

Willard H. Keeber
424th/Company G
106th Infantry Division

Beatrice F. Keeber
131 River Drive
Milford, MI. 48381

September 24, 2007

Dear Mr. West,

Your name and address were sent to me by John Schaffner. I understand you are working with him on the military histories of men of the 106th. I am enclosing recollections my husband dictated to me two to three years ago. I sent this to the Library of Congress Military History collection, and then it occurred to me to find out if the 106th would also be interested. When I wrote John Kline to ask, he responded with Mr. Schaffner's address, as well as forwarding my e-mail to Mr. Schaffner. Mr. Schaffner wrote back that the 106th would be interested, and directed me to send this to you.

I had intended to do this some time ago, but circumstances delayed my carrying out that plan. Bill was hospitalized in both April and July of this year. After the most recent hospitalization, he went to rehab improved markedly, and came home on Sept. 15, for which we are thankful. All of that took my time and attention until now, when I was able to carve out time enough to make copies of what I sent to the Library of Congress.

I hope you'll find it of interest. Perhaps it may offer a different "slant" on WW II and the Battle of the Bulge than you have heard previously, or it might be a reiteration of other men's experiences. At any rate, you have it now, as I had promised.

Very truly yours,

Beatrice F. Keeber
Dr. and Mrs. Willard H. Keeber
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This information is about Willard H. Keeber, PFC 12 238 570, who served in Company G, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division. He was in the Battle of the Bulge, 16 December 1944 - 25 January 1945.

My husband now suffers from Parkinson's, which has affected his memory and communication. However, the following was dictated a couple of years ago by him (Bill Keeber) to me (Bea Keeber), who typed them up as Bill talked about them:
World War II Memories of Willard H. Keeber, PFC 12 238 570, Company G, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division:

I could expect to be drafted after age 18, in October or November, 1943, following my High School graduation. (My eighteenth birthday was Oct. 22, 1943. I graduated from High School in June of 1943.) So, to avoid the Draft - where I would have no choices

available to me - at the end of High School, while still 17 years of age, I volunteered for the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program. That was a program designed to make me an officer. The program was designed to send a volunteer to college as an Army Reservist until the end of the semester in which he was 18 (which, in my case, would have been about Dec. '43 or early Jan. '44), at which point he was to be inducted into the regular Army, given Basic Training, then returned to college. In my case, in September of 1943 (following my High School graduation in June of '43, I was sent to an off-campus unit of the University of Syracuse in Auburn, N.Y., about 50 miles from the main campus. I was there for one semester, and my group of guys were the only physically capable males in the town. All the other males of draft age were gone. That means we had all the girls to ourselves! We thought it was a pretty good deal! At the end of that semester, in January '44, I was sent to Fort Benning, GA, for Infantry Basic Training, since I had turned 18 in Oct., 1943. This was with a bunch of other people who were in the ASTRP or ASTP (two different programs). Basic training wasn't terribly bad. It took a little while to get my muscles used to the hard work, but the weather in Georgia was quite comfortable at that time of year.

During the time of our basic training, the invasion of Africa was launched, and suddenly the Army needed Infantry replacements. Since we were taking an Infantry Basic, we were all transferred to the Infantry instead of being sent back to college. So much for "officer training", having "some choices available to me", and "having all the girls in town to ourselves"!

At the last minute, it was discovered that our basic training program had not included training in the Browning Automatic Rifle, an essential weapon of the Infantry squad. So I was held over with several others at Ft. Benning, doing KP and policing the area till the next group came through for Basic Training. When they arrived, all of those who had been held over were sent to Camp McClellan, AL. to take another cycle of Basic Training. They assigned us to a group that was just starting Infantry Basic. After we finished training with the Browning Automatic rifle, we were made acting PFC's (Hot Spit!) -- which meant we were go-fers for the real cadre of trainers. We finished the second full cycle of Basic at Camp McClellan. From there, a small group of us were sent to Fort Worth, TX for Advanced Infantry Basic. Part way through this cycle, I was sent to the 106th Infantry Division in Camp Atterbury, IN. - at about the beginning of September, '44.

