

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
Oral History Interview with Leo Contois Jr. and Rita Contois Roman
Military Dependents of Leo Contois, 52nd Coast Artillery
1930-1939

Interviewed by Mary Rasa, NPS
August 18, 2004

Transcribed by Mary Rasa
Editor's notes on parenthesis ()

Photos courtesy of Gateway NRA/NPS



Leo Contois Jr. and his sister Rita Contois Roman at Sandy Hook, 2004.



Building 101 was one of the residences of the Contois Family at Fort Hancock.



The Contois Family's last residence while stationed at Fort Hancock was Building 335.

MR: Today is August 18, 2004. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am at Sandy Hook, in the Education Center and we are going to conduct an oral history interview. Please state your name for the record?

LC: Leo Contois Junior.

MR: Could you tell me when and where you were born?

LC: I was born at Fort Eustis, Virginia. August the 18th, 1928. (Mr. Contois passed away in 2005.)

MR: Can you tell me a little about your Father's military service? When he got into the military?

LC: When he got into the military it was the First World War. He went to Europe. (He) was in the trench warfare there in Europe. And when he returned after the War, he returned to Fort Eustis, Virginia, where he was with the rail coast artillery, 52nd (Coast Artillery). (The unit) which further was transferred here to Fort Hancock, sometime about 1929 and brought the family down here about 1930. And the 52nd Coast Artillery remained here. While it was here, my Father was the Post First Sergeant, Provost Sergeant, he took care of the Theater, collected tickets, ran the projectors. My Mother took care of the concession stand. My Father, also to earn extra money to make sure that us kids had shoes and clothes, that he shoveled coal to all the officers' furnaces along the Officers' Row, plus the furnace in the theater and also ran the snow plow in the wintertime. (He) also took care of the prisoners and the stables and the, made sure that the various gardens were maintained around the Post.

MR: So he was busy. (laughter)

LC: He was busy. We lived at Gunnison along with the Nightingale family and the Carr family right across from Gunnison Battery. I remember Gunnison very well, because every time they come to fire the gun, they run up a red flag. Before the flag reached the top, I was at the Main Post. I was afraid of gunfire. We moved from there to Building 101 which is right across the street from here (in today's Coast Guard Station property) which is no there no longer and then from there to what is now the Daycare Center. It used to be old Chuck Connors' quarters.

MR: Building 338. (Building 335 at the south end of the Parade Ground)

LC: Mmm hmm. We used to sit there and watch the parades right across from the parade field. The best years of our lives were right here. 1939, the 52nd was broke up and my Father was transferred to Panama where Headquarters of the 52nd and B Battery of the 52nd became C Battery of the 4th Coast Artillery and the defense of the Panama Canal, Pacific side. We lived there until War broke out and then returned to the United States.

MR: Now, but your Father remained in Panama?

LC: He remained in Panama for oh, about another year, was promoted to Warrant Officer and was transferred to Europe.

MR: So, where did you go when you came back to the United States?

LC: We went to live with my sister in New Jersey.

MR: Okay.

LC: Stayed there until I enlisted in the service in the end of 1944.

MR: So what service did you go into?

LC: Well, I first went into the Navy. I put a little over 12 years in the Navy. Got out in 1953, remained out until 1958 when I joined the Army. And I remained in the Army until 1970 and retired.

MR: Okay, so your Father, he was a First Sergeant the whole time he was here or was he promoted while he was here?

LC: He was promoted while he was here. He was a Staff Sergeant when he first got here.

MR: So, you talked a little bit about his jobs, did he also work with the guns or was he more about with everything else?

LC: Oh, yes. He worked with the guns. As a matter of fact, his battery helped train the CCCs (the CMTC, Citizens Military Training Camp, had a summer camp during these years at Fort Hancock) when they used to come here for summer training and the ROTC

program. And we also had a WPA (Works Progress Administration constructed several buildings at Fort Hancock in the 1930s.) program here. And the CCCs (the Civilian Conservation Corps completed many construction projects at Fort Hancock in the 1930s.) and the WPA helped build what was know then as the Scotland Light Trail, which went from the main road coming in, the trail went out to view the Scotland Lightship which used to be out there at that time.

MR: So he did a lot of construction work?

LC: The CCCs did most of the construction.

MR: He was probably drafted into World War I is that how he..?

LC: No, he enlisted.

MR: No. He enlisted. Okay. And he liked it so much that he continued. Okay. While you were living out here were there ever threats or anything or did they have a lot of mock wars or anything going on.

