

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Wells Monson

Interviewed by Kathy Bradford in Brigham City, Utah, February 12, 1987.

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Kathy Bradford: I'm talking to Wells Monson of Brigham city. He's going to tell about his experiences at Bushnell Hospital with the German POWs. When did you start working at Bushnell?

Wells Monson: 1943. The fall of '43.

Kathy: And that was just a year after they opened the hospital, wasn't it?

Wells: Right around there. I'm not quite sure, but I think it was about a year afterwards.

Kathy: And what were your duties there?

Wells: I started out with the Post Engineers delivering the maintenance men to all different jobs and picking up and delivering tools to them whatever they needed.

Kathy: Was it like a taxi or shuttle?

Wells: Yes, a shuttle-type taxi deal for the engineers.

Kathy: What kind of vehicle did you have?

Wells: We had a pick-up truck, and they could put their plumbing tools and whatever they needed in the back of it. And they had benches for them to sit on in back.

Kathy: Oh, so they sat in the back of the truck, too, and you drove them around?

Wells: Yes.

Kathy: Did you have contact with any of the POWs then?

Wells: Not as much as later on. I transferred to the motor pool, and then I had more contact with them. I drove the commissary truck to deliver supplies to all the mess halls where they had potatoes and all the meat and everything like that. I had a German POW who would help me with delivering the material, and then we'd get POWs in the mess hall there to come help unload it. They were what you'd call real good workers. They'd tell me to take it easy and they'd take care of loading and unloading when they could.

Kathy: Suspicion against the Germans was high in those days. Were you nervous, having to work with them?

Wells: No, I didn't feel a bit nervous around them. They were all polite and wherever they could help anybody, they would pitch in and do it. They were really more or less right on the Bushnell campus.

Kathy: They didn't try to escape?

Wells: Well, I don't think so. They were treated too good.

Kathy: So you don't think they felt any hostility to their captors or the American people?

Wells: None that I know of. One guard would take about a dozen out there, and he'd have a shotgun. But he was just there with them. As far as I know, we never had any trouble with any of them. They seemed pretty happy, and they were always joking and kidding with you. We'd take a load to the commissaries or these mess halls, and they had bananas there which in those days were hard to get, and this one German would get a handful of bananas and put them down in the front of his apron. When we'd get in the cab, he'd hand them to me, and we'd have bananas. Then we'd drive over to a garbage can, and he'd empty out all the banana peelings.

Kathy: You mentioned that you did work with some Italian POWs, too. Could you compare the two groups?

Wells: When the prisoners first came in, they were Italians. They were kind of lazy on the job. They had to keep prodding them all the time to keep them going. If you weren't watching, they'd sit down, and you'd have to do the work. There was a big difference between them and the Germans and their help. The Italians were complaining a lot where the German prisoners didn't.

Kathy: Did the prisoners go near the patients in the hospital?

Wells: I don't really know too much about that, whether they had them helping in the wards or not. They were more or less out in the orchards and doing odd jobs around the hospital. They had a pretty good-sized camp along the south end of the hospital where the golf course is being built now. It had a wire fence around it. If they wanted to get out, I don't see any reason they couldn't have done, but I don't recall any of them trying to escape.

Kathy: Did they live in barracks?

Wells: Yes, they had barracks just like the regular GIs had.

Kathy: It sounds like you got along well. You didn't notice any hostilities toward the other workers?

Wells: No, not a bit with the ones I came in contact with.

Kathy: You indicated to me before that some of them didn't really want to be in the war.

Wells: Well, one told me that he was out in the field plowing. He had his team and a plow. He says he looked around and he had an SS trooper with a rifle in his ribs who told him he had to go to war, and he said he didn't want to. He said, "You haven't got any choice. Either you stay here or you come with me."

So he said he left the team and plow right where it was, and they took him right there, put him right in a uniform and sent him out to fight.

Kathy: Well, I suppose their loyalty was still with Germany. Did you hear any of their political views?

Wells: I didn't talk to them too much. Anything they did say to me like that—as far as I could see there—they were happy to be over here, not over there fighting.

Kathy: What about your father? Did you say he worked there, too?

Wells: My father worked for the Post Engineers, and he was on a garbage truck. They had POWs that helped them—and down at the incinerator and wherever they could help. They'd push these old fellows aside and do their work for them whenever it was possible.

