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Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

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Interview with Howard Howell

U.S. Marine Corps

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## INTERVIEW WITH HOWARD HOWELL

This is Cork Morris. It's September 28, 2002. I am interviewing Howard Howell at Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife.

Mr. Morris: Why don't we start with where you were born, and who your folks were?

Mr. Howell:

My name is Howard Howell. I was born June 16, 1924 in a little town in east Texas by the name of Dangerfield. My mother was nicknamed Suzie, my father was J. Frank. I had five brothers and sisters. I experienced one of the worst depressions the United States has ever experienced. I had an ambition. My father during that time was unemployed, money was very scarce, but I had a burning ambition and desire to get a college education. I figured out at an awfully early age that the only thing really to do around that town in our economic status was to pump gasoline or work as a clerk in a store, and neither one of those appealed to me. There's nothing wrong with it, but I just wanted something different. I attended school in Dangerfield up until my senior year. I had a coach that realized my ambition and he encouraged me to go to North Texas State and be in what they called a demonstration school. The demonstration school was organized by the University of North Texas to give hopeful teachers a place to practice on students. It had a very good staff. The head of the school, for example, later became the President of the University of North Texas. All of our teachers were university professors. It was a very different school, more or less unstructured, and if you wanted to fail no one really bothered you. They would talk to you but it wasn't an authoritarian school. I liked it that way.

Somewhere about my sophomore or junior year I had the ambition of becoming a Marine Corps officer, but for someone from where we lived and our opportunities I didn't think I'd ever make it. Well, the Japanese took care of that. When I was a senior at the demonstration school the war started. I worked for my meals, I worked for part of my room rent, and I played football since that coach told me that was one way to get an athletic scholarship. I weighed 118 pounds sopping wet, and it didn't take me long to figure out that I was going to do something other than get a football scholarship. But I had the determination to go to college. In my freshman schooling in the summer of 1942 I heard of a program called E-12. The Army and Navy calculated that it would be a long, hard war and they wanted a steady, sustainable cadre of junior officers. So I signed up, I took tests, I passed the tests, I was accepted. This was in December. In the year 1943 I enrolled as a freshman at North Texas, and then July 1 they called the E-12s up. Even though we had signed up in the Marine Corps we were still free to go to college.

Several of us were assigned to Louisiana Polytechnic Institute in Rustin, Louisiana, which is a very good engineering school. They sent us to boot camp, and then to Quantico, on the basis of our age and college classification. The oldest group went, then next oldest, and then I was in the third group. There was one group behind me that was younger than I was. I was at Louisiana Tech for 12 months, and in the 12 months I earned two years of college credits. In 1943, I went to boot camp at Perris Island. That was a learning experience. We were on the rifle range three days. My

nose peeled three times in the sun. We had a medication called Noxema, I think they still make it, and I can smell Noxema today and I'll have a flashback to the firing range at Perris Island. From Perris Island we went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. We were there for quite awhile. There were still a large number of people ahead of us to go to Quantico.

In February of '45 I finally got to Quantico. They started a new system in the Marine Corps, they called it the Platoon Leaders Class, PLC. They were losing so many lieutenants that they thought if they changed the name it would change the fatalities. It didn't, so they called it the Platoon Commanders Class, and a commander you usually think of as someone that's behind everybody else telling them what to do. It didn't help a bit as far as fatalities were concerned.

I graduated May 23, 1945. An interesting side note: Roosevelt died while we were at Quantico. We were in the Sixth Platoon Leaders Class. The Fifth Platoon Leaders Class was picked as the honor guard representing the Marine Corps at Roosevelt's funeral. So, if he'd lived another two weeks I'd have been in the honor guard.

It had been a pretty tight schedule ever since I joined the Marine Corps. After we graduated I got two weeks of leave. I went home, visited a girl I used to go with, went back to Camp Lejeune for a little training, and then they told us we were going to be shipped by train to Camp Pendleton, California. I smoked cigarettes, so we bought two or three cartons of cigarettes to smoke on the train, plus some other things. We showed up, about 40 of us second lieutenants, and there was a contingent of about 400 marines that had already been overseas all the way from two to three years, and they were going back for their second round. I was 20 years old, I was named the chief MP officer for the troop train. The "old man" was a first lieutenant and he was 22 or 23 years old. We took that train across the United States and did not lose a single person.

