

Oral History Interview with

CHARLES WAGNER

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Interviewer: Norman Taylor

Transcribed by: Gloria Updyke

Shenandoah National Park
Luray, VA

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Transcription

NT: This is an interview with Charles Wagner for the National Park Service by Normal Taylor, at the museum on August 28th, at uh 2:00, 1:10 p.m. Could you tell us um, just basically what you wrote down on that paper. Where you grew up, and where, when, when you were born, and uh, uh, just a little.

CW: Alright. I was born in Swanton, Maryland. November the 7th, 1915. And I was there until uh, resided there, in other words, went to school there. Went to school in Oakland, Maryland. And I uh, come to the CCC, January 5th, 1935. Which I was 19 years old at that time. We uh, first, went to Oakland, on January 1st. From there to Cumberland, Maryland, we was processed there.

From there to Fort Meade, and received our clothing, and, from the skin out. And we arrived at Camp Number 1, CCC, Skyline, Skyland, Virginia on January the 5th, 1935.

From there, I uh, worked in the woods as a woodsman. For 2 weeks. And uh, I thought well. It was pretty cold out, and I thought, well we got a, there's better jobs for me than working out here in this woods, so I saw a sign on the bulletin board, says Dining Room Orderly Wanted, and so I applied for that and I got it. Plenty to eat, right in the dining room. Had to get up early though. Got off late. No KP on weekends. And uh, I worked in there about 2 months.

And they was a supply truck driver opening. I applied for that and I got it. And I drove to town and back every day. During the week course, Saturdays and Sundays, every day. And, of course we was under the discipline. Under the Army. We had discipline and I learned a lot there. We had to go to school. We had to take a class or 2 each week, go to school. And I drove the CC truck, the army truck, for about a year and a half.

And uh, one morning the company clerk came up and said, "Wagner, I want your keys." "Boy," I said, "What have I done now." I said to myself. "Report to headquarters." I went down and the captain was sitting there, and the staff at attention. And he said, "At ease, Wagner. The 1st Sargent's leaving, and we want you to take his place." That was a big promotion, from \$30 a month to \$45. Course, we only got \$5 out of the \$30. \$25 went home. And of course that give me \$20 more on pay day. So when I left the CCC I was the head man, next to the captain. That's how I got promoted.

NT: Well, that's a lot of, a lot of different things, you did. Um, when you uh, how would you describe, like in the camps. What, what uh, was it like.

CW: Oh, it was wonderful. In other words, they called it the Civilian Conservation Corps, but a lot of people asked me, what, what did it mean. I said well, Civilian Conservation College, that's where I learned all my, uh, good things, that put me on through life. Gave me a good start. And it was, everything was wonderful there, if you

wanted to make it that way. Of course, you could make it miserable if you wanted to, just like everything else.

NT: What would, if you had a, uh, I mean, I guess in your different jobs, a typical day, when you were working in the woods in your first 2 weeks, what was a typical day like doing that?

CW: It was 8 hours, we worked 8 hours.

NT: Mm hmm.

CW: With an hour off for lunch, and our lunch was brought to us. In the mountain, out in the mountain. And we was cleaning up uh, the old dead chestnut that the blight had hit. And we was cleaning up all that. And it was hauled into camp for uh, to heat the barracks with. And we uh, had a power saw, and we sawed it up in lengths. And that was our main source of heat.

NT: And uh, after, after work, how would, what would you do?

CW: Well, uh, we had a recreation hall, we could go uh, shoot pool and uh, one night a week, oh we had a movie that they transferred around to all the camps, and we could go to the movie. Uh, you was at your own leisure, whatever you wanted to do, after the main day was over.

NT: When you were working in the uh, kitchen, what was the day like there?

CW: Oh uh, up and well, through breakfast, there was quite a bit of work to do, clean up the.

NT: What time would it start?

CW: Breakfast was 7:00. At 7:00. Then when they was all fed, I helped clean up all the tables, scrub the top of them and get them good and shiny. Set them up with, now at first, first they used mess kits, but then finally they came out with dishes. And then I'd set up the tables for the next meal, which was lunch, or we called it dinner then. Breakfast, dinner and supper.