Kathy: You must have been quite young at that time.

Wells: I was about 20, somewhere about that – 21, 19. It's been quite a while ago.

Kathy: So this was just a temporary job for you?

Wells: I worked from 1942 to 1946. I stayed there until they started to close down, then I rehired back on when they were hauling material to Ogden for storage. I worked there probably six months the second time.

Kathy: Were you born in Brigham City?

Wells: No, I was born up by Rigby, Idaho.

Kathy: So when did you come to Brigham City?

Wells: We moved to Brigham in '32. The family moved here to Brigham at that time.

Kathy: Was your father already here?

Wells: Well, he worked at 2nd Street, and I talked him into transferring so he wouldn't have so far to drive.

Kathy: Where did you live?

Wells: When we first moved to Brigham we lived in the red brick house that's on the reservation now where Bushnell is. They turned it into a Noncommissioned Officers' Club, then we moved up to 5th East and Forest. That's where we were living when I worked at Bushnell.

Kathy: You weren't married?

Wells: No.

Kathy: Were you familiar with Brigham at all? You were talking about the orchards out there.

Wells: Where Bushnell was built they claim was the best orchard ground that there was because it was on such a slope. The sun would hit it, and there was no freezing of the fruits whatsoever up there. Where all the other crops were froze, that part was protected.

Kathy: Did you ever see it when the orchards were there?

Wells: My brothers and I bought fruit from those orchards and peddled fruit in Idaho. We had some customers up there that bought it each year.

Kathy: So you came here, maybe every year, to pick up fruit to sell up there?

Wells: Oh, yes. I worked in those orchards.

Kathy: You talked about working with the prisoners in the orchards. Were some of those orchards still there? I don't see any orchards there now.

Wells: No, shortly after, Bushnell closed and the Indian School came in, they tore all the fruit trees out. There used to be fruit trees all on the east end of the hospital there. They were up on the east of the main gate on 7th south. On Main Street there they had homes all along there. There was about five homes on the east side of main Street—some running east on 7th south where the officers lived.

Kathy: Did they build those homes new when Bushnell came in?

Wells: No, they were homes where the farmers lived.

Kathy: But there were orchards on the east side of the property that had been part of the whole area?

Wells: Yes.

Kathy: Did Bushnell use the fruit from those trees?

Wells: I'd take the fruit down to Ogden to Pringles and they'd take care of it for Bushnell, and then later on I'd go back down and pick it up and they'd use it here for the patients.

Kathy: You mean they'd can the fruit?

Wells: Yes.

Kathy: And then they completely took out all the orchards?

Wells: Right. The orchards were quite old at the time, and I guess they just didn't figure they'd amount to anything, so they took all the trees out.

Kathy: Did they have to pull a lot out when they originally built the hospital?

Wells: Oh, yes. There was a lot of orchards all through there—cherry orchards, peaches. We picked lots of fruit in that orchard—strawberries and everything else.

Kathy: To take back to Idaho to sell?

Wells: Well, I was too young at that time, but later on when we went up there with it.

Kathy: Tell me a little more about Bushnell itself. When you worked there, what were your impressions of the hospital itself? Did you think it was a good hospital?

Wells: Well, it was a good hospital. We had Col. Hardaway there, and he was an excellent commander for the hospital. Some of the GIs would have trouble with their officers. Col. Hardaway, I remember, one time told the officer, "don't push them too hard. We're one big happy family here, and I want it to stay that way."

There was very little trouble that I knew of. You'd see those GIs walking around with one leg and one would fall down and the other one behind him with legs off might yell at him and say, "You act like you're a cripple. What's wrong with you?"

They'd joke back and forth with one another. You'd see guys with their arms off. They had one officer who had both hands off, and he had artificial hands. He taught the other GIs driving with artificial limbs. They seemed like one big happy family. I remember one guy that was in what they called the brig in the guardhouse all the time. He didn't want to go out and do anything else, so when his time was up to be released, they sent him to the Motor Pool to help up there to change oil and that.

Kathy: Was he a soldier?

Wells: He was a GI, yes, and the first thing he did when Col. Hardaway brought his vehicle in to be serviced, he left the plug out of the oil pan so it ruined the engine, and back in the brig he went.

Kathy: He did that on purpose?

Wells: I kind of think so, from the way they talked.

Kathy: What were you doing from '32 when you came to Brigham City until Bushnell was built?