In Houston there was a Marine corporal who came out and talked to me. They issued me a .38 special with a shoulder holster. This corporal asked me, "What would you do if I started running?" I said, "Corporal, you'd have to run out there about 10 yards and I'll let you know." I was scared to death, but I wouldn't show it. As soon as I got him back on the train, he decided that I was so confused he'd better get back on the train. I went in and talked to the first lieutenant and asked him what to do, and he said "Gosh, I don't know. I tell you what you do. You fire the first round in the air, and then you do what you want to." So I saw the corporal later on, I said "Corporal, I found out what to do." He said, "What?" I said, "You have to run to find out."

We went to Pendleton and we were in transit there. From there we rode up to San Francisco. I have never seen such dirty train floors in all my life. They had wicker covered seats, they had places for old lamps—this is how old they were—and they hadn't been cleaned since they were stored, whenever it was. We were put onboard the ship, the ATA 58, the ???? That was one of the most lonesome feelings I've ever had in my life, was walking on that ship. We started to the South Pacific. We were at Ulithe Atoll. We were taking on diesel, fuel, and the war was over. I didn't know that was that much whiskey on that ship. We celebrated, they celebrated, I celebrated

a little bit, not much. So we went on to Guam.

On the Island of Guam I found out that these 40 second lieutenants that I was with, we were replacing infantry officers for the Marine Third Division for the invasion of Japan scheduled in something like six weeks or two months. It was only fair that we stay over there and let other people go home, and I did.

I was in the transit center in Guam for awhile. One of the interesting experiences I had on Guam, or a couple. There were still Japanese in the jungles in Guam and we used to go out and hunt them, why I don't know. They say that people our age then, their frontal lobes are not really developed and they can't reason well, and I agree. One night in a bar we were with some B-29 pilots, and they said "Would you like to fly to Japan on a reconnaissance mission?" Sure, we didn't have anything else to do. I'm probably one of the few Marine officers ever flew tail gunner on a B-29 over Japan. We started with Tokyo and worked our way all the way down Honshu. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were off limits, we couldn't fly over them. I have never seen such destruction in all my life. The thing that remains in my mind about the destruction is, there's something about the characteristics of a smokestack that after the bombing, they're usually left standing. That's the only thing the bombs really didn't tear up.

We went back to Guam, we were at 18 hours, we had three meals, we flew over Iwo Jima and we could look down and just see a steady stream of all kinds of ships converging on Japan. A couple of days later we flew back on a passenger aircraft, four engine plane, landed at ???? north of Tokyo. Tokyo did not have any airfields large enough for four-engine planes, so we landed over there. They ferried us over in a twin-engine cargo plane, it was called a Curtis Commando. I have never seen such a rickety airplane in all my life. I feared for my life. It had holes in it, it would scream, it would whistle, it would shake, it would rattle. We landed at Luitao and on the island of Guam I had run across a Zenith transoceanic radio. It was a valuable commodity. I cradled that thing with my dear life. Maybe you could hurt me, but I didn't want my radio hurt. From there we got off.

The Marine Corps was kind of—well, we were strange people, anyway, I guess. They didn't say you go fetch this train or this boat or this to get you on to Sasebo. We looked for something to eat, and there was a hospital ship. They said, "You can come on board and eat, but you cannot stay since you're a combative." The war was over and I didn't quite understand that, but it was the rules of the Geneva Convention. The Navy had built and transported a lot of barracks that were built on barges, and we stayed on those barges.

The next day we had action, flying in a flying boat. We had already been flying, that trip to Japan and back, and then back to Japan. My buddies and I discussed it, and they said there was a destroyer going down there. We'd never ridden on a destroyer, so we got on a destroyer. I found out why they called them tin cans, because that night we got in a storm. I got up to go to the head in the middle of the night, and there was someone, he had his toenails next to me, and I looked over at my buddy. I looked at him, I said "I can't help you anymore," and I went back to bed.

