

What Is It Like To Be 101?

I shall assume that you, my colleagues at Cardiac-Rehab, are about 70 years old, which means that you were born in 1936. I was born in 1905. So we share the experiences of life after 1936, but I would like to tell you about life, as I knew it, between 1905 and 1936.

President Roosevelt. In 1905, Roosevelt was President of the United States, Theodore, not Franklin D. Of course I was not aware of this, but few Americans at the time perceived what he was doing. It takes many years to evaluate a president's accomplishments. And Theodore Roosevelt's are just now coming to light. See the story on him in *Time*, July 3, 2006.

It now appears that the system of checks and balances he established has shaped American society more profoundly than we realized.

Electrical Power. In the nineteenth century, steam power had transformed American life. To get the advantage of steam power huge generating plants had to be built, and they supplied the power to the smaller manufacturing units clustered around them. This meant that a town had to be built for the generating plant, the manufacturing units clustered around it, and to house the workers in them.

But by 1905 when I came along, electric power was replacing steam power. Electric power could be sent over transmission lines from a network of generating plants far away. That meant that those towns, built around steam plants, had become obsolete. And they were in process of decay and elimination in my earlier years.

Electric power could be easily transmitted to homes too, for light and household appliances. It also transformed life on the farm.

Transportation and Travel. The railroads had been built before I came along in 1905. They were steam powered, which, as in the case of stationary power sources, required concentration. Theirs took the form of long trains of cars pulled by one steam locomotive. And they required rail lines, which limited their access to places and their times of operation. But they could provide cheap and fast transportation of freight, and passengers. A major use of the trains was to visit one's relatives. You could reach more of them, faster, than you could with the old horse and buggy technology.

The cost of electrical transmission lines slowed the replacement of the steam locomotive, except for commuting in metropolitan areas. And it would be a long time before gasoline-engine powered busses replaced railroads in transportation and travel. But we have seen that happen and are seeing the disappearance of many rail routes. However, this was not apparent in the time 1905 to 1936.

Entertainment. We did not have television, radio, or even the movies. Church on Sundays was a major part of entertainment. And the old folks visited friends back and forth across the street and talked. The best talkers were the “liars” who told tall tales such as Bob’s Huckleberry Jam.

We kids played our games on into the twilight. For the boys this included marbles. It was against the rules to toss the marble. You had to “shoot it” with your thumb. To make sure that you did this, you put the knuckles of your shooting hand on the ground. Hence “knuckle down” meant to get ready. The girls played hopscotch. The sidewalks and streets were dirt roads, so the girls could mark their hopscotch figures on them.

Automobile. I got my first ride in a car when I was seven years old. My father was a minister, and a rich man in the church came to take the minister and his family for a ride to show off his new Hupmobile.

Cars came on very fast. I got my first job making Ford Model T’s ten years later in an assembly plant in New Orleans. Ford paid me its rich \$5.00 a day until they found out I was underage. Then they cut my pay to \$3.00 per day, but I still did the same job. This was to nail on the panel that covered the strut at the right side of the windshield. Those cars had wooden frames and you nailed the panels onto each frame as the car rode down the assembly line.

Airplanes, which we called aeroplanes, came much slower after their invention in 1900. But they developed much faster after Charles Lindbergh’s solo transatlantic flight to Paris in 1927. It had to be solo to save lifting power for more fuel. That seems incredible now that improvements in wing technology and plane design permit us to fly to Paris and beyond with hundreds of passengers, carrying many tons of freight and baggage besides!

War Between The States. That reference to the development of aviation took me ahead of my story. In fact even though World War I, 1914-1918, occurred during the time of my story, Americans did not enter it until April 1917.

When I was a young boy, “The War” meant The War Between The States, as we Southerners called it. So now let me return to the stories of that war as I heard them from my great uncles, who were Confederate veterans.

First let me put you straight about the cause of the Civil War. Yankee historians would have you believe that President Lincoln declared the war to free the slaves. That is not true. South Carolina had tried to assert its states’ rights by seceding from the Union. And President Lincoln did not permit that, saying: “The Union must and shall be preserved.” He did not free the slaves until two years into the war, and then only in the Confederate states.

On my father's side of our family there were 13 men of military age, and 9 of them did not survive the war. None of their families had any slaves. They fought because the federal troops had invaded the South. There was a better survival rate of the men on my mother's side of the family, but none of them had any slaves either. These men made their living on small farms that they owned, using family labor. Cotton was their cash crop. And cotton production on big flat plantations using slave labor drove down the price of cotton and made the family farmers poor. Slave labor made them poor, so why should they fight to defend slavery? I do not claim that slavery was not an issue in the Civil War, but it was not the issue for which those Confederate soldiers fought and died.

The enormous casualty rate implied that there were not enough men for husbands of the southern women. So, when I was growing up, there were many unmarried old maids. Other women borrowed a man to father their babies. Nothing was said about this, and as a boy, I was unaware of it. But the Confederate veterans, including my great uncles and grandfather, were still around and they loved to tell us kids their tall tales.

One of these family liars was my great uncle Sam Carruth. He had been shot through his face at Shiloh, and the bullet took away part of his tongue. So his speech was slurred, but that did not stop him from endlessly telling us his stories.

