

Veterans Oral History Stories

On Saturday, September 24, I had the pleasure of being the luncheon speaker at the annual Family History Workshop held at Horizon Middle School and sponsored by the Heritage Education Commission and Moorhead Community Education. I gave a presentation on our Veterans oral history project and talked about and played clips from three individuals we recorded; Ben Steele, Roland Dille and Nelson Peery. All three individuals served in WWII and all have passed away, the most recent was on Sunday, September 25 when Ben Steele died at the age of 98 in Billings, MN. Steele was an invited artist to MSUM in 2007 where he showed his work including charcoal drawings from his experience as a survivor of the Bataan Death March. He consented to do an oral history interview.

From his obituary "After being captured by the Japanese and surviving the 66-mile "Death March" in the Philippines, Steele was packed away on an infamous Japanese "Hell Ship," which he also barely survived, before ending up in a forced labor camp in Japan. Hospitalized in late 1942 from a near-lethal combination of beriberi, dysentery, jaundice, and malaria, Ben began sketching on the concrete hospital floor with a piece of charcoal from the nearby stove. His first drawings of horses, cowboy hats, and corrals helped restore his strength and brought his unknown art talents to the attention of others in the compound. On smuggled paper and at the urging of other prisoners, Ben began drawing scenes from the death march and camp life—images that would find their way in the years to come into a collection that has toured the nation and now resides permanently at University of Montana." Steele grew up in Roundup, MT a young cowboy turned artist who joined the Army Air Corps on October 10, 1940 to see the world. Steele was stationed in the Philippines when the war started. From our oral history, Steele said "From Clark Field, we went into Bataan. That's because the war started on December the 8th over there. You know, it was a day later in the Philippines because we were on the other side of the line. We stayed at Clark Field until we were bombed the same day as Pearl Harbor. And we stayed at Clark Field until Christmas Day of 1941. When the Japanese invaded the Philippines, then we were forced into Bataan. We didn't have any airplanes left because we lost them all". About the march, Steele said "There were about 500 of us in a group; and if you fell out, you were killed, either bayoneted or shot. And I was jabbed with a bayonet but not too severely, probably an inch or so. I was trying to help a fellow and the Jap guard came along and made me quit by jabbing me with the bayonet. And I lost a little blood but not a lot. But I can remember how the flies used to follow me because I had blood on my shirt and -- it was sore. But I healed up and got all right". Steele was freed from the Japanese camp after the war ended in 1945.

Steele's complete interview can be heard or read on-line at www.heritageed.com, click on Oral History Projects. If you would like your story recorded, please contact me.