

**Gordon Hanna
Veteran**

**Hudson Falls HS
Interviewers**

**Interviewed in 2010
Home Interview
Hudson Falls, New York**

Q: So, my first question was, where were you born?

GH: Here in Hartford.

Q: How was it growing up in Hartford?

GH: It's been very nice. I mean, we lived here all our lives. I have, my parents lived here, and my grandparents lived here at this point. I lived down the road. It was very nice. We always enjoy the countryside around here. It's semi-rural.

Q: You said that you were a farmer when you were a kid?

GH: No, I worked on a farm.

Q: You worked on a farm?

GH: I started working on a farm when I was 11. There was a big farm down the road. The Clifford Sheldon farm, about a 300-acre farm. I started working for him when I was 11 years old. Nights after school and Saturdays and Sundays.

Q: Were your parents farmers?

GH: My parents lived down the road. My father, my uncle and my grandfather owned Hannah Hardware up in Hartford. Up here, One mile up.

Q: Was it difficult for you to balance both school and working on a farm?

GH: No, it wasn't that bad. Because you got out early. We got about 3:00. You didn't work until dark. I worked Saturdays and Sundays. I did all the plowing and fitting ground like that. I thought I'd do it pretty good. I was getting a dollar a day when. That's when grown men, that's all they were getting for work at that time.

Q: Were you raised in like a religious home. Did you attend church every Sunday?

GH: Yes, I went to church right here. This white church, Congregational Church up here. Then later, I taught Sunday school up there.

Q: Mr. Roselle told me that you worked in Smith's Basin harvesting ice.

GH: Yes. Mr. Roselle thought that might be something you hadn't ever heard of. Well, see, the milk was transported from all the farms. There used to be a lot more farms around here than there are now. And the milk was transported in cans over to Smith Basin. There's still a great big building there that was a creamery, and the milk was all taken in there. Well, at that time, there was no mechanical refrigeration as you know it today. So, we had to refrigerate everything with ice. The canal runs right along there and up the canal right next to the locks. They used to cut the ice. They cut it with an old Model T Ford Motor and a great big 48-inch round circle saw, which you probably never saw sawing wood or anything. That's what they used. They cut slices in the ice two foot wide and then they would crosscut them every three feet. A cake of ice was two by three by whatever depth it froze to. Later in the winter, February, like that, it would get up to 3 foot thick. A cake of ice at that time would weigh probably 300 pounds. The canal sets a lot lower than above the bank up here and it goes down the canal. They had a long ramp made of wood with sides on it, narrow side like that, and a walkway up and down it. They had a winch up on top, which one of the farmers would bring his tractor there and run this winch. They had what they called a crab, which was a metal thing shaped like that with a handle up here. What they do, they had this ice all scored, they would take it, and they head it right up to that ramp. They would take spuds or. What they are is just a big knife. Yeah. About that wide, sharp on a handle. They take that go in the scores where they scored the ice. And that was split off the cake in the individual cake. They would bring them over to the ramp, then they would take this crab, and whoever was running the crab, depending on how brave he was, he'd take three or four or five cakes, hook that back of it. Then the farmer would start the winch, pulling it up and he'd have to walk alongside of it to keep it from kicking up. Well, some of the guys go up onto a platform up on top. Then all the farmers that brought in milk would have their trucks there. That was a big thing because that paid good money at that time. They would slide it onto the trucks, then they transport it over to the icehouse. The icehouse was about three stories high. They had a big framework that went up like an elevator. Well, it was slanted like that, made of steel. A farmer would have a tractor on a winch. At that point they would slide the cake onto. When they brought out the truck, they would go onto the elevator and of course they started down. Oh, we'll say this high. The elevator would just go up, and the cake would slide off into the icehouse. Well, as they got a layer of ice, of course they kept going higher and higher and higher and they end up about three stories high.

Q: When did you ice harvest? Like, what age were you at?

GH: January. It was done in January and February. It was normally started in January, and of course that was good for me because I had a vacation in January from school, I was able to get on the job that was a privilege to get on that job, because at that time, as paying as I remember, I think it was paying like \$5 an hour when the average man was getting a dollar a day.

Q: What year did you start ice harvesting?

GH: I was born 26, and I was 16 years old. I couldn't work on the ice until I had my Social Security number. I couldn't get that until I was 16. Okay. And so I'd have to figure 1942.

Q: Can you remember how you felt on December 7, 1941, when Pearl harbor was first bombed?

GH: Yes. We were all shocked. Of course, we'd been watching, or rather, listening to it. Couldn't watch it then. There was no television, so we were listening to everything.

