

Finally, one clear morning, I went up on deck and there before me was the Statue of Liberty and the New York City skyline. What a wonderful sight. It was a wonderful feeling to be on dry land. I had been on the ship so long that I thought I could feel the ground moving. We boarded a train and went to Fort Dix.

The first morning we were awakened at six o'clock and had to stand in formation, outside in the street, for roll call. A sergeant from the recruiting office said he wanted us to sign up for the reserves. No one moved. He said if we volunteered we could go home that day. No one moved. Then he told us to police the area. Someone in the back shouted, "F--k you." The sergeant got mad and said, "You are still in the army and I will have you court-marshaled." No one moved. This went on for three days. On the fourth day, I was given train fare, \$13.20, and released from the army. I took a train to Albany, where Dad, Mother and my sisters met me.

Readjusting to Civilian Life

At long last, I was rid of the army—honorably discharged with the rank of corporal. I had a sense of freedom. A great weight had been removed from me. I had not liked the service. As a matter of fact, I had hated it. The incompetence, the stupidity, the harassment—I marvel that we ever won the war! But at the same time, my three years in the service were invaluable. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. It took me out of isolation; it showed me the real world. I saw foreign countries, historical sights, the ocean and modern marvels like ships, planes, and weapons of war. That was a great education. Even that, though, was not as great as the education I got from the people I had met.

They came from all walks of life. Their values ranged from high to low. I learned firsthand how mean-spirited people could be, and I saw great love and compassion. I saw how people could respond to different situations. I learned that there are many ways to accomplish a task—that there is not necessarily a right way and a wrong way or the army way. Having lived with and met such a diverse group of people as I had was the greatest education. That was what I liked best about the service: the people—the good, the bad, the learned, the unlearned. I'd been introduced to the fact that there was a bigger and better world out there and I'd realized that I wanted to be a part of it.

In my absence, Dad had returned home. He and Mother

slept in different bedrooms. I do not know what their arrangement was. He stayed sober and all seemed well. I walked in the house that evening and could not get over how small and tiny the complete house looked. Sister Alice did not know me. She'd been five or six years old when I left.

The first couple of days, I stayed home with Mother. Civilian life seemed foreign to me. It was a strange way to live. After a week of home life, I told Mother I was going back in the service. She cried and pleaded with me not to go. It hurt me to see her cry, and I told her I would try and stay home. But, I had to find a job. I did not want to return to the mill job that I had left. I did not want to work in a store. The orchard was closed for the season so that was out. Under the GI Bill, I could have pursued my education. I was twenty-one years old. I had no desire to go to school.

I bought an automobile and joined the American Legion to mingle, drink beer and play poker with fellow veterans. I met a navy veteran, Bob, there. We hit it off well and he and I did some crazy things. Primarily, we went barhopping together and out on double dates. Bob and I always double-dated because I never wanted to take any relationships seriously. We dated girls from out of town mostly so I could keep on moving.

Some nights, when I was driving home after barhopping, I would see two lines on the road. In order for me to know which one I should pay attention to, I would close one eye so the second line would disappear. Very late one night, we were twenty-five miles from home when the brakes failed on my car. I had backed out of the bar's parking garage and turned onto the highway. Along the way, I put the brake pedal to the floor, but nothing happened—the car would not stop. I pulled up the

emergency brake, and the car managed to stop. We were out in the country and basically stranded. I decided that we could make it home if I drove slowly. We knew that it was going to be a long ride, so we went into a bar, bought some beer and were on our way. Before we got home, the double lines appeared on the road and I drove with one hand covering one eye. We had a couple of close calls on the way but we thought it was all a big laugh.

After the service, I did a lot of bizarre things. I was never arrested, though I came close a couple of times. One night I was highballing down Main Street, headed for New Jersey, when I noticed a cop was parked on a side street. I saw his car come to life, and I knew he was coming after me. I decided to outrun him to the state line. I put the gas pedal to the floor and left it there. His lights flashed and his siren screamed but he never got close enough to get my plate number. I enjoyed that—it got my adrenaline flowing.

