appleton: Oooops!

Gross: And you know what you're sayin'? You're prayin' to God, "Don't let 'em tell your father and mother!" Because what the mother and father gonna do?

Appleton: Yes. They would do it again!

Gross: They gonna thank them . . . Oh, thank you very much 'cause I'm gonna give him another one!

Appleton: (Laughing) Well, I think on that story . . . and I like that one . . . I think we have to come to an end.

Gross: Okay.



Silas Gross during the interview on July 23, 2012

Appleton: I want to thank you for telling your story . . . obviously, and for participating in this important project, and for sharing your experiences. This conversation will be reviewed and you will receive a copy as I've shown you, and then a copy will be placed over here on the shelves of the library, and you'll have the first copy, and one in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., as part of the Veterans History Project.

So, thank you and thank you for your service.

Gross: You're welcome, Sir.

Appleton: You've had a long and distinguished service, and I think we all . . . your family and all of us appreciate it.

Gross: Right.

Appleton: So this concludes our conversation. Again, thank you.