

Interview with Thomas Beber

May 29th, 2009

Interviewed by Josh McDowell

Josh McDowell (JMD): Interviewing Thomas Beber May 29th, 2009.

Thomas Beber (TB): I was born in Wakefield, Michigan 1934, March 24. Went to school graduated from Lakeville high school in 1952.

JMD: What sports did you play in high school?

TB: Oh, I played track, basketball, football. And you went out for tennis because you got a free pair of tennis shoes. That was it, those three, that's about all they had then. Except, well, they had tennis also but tennis and then there was no golf.

Unidentified Female Voice (UFV): Did you play baseball?

TB: Oh baseball! That's the other thing. Yeah, that's the other thing I played, that's the one I like the most.

JMD: Tell me a little bit about your family background, how it was because I know that a lot of the Barracks Boys were brought in because the families couldn't help out with school or anything like that.

TB: That would probably be true. My dad was a janitor for the city. My mother she did work or didn't work, what-have you. In fact I worked for the mine during the summer before I went up to Northern and I made more money per hour than my dad did, who had worked for the city for, I

don't know how many years at that time, probably ten or twelve years. I have a sister who is a year younger than me and my dad would be Italian and my mother was "Jokela" which is Finnish. And, they... Besides the grant and aid, they provided other money. In fact, one of the things I want to make sure that they gave me money and I didn't do too well spending it, as far as going to school and that. We can get into that because I was kind of like on the bottom of the freshman class because I didn't, after football after the second semester; I just kind of blew things. But I will say, from that day on I never, ever got one penny from my mother and dad. I didn't, I had to thank them for helping out. And at school doing the Grant and Aid I was a soda jerk at first, because I don't know if you gave nice Sundays and malts to the coeds I got demoted to the... peeling potatoes and washing the dishes and my last job with the Grant and Aid I did janitor work by cleaning up, I think it was three rooms and once you cleaned those up you were done no matter if it took you five hours or one hour.

JMD: How did you get into Northern or how did you come to Northern?

TB: How did I come? I got a call from the coach and said that there was an opportunity for this Grant and Aid program, you know, to come up and play football and go to school and I also had another choice, a scholarship at Western Michigan to play baseball. But I got the urge to play football again so I went up to Northern. I enjoyed it, playing football and meeting the people there and it's surprising after being there only one year and not really during that first year. Most of my friends were people from Wakefield that I knew that were going to school there or people from Marquette that I meant, you didn't go too much with the people in the Barracks, I didn't socialize with them after hours and that stuff. Just during the Barracks time and became friends

that way and I can't believe after all those years and only being there one year that they still remember me and I remember them.

JMD: What were the sports that you played at Northern?

TB: Football.

JMD: What year did you enter Northern?

TB: Fifty-two, that would have been the season of 1952 when I played.

JMD: How did you guys travel around and what teams did you play?

TB: Ohh! Michigan Tech I do know that, at Michigan Tech we got bombed and beaten up, oh that was terrible. I never been so sore in all my life and never, I punted. Our end if he would have gotten up a second earlier I would have hit him right in the back of the head because it was like a five yard punt and we played Ferris, Northland-that was Ashland, Wisconsin. All of it... And then we played down in Ohio, Central. I think it was Central university something like that. And traveling, it was easy to travel to Tech and the other games are home except for the last one and that last game I was, I had been injured the game before but I still, we traveled in a bus and, and some of us younger guys, well Coach Money isn't her! So us younger guys were like well, you got to ride with Coach Money , so I was on that road with Coach Money and we got down to Ohio and I didn't have the pads on I had crutches, but I still was in uniform. Catching the ball and doing stuff like that, I guess you couldn't make the trip if you didn't work, but it was, it was my last football game was at, the week before you know playing against Northland, Wisconsin.

JMD: So, you only played football for one year?

TB: One year, that's it.

JMD: How come you didn't continue on playing?

TB: Well, if you're really not doing too well in classes and you're really... they're still waiting for my notebook of business letters, which I've never sent any. I went home and I one day asked my mother if I could use the car and my good friend Tom Dooly and I went to Duluth Minnesota together and I joined the Marine Corps. I didn't want to go to the army and that time you couldn't get into the Air Force or Navy, they had waiting lists. And the other option was, this is dumb, how dumb can you be? French Foreign Legion and I found out, jeeze I have to go to San Francisco to do that, so I went to Duluth, came home and told my mother I joined the Marine Corps. To this day I don't know what she thought, but I read a book about another person who joined the Marine Corps he came home to his father and then they talked together about it and I just realized, holy-cow I didn't even tell my mother I was going to join. I just went and did it and came home and she's Finnish and pretty straight forward, she didn't say anything, drove me up to Duluth. My dad put me in a train at Minneapolis and off to San Diego I went, so and I think that's the best thing I ever did as far as...