Q: When did you first hear it? What were you doing?

GH: I don't remember just exactly what I was doing at the time. I knew I was working someplace when we first somebody came and told us about it, but I was in school. When I first heard about it, they announced it over the public address system. Then everybody, of course, was trying to find a radio, because that's all you had at that time. Yeah, go to the movies and watch Movie Town News. That's where you got most of it.

Q: So you weren't old enough to join the war when it first broke out?

GH: No.

Q: Do you Remember, like how life was on the home front during the war?

GH: Oh, yes, we had everything. We had rationing, of course. Everything was rationed. Sugar, gasoline, tires, everything.

Q: In this area, there was a lot of support for the troops?

GH: Oh, yes, there was a lot of them that went from here.

Q: Did you have a lot of friends and family that went into the war?

GH: Oh yeah, a lot of friends and some family. My uncle. I had one uncle as a captain over in China, Burma, India. He was a veterinary. He was in that. I had another uncle who was in the Seabees, and he was over in South Pacific. I had a lot of friends that went in after they got out of high school. They had been drafted as well. Tommy, Bill, McHugh. We had several of them killed overseas. We had scrap drives. You know, you gathered metal, tires, everything up in school there. We collected over 100 tons of scrap. We had the whole backyard of school full of scrap. We had snow fence all around it like that. Then you had the airplane watch. Volunteers watched 24 hours a day. Up there, everybody had different things for airplanes going over. You had a call system where you heard or saw a plane. You had to call it in to a certain number. So because they didn't know when you know they were going to be attacked or if there was going to be. That

was a 24-hour thing. I was in that for years. Usually at night, cold. It was all cold. If you were like.

Q: If you were the age to join the war, would you have wanted to have joined the war?

GH: Well, when I got to be 18, when I graduated, I joined the Navy V12 program. I passed all the tests and everything myself with another fellow from up here. That was a program where you went in for two years. You had a chance to go to a two-year college to get an education or whatever the name you wanted. I passed all the tests, done my physical. They rejected me because I wore glasses. The other fellow that was with me, Billy Miller, he passed. He went in and he wore glasses too. I was nearsighted, he was farsighted. That was the reason they gave me. I was not able to get in. I thought, well, I might as well go to work after I graduated. I worked for a year, probably a year at Union Bag up Hudson Falls. It's gone now. The building been torn down next to the river there. Then I was drafted in June or July and went down in September.

Q: Into the artillery army you said?

GH: No, just in the rear army.

Q: Okay, and where were you stationed?

GH: Fort Hancock, New Jersey. I joined the New York State Guard while I was still working. The New York State Guard was organized because the National Guard had already gone into action. They had the New York State Guard, and I was a member of that until I was drafted. I went into the army. Since I was corporal in the state Guard I had most of my basic training. I was transferred right out to Fort Dix. Then since I had worked in the hardware store that my parents owned. The fact that I worked for the town of Hartford while I was still in high school because all able-bodied men around were in service. I worked for the town plowing snow during the winter because nobody had fair two able-bodied men still around. I got down to Fort Dix and they say since I worked in a hardware store, they say all right, you're a storekeeper. I was transferred to Fort Hancock at that time. Fort Hancock was originally a coastal artillery base because at one time the German subs had come right alongside Long Island and all down through the ocean there. They had these huge field artillery pieces along the coast there.

Q: Right. It was during the Battle of the Atlantic; the submarines came close to our shores. They bombed some beach sides. Is that why they constructed Fort Hancock?

GH: No, Fort Hancock was there been there for years, but it was a coast artillery base at that time.

Q: Towards the end of the war they started removing the guns, didn't they?

GH: Yeah, and they also constructed a prison camp. That's where they put a lot of German and Italian prisoners that were brought over sea. I do not know if you are aware

of Fort Hancock where it is. It is right out in the ocean. Bear with me. But it might help you. [Takes out a map and shows it to the interviewer.] There is Fort Hancock right on the end of there. As you can see, where that comes back to the land, it's very narrow. In fact, where it came back to mainland is only less than half a mile wide. It made it ideal for a prison camp. It was so isolated, you might say. I was transferred there in the 1225th United States Disability Barracks USDB. When I went in there, there was only, I think five noncommissioned officers. One officer and five noncommissioned officers. It was wide open to get things done. It was quite a place.

Q: When they were transferred to Fort Hancock, your job was to give out clothes, right? To the prisoners?

GH: No, not to them. Okay. When I first went down there, our first job was to load these prisoners. There's about 500 of them. Load them on the ships to send them back overseas.