The history of the 106th was that it had been turned into an excellently-trained force, with well-coordinated command officers, under General Jones. However, at the time I was sent to the 106th, it was short of men because most of the members had been sent to divisions that had lost men during the invasion of Europe in June of '44. This effectively decimated the 106th as a "trained division".

For a matter of several months prior to my arrival, new recruits had been coming into the Division, being trained in a rather helter-skelter manner due to the "drifting in" manner of their assignments to the Division. After I was in the Division for about a month, the 106th was sent to Great Britain on board the Queen Elizabeth. It arrived in Scotland on my 19th birthday, October 22, 1944. The Q-E sailed alone instead of in convoy because she was fast enough to easily outrun the U-boats that were terrorizing the Atlantic at that time. The Division was in training for about a month near Banbury, England, after which we were shipped to France in early December of 1944.

The crossing was very, very rough; everybody was seasick. We had two meals a day. Breakfast was porridge and two baguettes of French bread to last till dinner. Dinner was greasy and didn't help the seasickness at all. After about three days of standing offshore in rough seas, when the weather calmed down enough for us to land, we put ashore near Le Havre, at night, in the rain. We were told to pitch our tents in a cow pasture. We sure didn't get much sleep that night! The next day we were loaded into boxcars and sent to the area where France, Liechtenstein and Germany meet. On the 11th of December, we replaced the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division (which was sent to St. Vith). We were in a salient that was supposed to be very quiet, in the Ardennes forest, east of St. Vith. I had been assigned to a 60 mm. mortar squad as gunner.

Our position was about 100 yards back of the front line, at the edge of a stand of trees. We were the right flank company of the right flank regiment. The next units to the south were from the 28th Division. This area was known as the Ardennes Forest, which had seen a lot of action during World War I. Bea's father recalled spending a lot of time driving a mule cart of munitions through the Ardennes from the rear to the front line, including one time when he got lost and rattled and banged his way all night long through the woods. When he finally found the unit to which he was to deliver his munitions load, he arrived to find all arms trained on him. When the men he was approaching saw he was a Scot, they were pop-eyed, according to Dad Fulton, since he was approaching them through the German lines. Apparently, he had been driving his mule-cart all night in the German-held territory. Since - going through the forest at night - he often sang aloud in his Scottish burr to keep up his spirits, he concluded the Germans had been unable to understand him, but didn't think he sounded "English-enough" to be an enemy! The main thing he recalled about the Ardennes was that it was the "blackest" forest he ever remembered.

The Ardennes is a pine forest area, much like the area just south of Flagstaff, AZ. here in the U.S. The trees are very tall, with the first branches up quite high. There is very little underbrush - probably because people have gathered wood from the forest for so many years that everything within reasonable reach has been taken for firewood. The reason the forest seems to be "black" at night is that, with the high cover of the evergreens, very little moonlight reaches the ground. On the 16th of December, at about 5 in the morning of our fifth day there, while we were still trying to "settle in", and before all of our supplies had yet arrived, the Germans attacked. Under cover of heavy fog, 38 German Divisions struck along a 50-mile front.

This was the area that was supposed (according to Allied expectations) to be "very quiet". Because the Allies had expected little action in the area, the Allied forces were spread very thin - partly due to the fact that the original U.S. plan to commit 200 U.S. Army Divisions had been scaled back to only 89 - so American manpower was stretched to its limit to wage the war in that sector. Furthermore, this area of the Ardennes (General Jones' command) was probably the worst to try to defend along the entire Ardennes line, given the restrictions placed on the unit from the higher headquarters. The 106th had to contend with a corps boundary, a flank sitting astride a principal invasion route (the Losheim Gap) and a large portion of its unit confined to an exposed location on the Schnee Eifel. The truth is that nobody believed the unit would be attacked on the so-called "ghost front". The German offensive came as a complete surprise to the Allied High Command. It's probable the 106th would not have been destroyed had it not been placed (untried, untrained, unsettled and even un-supplied) in the path of a powerful offensive that no-one had thought was even a remote possibility.

