

Clinnie Malcolm Laws — Survivor of Pearl Harbor and World War II, Part I

When I co-chaired and chaired (after the death of Don Buie) the Lee County Centennial (2007), I asked Tom and Brenda Winstead Spence to tape interviews, which I transcribed and edited for the major book about the event. In 2011, I invited Clinnie Malcolm Laws, one of those interviewed, to speak at the Sanford Rotary about his experience in World War II. He was in his early nineties then and said that I would need to ask him questions. I had them all set but did not get to use them—Malcolm “took off” and performed wonderfully without any prodding from me.

Malcolm and his brothers, sisters, and mother talked his father into coming to Lee County for a year to raise tobacco in its “sand.” The family moved during Christmas 1936 to the farm of Lonnie Sloan in Broadway. His “parents’ folks” were originally from the Rougemont area in Orange County, but its land was not suitable for tobacco because of the rocks and fast-growing grass that required chopping. “You’d hit a rock,” Malcolm remembered, “and the hoe would glance and cut your toe or chop down a tobacco stalk.” The eleven acres they “tended” brought in \$200.00 per acre, half of which went for rent. Malcolm was about sixteen or seventeen and did not understand having to pay for using the land. He persuaded his “daddy” to buy a small farm at Swanns Station and, later, land in Lemon Springs. The Laws sold their tobacco

in Sanford, Durham, and sometimes Roxboro, which was close to their original home. They used mules, shared the work with neighbors, and did not need to hire help.

Malcolm went to school in Broadway that first year. He was shy, though a “little ornery,” and was characterized as “a slow learner,” but some of the teachers kept him in during lunch and worked with him. When the Laws moved to Swanns Station, he attended school at Greenwood in Lemon Springs. He finished high school in 1939 and wanted to go to college, but the family was too large and lacked the money. He had two brothers—a third one had died in 1930—and three sisters. Malcolm was intrigued that he and his wife had the same number of children as his parents.

World War II was already going on in England, and Malcolm knew that America would enter and that he would be drafted sooner or later. He joined the Navy 11/11/1939. He just did not want to be in the Army, mostly because of the tales he had heard about sleeping in the woods with bugs and snakes.

After some fourteen weeks of training in Norfolk, he went aboard his first ship, the USS Morris, a Sims class destroyer, and was one of its “plank owners” because he helped put it “in commission.” The ship went up and down the coast on a “shake-down cruise.” He never saw an enemy vessel, but, once when he was on guard duty about 4 A.M., he sighted something sticking up from the water close by. He made no report because he thought a sailor had gotten tired of swabbing the decks and thrown his mop overboard. Malcolm later realized that he had probably seen the periscope of a German submarine!



The USS Morris was one of those on duty in St. Thomas. America had given aircraft to England, and the Navy was patrolling to protect them. Ships were being sunk.

When Malcolm “joined up,” he did not realize how big the ocean was. In fact, he “had the dumb idea that [he] could see across it,” but he was educated about it all “pretty quickly.” Once when the rain was pouring and the wind was blowing 80 mph, he was on duty in the crow’s nest. The ship would “rare up, fall back down, lean over, come back, lean the other way, and so on. I was terribly sick. In fact, when I’d pulled my duty, the Captain called off sending anybody else to replace me because it was so bad. Some of the fellows who’d been in the Navy for years admitted it was the worst storm they’d been through.” The purpose of the cruise was to check out the ship, which proved to be top-heavy.

After about six months in the Atlantic, the Morris exited through the Panama Canal and went to Pearl Harbor and beyond. When it crossed the International Date Line at Christmas, the crew was able to celebrate the occasion twice.

Hawaii was beautiful. Malcolm remembers its having only one hotel. He also recalls the “bright idea” he had there: he wanted to buy an acre of its land. He was making \$21 a month and sending \$7 of it home to his sister. He never followed through but often wished he had!