I had heard them over and over, so one day I sidled up his younger brother George, who never said much. I said: "Uncle George, could I see your rifle?" He said: "I ain't got it." Then after a pause he continued. "When they came and said the war was over I was out in Georgia. And I took my rifle off my shoulder and told it: 'Old rifle, I've been toting you all over Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia, and you was heavy! So I threw it behind a log and walked home to Mississippi.'"

Generals. Most of the big shots in town claimed to have been generals in the War Between The States. One of these was General Sykes, who lived across the street from us. In his will he stipulated that the Boy Scouts were to be his honorary pallbearers. And I was chosen to lead these boys in his funeral. My mother was worried about me because I had never seen a dead person. But when we walked past him I could see little difference, except they had painted his face.

I also met the famous Private John Allen. All the other politicians claimed to have been generals in the War. But he perceived that it was a distinction to be a private: and that got him elected to Congress as "Private John Allen."

World War I. World War I ran from July 29, 1914 to November 11, 1918, but America was in it only the last third of that time – from April 6, 1917. And although U.S. troop strength in Europe was eventually built up to a decisive 4.4 million, the American casualty rate was only a tenth of that of France. So back home in the U.S. World War I had a relatively minor impact. The flu epidemic of 1918 was far more effective.

As a kid, aged 12, I imagined myself to be a newspaper cartoonist and I still have my cartoon of Kaiser Wilhelm with his steel-pointed helmet.

November 7, 1918. I remember that day vividly. I would be 13 years old on Nov. 10. The war in Europe was still going on although the newspapers told us that Germany was crumbling. My job on Friday, Nov. 7, was to ride my bike to a garden plot outside of town where my father had planted a "Victory Garden." And I was to "grabble" for sweet potatoes and bring some home for dinner. When you grabble for sweet potatoes you don't dig up the vines, as you do to harvest Irish potatoes. Instead, you look for a crack in the earth that shows where a potato has grown large. Then you grabble up just this potato, leaving the vine intact to continue growing more potatoes.

My troubles on that day started because it had been raining and I could not make my bike run in the mud of the dirt roads. I finally made it to the potato patch only to find the rain had erased the telltale cracks in the earth which would have told me where to dig. But I finally managed by trial and error to dig a bag full of small potatoes that I found, and headed home, still fighting that dirt road.

Now a new problem showed up. I was getting sick. And as I struggled to keep going, off in the distance I heard whistle blowing and firecrackers going off. I thought the sounds were not real, just made up by my fevered brain. I somehow made it home, where my mother took one look at me, put me to bed, and called the doctor. It turned out that I had the 1918 flu, the first in our family to get it.

But here my strong immunity system took over. My especially strong immunity system is what has enabled me to survive to age 101. Back there it took over, so my flu lasted only a couple of days.

And it turned out that the whistles and explosives I had heard on my way home were real. Germany was crumbling but had not surrendered. On Nov. 7, 1918 a false rumor reached the country to the effect that Germany had surrendered. That had set off the whistles and firecracker celebration that I heard. The celebration was only a few days premature. Germany officially surrendered the next Tuesday, Nov. 11, 1918.

School. At the end of the war in 1918 the eight grades of public school were extended to twelve grades, voluntary at first. The first free public high school in the U.S. was Franklin Academy in my hometown of Columbus, Mississippi. I attended it one year before it was closed in favor of a new public high school they had built. Since then Columbus has built a new Franklin Academy in honor of its historical tradition as the first free public high school in the U.S.

Although my college and graduate school times came within the pre-1936 period that I am writing about, I will not bore you with an account of them. Just let me say that my B.A. degree is from Tulane in 1926, and my Ph.D. is from the University of Chicago in 1930.

A Southerner in Detroit. My first job after my doctorate was teaching mathematics at the College of the City of Detroit, now Wayne University. When the math chairman proposed my appointment to the dean – I have since learned—the dean first objected to hiring a Mississippian to teach their black students. But he allowed it on Professor Nelson’s assurance that I was okay.

In fact it turned out just the opposite from what the dean expected. My Mississippi background gave me a huge advantage with the black students. Northerners, bent on displaying no racial prejudice, keep their distance from black students. But from my Mississippi background where I had black playmates, I knew how to get along with the blacks, and how to talk to them. As a result, my office became a meeting place not only for my black students, but also for black students in other classes. Those poor guys had been neglected by the prim self-righteousness of northerners in the faculty. And they were glad to find a professor who would talk their language.

Family. Our family and the Hardesty family had summer cabin at the Seashore Camp Grounds in Biloxi, Miss. in 1921. Mary Hardesty was a demon swimmer; I was a fisherman. In fact, I knew her father better than I knew Mary. He and I pulled the seine together to catch bait and rowed out to fish together.

Mary and I had a an understanding during our graduate school years at Chicago, where she studied zoology, but we could not get married until I had the job in Detroit. We were married in 1931 and she came to live there, but we did not stay. We returned to New Orleans and Tulane the next year, where our first son, Peter, was born on April 30, 1935.

Mary had planned to teach biology in a woman’s college, so she studied nutrition at Chicago. But she married me instead, and our family got the benefit of her scientific knowledge of nutrition. And I learned from her, at least to the extent of restricting sodium and fats. I think that is largely the reason, beside my good genes and lifelong exercise habits, why I am still here at age 101 to tell this story.

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*It is wellness with me. I have not had heart problems.