LC: Oh, yes, we had a lot of mock wars here, but most of the time they went for the major training to Camp Dix, Camp Kilmer (both in New Jersey) and there was another one. Can't remember, but they used to go off for several months at a time to different locations.

MR: Well, I know the 52nd used to go to Lewes, Delaware to do big maneuvers. Do you remember your Dad leaving to go with them?

LC: Oh, yes. We never went with him. The whole unit would go. Also did a lot of target practice with the guns here, the main batteries here. (Battery) Gunnison, Battery Bloomfield, Battery Potter and all those.

MR: So the 52nd also did that? They would fire other guns.

LC: Mmm Hmm.

MR: Do you remember the mines?

LC: The minefield, no. We had nothing to do with the mines. That was a different unit altogether.

MR: Right. Tell me what it was like growing up by the beach?

LC: Oh, we loved growing up here. We had here on this Post we had beach plums, pears, peaches, apples all summer long we had fruit. As a matter of fact, this building here (Building 102) was where I first went to school. And upstairs in the attic they had a big

electric train. I remember the train because we used to ride it all day long. And then we were transferred to the school up by the Coast Guard Station (Building 109).

MR: So what grades did you go out here in Building 102?

LC: I think to the 5th grade.

MR: And then you went to another school?

LC: Then I went to Panama.

MR: Oh, okay. You were transferred out.

LC: Our dentist, when we had teeth to be done, we went to Leonardo for that.

MR: Did you ever go to the hospital out here for anything?

LC: Oh, every once in a while. All our shots were taken there. One time I fell down and cut myself. I went there for a stitch.

MR: Were there a lot of other children to play with?

LC: Oh yes. We had lots of children. We had the Carr family, the Nightingale family, the Burns family, the Gouch family, the Druin family. We had a lot of them here to play with.

MR: Did, what was a typical day like when you were off in the summer? Did you just go exploring?

LC: Every Saturday we had the Saturday Matinee at the Theater. Which we had the what they called chapters in them days. Cartoon, then the main western movie, and then some more cartoons, and we were kept busy so the parents didn't have to bother with us for a few hours. We had the parade field to play in when there wasn't a parade or anything else. We had bicycles and could ride all over. In the summer time we went a lot to the beach. We used to picnic on the beach.

MR: Did you fish?

LC: Oh definitely, definitely. My brother, he had a boat and we used to go out and fish right off the dock.

MR: What was a typical fish that you would catch?

LC: Bass, sea bass, flounder and then he used to go down by Camp Lowe and catch eels.

MR: So, you lived in a bungalow? Was it like two bedrooms?

LC: Well, where at?

MR: The one by Gunnison.

LC: By Gunnison, let's see we had what, two, three bedrooms, kitchen, dining room. My Dad built the porch. We had chickens, a garden, pigeons. We lived like a farmer down there.

MR: Did you have to walk to school?

LC: Sometimes we'd walk to school and then in the wintertime we had the horse drawn carriage to take us to school. It wasn't like a carriage it was like a covered wagon.

MR: That picked up other children too.

LC: Mmm hmm.

MR: Okay, so do you ever remember going to any dances or anything other than theater?

LC: Not me, I was too young for dances.

MR: Did you, did they have a Boy Scout troop out here?

LC: They had a Boy Scout unit, but we didn't belong. Boy Scouts, as a matter of fact they had a Boy Scout Jamboree out here and Boy Scouts from all nations were here.

MR: Okay. Did you go to any troop services out here?

LC: No.

MR: Did you go into New York by boat?

LC: Oh, my Mother used to take me to New York, to Battery Park. We used to leave here, go to Battery Park, spend the day there and come back.

MR: Would that be where you typically do your shopping or would you go to places in New Jersey.

LC: Oh, I guess she did some shopping there.

MR: Well, I guess, how did you say do clothes shopping? Where did you generally do things like that?

LC: Clothes shopping was generally here at the PX (Post Exchange) or in Highlands.

MR: Now, how would you get to Highlands?

LC: Oh, my Dad had a Pontiac.

MR: Oh, he did. Okay.

LC: I remember going to Highlands across the wooden bridge. Go down that hill and at the foot of that hill was a Merry-Go-Round. That's where we spent our Sunday afternoon, or would go down to Sea Bright, Asbury Park or something like that. Sundays, we would go for a ride.

MR: Did you ever go to the Merry-Go-Round that was in the south end of Sandy Hook which was called Highlands Beach or did you just go over into the Highlands side?