There was a long artillery barrage and many of the trees of the forest were blown down, so that the woods became pretty much impassable. Many of the downed trees fell across the roads, too, so where there had been roads, it also became impassable. There was a great deal of confusion since much of the Division and Regimental artillery was still in transit. There was poor communication with everybody partly because this front had not been prepared for an attack, and partly because the attack had severed many communication lines.

There were no ground attacks in the area where we were, but north of us, where the two other regiments of our Division were online, there was heavy foot and tank action. The two regiments north of our position were surrounded and cut off pretty quickly on the ridge called the Schnee Eifel. It was later described as the "the most horrendous disaster that befell the 106th Infantry Division", that the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments became the largest defection of U.S. forces (through capture) of World War II. Ours was the only remaining Regiment of the 106th. During the night of the 19th of December (8 days, approximately, after our original arrival in the sector), we were ordered to withdraw, and subsequently found that the 28th Division to our right had withdrawn many hours earlier. With the confusion at night and the continuing occasional artillery fire and fallen trees all over the place, a group of us (maybe 8 or 10 of us, altogether) became separated from the rest. We wandered around back of the lines for quite some time - quite a few days, maybe a couple of weeks - trying to keep warm, stay out of the line of fire and find food. I especially remember one day - just about Christmas Day, which was the first fairly clear day in the skies after the German attack. From before dawn until after dark, the sky was full of American airplanes bombing the German supply lines and positions. It was on that day I saw my first jet airplane, which was a German plane, and tried to figure out WHAT it was! But we sure were pleased to see the American planes which kept the Germans from moving around very much.

I recall once coming across a burned-out U.S. tank, which we entered in hopes of finding rations - and did. I also found a Zippo lighter, which was a high point for me, since I had wanted one for some time! Bea recalls that when I first met her and she asked about my Army experiences, I told her that I had not been under a roof for about two or three months. I don't recall telling her that - and think my recollection of how long it was may have been because it seemed like "forever"- but I do know that I have no recollections of any houses in the Ardennes area where we were. I do know that from the time I arrived in France, I was not under a roof until I was in the hospital - so that "two or three months" included all of that time, including my time wandering around in the Ardennes Forest. In actual fact, it probably was about three to four weeks! Anyway, whatever shelter we could find in the forest consisted of incapacitated tanks, trucks, downed trees, etc.

(P.S. addition by Bea Keeber at a later date: Bill once told me that he was so cold in the December nights in the Ardennes that he recalled once coming across a disabled German artillery piece. He was pretty skinny in those days, and maybe skinnier than usual at that time since rations were in such short supply. To get out of the cold wind, he slithered into the "cannon's mouth" to sleep. Imagine how cold it must have been that sleeping inside a metal artillery piece was warmer than any other place available!!) The ground was covered with a light snow, which occasionally melted enough to become just slush. The daytime temperatures were in the high 30's to low 50's, with freezing temperatures at night. My feet got wet, and I never had a chance to dry out my shoes or socks since I didn't have anything else to change into. That was when I got "trench foot", for which I was later hospitalized. I'm not sure how trench foot is described medically, but it is the result of poor circulation (from cold and wet). It is not exactly the same as frozen feet or

frostbite, but can certainly include those problems, too. Isay this was the experience that taught me to try to keep my socks dry for the rest of my life!

After days of wandering around cold and hungry, trying to keep from being killed by artillery fire or hit by falling trees and wondering if we'd be captured by the Germans, we finally found a group of tanks from the 3rd Army which were moving into position to counter-attack the German offensive. I was sent to the hospital from there with Trench Foot, and I learned, after the fact, that I had been listed as "Missing in Action". A telegram had been sent home. Then my folks got another telegram saying that I'd been found, but they worried a lot between the two telegrams!