Q: So why did they bring them to Fort Hancock originally?

GH: Well, they brought a lot of German and Italian prisoners over here. They were all up and down the coast because they didn't have room for them overseas.

Q: So they were prisoners of war and at the end of the war, they started shipping them back?

GH: Yeah, a lot of them didn't want to go. They had girlfriends over here like that. They were shipped back and at this time I was what they called company clerk or supply clerk in the supply room, which was very small at that time. Then they started bringing American prisoners over from the European Theater. They got points for how many years they had been there and how many battles they were in overseas. Even though they were prisoners, they still had their points. The biggest share of them were black market. There was murder, rape, any kind of crime you could think of.

Q: Those were the kind of crimes that earned their position in Fort Hancock?

GH: They were brought back here. All of them had life sentences. During the war, all the sentences handed out were life. There were four different kinds of life sentences, which I did not know until I got down there. All of them had life sentences. They would bring them over and into this compound, which was a bunch of wooden buildings, barracks and all surrounded by a double wide fence 10ft high with barbed wire on top of it and everything. There was a jeep path around it. There were guards going around in jeeps all the time guiding it. I was told there was a total of about 45,000 GI prisoners. They ranged everywhere from privates to one lieutenant colonel, the air force there. They sold everything over there after the war. This is the end of the war. They were selling everything. They even sold a Liberty ship over in France. They sold one of those to bunch over in France. Of course, the people over there didn't have much of anything

at all been destroyed during the war. The Americans had all sorts of food and everything you could think of. That's where the black market came up.

Q: You said that the prisoners in Fort Hancock were there because of like rape and murder, but also because they sold items on the black market?

GH: That was the biggest share. Okay. The black market was probably 2/3. When they got over here, every one of them was given a new trial. They were tried by a military tribunal over in Europe during wartime. Well, then he got over here. Every one of them was given a new trial and all their sentences were reduced way down from a life sentence to five years, 10 years. During this time, I was a company clerk, a supply clerk. Then I got promoted to a regimental supply sergeant. That's when I got my three stripes. I was supposed to be a tech sergeant, which is two ranks higher, but since that's my first promotion, I was given a buck sergeant. There were 1500 people guards that were in the United States Disciplinary Barracks 1225th. I had all the food, clothing, ammunition, transportation, everything was under me. Here I was, 19 and a half years old. There were four civilian workers. They were hired to do most of the paperwork and things like that. I had four warehouses, and we had to furnish all the food and everything for the prisoners and the clothing. In fact, one trip out of, I think in the company that I was in, I think there was only eight or 10 people from north of Mason Dixon Williams. All the rest of them were Southerners and they had to have a bunch of clothing which was being processed at Pine Camp. Well, Pine Camp is now Fort Drum up in the Adirondacks. Since I was the only one from out the north northern area, I was put in charge of a convoy of eight trucks to go to find camp and pick up all this clothing for the prisoners. What the clothing was just khakis, shirts and pants and so forth that were dyed brown, lousy brown, but that's what the clothing was. I had to take this convoy trucks from New Jersey up to Fort Drum, New York. You load all the clothing and brought it back.

Q: All the clothes from there you brought back to Fort Hancock was for the prisoners?

GH: For the prisoners.

Q: You said you're in charge of the clothing, transportation and ammunition, and food, but what about the ammunition and weapons?

GH: When the prisoners were sent over. They took high point men that were ready to come back home and put them as guards of all these prisoners. When they got over here, they were all armed with pistols, carbines, mainly submachine guns. Burp guns they called the Thompson submachine guns. When they got over here, they had to turn that all in before they get discharged. I had all this ammunition and weapons and everything, and I had to get a receipt for everything they turned in. If that didn't correspond with the receipt they were given when they were shipped over, they couldn't get discharged. They made sure that they had everything because they wanted to get out. On Fort Drum happened to be an armory, which was an area that had, you know what a Quonset hut

is? It's a half round steel building. You see them around now, garages like that, made of steel. That's what was a standard building for the military, the Quonset hut. They'd be all 20-foot wide by anywhere up to 50, 100, or 200ft long. Then there were also concrete bunkers where we kept all the ammunition.

Q: So, the ammunition that you got from the guards at Fort Hancock, you transported to Fort Drum?

GH: No, no, the only time I went to Fort Drum was for clothing. This stuff was all kept right there at Fort Hayden, and I had to inventory all that stuff. When you had a pile of .45 caliber ammunition, you had to count it, every one of them.

Q: Mr. Roselle said that you had some anecdotes that you remember from Fort Hancock?