We got to Sasebo. I'd been trained as an infantry officer, and I was assigned to a ???? company. A ???? company at that time consisted of Blacks. I didn't think that was very good duty. That was not a racial thing, but I had been trained as a fighting infantryman, and here I was unloading ships. But I did it. And on one of the jobs, there were probably two jobs. One, we would go in and clear out factories, clear out the machinery. Then we would load our supplies in those torn-up buildings. Touring that part of Japan, these people that said we shouldn't have dropped the atom bomb, I guarantee they were not a Marine lieutenant in the infantry. I have never seen a place so fortified. You'd go into a factory, there'd be a narrow gauge train track through, there would be roads that crisscrossed, north, south, east, and west. And right off to one side of that there would be a pill box with openings. If you looked in the pill box, it had a tunnel that went down under the ground and the tunnel would come up over in the next factory, and they were just honeycombed like that. We lived in an area just right off the bay, and behind it there was cap rock, a geographic formation, and if you've seen the cap rock in West Texas, cap rock in New Mexico, you know what I'm talking about. They had tunnels buried back into that area, and they were full of supplies.

The closest I ever came to killing a Japanese was one day we were in our room and one of those tunnels exploded. A few of my friends were there, I grabbed my .45 and ran out. My dad had presented me with a Colt .45 when I graduated from Quantico. Here was this Japanese running down a trail, turning and looking over his shoulder at these two other lieutenants that had run up there and he didn't even notice I was there. I was sitting there, tracking him as he came down. My intentions were to shoot and shoot to kill if he pulled a weapon or if he acted like he was going to set off an explosion or something of that sort. Regardless of all your training about killing, you still don't like it. The closer that Japanese got to me, the less inclined I was to shoot. Finally he got so close, he was still looking behind him, I reached out and tripped him with my foot. He fell, he rolled over on his back, and my .45 was only about eight inches from his eyes. He was a young Japanese kid, I estimated between 13 and 16 years of age. It's kind of haunted me, what if, what if I'd shot him and he turned out to be a young kid. It would have been hard to live with.

Mr. Morris: Was this kid responsible for that explosion?

Mr. Howell:

I don't think he was. The Japanese used petric acid, which is highly unstable. We worked in an area one time where there were some Japanese sea mounts. The detonators were stored in stalls, in boxes, and those boxes caught on fire about three times. We don't know why, but finally I took my troops and left. Their explosives were just so unpredictable. I bet it was something like that, because there were all kinds of supplies in those caves.

New Year's Day we loaded up and we went back to Guam, took our troops with us. They got liberty the day after we got there and they all went to the beach. One of the men was swept out to sea with a rip tide, we never did find him. The last time I was in the company they were still carrying him as "missing."

the company commander and I had several disagreements. I didn't mind being worked hard, I

didn't mind catching all the bad details, it was just his attitude that was irritable to me. So I had a good friend I'd gone to college with, he was a first lieutenant. He said, "I tell you what, I'll loan you my jeep and you go find your job." And just like in the civilian world, I went out and started hunting a company to work for. At the motor transport battalion they needed an operations officer. I talked to the captain and he said, "I'll see what I can do." So I went back, and he said "With the shakeup that we're going through and the transfers, we don't know where we are personnel-wise, they're not making any transfers right now." Of course the word got around. We went to eat that night, the executive officer said "The company commander will be mad if you threaten to transfer." I felt pretty badly.

I met a Marine Corps major who was a personnel officer at the hospital. I was visiting a friend there who'd had an appendectomy. At the same time we visited, a sad story, that captain from the Marine Air Force had flown all through the south Pacific, celebrating New Year's he was in a jeep accident and broke his hip. This was on Okinawa, and he was on Guam. They wouldn't send him on to the Sates because they'd lost his medical records. He was annoyed, he was really put out about it all. He said, could we take him for a ride in a jeep? They said no, he could not leave the hospital. So we'd go see him, and we'd wrap a cold tin of beer in a towel and take him a clean towel. I met this personnel major while we were visiting this man.

That company commander and I almost got into it one night. He came in drunk and poured beer on me. My locker was always open, the .45 was in the top of it. A towel was spread over my locker so it was dry. I started for the towel to dry the beer off and he thought I went for my pistol, and he almost pulled the tent down getting out. I cussed him out for about 30 or 40 minutes. The personnel major lived down where we did, and he heard all of it. I could hear him out there in the latrine. I told my roommate, "I'm going to grab his heels and dump him head first into the latrine." I got to thinking, I said "No, they'll court martial me if I do that," so I went out and cussed him out again.