NT: That's the way it worked.

CW: And the ones that ate in camp, well, it was all set up for them. And the ones that helped pack the lunches, for, to go out on the mountain, for the ones that ate out on the mountain. And we had good food.

NT: What time, you had to be there pretty early I guess. What time did you have to be there to get breakfast ready?

CW: About 6 o'clock. 5:30 to 6:00, yeah.

NT: And then.

CW: In the evening, why it would be 6:30, 7:00 before we'd get off, but, oh we had some leisure time during the, the middle of the day. Could do whatever we wanted to do.

NT: What kinds of food do you recall then having.

CW: Well for breakfast we had cereal, coffee, uh eggs, anyway, generally over light or whatever you, fried eggs, scrambled eggs, uh sometimes potatoes, with the, coffee, I mentioned coffee didn't I. Of course then on the weekends, we had a pastry cook. They made pies, cakes, homemade pies, good. Yeah it was wonderful.

NT: What about for the other meals?

CW: Oh yes, yeah. Generally the dinner meal was oh, soup or sandwiches. Weekday. And uh, sometimes they'd have uh, other vegetables for uh, dinner, but uh, our main meal was evening. And we had steak, mashed potatoes, gravy, chicken, and we had once in a while we'd have liver, onions, plenty of bread, milk. Always had milk. And then we'd on Sundays, we'd have ice cream. On some of the meals, uh generally, dinner meal, ice cream.

NT: Uh where was, where did the food come from usually?

CW: It was bought locally.

NT: Now in your uh, your third job, as truck driver, what was that like?

CW: That was my second job.

NT: Second, I mean.

CW: No, that was the 3rd, that's right. Alright, I drove the supply truck, which was the, the army truck, it wasn't park service. The park service had a bunch of trucks, too. This was army, we had 2 of them. They had a canopy over the back of it. It was bowed and canvas. Uh, they was governed, governed to 30 miles an hour. They had a governor on them. I would pick up the mail from the PX, take it to Luray.

NT: Where would that be?

CW: PX, in camp. And that's where the mail was deposited. And then I'd pick that up, take it to town with me, and then I'd go by the N & W station, for pick up freight shipped in from Fort Meade, which is a lot of canned goods come in then, on that.

NT: N & W is?

CW: Norfolk and Western, Railroad. And uh, then I'd go by the bakery. The bakery was named Oak's Bakery, he was a, a Frenchman, a Dutchman rather.

NT: That was in Luray?

CW: Luray. Go by the bakery and had a great big, oh must have been 3 feet long, 4. About 2 and a half feet deep, and 2 and a half wide, that'd be stacked full of bread, 2 of them. And then put that on the truck, go by the drug store and pick up other stuff for the officers and so on. And then I'd hit that camp. Or I wouldn't, I'd go by the Creamery, dairy, pick up milk. It'd come in half-pints, half-pint bottles, glass. And they had big long, [serpentine____] or tubs or whatever you want to call it. Stood about 4 feet tall and there was ice all back in that. And uh, I remember the old baker, he'd take that big old, I don't know what you called, what did you call that thing you got bread out of the oven with? It was a great big long paddle.

NT: Mm hmm.

CW: He'd reach way back there in the back and he'd pull out a, a loaf of rye bread. He's say, "Here, Vagna [Wagner]." He couldn't talk English very good. "Eat this going up the mountain." I'd get me a half a pint of milk, eat that going up the mountain.

NT: Eat a.

CW: Yeah.

NT: Um, what were your hours like in that job?

CW: Anytime in the evening. Whether it was, a lot of times they'd call me maybe in the evening, 4 or 5 o'clock, you've got to go to town for something.

NT: And uh, and your 4th, when you got promoted after you drove for a year and a half.

CW: Year and about, year and a half, right.

NT: What was that job like?

CW: Well that, that was, I was next to the officer, captain.

NT: And so how did the ranks work? And you were in Camp, what was the name of the camp again?

CW: Uh, CCC camp Number 1, Skyland, Virginia, Company 334.

NT: Ok, and how did the work and how did your rank fit into the command?