I was sent to a hospital in Liege, Belgium for about two weeks over New Year's. At that time, the Germans were using "buzz bombs" - V-1's - which we could hear flying overhead. They also used these bombs to attack London, but the ones directed at our area were the short-range ones. If we heard the motor cut off, which was a sign of it being ready to hit the ground, we'd roll off our cots and under them. Fortunately, nothing hit the hospital. After about two weeks of being nicely warmed up, I was sorry to be shipped back to my Division where I expected to be in the cold again! I mentioned earlier that two of the regiments were surrounded. When I was shipped back to the Divison (or what was left of it since it now consisted of only one regiment rather than three), we were involved in some light actions for about two weeks. This must have been somewhere near the end of January. After that, the regiment was shipped back to France and put into position near San Lazare (or Nazare) on the Normandy coast. A group of Germans had been cut off toward the end of the peninsula shortly after D-Day and it was our function to keep them there. While we were at this position, the Division was brought back up to strength. The Division was augmented by the addition of more men and units, but I don't recall what the structure was. After awhile, in early April, the entire augmented group was shipped back to Germany in the area near the Rhine near a town called Bingen, where we were made responsible for guarding several prisoner-of-war camps.

At this time, the Germans recognized (after their losses at the time of the Bulge) that they were losing the war. The Allied High Command was moving regiments and armies around Europe like pawns on a chess board. The German High Command tried to move as many men as possible to the east side of Germany - at the Russian front - because they wanted to have as much as possible of Germany taken by the Americans rather than the Russians because the Germans expected they'd get better treatment from the Western Group (Americans, English and French). The Russians complained - a political thing at the time - so the Allied Forces held up for a couple of weeks (possibly near the Elbe, but I don't recall for sure) to wait to be joined by the Russians.

A funny thing happened on our way from St. Lazare in France to this new post in Germany. We were traveling in the normal way - crammed into boxcars furnished with only straw on the floor and 5-gallon cans of water. We stopped at a rail yard, where we all got out of the boxcars to stretch our legs. About 5 tracks away was a group of what looked like very large wooden barrels loaded on flat rail cars. Out of curiosity, since we all had ammunition, somebody put a rifle slug into the side, near the top, of one of the barrels. Out squirted a stream of extremely sweet red wine. Naturally (or more likely, stupidly!) we emptied our 5-gallon water cans, and filled them up with this wine. Then the train left, and the last I remember was lying on my stomach in the open door of the boxcar puking up my toes, and seeing a whole row of heads sticking out of every boxcar up and down the train! Worst of all, when we came to, there was nothing in the cans to drink but more wine!!

Until the war in Europe was finally over on May 9th, 1945, our particular group was posted near the town of Bingen on the Rhine in the heart of wine country. Undeterred by the train incident, even though we weren't supposed to "fraternize" with the German civilians, we were able to sneak out and swap cans of Spam for bottles of wine, which did make guard duty go much faster!

We were billeted in a castle. It was a big stone building that had had some windows put into it, and we slept on cots. It was Spring, and although it was cold, it was a lot warmer than we'd been in Winter. We did have hot food, which was a nice change from cold C-rations. Cigarettes were free to Allied soldiers, so we sold a lot of them to the prisoners, for Marks. This was not convertible to U.S. cash, so we put the money into a "pot" which we used to buy wine, beer, and Cognac. Every day a large group of prisoners would be turned loose from the gate to walk back to their homes in Germany any way they could get there. We didn't worry about how they made it. We didn't think much about them at all; they were just prisoners, and the "enemy" that had been shooting at us, and we'd been chasing each other around Europe for a while. Getting through Germany was their problem, not ours. The prisons had slit trenches and they got very stinky, and since more prisoners kept coming in, the camp administration had to get rid of some. Officially or unofficially, somebody from Administration opened the gates, and let them out. We never knew who. Basically, we pulled guard duty - but "what for"? They just came, and later they left. While they were "in", we guarded the fence. When they were let out, we just watched them go.