As more and more servicemen returned home, jobs started getting scarce. I saw an ad in the paper for carpenters, and I applied. I was hired and reported to the job on a cold, windy day. The contractor gave me a hammer and a nail apron. Of all things, he was building a large, two-story chicken coop. My job was to nail down roof sheeting. The roof was very steep and the danger of sliding off was of some concern. It was so cold that the nails stuck to my skin, so I had to work with gloves on. I pounded nails all day, nonstop. The contractor told me he had a lot of nice jobs that we were going to be doing after this one was done. I worked long and hard hoping to make a good impression. When the roofing was done, he took back his hammer and gave me my paycheck.

I tried to find work driving a truck but had no luck. Some of my friends were working in the mills making big money and wanted me to join them but I wouldn't do it. Within a week, I saw an ad in the paper that our utility company wanted a truck driver/ground man. I applied for the job and got it. They were paying thirty-six cents an hour. My duties were to drive the line truck, operate the boom, dig holes and set poles and supply the linemen when they were working on the poles. We were a crew of five men and a foreman. The work was hard and dangerous but I loved it. I decided I would learn as much as I could. I asked a lot of questions but I didn't get too many straight answers.

After a year, I was promoted to third-class lineman. I bought a line belt and a set of spurs and started climbing poles. There was no school or classes; I learned through on-the-job training. It took time to trust the three-inch-wide safety strap. If the belt slipped one inch, it felt like a mile. We kept our climbing spurs sharp but we never knew if we would hit a bad spot or a knot in the pole. Either could cause our spurs to lose contact with the pole and slide down or fall to the ground. We worked high voltage lines with rubber gloves. At first it was scary to hold a wire in my hand knowing it had the potential for instant death.

I had a few close calls as a lineman. One day, we were cleaning up after a storm, and we had to pass some wires through the branches of a tall pine tree. My buddy climbed the pole and I climbed the tree. I got up to about twenty-five feet, stood on a limb and wrapped my safety strap around a stout-looking branch. My buddy tossed a hand line to me. I could see it was coming in short, so I leaned out as far as I could,

putting my full weight on my safety strap. I heard a snap and I felt myself falling down through the tree branches. I knew what was happening. I remember saying, "Please, God," before I hit ground. I landed on my back. The branch that I had secured my safety strap to was lying across my chest. It knocked the wind out of me. I was taken to the doctor against my will, but he could find nothing wrong. I returned to work and worked well into the night.

We always knew when a storm was approaching. The atmospheric conditions would change and the electricity would pull the hair on my arm out straight. I could feel or sense the electricity on my face.

In my third year as a lineman, circumstances forced me to quit. I had developed bursitis in my right shoulder and could not move it. The doctor advised me to get out of the cold and do inside work, so I transferred into another department, repairing household appliances. I served my apprenticeship and enjoyed the work, but the pay was very poor. On weekends, I would make more money playing poker at the American Legion Hall than I did on the job.

I bought a water pump and installed it in the basement of our house. I bought an electric hot water heater. With the increased pressure, we finally had running hot water. I bought a used electric stove and installed it in the kitchen. Mother was afraid of the stove, though. When I demonstrated it to her, she backed away from it. I recall her setting the tea kettle on the stove, returning to the kitchen sink and then asking Alice to turn on the stove. She was also worried about the cost of the electricity, so I paid the utility bill. As an employee I was given a 10 percent discount, anyway. I would

never tell her how much the bill was.

When asbestos siding came on the market, I installed it on our house. I had never done that type of work before but I managed. It was a challenge and I got a lot of satisfaction doing it.

I got interested in refrigeration because there were only a couple of people in town that did that type of work. At that time, household refrigerators were belt driven. There was a lot of maintenance on those units. I got a year's leave of absence from the company and enrolled in a refrigeration school in Boston. I attended school every day and worked nights at the General Electric appliance center. I enjoyed the course. There was an extensive study on electrical circuitry. I graduated second in my class, returned home and resumed my old job.

All my customers were unhappy housewives who had broken appliances. Doing repairs was interesting work but it got to be just a job. Newer refrigerators were also coming out on the market that had hermetically sealed units, so the refrigeration work fell off sharply, as well. All the jobs became routine and uninteresting. There was no longer much of a challenge, and the wages continued to be very poor. I got to thinking that I wanted more than this for the rest of my life.