CW: My rank was next to the captain. The captain always said, "Whatever you can't handle, send them to me." But you got to see them first. I handled all the uh, duties as KP, and see that the men was out to work on their different jobs, took the roll call in the morning, and uh, made the uh, uh morning report, which anybody absent, or whatever it might be, that was put on it and that was every day. And uh.

NT: How many uh men, were, were you responsible for?

CW: It, the past few, we generally had around 220. 220. And they worked under the park service too, see. National Park Service.

NT: So um, you kind of told me a little bit already what the job was like, but tell me a little bit what your day was like in that job, day to day, how it started out, and how it went through the day, and.

CW: It started at Reveille, and.

NT: Which was what time?

CW: I believe we generally had it at 6 o'clock, so they'd be ready to eat at 7:00. I believe that was right now. And then we had Retreat at 4:30, 5:00, somewhere along there. And then from then on I was free to do whatever I wanted to do.

NT: How was life different as an officer? Or, I suppose you were called an officer, wouldn't you?

CW: Oh, I was called First Sargent.

NT: First Sargent? How was life different, from?

CW: Being enrollee or?

NT: Yeah.

CW: Well it made me feel pretty good, by being in charge of that many men. And as young as I was see. I wasn't but 20, 21 years old. 20 years, to 21. When I was 21, why that became, I was up there 2 years and 9 months.

NT: So you were a Sargent for uh, about a year or so.

CW: Something like that.

NT: Uh.

CW: We had other leaders now, they called them uh, uh. In other words the first Sargent was Senior Leader. We had some leaders which were \$45 dollar a month men

too. Then we had uh, assistant leaders, they were \$36 dollar men. And then the regular enrollee was a \$30 dollar a month man. Now most of these were uh, local enrollees, which they got their full pay across the table on pay day. But the enrollees that came through, uh, they only got \$5 a month, and \$25 went home.

NT: Are you saying that most of the men in your camp were local enrollees?

CW: No, most of them were enrollees.

NT: Ok, which ones, was it the leaders that tended to be local enrollees?

CW: Yes, yeah. Which they would have maybe 8 or 10 leaders.

NT: Why was that? Do you think?

CW: Well, well they had to have supervisors, which they were, to keep the men, to keep them.

NT: Right. And was it the local people knew more, more about some of the skills?

CW: That's right, yeah, yeah.

NT: Um.

CW: Of course some of these boys come in there, they was, couldn't even write their name. Couldn't even read.

NT: What kind of classes were there?

CW: Oh, they had uh, classes in everything. We had an educational advisor, and assistant educational advisor.

NT: Which ones did you take?

CW: I took mechanics, motor mechanics, and uh, I believe that was all I took, motor mechanics. While I was working on that truck driver job. I had to take that.

NT: Mm hmm.

CW: So I, I took that.

NT: Did you have uh, how, in your experience, how did the people in the camp relate to the surrounding people in the area, and uh, uh do you remember any of those contacts?

CW: Yeah, they were, we uh, of course we come to town. The other enrollees come to town every weekend. They had good ones and bad ones. Sometimes well, we'd have to get 2 or 3 out of jail after a Saturday night. Uh.

NT: Did you always go to Luray?

CW: Generally, Luray.

NT: What, what other places?

CW: That was the nearest. And uh, well they couldn't go too far. In other words, the trucks, uh we used maybe 2 park service trucks, and 2 army trucks which would haul maybe 40 people to the truck. And uh, 2 of them and 2 park service trucks, and uh, come to town on Friday night, Saturday night. And stay 'til 11:00, and then we'd pick them up and back to camp. And some of them were unruly. They'd get inebriated, get in jail. Some of them did, some didn't. Very few, we didn't have many of them that did. They were very obedient. Good bunch of boys.

NT: What uh, what, was there to do in town, that the uh.

CW: Movies, and then dances that they had, you know. And then of course then you, down to your girlfriend's, why, they'd have parties and invite you and. Birthday parties and so on, whatever it might be.

NT: Mm hmm.

CW: That's how I met my first wife, at a birthday party. And of course I, I married here. I just stayed, I liked it, like it here.

NT: So you've been here since the time?