Although the European War was over, in May 1945 (Germany surrendered May 7, and May 8 was declared V-E Day - Victory in Europe), the Pacific War was still hot. Invading Japan was the hot item in the rumor mill. Those who were in combat units in Europe were supposed to be shipped to the Far East through the U.S. and given a furlough en route. Since time was of the essence to the Allied Command, to the extent possible, combat units were transferred to non-combat units and shipped directly from Europe to the Far East, instead of being sent via the longer (with furlough) U.S. route. I was attached to a Port engineering group which had built the sinkable docks and breakwaters that were used immediately after D-Day to allow movement of materials into Europe. We were stationed in the desert north of Marseilles, France, in tents. We passed our time playing pinochle since there was nothing else to do. Meanwhile, the heavy equipment was loaded onto the ships. While this was happening, in very early September or late August, I think, the A-bombs were dropped on Japan. They surrendered within a week of the second bomb. (The Japanese surrendered Sept. 2, 1945, which then became known as V-J Day - Victory over Japan). Rather than unload the equipment from the ships, they loaded the Engineers (by now including me) onto the same ships, and we were shipped back to New York harbor. It was a beautiful trip! The war was over, everybody was happy, and we were going home! "Sentimental Journey" was the big popular music hit at the time! Aboard, during the trip (about a week or two), we passed our time playing poker, just talking, just lazing around. We didn't have any particular assignments or duties. As the time wore on, there was less gambling, as all the money was concentrated in the hands of the best players. I had a month furlough after I got back to the States and was shipped home. At about the end of that time, my father had his first Stroke, and my leave was extended. After the extension, I went back to Fort Dix, N.J. and was discharged close to Thanksgiving (just before or just after) of 1945. I came home, helped my mom with my father and decided to go to college under the G.I. Bill.

I started at the University of Buffalo in January of 1946. My selection of Chemistry was mostly due to the fact that a family friend a little older than me was a chemist at Linde Air Products, which sounded like good work. I really didn't do much research into possible careers, just sort of followed my nose. My nose turned out to do o.k., as it turned out.

On February 14, 1946 (Valentine's Day), I met Bea Fulton in the Student Union at U.B. We were married June 12, 1948, 2 years and 4 months later.

Bea keeps asking me to describe my feelings during the war. I didn't really think I had any feelings except cold and fear and hunger. They put me there and in order to stay alive I had to shoot faster and try to be a little smarter than the other guy. That's all there was to it.

After I got out, and came back to college, most of the guys in school had been in the Service, so there was nothing to talk to them about - we all had more or less the same experiences. I had been out of school for a while, and needed to concentrate on learning and grades. Everything in school was new to me, and that took my interest and attention. Bea and I dated, and between classes and homework and dating, I kept pretty busy.

After we were engaged, Bea decided to leave college, since we wouldn't be able to afford to get married with two of us in college. So Bea went to work instead, and I stayed in college, since - in those days - it wasn't considered as important for a wife to have a college education as for a husband.

Then we got married, and I was on the G.I. Bill, so money was not plentiful. I worked part-time or full-time, depending on school. Then the kids started to arrive, and money was tighter, and work was more necessary. Bea and I were determined I'd finish college, so we just kept plugging along. Bea worked till before Gail was born, then she stayed home and pinched pennies. I worked whenever I could, and studied as much as I could. I got my BA in June, 1959, just before Gail's birth in Sept. '49. That June there was a little Depression going on in Buffalo, N.Y., where we lived, and jobs were scarce as hens' teeth. My mother needed her large house painted, so she hired me to do it, and that supported us that summer. Since my G.I. Bill was used up, I took an exam to qualify for a N.Y. State Veterans' Scholarship and got it. That enabled me to go on to Graduate school, which was a good thing, since jobs were still pretty scarce. By the time I had run through that scholarship, we had 2-1/2 more kids, and I didn't yet have an advanced degree. I had earned most of my credits toward a Ph.D., having elected to skip the M.A. step. But the scholarship ran out, and I had to look for work.

At that time there was quite a bit of recruiting by major corporations, which - by then - were getting back into a good business swing after the transition from war work to civilian efforts. During Graduate School, I had worked part-time for National Aniline, and also for DuPont. I also worked full-time for DuPont, and went to school part or full-time at the same time. At one point, DuPont wanted to transfer us to Columbus, Ohio to a new plant, but when we went down there to look over the housing, etc., we discovered that the U. of Ohio would not accept my Graduate credits for transfer. So I quit DuPont.