JMD: So did you only attend Northern for one year?

TB: One year? No, after I got out of the Marine Corps I went to Northern to see if I could handle school and when you have three years of Marine Corps education you can handle almost anything, so I did.

JMD: Um, so were. Were you more focused on having fun in school that first year? Or you were just?

TB: I... It was just like you didn't care. We did dumb things like, standing around, where should we go this weekend? Let's go to Milwaukee. Stuff like that. It wasn't, that one time, I can't remember the name of that coffee shop, we were sitting in there, let's go to Milwaukee and we went. It wasn't really like doing funny, a kind of, it was a feeling of what's the use?

JMD: What were the Barracks like?

T B: Oh, there was...In our room there was three, I think there was probably three people in each room and you had bunks and single bunks and I was with George Dumass. George and Corey Shade when we were...my wife when we were up at a reunion, a number of years ago she asked George if I was messy in that room as he says I'm messy and George said yes I was. Then, and I think we had to pay a dollar a month that we put in and that bought oil to fire the space heaters. It was crowded you couldn't really study there, of course that didn't bother me any. You had to go to the library or someplace because there was all these people in one barracks and so and we ate at the cafeteria. I don't think we were supposed to have any food around in the Barracks, but I imagine there was. So, no they're gone.

JMD: How was your relationship with Coach Money, given that you were not caring so much about school as much?

TB: Well he was like a football coach, that's what he was to me, a football coach. I know other people got closer to him but in that short time it was very hard. I remember that he did meet my

family and I when I arrived at Northern, it was kind of later in the day too at night. He is thoughtful about that. But he was a football coach, I couldn't go up and pat him on the back or do anything like that. I would have to address him as Coach Money and that's what I would do and so I was. Some of the other guys knew him well after spending four years there and especially if they were in physical, Phys Ed.

JMD: What was your major when you went there?

TB: The Business Administration and Business, that was second semester and, the first semester is pretty general.

JMD: What were the jobs that you held with the Grant and Aid program?

TB: I was a soda jerk and then a potato peeler, I washed dishes, janitor and the women then had their meals there and so sometimes you would have to pass out the food at it. I don't even know how much we made, probably not too much but it got me through there one lull... that's a terrible thing. I can't believe how embarrassing it is to say, when you think about how you're young and you're actually pretty dog-gone stupid, but I grew up.

JMD: Is that why you went off and joined the marine corps?

TB: (inaudible)...lost a girlfriend, stuff stupid things like that.

JMD: So your buddy was joining and you wanted to join?

TB: No, my buddy? No, none of them joined. There ain't too many marines around, I think in this town there were only six I knew. My good friend who wasn't at Northern, he joined the

Army, he was in the Army and my other friends they were a year younger they were in the Navy. Almost everybody joined something. I thought...joined something. But one other Marine was in our class, graduating class. So..

JMD: So what did you do in the Marine Corps?

TB: Oh God, we replaced two things, We replaced draftees for one thing and when you came in there you took tests. They had Morse code and I couldn't hear anything and I took a typing test and I found when I left I got five words per minute, five so I replaced dispersing which was pay roll and during some of the months when reserve units came in I was a rifle coach and then I could shoot. The...I went in... I joined in June or July and didn't called in to start until August 18th in the Korean War which I just saw in the paper that they were going to throw out they had cease-fire type agreement July 27th of that year, so two weeks, three weeks after that's when I went in. And now I see they were going to throw that out. They didn't have any peace treaty it was an agreement, so that's what I did I was at Camp Pendleton, California. Huge base and that's where, I think it's the first marine division is stationed there. Now it's completely different. I went there in 1957 and that's where I was which had like half the Marine Core had been going through it as an infantry training regimen. They went from boot camp and they went through there for infantry training and at this intersection there wasn't one person, one Quonset hut, not a tent, nothing it was just quiet. It was really funny being there.

JMD: So what year did you come back to the?

TB: I came back fifty-six I was done, it was 1956. Right to the minute. The government, the lieutenant there would not let me go until midnight. Other guys he had given the orders to leave earlier, but he would not let me go until midnight, he was young.

JMD: What year did you come back to Northern then?

TB: Fifty-seven.

JMD: And what was your major then or was it still the same from when you left?

TB: No it wasn't, it was I took, I wanted to see if I could do good at school so I didn't have really any major and five of us from Wakefield lived together in a cabin and I can't remember, I took chemistry and things like that a little different classes than before and the intention was to be an engineer as I had worked between 1956 my friend and I worked on a survey crew, surveying I-75 south of the bridge and it seemed interesting, so after that see if everything was okay and I went to Northern, I mean Michigan Tech. Graduated from Michigan Tech with a BS in Civil Engineering and not the top of the class but close and I was married. I got married in Fifty-eight.