CW: Except during the war, World War II. After I left camp, I got a job with the trucking company, and uh, I was driving truck. \$15 dollars a week. Went to work at 7 o'clock in the morning and got off when we got through. Whether it was 8:00 or 9:00 or 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening. 15 bucks a week, 7 days a week. Now, I got a promotion then, in 6 months, to terminal manager. Of course that was 6 days a week. And I think I got a raise to \$20 then, and then it went on up. And during that time, I learned to fly, at the local airport in Harrisonburg. And I, let's see it was.

NT: You last time, I want to try to get the, your about the last date approximately when you left the CCC was about what time?

CW: October 1, 1937. That's when I left 3 C's.

NT: Ok.

CW: Yeah. Civilian Conservation College. I told a lot of people that. Instead of Corps, College.

NT: I want to interrupt you for just a second.

CW: Alright.

NT: When you were working with the CCC, um, did you, do you ever remember, um, uh, either uh, contact with the people who had lived here, either um, taking down their houses, or helping to move them, or, or, or just talking with them, the people who had lived here in the park. Do you remember anything?

CW: Oh yeah, I remember when they moved them out of the park. Now we had one family that lived right beside the CCC camp. They wasn't over, mm, half a mile away. And they were moved out of the park, down to Ida. And of course I had contact with all those fellows, people that were moved from up there. And I still know some of them that are still living. Yeah.

NT: Do you know some of their names?

CW: Yeah. Ed Parks was the one that lived right by the camp. And he had uh, mm, I believe 5 boys and 2 girls. And uh, there's one or 2 of the boys still living. And one girl. And then they was some Taylors. Bernie Taylor, Wren Taylor, I remember one little girl that died on the mountain. We was I think 6 years old. And I followed the funeral procession about half a mile with my truck, just watching them. And they was carrying this little baby in a homemade casket. And I can take you to the spot right today where she's buried up on the mountain.

NT: This was um, uh, a burial right on the, right near the camp?

CW: Oh, it was maybe 5 miles from camp. But I had taken garbage out to this garbage dump. We dumped it in the mountain for these people's hog you know, that lived up there. And they was bringing this baby out and carrying it down the road when I went out there. So I followed the procession and watched them bury her.

NT: Do you remember anything about the burial that day, or about how it was done?

CW: Well, it was just normal, only it was a homemade casket and so on.

NT: Uh.

CW: A pine box. You know they used to be a song about a little rosewood casket.

NT: I may have heard that.

CW: You probably heard it.

NT: Uh, you don't remember what family that was?

CW: It was the Taylor family, Taylor. I forget the little girl's name. It was on a marker, I can take you right to it up. Right at the foot of Hawksbill mountain. There's a little cemetery on the left. In the flat right there. You just, where you go up, the trail goes off the to right, goes up on Hawksbill, and there's cemetery's still there. They used to keep it up pretty good, but they don't any more.

NT: Um, do you remember anything else about. How did, that day when they moved the family, how did they do, you know, was it just how that was done?

CW: Well, the park service used their trucks to move. And some of them went peacefully and some of them didn't want to go. They'd just taking them right away from their home. But they was going to a better place to live. Which they called it the Ida Valley Homestead. And that's uh, they built houses down there, and had running water, bath and everything. More than what they had in their own home, but that wasn't their style of living.

NT: Did you ever uh, do any work on the homesteads in terms of taking them apart, or?

CW: No, no.

NT: Do you remember any of the things that were left behind? Uh that, do you remember that they left anything behind.

CW: Not that I know of. Maybe some old machinery that was broken up. Of course, they didn't have much. Uh, maybe a mule team and an old plow or something, but they didn't have too much to work with. Most of it was done by hand, digging and. Their gardens. Well some of them had mules, some of them had horses, cattle, milk cattle. Hogs, most all of them had hogs.

NT: Do you, do you remember an area where up, and one of the other people I interviewed told me about it, and I can't remember where exactly it was, but it was a big flat area where there was a lot of wild goats. Do you ever remember anything about that?

CW: No sir. There wasn't any up there. In other words, there wasn't any deer up there when I was up there. And uh, now the mountain just is full of them. And I can't remember seeing a bear. And I do remember the black snakes and uh, the copperheads, and rattlesnakes.