The major came in and he walked over to me at mess when we were eating that evening in front of the executive officer and a friend of mine, and he said "That old guy must have been mad because you have that transfer." I had some more. A major walked in, he said "Lieutenant, I talked to the colonel for you today, and you're to be transferred tomorrow to Motor Transport." Here goes the exec., he runs, tells the company commander, and arrogant little company commander says "Where you going to go tomorrow?" and I said "Sir, I'm going to report to Motor Transport." He said "I've never seen any orders." I said, "See the major right over there? Go discuss his problem with him."

I thoroughly enjoyed it. We hauled a lot of things. There were always challenges, always something to do. I had part office duty, I had part field duty. Those were good Marines. One of my first assignments was to go clean out a new area for us to move into. The captain gave me four men, I thought we'd never make it. By ten o'clock we were through, we had the place cleaned up, we had it squared away. I wasn't used to that, with the other troops I'd had.

Mr. Morris:

I've heard there was a no fraternization policy, but did you interact with the locals at all?

Mr. Howell:

No, not really.

Mr. Morris:

So you went into an area, was everybody out, was there no one there?

Mr. Howell:

On Guam there were the natives there, and we were friendly with the natives, but I don't know, I just didn't associate with them. I had always been with the Marine Corps. We went to Japan, the Americans hired the Japanese to clean out some of those warehouses and the troops that I had supervised the Japanese. They had an interpreter. One of the interpreters had been the youngest, he had graduated from the Japanese Naval Academy. His father had been the provisional governor of Korea. I had a very interesting talk with him. Another interpreter I had was a Korean. The Koreans were mistreated by the Japanese, as you well know. And when I had the Korean interpreter we got our money's worth out of the Japanese. He did not let anyone loaf. He had them moving. He wasn't cruel, he wasn't ugly, he wasn't physical, but he let them know that they had to work and work all the time that they were there.

They would bring us meals. We had one meal while we were out working. It was always more than we could eat. The Japanese workers had little tin containers, they had fish and rice they had stuck in it. It didn't take them long to figure out that when we got through eating, we would let them have what was left, and that was appreciated, the civilians eating our food. I enjoyed my tour in Japan. Back to Guam.

Later on, my lieutenant, a second lieutenant—I became a company commander when I moved to the Motor Transport company, we were downsizing. We had downsized from a battalion to a company. I wrecked a jeep one night on Guam. I turned in an accident report to the captain who I had replaced. He asked me the next morning "Who was with you." "No one." "Were you hurt?" "Well, no, not really. He said "Well, I'm going home tomorrow and you can tell them if this ever comes up that you filed an accident report with me and you don't know what I did with it."

A friend of mine was in ????, and he investigated the accident. He went up to the company and got them to bring a wrecker down, and they hauled my jeep off and we patched it up, and I checked out a new one. I wouldn't drive a jeep for a month. We had a badge command car. I drove one of those for about a month. We got in a bind one time, we were in charge of loading and unloading all Marine gear for the island of Guam. There was a civilian there, his first name was Harry, I forge his last name. He worked for an airplane company in Wichita, Kansas. This airplane company had bought all the barbed wire on the island of Guam. Brand new stuff, never been used. And we hauled. We needed extra drivers to really get the job done, and each company sent us two men. They didn't send us their best men. One that was civilian, from the military transport command. They went off and got to drinking, they wrecked the vehicle, killed a civilian. I had signed the ?????ticket.

The Marine Corps was desperate for junior officers, so they sent me over there. I stayed a month and a half to two months. I was probably the last Marine Reserve officer off the island of Guam in World War II, which is a dubious honor. They gave me a priority four, that's to get on an airplane to go home, because I wanted to get back home and go to college. By then I'd be a senior. I'd go up and I'd get bumped, wouldn't even get on the airplane. Finally I went up to Admiral Nimitz' headquarters, I talked to a commander up there, and I said "Now look. I've been hung over here on a court martial that didn't happen, college is about to start, I'm a first term senior and I want to get back." He said, "I can't help you very much. I'll give you priority three." He gave me the priority three. I was on the next airplane.