In order to finish college, we decided NOT to buy a new house on which we had put down a deposit, planning to buy it with a VA loan. The builder was very sympathetic with my desire to finish my Advanced Degree. Even though they had dug the foundation, he was sure he could re-sell the house easily, so he gave us back our entire down-payment. That

money was what we lived on while I worked a lot of extra hours at the University to complete my Ph.D.

During school, we had rented a couple of different places to live. But apartments or flats were hard to find, since so many G.I.'s were starting families. So the pickings were slim. When a man in our church mentioned that he was moving and selling his house, we asked about it. It turned out to be quite inexpensive, and we were able to scrape together the down payment (\$300!) so we bought it on the G. I. Bill in 1951. That was our \$2,900 house on Waverly St. in Buffalo, N. Y. Before I had all my work finished for my Ph.D., Esso came to the campus to recruit. They made me an offer, which included a move to N. J. to work in their research facility in Linden, N.J. I decided I would finish my Ph.D. work part-time, since we were running out of money.

When the company sent me a telegram offering me the job, they quoted a salary which popped our eyes. Bea's comment (which we now laugh about!) was, "How could we possibly spend all that money?!" As it turned out, N.J. had a higher cost of living than N.Y. State in the Buffalo area, so we soon found out. However, my Professor - upon seeing the telegram I showed him - commented wryly that it was more money than he earned as a tenured Professor nearing retirement!

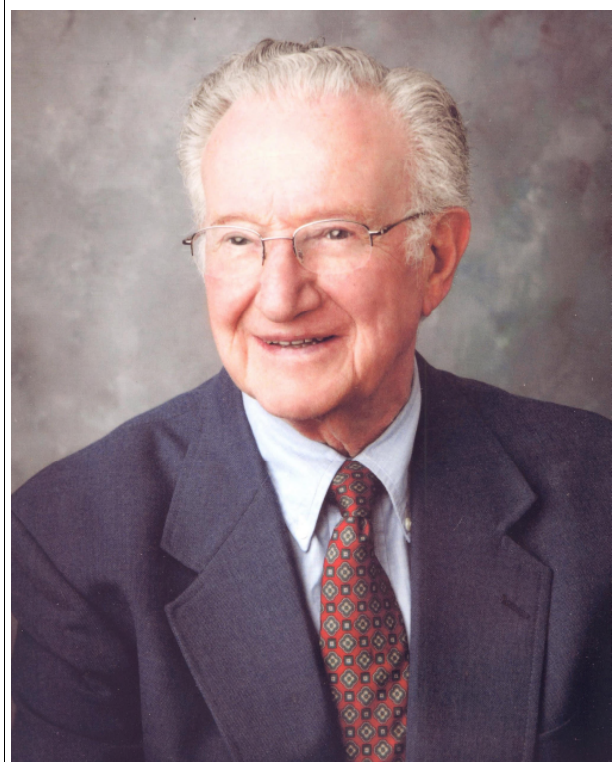
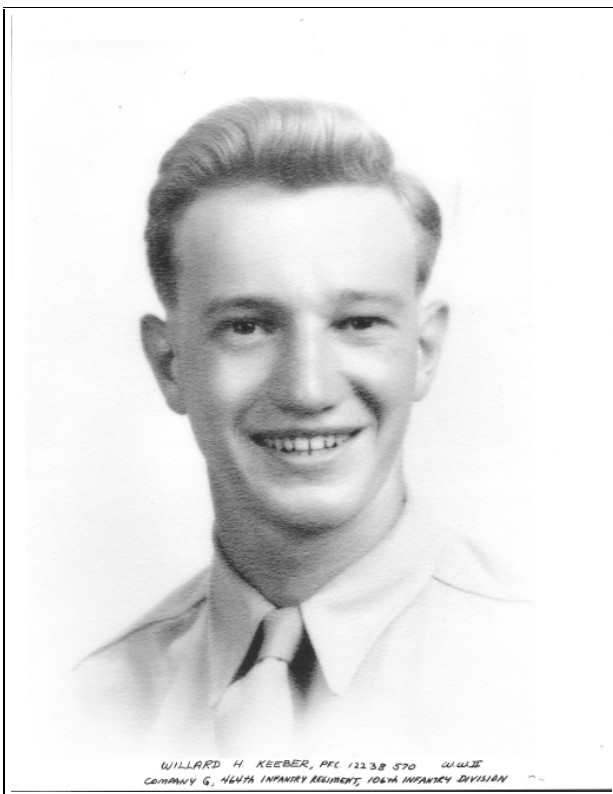
I moved to N.J. to start work for Esso Research Labs in October of 1955. Bea and the family stayed in Buffalo to sell our house on Waverly St. I came home to spend Christmas with the family, and then Bea and the family moved to N.J. in January. I rented a house - about the only house I could find to rent to children without a lease. It wasn't a palace, but it was large. Bea described the stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms and only bath as "Jacob's Ladder to Heaven"!

