

**Oral History Interview with**

**ASHTON BURRESS**

Saturday, Sept. 27, 1998

At Skyland Conference Hall  
66<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the Shenandoah Chapter  
of the  
Civilian Conservation Corps

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Shenandoah National Park  
Luray, VA

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## Transcription

RE: September, at Skyland Conference Hall. We're interviewing Mr. Ashton Burress about his experiences at Camp Roosevelt, the first CCC camp in the United States, in George Washington Memorial Forest. Mr. Burress, you understand that this interview will be used for non-profit and educational purposes and research on the Civilian Conservation Corps?

AB: Yes sir.

RE: Thank you very much. Ashton, before we get into the Civilian Conservation Corps, why don't you give me a little bit of information about yourself. Where were you born?

AB: Uh, I was born at Bumpass, Virginia.

RE: Bumpass is outside of Fredricksburg?

AB: That's not, that's not where I live now.

RE: But that's where you were born?

AB: That's where I was born. Bumpass is uh, close to the main line of the C&O Railroad track, about 30, 40 miles west of Richmond. About halfway between Charlottesville and Richmond. And that's where I was born, Bumpass, Virginia.

RE: And who were your parents?

AB: Littleton C. Burress and Bertha Meeks Burress.

RE: Meeks?

AB: She was a Meeks, my mother was a Meeks. She married a Burress.

RE: And what did you parents do for a living?

AB: He was a farmer.

RE: Your father was a farmer?

AB: Mm hmm.

RE: And your mother was just a homemaker?

AB: Right.

RE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

AB: 9 brothers.

RE: Wow, 9 brothers.

AB: 3 sisters.

RE: So that was 13 of you?

AB: 12.

RE: Oh, counting you, 9 boys?

AB: Mm hmm.

RE: And did you go to school in Bumpass?

AB: Went to school in Bumpass, yes. The school, the name of the school. The name of the school was Broad Street. Back then, the country, just an old country road. One room school, Broad Street School.

RE: Alright. You grew up in Bumpass, before you left? Before you went in the Civilian Conservation Corps?

AB: I went in uh, CC's when I was 17 years old. I was supposed to have been 18, but I told them a story and I got in.

RE: What year was that?

AB: I believe it was in '34. 1934. I believe it was.

RE: '34 was five years into the Great Depression. Uh, did the Depression have any impact on your family? On, on your father particularly in farming?

AB: Well, yes. Of course, we farmed you know for a living and uh, uh, it, we raised a little tobacco for a cash crop, you know. But uh, you know, the Depression hit. Effects on a lot of people about. Actually, uh, I would go out and work for somebody else some, too, when I was on the farm. And uh, let's see, I believe the first work I done was 50 cents a day.

RE: Wow. Did you get a meal with that though? Did they give you a meal with that?

AB: No, no. No. No meal. I had my own lunch. 50 cents a day. Worked 10 hours.

RE: Now 1930 was the biggest drought in the history of Virginia.

AB: I remember.

RE: Right in the beginning of the Depression. Do you remember that?

AB: I remember that. I sure do.

RE: What?

AB: I was about 13 years old. I was about 13 then.

RE: What impact, what impact did that have on your father and your neighbors?

AB: Well, like I say, we had to cut corners, to, to survive, you know. Back then, if you raised a good corn crop, you about had it made, □cause you could use the corn, you know to feed the stock. To feed the animals that you need. Hogs, and like uh, chickens. And uh, we kept a few chickens to raise, hens laid. Trade eggs for sugar and coffee and stuff like that you know.

RE: Now some of the interviews that we've had said 1930, since the corn crop was lost to the drought, that an awful lot of farmers had to butcher their hogs, □cause they had no market, couldn't feed them.

AB: Well people had to get rid of their stock. Sell their stock, like uh. We lived on a pretty good farm. We had uh, Lake Arrowhead's got my old home place covered up.

RE: Oh, really?

AB: And we raised enough corn to get by.

RE: You did?

AB: Yes sir, we sure did.

RE: Well 1934, you were 17 years old and uh, the Civilian Conservation Corps had been established just the preceding May in 1933, uh how'd you find out about it?