Wells: I picked fruit around and did odd jobs. They turned me down for the service, so I went to 2nd street and worked there for a year. I got sick there so I couldn't work any more and came home. Then I went to work for Bushnell.

Kathy: What did your father do?

Wells: When we moved to Utah, we lived in Kaysville first. He was on welfare. You know, WPA, I guess you call it.

Kathy: That was during the Depressions years when jobs were hard to find.

Wells: I can remember standing up on Main Street just off 3rd south where those fellows had to dig trenches so deep by hand that they had to have platforms to throw the dirt up and in. Another fellow would be on that platform and throw it out.

Kathy: What were the trenches for?

Wells: It was for a sewer line in Brigham City at that time.

Kathy: How old were you then?

Wells: I was about 7 or 8 years old.

Kathy: So you weren't very old when you came to Utah.

Wells: No, I was 7 when we moved.

Kathy: Then you went to school here.

Wells: I went to school here, yes.

Kathy: As a school child you went out there and picked fruit?

Wells: Yes, I picked fruit. My father worked for a dollar a day, and I worked for 25 cents a day – picking fruit and hauling hay.

Kathy: And your dad did that too?

Wells: Whatever we could get.

Kathy: Did you see a big change in the economy when Bushnell came?

Wells: There were a lot of changes. We lived just south of where the warehouse is just down there on 1100 South so I can step back and see the changes in Brigham City from those days to now. It's quite a difference.

Kathy: Were there prisoners at Bushnell when you first started working there?

Wells: No, they didn't have the prisoner camp. See, my father and I dug the first waterlines to the POW camp because later on they brought the POWs in.

Kathy: How did you feel when they closed Bushnell down?

Wells: Well, quite a few people were sad when they closed it up because they figured they had a good place there, and they couldn't see any reason why they did close it up, but that was the government, and that's what they had in mind to do.

Kathy: Do you think that's what they intended – just to have it operating during the war years?

Wells: I imagine that's what they intended just for this length of time because they had other hospitals closer to home for the GIs to go to. And they figured that the hospitals closer to where they lived was where they'd put them.

Kathy: What were some of the duties you had in the Motor Pool?

Wells: Well, they sent me down to Ogden to pick up patients. We had what they call a 15-passenger bus. They sent me down to pick up a few NP patients.

Kathy: What were they?

Wells: Some of them were mentally ill. Some were shell-shocked, and you couldn't tell what they were going to do next. They had wards up there just like a prison for them.

Kathy: Did that scare you?

Wells: Well, it did, yes. When they put them in, they put all of them in, and then the ward boys were supposed to help. They got in the back seat. That was the fastest trip from Ogden to Brigham that I took.

Kathy: Did you have any trouble with them?

Wells: No, not a bit. I took an ambulance down there at one time and picked up four. They were on stretchers, and that was the time they were rebuilding the road from Brigham to Hot Springs. Some of the road was torn up. I was coming along there driving real slow with this ambulance. It was one of the field ambulances they used to have, and officer up there yelled at me and said, "Get this thing going. These guys are not used to this kind of treatment." He said, "We gotta get up there as soon as we can." So the ambulance went 60 miles per hour, and that's what I ended up driving to get into the hospital.

Kathy: Where were they?

Wells: They came in on a train at the Ogden Station. Then they had a train track right up there. They'd bring them right in on the train—right to the hospital. At first they brought the whole trainload and put them in the hospital. They had trains that came right into the area there.

Kathy: They had a whole community out there, didn't they?

Wells: Yes, they had a big laundry and a fire station, a big carpenter shop, plumbing shop, paint shop. Everything that they needed was right there.

Kathy: That was sort of handy when Intermountain took over. They needed all of those things to set up the boarding school.

Wells: Well, I don't know about the laundry because everything was put away in storage areas for the government. I don't know if they ever recovered them or anything or if they'd just lay there and deteriorate.

Most of the time I was driving a vehicle. One time I drove a tractor out in the orchards and disked up so they could plant it into grass., and on the west side I disked all that up, and they finally put grass into the west side where they have the ball diamonds.

Kathy: That's been a long time. Did you eat at the hospital? I've heard they had good food.