GH: Yes. I was sitting on the back with another friend of mine, and when there was a big explosion at Perth Amboy, which was a big munitions depot where they brought in all the ships and unloaded mines and such as that. They had a tremendous explosion at that time, and we saw the, you know, the flash and everything. Well, Perth Amboy, you look at the map, is directly across from Sandy Hook and probably, I'm guessing, five miles. We saw all the smoke going up, this huge flash. Well, it takes, you know, sound travels slower than eyesight. We saw it and, then seemed like minutes afterward we heard it and felt it. In fact, it rolled the three of us sitting there, feet hanging over the dock. It rolled us right backwards. The concussion from five miles away. That was probably the thing that I remember most from down there. There were these prisoners were all after they'd been through their final trials. You asked about counseling when you were talking to me. There was not anything like that back then. You know, they were brought over, retried, then shipped out, and they were shipped to federal penitentiaries. I had to prepare all the food and clothing and everything for all these trips. A prison train came in and loaded up. Getting prisoners ready to go and took off to Atlanta, Georgia, one federal, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and I forget some of the other, but some ended up in Alcatraz. They were distributed, depending on where they were from, they were distributed to their area.

Q: Do you remember any certain prisoners?

GH: Yes, this Lieutenant colonel of the Air Force. In the Air Force, they made rank real young. Lieutenant Colonel could probably be going in his 40s or 50s, something like that, you know, for the army. They made it when they're late 20s, early 30s. I was talking to him. He was sent on a work party. They used to send work parties up to me when we were counting this ammunition or things like that. He was one of the ones that sat on that work party. I got talking to him and he would tell me he had 27 missions over Germany, but he apparently sold a tremendous amount of stuff to the French mainly. You know, the black market. He told me, "I'm probably going to get five or six years,

maybe even more, but I guess I can stand that. I got about \$100,000 stashed away some banks. When I get out, I'll have that." I remember one guy, somebody would send me up prisoners that came in to get new clothing. He sent me up this one guy, he was a Negro fella, and he was about, I remember, about 6 foot 6 tall. He took a size 18 collar. Well, I didn't have anything that big, and I had extra-large clothing, and it would just barely fit him. Oh, he was, you know, talking about muscles. I'm telling you; he had muscles and then some. His shoes were size 14. I didn't have any of those. I had to order special clothes, clothing, shirts and so forth for him particularly.

Q: You first dealt with German and Italian soldiers and then Americans. Was there any, like, different feelings for the Germans compared with the American prisoners of war?

GH: Well, the Germans prisoners, yeah. For the German and Italians, it was just shipping them back over. You felt sorry for a lot of these Americans because a lot of them would escape. You know, they would get out of there somehow, they would escape Fort Hancock.

Q: What happened to them once they escaped?

GH: They were caught because the biggest sheriff lived in New York City. Well, straight across where we went on a ferry was Battery Park. That was only eight, nine miles, something like that, where you went around to get to New York City was 100 miles. They said it happened so many times they'd have their get their address so by the time they got, there'd be MPs waiting there to pick them up.

Q: Was it easy to escape Fort Hancock or was it just a few lucky prisoners themselves?

GH: No, just a few that figured some man's way of getting out.

Q: Your later years while working at Fort Hancock, what was that like? You said that after Fort Hancock you started, you went into the construction battalion?

GH: Well, 20 years later in 1969. I was only there at Fort Hancock for a year and some days. I got married before I went in the army, and it lasted pretty good. 65 years.

Q: After Fort Hancock what did you do?

GH: Well, I came home, went to work for the hardware store.

Q: Why did you go into the construction battalion when you did?

GH: Well, they had electrical, plumbing, everything in it. I was an electrician and a fellow that lived across the road from us up there ran the general store in Hartford, which isn't there anymore, was in the Seabees, and he talked me into going into the Seabees.

Q: Where were you deployed during your time with the Seabees?

GH: Well, we were deployed to Camp Lejeune. We Seabees trained with the Marines every two years. Every year, the Seabees reserve go on two weeks or better active duty. We went to Gulfport, Mississippi, Camp Lejeune, Parris Island. We worked on a big, huge Boy Scout camp down in Virginia. Of course I went down to Gitmo, Guantanamo. I had been there for two and a half weeks and then also went to Rota, Spain. We were over there. This was all construction work for the Navy. I was in for 23 years during different deployments. We went to various ports on the eastern coast. Then, let's say I was lucky enough to get chosen to head an air detachment down to Gitmo and also went over in Rota, Spain.

Q: Head of an air detachment? What does that entail?