AB: Well, you know uh, we had, we had friends, and uh, a man named uh Lewis Chisolm, he was a friend of my dad's. Word got around, and he told us about it, and uh my brother, older than I am, he. They took into the CC camp. He was up here in one of these camps up here on the ridge.

RE: What was his name?

AB: John Burress.

RE: John Burress?

AB: He's dead now. He's 3 years older than I was. Something like that, or 2 years. And word gets out. You know, spread around, and I found out there's another boy a mile or 2 away, and he got in a camp, like this you know. And I was just anxious to get in myself. And uh, when I got 17, I thought I could fool them enough. You know, I was strong.

RE: Now did you have to be mustered in for a couple weeks of training before you went to the park?

AB: They took us to Fort, took us to Richmond, Virginia, to the recruiting station. And uh, from there we went to Fort Monroe, Virginia. Stayed there, and that's where we took the, the big examination. You know, there's a doctor, do you have anything. And I stayed there about, I think 10 days, and that's where they muster you out to different places, you know. But I stayed there about 10 days. And we left there on a train. I guess it had about 12 coaches. And they just dropped coaches off, here and yonder, here and yonder, you know, like that. And uh, they'd tell you where you were going when you left there. And they told us, "Camp Roosevelt!" I remember that. Army sergeant tell us, "Camp Roosevelt!" He says, "The Garden of Eden!" I remember, I remember that. And some of the boys complained, says, when they got there, "Camp Roosevelt!" They says, "Brought us right back in the brush." And all that, you know, young people, one thing to do, but uh.

RE: So you arrived on Luray on the train?

AB: Edinburg.

RE: Edinburg?

AB: Yeah. Truck met us, brought us to the camp. About 8 or 9, about 8 miles I reckon it was crossing there at that time.

RE: Now when you got there, [pause]

Now when you arrived, uh, at Camp Roosevelt, which was the first Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the United States, were the buildings constructed at that point, or were you still in tents?

AB: Yeah. The buildings was constructed. But I seen movies of what went on at first. But the barracks was actually built when I got there.

RE: And you arrived in the spring?

AB: it was in the fall.

RE: You arrived in the fall. October?

AB: October.

RE: October. And uh,

AB: I believe uh, the forest ranger was there, and kind of gave a little talk. I can't remember what happened this morning, but I can remember what, I can remember the captain's name. The army captain, was uh, Paul O. Tucker.

RE: Paul O. Tucker?

AB: Mm hmm. And the lieutenant was Duvall. Lieutenant Duvall. And the doctor was uh, he was a short guy, Italian, Cadonia.

RE: Cadonia?

AB: That was the doctor. And uh, that was when we arrived uh. John Crisman was a forest ranger. He was the head man of the whole national, in that district there. He was the boss, right.

RE: Now what, what work were you specifically assigned when you got to Camp Roosevelt?

AB: Well, same, best thing I got was, helped cut the road away. They was working on it. They built the road up there on the ridge, coming from Camp Roosevelt, out to 211. Where you can look over there and see New Market, and to the left is going toward Luray, you know. The first, the first work I done was help cut the right of way for that road.

RE: Now when you say cutting it, are you talking cutting trees?

AB: Cutting trees. Right

RE: Now were they dead chestnuts? Or were they live trees?

AB: No, no, no. We were just cutting the right of way for the road. The right of way for the road. So, it was laid off by the engineer, you know. We cut the right of way. And uh, and they was working on the road, you know.

RE: With big equipment?



AB: Well, we had, I know we had one bulldozer then, and another big caterpillar tractor. And finally got another dozer. And, bulldozer, and uh, then uh, we got the right of way cut. I did different things. Helped build the road. It was things to do. Shoot stumps, I helped dynamite stumps out, things like that you know.

RE: Tell us a little bit about your day. What time did you get up in the morning?

AB: I done forgot, I really done forgot that, but it was early, you know. We lived on the army rule. Had to get out and sing Reveille. Roll out. And we had a barrack leader you know. And uh, we'd have to go out and call your name off, and give you time to run over to the bathhouse and wash you face and get ready for cold shower.

RE: And then after you had breakfast, you'd head out to the field?

AB: Yeah. After you had breakfast, we'd come in and uh, uh they'd give you a little time. We went over to what they called the Forestry side, across the road over to the, and that's where we, where they kept equipment, the trucks.