JMD: So you were a pretty intelligent guy you just weren't focused on school?

TB: Yea, well, I don't know if I'm intelligent, but at one point I remember at Tech I can't remember what class it was I said, "If I get a D or that in this class I'm going to go back to Northern." And my name was the first one above the line but I wasn't really smart I guess but I was in the top 25 or 15 in civil engineering and I had my first son was born there and my first daughter was born the last month we were there. My wife graduated from University of

Michigan and BS in Nursing and she taught nursing over at St. Josephs, that's what it was called then and then after the baby came she worked in nursing, so the G.I. Bill, work in the summer and her working. Got us through this Tech. The second to last reunion we had, I had to stand up and just tell everybody, I think I'm the only one here that graduated from Michigan Tech here, and I was!

JMD: Did you use your engineering degree?

TB: Oh yes, I worked highway department in Wisconsin, of Michigan and then U.S. Forest service, that's where I retired from and I was a civil engineer with them for thirty-some, thirty-three years I guess it was. In the government service and that counts the Marine corps and the time you spent and they were cutting back so they actually paid me plus 2,499 people 25,000 dollars to leave and I still have it in the bank collecting interest.

JMD: How long were you at Northern then, before you went back to Tech?

TB: Just that one year.

JMD: So then you went to Tech?

TB: Then I went to Tech, yes.

JMD: Did you still keep in contact with some of the guys in the Barracks then that you knew?

TB: No, no I didn't and it was quite a bit later, I met with George and Pangrazzi from here and a few others that I saw them and go to talk to them.

JMD: Did you meet them at the reunions more so?

TB: At the reunions yeah, I couldn't believe that, it's pretty hard to sit there when you get there and you get something Sandy McLean. You know it was this here little reunion and it's at George's house and to be invited it was really great to go back and you couldn't miss any of those people. I knew who they were and it was nice that they, I don't know if there was anybody else maybe Anglen he may have only stayed there one year and I think there was a D.D. Erickson and I think he moved to the Air Force but I think he had been up at Northern a couple years, I'm not sure. He wasn't in the barracks.

JMD: Did many of you enter the service?

TB: I don't know, I know one of them Old Sam in the Detroit area, he was in the Marine Corps and then went to Northern and he was in Korea.

JMD: So he was part of the barracks boys?

TB: He was a barracks a boy, he was in the Marine Corps reserve, I found out this later that he was in the Marine Corps air wing and they were in Korea and he was in Korea for maybe a year or two years and then he came back and he went to school under the Grant and Aid program, Sam... I can't remember his last name, I don't know how to pronounce the names. I think he was superintendent of schools. Most of them that I met at the reunion they, were somewhat, way connected with education.

JMD: How was campus life at Northern?

TB: Then? It was small, it was the barracks and maybe Kaye Hall, is that still there?

JMD: I don't think so.

TB: They don't use it anymore, that's where they have art exhibits and stuff like that, when you go in and there's a circle-

JMD: Yea, they don't use that building anymore.

TB: You had the administration building, I can't even remember if there was a library then. I don't think that was there, it was there the second time I went. Was it J. D. Pierce, or something like that. At that time it was like a high school training school, which was no longer, they don't do that anymore. That's all there was.

JMD: So, in other interviews, you guys would go out and help community like, fix things and rake, were you part of that group?

TB: No I wasn't. They did though? That's very nice. I imagine, I could see them doing that, but I wasn't involved in it.

JMD: As I was talking to you before the interview, you said something about Tiny that you might confuse him that he was in Korea when he was killed?

TB: He was in Vietnam.

JMD: Vietnam?

TB: Yes, he was from Ironwood, he went to Saint Ambrose and I played against him in basketball and over years in high school. Of course when I was gone, he was back in the

Bessemer area which is Wakefield Bessemer area and he was an ROTC instructor and he was making a career out of the service. He was killed in Vietnam towards the beginning.

JMD: He was killed very early in the Vietnam War?

TB: Yes, yes it was. He was big, he was a big guy but it wasn't Korea, because he went to Northern he couldn't have gotten killed in Korea, because it was fifty-three where they almost started shooting. The terrible thing about a marine is if you're seventy-five you're a marine yet, if you ever noticed that I don't know if you ever noticed it, that's how it is. You don't say you're an ex-marine you say you're a marine period and that's it.

JMD: So were you glad to be part of the Barracks Boys, was it helpful getting your foot in the door for education or were you going to go on to school without getting that Grant and Aid or were you just going to stay here or what were your plans after high school?