LC: The Highlands side. I never knew there was one on this side.

MR: There was, but it might have been gone by the time you were here.

LC: This was at the foot of the hill, almost under the bridge.

MR: Do you remember ever seeing any minorities?

LC: No.

MR: Servants?

LC: No.

MR: So you found this to be a fun place to live?

LC: Oh, it was a great place to live.

MR: Anything especially humorous occur while you were here?

LC: 1938 Hurricane, but that wasn't humorous.

MR: Tell me a little bit about that. Which house were you living in at that point?

LC: Right across the street in Building 101.

MR: Okay.

LC: And as a matter of fact there was a great big old oak tree that had come down right in the front yard. The water from both sides was coming in. I remember the water coming over the breakwaters that year. The jetties, it was almost over the dock, come right across the yard, as a matter of fact there was water in here.

MR: So, did it go, were you still in the house?

LC: Oh yeah.

MR: Did you stay there?

LC: Oh yeah. My Father was out; he had the prisoners out pulling trees off the road and stuff like that. We had a lot of trees down throughout the Post. A lot of sand washed up from the waves. As a matter of fact, the road between here and the main gate, of course we had two gates. We had a winter gate and a summer gate. The road between here and there was covered in sand. Because at that point, the water came in from both sides.

MR: So, you probably didn't leave for awhile?

LC: No. It took a couple of days and then we went down through Sea Bright because Sea Bright, the road was all covered with sand. This was an interesting life here.

MR: Anything stand out in your mind that you would want to talk about?

LC: Oh, not really.

MR: Okay. Well, your sister's here and I would like you to state your name as well. Could you come a little closer so we can...?

LC: Yeah. She was a little older than I was.

MR: We'll here another whole story.

LC: She met her husband here.

RCR: Not too much. Like he says we lived in Gunnison. I was the only girl with four brothers. I had a half brother.

MR: Now, how old were you when you came here?

RCR: I was born in '22. We came here in 1930.

MR: Okay. So you remember a little bit more.

RCR: I do. I remember more at a young age, than I do now. (laughter) We had a good life there. That was all we knew being brought up in the service. And we would go beach plum picking and we would pick bushel baskets and people would come from the city and we would sell it to them.

MR: Oh, really.

RCR: We would pick asparagus. I would pick asparagus for the officers' wives. I would sell it to them for dinner. My brother would dig clams and dig worms and they would sell it to people who would come fishing. So that was our way of making kind of a contribution to the family.

MR: Now, would these be other military families that would be coming for recreation?

RCR: No, a lot of people from outside.

MR: Came to go fishing.

RCR: Yeah.

MR: I guess they were allowed in at that point.

RCR: Yes. Yes they were.

MR: Do you remember who the commanding officer was at the time?

LC: Colonel Winters.

RCR: Yeah. I knew a lot of the officers. Captain Golph. As a matter of fact I worked for Capt. Hennessey.

MR: What did you do for him?

RCR: I used to serve dinners when they had entertainment. I also used to work at the Officers' Club when they had doings going on.

MR: What would you do?

RCR: I was a maid. I used to fix fancy dishes and work in the kitchen.

MR: What was the Officers' Club like then?

RCR: Pretty much like it is now. We went by there. Of course it was nice. It was very nice.

MR: Do you remember anything about the interior? Did they have any wallpaper on the walls or?

RCR: No.

MR: Painted walls.

RCR: They were mostly all painted, a lot of green. I had a room upstairs in Capt. Hennessey's house because I stayed there most of the time.

MR: Oh, you did on the third floor?

RCR: On the third floor overlooking the Parade Ground.

MR: Were you there in wintertime?

RCR: Oh, yes.

MR: Was it very windy up there?

RCR: Yes. It was. You could here it howling because some of the windows didn't fit very well. Cold air used to come through you know.

MR: Do you remember which house that was?

RCR: It's probably the third house, right directly across from the American flag.

MR: Okay, so it was probably, probably, like nine or ten. Something like that maybe.

RCR: Mmm hmm. Because Capt. Snell and Capt Carlisle lived on each side of us. McFadden, Lieutenant McFadden I think was his name. I knew quite a bit of the officers cause, like I say, my brothers used to pick asparagus and I would clean them up and take them to the maids that worked for the officers.

MR: Okay.

RCR: And they would buy it for their dinners.

MR: Were you the only one up on the third floor or did they have another person?

RCR: No, I was the only one there.

MR: And did the heat come up through the radiators up there?

RCR: It was warm enough. It was cold in the wintertime.