I went back to college, thought I wanted to be a lawyer. I had the grades, had the G.I. Bill. The life expectancy, they tell me, of a second lieutenant only beats 80 minutes, and I came so close. I wouldn't talk about this for a long time. I reasoned out that somewhere somebody, something greater than I am kept me from being killed, and I needed to do something with my life other than being a lawyer. One of my best friends is a lawyer, so it's no problem. I felt, well, I'll be a teacher. And I have, and I was, and I was never just a teacher, I was A Teacher. I attended the reunion, 45th reunion, of a group of my former students the other day. Wouldn't take a million dollars for it. I was a teacher for seven years, assistant high school principal for ten years, ten years as principal and ten years as director of instruction.

I learned several things in the Marine Corps. One of the things I learned, the road to hell was paved with bars of second lieutenants who forgot to do such-and-such. I lived by that. It applies to civilian life, too. I have never regretted becoming a teacher. I got into the market several years ago. I did OK. I'm not a millionaire, never did set out to be one. I always said if I made some money I was going to save some of it, I was going to spend some of it and enjoy it. We're on our fourth motor home right now. I never buy a new one, though. I let someone else take that initial hit, and then I analyze them and buy. I enjoy coming to this and associating with the people who run the Nimitz organization.

Mr. Morris: Do you ever get together with any of the fellows you went through the Marines with?

Mr. Howell: Not really. They did for many years, and there's just so few of us left. A year ago, mortality rate for veterans of World War II was 1,400 people a day. This dropped to 1,300. It's not that fewer of us are gone, it's just that fewer of us are left to die.

I was in the Marine Reserve and I was up for promotion. I lived in New Mexico. I had to go someplace to take a physical and I just never did get it done. The Marine Corps said "Do you want a discharge?" and I said "What kind?" They said "Honorable." I said, "I'll take it." One week later the Korean War broke out.

Mr. Morris: How long did you stay in occupied Japan?

Mr. Howell:

I was only up there for a couple of months. We went up in November and we left January 1 of '46. The rest of the time I was in Guam. The place I was stationed the longest was in Louisiana, going to school.

Mr. Morris:

When you and your lieutenant buddies got on the train with those 400 guys who were going out for their second tour, did you ever talk to them? You said one of those fellows wanted to run away, so they probably weren't all that happy about going back.

Mr. Howell:

No they weren't, and I don't blame them. I understood it. But we had a job, they had a job, and I had a job. We had one man that jumped train in Texas. He had farm and we caught him. Took him in and the first lieutenant acted as the judge advocate general or something of that sort, and his punishment was he had to wash pots and pans on the troop train. This was in August, we went through Texas and New Mexico in August. I lost about 10 pounds. We would confiscate whiskey, and we'd take the men to the first lieutenant's little office, and about the only thing we ever did was take the whiskey and pour it down the drain right in front of them, so they wouldn't think that we were taking it.

The troops were not prepared to go across country, they didn't have cigarettes. they had whiskey, some of them. At Quantico, you were allowed to draw three months' pay, and I drew \$450. I had most of it. The troop train commander wired ahead, and we found some Army PX ahead on the train schedule that would sell us a carton of cigarettes. I'm talking about probably three feet by three feet by three feet, that's a lot of cigarettes. I had the money to pay for them, so I bought all the cigarettes and sold them. Right before we got to Camp Pendleton the lieutenant called me in and he said "How much money are you short?" I said, "I came up \$40 short." He made all the other lieutenants pitch in their money to get my cigarette money back. They were mostly a good bunch of fellows.

Some of the problems we had, some of them had malaria. They would have nightmares, and I'll never forget, one fellow was having a nightmare, he was in an upper bunk, and in his dream he was back in a foxhole on Guadalcanal or someplace like that and the Japs were after him. It hurt.

Some places we'd stop and let them get out and walk around. Somewhere in Arizona the Army stopped the troop train and we stopped, and I thought we were going to have the Civil War all over again, but we got them separated. It was quite an experience for a 20-year-old. We had an Indian railroad yard worker. He was watching one train, our train caught him in the back of the head. I had to be out there since it was a casualty. Our train was delayed for two or three hours for all of that to happen.

We thought if we'd lose anybody it would be the last night before we got into Pendleton, so I told everybody to wake up about 10:30 or 11 o'clock and get with it. Then I slept through it, so did the troops.