RE: And they, they drug you out to your worksite. Did they bring lunch to you in the field?

AB: They did both. They, either way you was asking. We'd take lunch. And then on, on the, course if a lot of them working, they'd bring the chow truck out there. And eat, eat fish out, out of the chow line.

RE: Decent food?

AB: Oh, yeah, good food.

RE: And what time would you knock off in the afternoon to go back to camp?

AB: Uh, I don't know, we worked, we worked about 6 hours. That was the rule, you worked 6 hours.

RE: And so you'd go back mid-afternoon to camp?

AB: Oh yeah, yeah, you got back in plenty of time to take a bath, wash up you know, and I think we'd go out just before time to go to chow. We lined up and uh, I believe we lowered the flag before we ate, I believe. We lived, we lived on the army rule. And I liked the army rule.

RE: Now, what did you do for recreation, Ashton?

AB: Well, we uh, later on, we had a recreation hall. And then we had a [Education Advisor], I forgot what you'd call it now, but he [was] named Mr. Tinney. He was the

head of the uh, see that you got recreation, and this, more or less. And we had, had the recreation hall we met in after supper, after we'd ate.

RE: Did you have sports teams? Basketball?

AB: Sports teams, yes we did. And uh, we had uh, uh, I don't know whether we had, I know we had softball, and uh. And later on they uh, they got us a radio. Big radio, put it in the recreation hall. So it was uh, it was alright. Wasn't nothing wrong with it.

RE: Did you have dances with any local women?

AB: I don't remember any dances there when I was there, at the camp. But uh, yes, uh, the board, they'd take us to town, I believe, on a Wednesday night, if you'd signed up, you wanted to go to town. And then again Friday nights, Saturday night, Sunday night. They'd get so many in. Sometimes it would be one truck or 2 trucks. Take us to Luray, or New Market, or Woodbridge. Not Woodbridge, Woodstock. There's a Woodbridge down where I live, that's the reason I.

RE: And what did you do when you went in to town?

AB: Oh, you can about guess what young people would do you know. Talk to girls, and drink beer. Stuff like that, a little bit you know.

RE: Drank beer during Prohibition?

AB: Well, everybody, in '34 it was three-two beer.

RE: Three-two beer, Roosevelt did pass three-two beer. Near-beer.

AB: See I can remember back then. I can't remember what's happened this morning. I can't remember what I done this morning. I can remember that.

RE: Is that the first time you ever had beer? When you came into the CCC?

AB: Yes, I drank a bottle or 2 of homebrew. I never was drunk. I drank a bottle or 2 of homebrew, before I went in camp.

RE: Was uh, did anybody sell homebrew up at the camp? I know here at the park.

AB: Yes, yes they did.

RE: A lot of moonshine?

AB: I'm not going to say who they were.

RE: Well, now the CCC officials made a, made a great deal over the education programs the CCC ran, but some of the interviews we had, seem to indicate that an awful lot of the boys really didn't participate in the education.

AB: They did not. We had, they had a chance. They had mechanic teachers there, working on cars, gasoline engines you know, whatever. They had several things there. I think I took mechanic a little bit, but I just wasn't in to that, I didn't have no education. I attended several classes, but they did have, they tried to give the boys a show, you know.

RE: What uh, what did you think was the best, the best thing about your CCC experience?

AB: Oh it was a great experience for me. Even back then, the country. And uh, know how to be with people, and work with people. That was a great experience. I learned a whole lot.

RE: Now the boys at Camp Roosevelt, were they all Southern? Or did you have Northern boys as well?

AB: We had mostly Southern boys, mostly Southern. A lot of them from down in the Southwest, Virginia. A lot of them, a whole lot of them were. And uh, most of them was from the Southern, later on we did get a few in there from up Pennsylvania. Just a few. But most all the ones I was with, with were Southern. And most of them from Virginia. And a good many of them was some uh, people that uh, been in the military. And done served in the military and they couldn't get jobs, and they signed up the CC camp. And I say, wasn't all of them no 18 year old, 19 year old. There was plenty of them in there 25, 26 years old.

RE: Oh really?

AB: Yes sir, even when I went in, that was towards the beginning. I understand later on, after I went left it got to ignore the age, and got to taking in more young boys. But now it was a good many now that didn't have work.