MR: Yeah, I'm sure.

RCR: But we were used to that. When we came up from Virginia and lived in Gunnison, we lived in a house that was unbelievable today. It had a tin roof and it had fiberboard walls. It was cold right across from the ocean. So, it was cold and we got kind of accustomed to the atmosphere, the climate.

MR: How big was the family you were living with?

RCR: They had two grown boys. They had three, two was in college and one was going to Leonardo High.

MR: So, there was only one at home when you were living there?

RCR: Right.

MR: Anything else about that house that you remember?

RCR: No. Just that I really enjoyed the work that I did there. My husband used to fire the furnaces along the officers' quarters.

MR: Is that how you met him?

RCR: I met him on the officers' beach. He was a lifeguard there.

MR: Oh. Okay.

RCR: So I met him there. Later on, I found out he was a fireman for the officers. I used to watch him come across the parade ground.

MR: Now, what unit was he in?

RCR: He was in the 52nd Coast Artillery.

MR: Okay, he was as well. And what was his full name?

RCR: John, John Roman. He had no middle name.

MR: Oh okay. So what year did you meet him?

RCR: I met him probably in '32. I was just a kid.

MR: And what year did you get married?

RCR: We got married in '39.

MR: So it was after your Father was transferred at that point in time?

RCR: He transferred right after I got married.

MR: Oh okay. And were you married out here?

RCR: I was married in Leonardo.

MR: Oh okay. Anything else about your husband's service?

RCR: He was like I say a lifeguard for a long time. He was very active. He had a lot of medals for sharp shooting and whatever they gave him. And he was in for his first hitch.

MR: Where did you go on a date or anything?

RCR: We walked. We went to the docks where the boats were you know. The seashore, walked along there. I never went out on a date.

MR: Okay.

RCR: Never went out on a date. We would just take walks and sit on the steps. I was a young girl. My Dad never allowed a man in the house. So we used to just sit on the steps. (laughter)

MR: So how old were you when you got married?

RCR: Very young. Very young.

MR: So, after you were married, was your husband out of the service at that point or was he still in?

RCR: He got out probably about a year later. We moved to Passaic, New Jersey.

MR: Okay, so that's where you ended up living?

RCR: That's where we raised our family.

MR: Now was he, did he have to go back in during World War II?

RCR: No. He wanted to but he couldn't. He had skin cancer because he was on the beach so much.

MR: Oh wow.

RCR: It was real bad. His whole face was. He wanted to, but they wouldn't let him.

MR: Any other social activities that you remember that you want to talk about or anything?

RCR: I used to go to the YMCA. They had a Baptist church group there and once in a while for the teenagers they would have dances. My Dad never allowed it, but of course I lived right across the way from there and I used to go there. He never knew I went but I

used to go because I enjoyed it and that's all. I liked to play basketball. I played football with my brothers, went fishing, dug worms.

LC: Kick the can.

RCR: Kick the can. I had four brothers and that's all I knew how to do. My Mother died when I was very young.

MR: So your Father was in charge of everyone?

RCR: My aunt came to live with us. She was there kind of to help out. She was only 21. She was just a young woman. So it was kind of difficult. I had just lost my Mother and she moved in and it was very helpful.

MR: Okay. Anything else you would like to say about your time here?

RCR: No. Not really. I remember when we had the hurricane the ground was flooded and those type and there was a lot of water. I remember the officer's young boys were home from college. The water came from the other side of the seawall. They were up in their yards throwing pieces in the water. And I remember all that.

MR: So you had a good view if you were on Officers' Row?

RCR: Oh yes.

MR: Did the house flood at all? Did you have any water in the basement?

RCR: No.

MR: Those houses are built well.

RCR: Yes. That's what I was telling my Brother.

MR: That's quite a view.

RCR: It's a shame they are unoccupied. Do they intend to do anything?

MR: Yeah. I'll tell you about that later.

RCR: Oh okay.

MR: But, okay. So, that was right before you got married you were staying in that house.

RCR: Yes. It was right after I got married it was a short time that my Father got transferred.

MR: Well, thank you much for your time and I'm going to stop the tape.

RCR: I was glad to do it. I hope it was a help. I don't know. Like I talked to you on the phone or wrote to you I do have pictures but I was in the process of moving and I had gotten real sick and went for surgery and all this stuff and all my pictures and things are in boxes.

MR: Okay.

RCR: And when I get through them this winter I will send some on to you if you still want them.

MR: Absolutely. Okay. Thank you very much and stop the tape.

End of interview.