Wells: Well, a lot of times different guys would take me up in the mess hall, and we'd have chocolate cakes and doughnuts. They were real good. They had their own bakery. They built cakes there about 3 feet square, and I'd deliver those. At time I'd drive up in the Motor Pool, and some of the GIs up there would take a cake out and eat up there with their coffee. One time Col. Hardaway drove up just at the time that they took the cake out. He said, "You fellows hadn't ought to do that. Some of the patients down there might go hungry." That's all that was said about it. It was for the patients, but they had enough so the GIs could have some.

Kathy: How about those POWs? Did they get in on some of that, too?

Wells: I think they had the same kind of food. I don't know if they had their own bakery in there at that time or not.

Kathy: How did the Germans and Italians get along with each other?

Wells: They weren't together. As soon as the Germans came in, I'm pretty sure they shipped the Italians out to a different camp.

The prisoners were happy to be over here, I think. From what I understand there are a lot of them that have come back over here and are living here.

Larry Douglass: How many POWs were there?

Wells: Offhand I imagine there were about 50 stationed at Bushnell. I could be wrong.

Kathy: Was that total or just the Germans?

Wells: Just the German prisoners. I can't remember how many barracks they had up there. I couldn't tell you really, but they had quite a few prisoners.

Larry: Did they have trouble controlling them?

Wells: Well, if they had any trouble with one or two, they'd take disciplinary action, but as far as I know they were so tickled to be out of that war. The biggest part of them here didn't even want to be involved in that war.

Larry: Were they older men?

Wells: Yes, they were. Well, I was young then, and they seemed old to me. Guys about 35 seemed old.

Larry: So they were in their 30s and 40s?

Wells: Yes.

Kathy: Yet you had to be a supervisor. Was that difficult?

Wells: No. They were just my helpers. I didn't have anything to say about it. They just more or less did what they wanted. They had their own officer over them in the mess hall and their own officer in the commissary. I didn't have to tell them anything.

Kathy: When they helped you with loading, did they just do it without you having to give instructions?

Wells: Right. I'd have to deliver meat to the mess halls. I was not built too good and strong at that time, and these German prisoners would pick up the hind quarter of a beef and take it in. If they needed any help, they'd just yell for more prisoners to come, and that's all there was.

Kathy: So you had to drive and they did the loading and unloading?

Wells: Yes, if there was any light work, I'd do it; but if they saw it was heavy work, they'd tell me to sit down and take it easy. They'd force me to sit down.

Kathy: So they were protective of you – like big brothers?

Wells: Yes, that's the way they acted – like a big brother – and if they saw anything they thought I couldn't handle, they'd take over.

Larry: How did you communicate, with the language problem? Did some of them speak English well enough to talk to you?

Wells: They spoke broken English so you could understand them.

Larry: Most all of them did?

Wells: The biggest majority of them that I was around.

Larry: So if you talked slowly, they could probably understand.

Wells: Yes, if they'd see a big string of bananas, they'd make you understand. They'd go in there and get a dozen or so bananas and then we'd get out in the truck, they'd hand them to me.

Larry: What about the Italians? Did they speak broken English?

Wells: Right a first I didn't have too much to do with them because I was on the post engineers at that time. Later on when I transferred to the Motor Pool, I came in contact with the Germans hauling supplies to the mess hall. We had about 5 or 6 dozen down there.

Kathy: Did the Italians live in the same barracks, and then they moved out?

Wells: And the Germans moved in. Yes, that's right.

The first time that I ever went up Logan Canyon I took the fire chief and a couple of firemen up there. We took fire extinguishers and got Tony Grove Camp prepared for the patients. When they got that fixed, they'd take a bus. They had a schedule up at Tony Grove. The patients would fish up there in the Logan River and they had recreation up there for them. They'd stay there weeks at a time and come back down. Then they'd take another group up there. They used that pretty near 'til it closed.

Kathy: Did all the patients go there?

Wells: No, they were just the amputees and the ones that could get around.

Kathy: But not the ones from the psychiatric ward?

Wells: No. One day I drove through the NP ward which was fenced in. That's where I was mostly nervous. I drove in there, and one of the GIs came out to the garbage can, and he said, "I'm going home on leave tomorrow. I got my brains smashed out on the highway over there. The Germans just scooped it up and put it back in my head, and I'm all right now, so I'm going home tomorrow on leave."

I just kind of looked at him. The next day I went up to the administration building, and he was catching a bus to go home. There were a lot of sad sights at Bushnell and there was a log of good done for the GIs.