I was able to have my G.I. Loan transferred to N. J. since there were no jobs of the same caliber available in the Buffalo area. Under the G. I. Loan rules, I was moving to find work suitable to my education. We started looking for a house to buy soon after we moved to N. J. When we found a new development on Roger Ave. in Westfield, we liked the model, and decided to go ahead and buy it. It was our first experience with building a home.

Our first look at "our" lot turned out to be a disaster. We drove down the dirt construction track denoting what would someday be Roger Ave. This was in the winter or early Spring, 1956. Being used to frozen Buffalo ground, it never occurred to us that we could not drive the mud track. As we drove, the wheels dug in deeper and deeper in the N. J. Spring muck. In front of the spot that would later be our home, we finally bogged down and could go no further. We were two building lots short of the pavement in the next town of Cranbrook! I climbed out the window since the mud was holding the door shut, and Bea handed me the kids one at a time through the window. I slogged through the mud with them, put them down on the pavement, and finally went back for Bea, carrying her out piggy-back. We asked to use a phone at one of the houses in Cranbrook, and called a tow truck. They came and tried to back up on the mud toward our car. When they began to sink, they pulled back onto the pavement and told us they'd drive us home and come back the next day, Monday, with a winch to get out our car. We didn't get a very good first look at "our property"!! The car WAS "winched out", very much in need of a complete cleaning. It had been mired in mud to up above the bottoms of the doors. Our kids will have recollections of life in Westfield on Roger Ave. So from there on, I'll leave the "remembering" to them.

Dictated by Willard H. Keeber to Beatrice Fulton Keeber. (Later P.S. by Bea Keeber - When I first met Bill in college, it was not unusual, if a car back-fired, or any sudden noise occurred, for all the vets at school to "hit the dirt" automatically. I recall dropping a text book in the Student Union. The book landed flat - with a smart whack! - and earned me the ire of a number of vets who dropped to the floor instantaneously. It also occurs to me, reading this over, that some interesting coincidences occurred to Bill. When he was in training in Alabama, he was reasonably close to Chattanooga, TN. where his great-grandfather (who had also fought in the Mexican War campaign in a unit which landed at Santa Cruz and fought overland to take Mexico City) died at the time of the Battle of Chattanooga in the Civil War. (The grave of Johann Michael Keeber is one of the earliest ones occupied in the first National Cemetery In Chattanooga!) That earlier Keeber soldier had drunk water at Gettysburg from a well supposedly poisoned "by the Rebs", and suffered periodic illness and misery from then on till his death in the early days of the battle to break the siege of Chattanooga. We never learned this until many years later, but his last recorded duty (according to his service daybook obtained through the Army History unit) was with a unit building pontoon bridges across the river so the Union troops could enter the western side of Chattanooga. And Bill's last duty in WW II was with an Engineering group which had built equipment to move materiel into Europe. Fortunately, unlike his great-grandfather, Bill did not end up in a National Cemetery as a result of his wartime service!)

At the present time - June 19, 2007, Dr. Keeber, a 60% service-connected disabled veteran of WW II - suffers from Parkinson's and some memory loss, In addition to other health challenges. He is unable to sign his name because of the Parkinson's, but was pleased that I prepared his recollections for the Veterans History Project.



Source: Beatrice F. Keeber



Page last revised

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