

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 14, 2008

The Weather Station at Roswell and My '40 Packard 110: At the end of May 1944, when I learned I would be assigned to Roswell, New Mexico, I wrote home from M.I.T. asking my parents for permission to drive to New Mexico, thinking I would be turned down. It did not occur to me that I was 20 years old and was about to become a commissioned officer. I was overjoyed when they replied in the affirmative, if I could get the gasoline. My '40 light blue Packard 110 sedan had been in dead storage most of the time since rationing had started in the summer of '42, so my father got it out and went over the car mechanically in anticipation of my first long trip without benefit of his oversight.

Cliff Ham and I traveled a southern route, stopping overnight at Lexington, Virginia, Chattanooga and Memphis, Tennessee, and Greenville, Abilene, and Sweetwater, Texas. Near Chattanooga, we climbed Lookout Mountain with its views of six states, site of the Civil War "Battle above the Clouds." Crossing Arkansas, we had lunch at Hot Springs and were somewhat upset to see Dukes and other European Royalty living there in seeming luxury while Americans had their shoulders to the wheel for the war effort. I wanted to stop at Abilene, where my twin cousins, Alan and Bob Mancill, were undergoing intense overseas training. Cliff and I slept part of the night in the Mancills' barracks, as Bob was on K.P. during the night, and Alan was out all night on a bivouac. At 5 A.M. the bivouac was over, Alan and his friends returned, and our night's sleep was ended. In the morning, Ham decided he should take a bus to his destination in Arizona. Alan, who had a few hours off, and I went to the movies in town (it seemed that movie theaters were open almost 24 hours a day). Coming out of the theater in early afternoon with the temperature about 100 degrees, a big steam locomotive on the Texas and Pacific Railroad was heading a long westbound train at the station across the street. I took Alan back to the base, and we said goodbye. Spending that night at Sweetwater, I arrived in Roswell the next afternoon. I never saw Alan Mancill again. He was killed near Colmar on the Rhine about January 16, 1945, at the age of 20. Bob was a prisoner-of-war until the Germans surrendered in May.

I soon realized that 95% of those stationed at Roswell (and most other places) were without "wheels." Of the 25 men, more or less, assigned to the weather station, Sgt. Andy Stockhausen of Milwaukee and I were the only two who had a car. An excellent forecaster then in his early 30s, Andy lived off the base with his wife and owned a '37 Studebaker Commander. In addition to those assigned, we always seemed to have two or three "attached" to the weather station. They were with other outfits but would come in daily and pick up weather data they apparently needed for some purpose. Ed Voss of Milwaukee was one, and he had a '39 or '40 Chevy that was immaculate. Ellis McLean of Jasper, Alabama, was another. Royce Wilson was still another. McLean, Wilson, and I were later aerial weather observers together in the 55th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron on Guam. The few with cars were given a small license tag to put on the front, which had "Roswell A.A.F." and a number. Whenever returning to the base, the M.P. on duty at the gate would wave us through.

I was reluctant to lend my car to the many who wanted to borrow it. Clyde Martin borrowed it for a date one night, and it came back with a couple of scratches. Almost the first Sunday I was in Roswell, a bunch from the weather station wanted to go swimming in the Bottomless Lakes, across the dry bed of the Pecos River about 15 miles southeast of Roswell. I took them but didn't enjoy the swim; the water was very cold. In July, another fellow and I drove to Clovis, 115 miles northeast, I saw my first B-29 there and also spent an enjoyable several hours at the Santa Fe railroad station, where long steam passenger trains were frequent. This was the only time I saw a Fred Harvey Restaurant in operation (remember the "Harvey Girls" with Judy Garland and many other stars, and the song "Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe"?). A Chicago-to-Los Angeles train came to a stop at the platform, the passengers got off, went into the track-side Fred Harvey Restaurant where long tables were set with white tablecloths, ate a very good meal (for wartime), and got back on the train to continue their journey. In August, Harrison Munro and I went on an overnight trip to Carlsbad Caverns, 100 miles to the south. In early September, Vince Sadowski, one of the observers in the weather station, and I went to Albuquerque and climbed Sandia Ridge, later a well-known ski area. Leaving Vince to hitchhike back, I met Wally Sonntag, an old weather-school friend, and we went on to Santa Fe. Before 1944 was over, I spent a night at Ruidoso, drove into the White Sands, and came back through Cloudcroft with its 9,000-foot-elevation golf course. Gasoline was rationed, but there were ways to get it in the Southwest. (Next week, I'll finish "New Mexico" with more on weather forecasting there.)