RE: Yeah, well eventually they lowered the age to 17, and then they lowered the age to 16. And some of the boys didn't tell the truth about their age and they came in at 15.

AB: Yeah.

RE: So it did get younger and younger and younger.

AB: Right. But the ones that I was in. I tell people, well when I went in. I know what happened later when they got taking them in. But I went in. And I appreciated them ex-Marines, and army men. □Cause they would tell me, how to get by.

RE: Helping you?

AB: It helped.

RE: Ashton, after you left, did you serve a 2 year hitch in CC's?

AB: Yeah.

RE: And what did you do after you left CC's?

AB: I went to uh, West Virginia. I worked for a contractor. Until I got a job in the coal mines.

RE: Whereabouts?

AB: Beckley.

RE: Oh in Beckley?

AB: Mm hmm.

RE: New River National Park. It's a national historic site now in Beckley.

AB: I got a job in the coal mines, and uh, that's where I retired.

RE: You were there about 30 years?

AB: I worked in the mines 33 years.

RE: Was it a shaft mine, or an open pit mine?

AB: I worked for a big company, when I went to work for this company, they had 11 different mines, big mines, and uh. Uh, worked at a, well when I first started to work, it wasn't in New River. I worked for a company called New River Company. It was just a small company, and back then you didn't have to have no mining certificate like they did later on. But they did require somebody to be, work for somebody that has some experience. And I worked for a little small company and I gave a friend \$25 to take me in.

RE: That's a lot of money.

AB: Well I was working for a contractor, you know. I was, I was, back then, I was getting \$3 dollars and something a day. And uh, course the [\_\_\_\_] was paying more than that, and I gave this fellow, my friend, he looked at me a little while and uh, and I

didn't work there too long. And uh, this little small company here the other mine, I thought that was a better mine. And they gave me a job later on. After I worked the first mine there. And then that was still that small company. And then I got in with the big company, had 11 big mines, and that's where I stayed.

RE: Now do you remember the strikes? The national coal strikes? The Molly McGuires?

AB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I, what I remember, the strikes. The Molly McGuires, I don't know about that, but I worked with the old miners that, that used to live in tents. Company threw them out of the housing they lived in. Then I worked with there you know.

RE: It got really violent, in Beckley in the '30s.

BA: Well, well, yeah. Most of the violence, most of that was in the '20s up to about the '30s. They had some non-union mines after I went to work. People helped to organize them you know. But a lot of that's just, union, the union didn't have too much power then. But the first coal I loaded, I went in as a coal loader. I loaded coal for 39 cents a ton.

RE: Whew. How long did it take you to load a ton?

AB: Depended on the place. Like I said, a good place made a better coal miner. A rough place, you know, you couldn't do as good you know.

RE: That was hard work.

AB: I liked it. I loved being a miner.

RE: You did?

AB: Did you ever hear of the, hear these, oh you know the saying, Once'd a, once'd a miner, always a miner. And that's about right.

RE: So do you think you CCC experience helped you in the rest of your career?

AB: Oh, yes, it sure did.

RE: So you'd do it all over again?

AB: I certainly would.

RE: Thank you.

AB: At the time, I stayed at the same company, and I worked for a mine, the New River Company. And uh, they came, that mine had run 50 years. And of course, I went there and they uh, got work now. When that mine closed they transferred me to another mine, same company. And I worked in 3 different mines, I left the company.

RE: Were you ever at Kaymoor?

AB: I, know, I know where Kaymoor is. I know.

RE: See we're in the process of restoring Kaymoor mine.

AB: I know what Kaymoor is, but I was over a little further away from there than that.

RE: Yeah.

AB: But uh, I worked for, actually 3 different company's. That gave me, by working for 3 different mines, from a big company, I have traveled for miles through the mines. There ain't much of that territory around Beckley that I haven't been.

RE: Underneath?

AB: Underneath, yeah.

John Amberson: One of these days it'll start sinking.

RE: Well a lot of them are, some of them are I think.

AB: No, well uh, it depends on how deep you're down.

JA: Right. Yeah.

AB: And they run the mines, people didn't just go and dig around, it's all engineered you know.

JA: That's true.

AB: And we worked on uh, certain parts, they knew where every house was.