Most of the employees belonged to the electrical union. I did not want anything to do with a union—I still remembered what our schoolteacher had told us about unions. The linemen kept badgering me, though, until I did finally join up. Every month, the international office would mail us a newsletter. One month, I saw that other jurisdictions were paying much higher wages than we were getting. I made some inquiries and learned that two of our union men were working

in Schenectady, New York, and making big wages. I told Mother that I was going to change jobs. She pleaded with me and cried, but I assured her that if I got the job, I would continue to live at home. That pacified her but she was still upset with me. I wanted to live my own life.

I spent one Sunday afternoon with one of the workmen I knew. He explained what the work entailed and how the union functioned. All the contractors that belonged to the contractor's association had agreed that the union would supply them with workers. Workers had to go to the union hall to be dispatched to the contractors for individual jobs; we could not go to a contractor directly. When a particular job was done, the workers went back to the union hall for another. There was no seniority, no vacation time.

My friend knew I was not qualified for the work and I knew it also but I was not going to give up. He advised me to go see the business agent and to tell him that I did not have experience bending pipe. The business agent was not fooled. He saw me for what I was—a veteran looking for work. I had a union card, though, and he honored it.

He teamed me up on the same job as a man from my home local so that we could commute the fifty-mile ride together. He told me to tell the shop steward I did not know how to bend pipe and I did. Everyday, I practiced bending pipe when I could. One day, the general foreman and the shop steward walked up and saw me bending pipe. I heard the general foreman ask the shop steward if I was a journeyman. The steward told him, "Yes, he is." The foreman said, "Fire him—he cannot bend pipe." The steward advised him, though, "The business agent knows it, and so do I." What a relief!

My pay jumped from \$36 a week to \$125. In addition, they paid twenty-five cents an hour more whenever we worked more than thirty feet off the ground, so I took all the "high time" I could get. The first day, I got teamed up with someone to help install pipe along a ceiling. He was up on a ladder, and it was my job to cut and thread the pipe for him. He called for a piece of pipe that measured 6-3/8 inches long, but I didn't know what "3/8" was. I would make it 1/2 inch. I was sweating bullets. He did ask me what kind of ruler I had. I do not know if I learned these fractions in school and forgot them or not. At lunchtime, I found a secluded spot where I could be left alone to figure out how to read my ruler. I counted the sixteen little marks in one inch. I saw that eight of them were half an inch. That was the key I needed, and I figured out the rest easily. I worked long and hard to make up for my lack of knowledge. I paid attention and learned all I could. I actually did well on the job.

It was bitter cold that winter. We had an inside job renovating an old factory for the government. I got up at six o'clock every morning. Mother would make my breakfast, and at six-thirty, I would meet my partner for the long drive to work. A friend of mine told me about a furnished apartment I could have for fifteen dollars a week. I took it, and told Mother that I had an apartment and would be leaving but would come home every weekend. She told me that I could take my pillow with me, and I did—it was the only thing I took with me when I left home. I did not know how to cook. Every weekend, she would teach me more about cooking. My diet was fried meat and potatoes and cold cuts for lunch. I never enjoyed eating out, and I still don't to this day.

Another young fellow and I got a job installing obstruction lights on a water tower. That was an experience. The tower was tall and big. When we were at the very top and looked at the clouds, it felt as if the tower was falling over. We would joke that it was about as high as we would ever get in life. The older men did not want any part of high work. I enjoyed it. I was getting the twenty-five-cent bonus, and no one was looking over my shoulder when I was one hundred and fifty feet in the air.

On the job I met drifters, men who traveled all the time looking for overtime jobs that paid good wages. I decided to travel, also, and go where the money was. I stayed in the apartment for three months and then bought a used house trailer. The drifters told me they were going to Trenton, New Jersey, when their present job was done to help build a steel mill. I could see the handwriting on the wall, too. The present job was winding down. In fact, Friday morning we were told it was our last day. At lunchtime, I walked down the railroad tracks until I found a pay phone. I called Trenton and was told to come on down, that they had an overtime job waiting for me.

That evening, after work, I hitched the house trailer to my car and left for New Jersey. A co-worker had agreed to come along and help with the driving but at the last minute he reneged. I did not give up. I did it alone.