TB: I guess I had plans to go to college but, I didn't sit down and say, "Here, I'm going to go to." You know, nowadays people they'll start in their senior year figuring out what college you want to go to and all that kind of stuff, I never did that and when football started, I just got to play football again, this is terrible, don't let my kids listen to this. That was, that year except for the people you met it was a complete waste as far as education and well you still got some education, because you figured out how stupid you were after a while. The nice thing about the Barracks Boy's, I know most of them. I wonder how many are still okay, it seemed like everybody I knew was still okay, a lot of them left Saint Jean? He went to the Naval Academy and the quarterback Ed Neff, went to University of Michigan, so that year they lost some of the first people in Grant and Aid, but I understand that they beat Tech that year, which I had a hard

time cheering for Tech, when I was going there, after I got beat up so bad, but when it came to hockey then I was a Tech fan and now I am, I'd cheer for Tech before Northern, I mean it took me a long time to cheer for Tech, I'll tell you that.

JMD: Did you go into any other education after you got your bachelors?

TB: No.

JMD: Do you have anything else you'd like to add about the program or your experiences?

TB: Most of them of course are not at Northern or that year, I mean the best thing... It's really something that people know you after many years, after only being there one year and still we talked about the Barracks and what have you at the reunions and it was pretty nice of the George and Sandy, I think they were leading, oh and John Bowmeyer, he was senior I think, so he kind of watched over me a little bit, but I guess he couldn't keep up with me? He was really, he's retired...

Unidentified Female Voice (UFV): (inaudible) That was the trouble...

TB: And then, if I had two things to do engineering would have been one of them, the Civil Engineering part I wouldn't have been any other and if I would have stayed at Northern I would have wanted to be a coach. Would have been a poor example, but you would straighten up after a while. But if I went back to Northern and not Tech I would have been into coaching, which people thought was a very simple thing but it is extremely, at that time it was extremely difficult. I mean if you were going into physical education you had to go for football, you may have never played it before but you have to go out. Very tough classes, Northern, my business letters I

wonder if they ever. That's why I got an incomplete, if you don't turn this in my business letters, that's why I got an incomplete in that class, failed. None of the other Barracks Boys, must all have gone on to be successes right away or something, you had to-

JMD: You went on to be successful, I guess, Civil Engineering is no small Feat, thirty-three years in retirement, your kids are successful it sounds like.

TB: Yea, my kids are: an electrical engineer, registered dietician, C.P.A., and computers. Well, I hope you get a good mark in this class.

JMD: Well if you don't have anything else to add, I'd like to thank you for your time and...

TB: Thank you for coming. I don't know if that was...

JMD: Anything else you would like to add about the Barracks, your experiences in the Barracks, or anything with the football program or the coach.

TB: No, I...The thing about the Barracks, I meet these people again and we go right into talking about things, we don't have to, you don't have to sit in one of our chairs and talk about and there's certain things, when I go on US2 towards the straits there's Monck, his family had a store there, every time I'd go by there I think of him, he's at the barracks and Coach Money, after one year I had, there was no big bonding thing. It was like a coach and player situation and Northern...

UVF: A lot of nostalgic...(inaudible)

TB: Yeah, but we did have, at Wakefield , when I played at Wakefield, my equipment at Wakefield was better than at Northern. I remember we had a practice helmet and it was, I don't know, it was orange inside and I had like orange hair. Until you got into your regular, it was different; it was almost like wearing pumpkin that helmet. But, it's, I mean Coach Money, he coached everything, it was just like in high school. He coached football, basketball, now –a-days you got a coach for left side linebacker and stuff like that. Then it was just him, a student I think it was Mr. Peters, and Mr. Gingrass and that was the coaching staff and Mr. Gingrass taught me how to punt, I never punted in high school but I did up at Northern.

JMD: What did you play in high school for football?

TB: What did I play? Running back and defensive.

JMD: So you just were a punter at Northern?

TB: No, I was running back and punted and played some defense. I even tackled some people sometimes. You remember, I told you about the shortest punting, well I got a real long punt off, it didn't go very far in the air, it just hit the ground and it was like a golf ball, kept rolling and rolling and rolling and rolling and rolling by the time it stopped, I don't know, I had about a sixty, seventy yard punt out of it , but if you really counted how far it went the first wind it would have been about a thirty or a twenty yarder. And I played outside too, instead of in the Dome. I don't know how they can play in the dome. I have gone to games, I have gone to games there but. So, I thank you, I hope you get an A. Do they give A's anymore or what or do they give passes or what? I don't know...

JMD: Well, I Thank you again for your time.

TB: Thank you, too bad we missed each other. But you were in the wrong town too weren't you? And I was up there, I was looking for you! But I couldn't find you, I had completely forgot about that.

End of Interview