Mr. Morris: On the ship, going to the Pacific was there any idea that the war would be over?

**Mr. Howell:** We thought it was a possibility. We knew that the war was going our way by that time. But you're never quite sure about things like that.

If I could go back and start over, I really wouldn't change too many things in my life. One of the things that the Marine Corps did not teach us that they should've, they did not teach us that you need to look after your men. I don't mean coddling or anything of that sort, but you need to make sure that they get their fair share of the food, and the ammunition. We were pretty hard-nosed second lieutenants. Going through Quantico was quite an experience. We went through pre-OC three times before we got to Quantico. The mechanics was easy. I failed one class in Quantico, and it's written on my graduation, a red line through math. I went to class. You had three things. You had a map, you had a work sheet, and you had an answer sheet. I turned in the answer sheet, threw the other in the trash can. I walked outside, and someone said "You didn't turn everything in." I went back in, I said "Can I take it out of the trash can?" "Nope." I made 33 and a third off.

They didn't have to worry about the academics for us. They had something they called "command presence" at that time that you had as an officer, that's really what it was, it wasn't the mechanics of it. We could take a BAR apart and put it back together blindfolded. Same thing with a pistol. There was a Jewish officer in our battalion in Quantico, he was not my platoon leader, named Raskin. There was a Jewish kid named Jacobs, kind of a smart kid, worse than smart, smart attitude. One day in the machine gun shed Jacobs smarted off to Lieutenant Raskin. Another Jewish kid said "Jacobs, you shouldn't have done that." He said "Ah, no, he won't do anything to me." He got back to the barracks that afternoon, had his orders, and he was gone. Those are things they counted you on.

One day they were showing us how to fire bazookas. The projectile goes out the front, a blast of air goes out the back. They had us down, had the bazooka on your shoulder, someone put the the bazooka in, took the two little wires and wired them to the contact. Our lieutenant would say, "Be sure the safety's on. Do not put your hand on the trigger until we tell you to." They had a tank running back and forth, they were dummy shells, but that blast out the back was real. Just as that lieutenant cleared that fellow he kicked one off. Right then they gathered him up, took him back into the base which was probably ten or 15 miles. When we got in he was standing on the corner with his sleeping bag. They told us that if you fouled up they would personally fly you to the South Pacific and you'd be firing shots in anger in a matter of house, and I believed them.

My Marine Corps training did me very well being a school administrator. One of the things I learned is, don't yell, when you're really mad talk in a very low voice. You get more attention that way than you do jumping up and down and yelling and screaming. I guess you might say I grew up in the Marine Corps, going from 18 to 22. I'm proud of my generation. My generation experienced the worst depression we've ever had, we won the greatest conflict we've ever experienced, and to a man we didn't write it down, no one verbalized it, but we made several promises. One is our kids

would be better fed, better educated, would have better health care than we had. And we did those things. And that's my generation.

Tom Brokaw wrote the book *The Greatest Generation*. It was kind of embarrassing. I don't feel that we're any better or any greater than some of the other generations, we just had different challenges than they had. I was talking to my daughter about that. She's never really experienced a war. Oh, we had Korea which was horrible, and Vietnam which was worse. I was telling her about the Depression and World War II and she said, "Dad, every generation has their war to fight. Mine is different than yours, but it's just as difficult and intense as yours was," and she's right. I see her raising two daughters. I'm glad I don't have to raise two daughters right now.

I do appreciate the people that work to put on these programs. They're very good speakers, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. One of the things I say, I can't keep from aging but I don't have to grow old. In the last six or seven weeks I bought a new laptop computer with a new system on it. I fought computers for awhile. I'd never run a laptop before, I'd never used Windows XP before, I had to learn all that. My daughter gave me a digital camera. I had to learn how to use it. I bought a two or three hundred dollar program on the Internet for \$40, it was not a pirate copy, it's just that they came out with a new version called "Photopaint." This is a very complicated program. As long as I'm learning and stretching, I won't get old.

Mr. Morris:

Still have that .45?

Mr. Howell:

No. Teaching school's not all that good, and I sold it. And I regret it.

Transcribed by: Betty Paieda April 16, 2005

Harbor City, California