GH: An air detachment is a CB unit which consists of approximately 50 to 60 men of all trades, builders, plumbers, electricians, surveyors. I was an electrician chief. They were set up and they were set to be mobilized on 48 hours' notice sent out by air. So that's the reason they're known as air detachments. Most of the things we did around here were what they call goodwill projects. We trained one weekend a month, plus two weeks active duty. We did hundreds of goodwill projects around this area. Fort Edward. We built a Fort Edward firehouse. Not the new one they have the two bay.

Q: So, you were in charge of a lot of local construction?

GH: Yeah, we had these construction projects. We built playgrounds for schools. I think about every school around.

Q: What about other countries. What kind of things were you building there?

GH: We were building buildings, and we were doing airport work. We were building housing for the regular Navy people. It was all naval construction.

Q: Mr. Rosell told me to mention Mr. Piper.

GH: Yeah. Henry. He was what Matt told me was essentially the secretary out there. Henry Piper was in the Seabees with me, and I went on several training duties with him. Very nice man. My wife met him. He was great guy. He was a surveyor estimator for Adirondack Construction. That was what he worked at regularly. He was in the Seabees for a good many years.

Q: How did you transition from working as a Seabee to your return home? You said you worked there for 29 years. How did you make the decision?

GH: Well, as far as the transition, it wasn't. You drill one weekend apart month, and you were gone for two-and-a-half-week year. There was no great transition. Several of our deployments were up at Fort Drum. Since we were northern battalions, we were considered a cold weather battalion, so we had to train in cold weather.

Q: When you did construction projects at other countries, those were kind of rare for you to come across?

GH: Well, there is like 23 battalions, reserve battalions in the country. Some battalions go overseas every year. The ones on the west coast go to Guam, Hawaii, different islands like that. The ones on the east coast mainly go to Puerto Rico, Gitmo, Spain.

Q: I think I'm done with that part of my question. Although I do want to ask you just a few more questions about World War II, just so I understand your feelings about it. What were your feelings when FDR died in April 1945 near the end of the war?

GH: Very sad, because he had been a huge influence on the war. All his meetings with Chamberlain and Russia, like that. He was a big influence.

Q: So, you were impressed by him and his actions in the war?

GH: Very much.

Q: Do you support Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb in Japan?

GH: Yes.

Q: Was that a sentiment shared around this area?

GH: Pretty much so, because we're so many young men being killed in this island hopping, you know, going from island to island to get to Japan, that they knew that when they actually got to attack Japan, that it was going to be a bloodbath.

Q: You were aware that some of the islands didn't necessarily have to be taken?

GH: Yes.

Q: You were aware of that during the war?

GH: No, you weren't aware of that during the war. You found out about afterwards, maybe some bad decisions made, but I had one uncle in the Seabees. He was over the South Pacific, Green Island. He was in Hudson Falls.

Q: Do you remember when Truman made this decision?

GH: Well, we didn't know about it until after it happened. You know, it wasn't told before the bomb drop. I think it was a horrific thing and all that, but it certainly saved a good many thousand American lives.

Q: Were you surprised by it at all?

GH: We heard rumors that they had this because of the tests out in Nevada, you know, the atom bomb tests out in Nevada. We knew that I'd heard rumors about they had such a weapon. So, it wasn't all that much of a surprise when they used it.

Q: So overall, what are your thoughts on World War II?

GH: It was a war that was supported by everybody in the United States. It had a purpose, you know, and so many of the conflicts they had since that you wonder about. Vietnam, for one, and even the last two, Afghanistan and Iraq, you wonder, what is the United States getting out of it? You know, for all the people that are getting killed, maimed and everything, losing legs. But World War II, you had a known enemy that you had to defeat.

Q: I think that's why a lot of the citizens were willing to make sacrifices. You said that, like, during your life in the war, the depression and the rations, you made a lot of sacrifices.

GH: Well, you got along with a lot of things without a lot of things, but you learned to make do, and you just got by with what you had. Well, when my wife and I were first married, I was getting about \$25 a weekend. For years we lived on \$25 a week. We used to sell Christmas trees. We did a lot of things. Wife sold produce. She had a big garden out back here. We had gas pumps up front here. My grandparents had them. We had gas pump for about 20 years. Tied all gas. You don't even hear that anymore. My wife pumped gas for 20 years. That picture up there is a picture of the pumps that were out here. After I got on, I worked for the hardware eight hours a day, sometimes more. I would get a job with some farmers pitching hay.

Q: A lot of side jobs because that's what you needed to get by?

GH: Every little bit helped.