Because he suffered from sea sickness and needed a larger ship, Malcolm asked to be transferred and was sent to the Dobbin, a repair vessel. He was training as an electrician but stood watch at a gun station. The duty was four hours on and eight off. On the Friday before the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, the order came down to put away the ammunition because two Japanese representatives were going to Washington to sign a peace treaty. Malcolm was on duty that weekend, but about everyone else had gone ashore. After breakfast, he went topside, read the paper a while, then left for an office area. Just as he arrived, the commotion—the biggest he heard before or since—started. Thinking the Germans had come, he ran for the gun station, which had no ammo! He went to the supply area looking for it, but everything was locked. He and the few who had joined him broke in, took armfuls, and headed back up.

The Japanese had already made two passes and had bombed the Arizona and other ships, and two planes now came at the Dobbin. They shot the first one down, but the pilot got off one bomb that landed beside the ship before his plane crashed in a pineapple field. The second one came at the tail of the ship and did some damage. They hit that plane, too, and it exploded in the air.

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HEALING

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his lucid vision to create a system of earth astrology to help guide people in our life path. This approach leads participants to “... walk in balance on our Earth Mother.” (quote from “A Sun Bear book: The Medicine Wheel”)

Sun Bear created the foundation for the Bear Tribe Medicine Society in 1971. Quote: “... the Spirit told me it was time to start working with nonnative people.” The lucid vision and the Medicine Wheel it produced led directly to a

world-wide adoption of this ritual as a means of sharing “native-teachings” to an audience that was, at best, only vaguely aware of the beauty and significance of the America’s native cultural and spiritual gifts. Initially, the American Indian Movement (AIM) voiced opposition to the movement that included non-natives; Sun Bear reported in published interviews that his vision was supported as the emerging practice spread. Due to the absence of traditional religious symbolism and dogma, the Medicine Wheel’s openness may contribute to healing of the spirit within as well as a bridge to multi-cultural appreciation.

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The practice of the Medicine Wheel may be elaborate or rather simple. Some models follow Sun Bear’s precedent with numerous animal totems (Buffalo, Eagle, Coyote, Bear) with native-inspired mythology. For example, the citing of a hawk is felt to indicate the value of paying attention to the wisdom and messages found in one’s intuition. The authority for the significance of the Medicine Wheel is the individual participant. Insights, dreams, or visions are not prescribed, another factor that makes its practice and site adoption practical and void of political controversy.

How to walk the wheel: The medicine wheel does not have an agenda. Twelve stones are arranged in a circle. Each stone is assigned a zodiac month, with due North noting January. Participants walk in a sun direction (clock wise). The participant walks the wheel several times in silence before stopping to privately meditate at his/her birth stone, marked by month. If there is a leader, it is customary to “honor your ancestors” (and family) with silent prayer or memories and words of gratitude and appreciation. The wheel may be used by individuals or groups. If no leader is present, some Medicine Wheels feature simple signage with suggested directions. Common features to the wheel are earth songs or chants (if led); honoring the four directions*; ceremonial tobacco or sage burning; selection one of 16 identified “healing characters.” (noted on wood or stone signs within the wheel in a N<S<E<W pattern), and corn meal to mark selected characters such as health, prosperity, guidance, compassion, insight... This practice, at some point, is akin to prayer; references to Great Spirit, Grandfather/Mother or “The Great Mystery” are optional. Often visitors choose to simply meditate at the site and may customize the practice as they are inspired. Frequently, A small stone may be taken home as a “memory stone” if the site provides. Fire and incense may be present if the ritual is supervised or led. More elaborate rituals include the peace pipe and burning of sage. The attitude is reverent, casual and personal.

Medicine Wheels have been erected in Orange and Chatham Counties.

(* Four Cardinal Directions: EAST: Sun rises. Brings warmth and light. A place of beginnings. Its light supports knowledge. WEST: Direction of the power of change. Healing. Dreams and introspection of the unknown. Purity and strength. NORTH: Cold winds. Power of wisdom. Time of reflection- elder age. SOUTH: Warmth; the spirit of the earth. The power of life. Represents peace and renewal.

Gaines Steer, Community Organizer, is a writer & storyteller who lives in Pittsboro. He is the author of “A Story Worth Tellin’: a documented memoir”.