

Oral History Interview with

EARL LEEK

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At Skyland Conference Hall
66th Reunion of the Shenandoah Chapter
of the
Civilian Conservation Corps

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Park volunteer in archives

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Shenandoah National Park
Luray, VA

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Transcription

JA: Mr. Leek, would you state your name and your address please?

EL: My name is Earl [Gaulter_____] Leek, I live at 201 B., Todd Avenue, Charlottesville, VA 22903-3631.

JA: Thank you sir, and Mr. Leek, you've been over the oral history release, you've read over it and you agree with it and you've signed it?

EL: Yes.

JA: Ok, thank you. Mr. Leek, when did you enlist in the Civilian Conservation Corps?

EL: I did not.

JA: You did not enlist?

EL: I was in the Civilian Carpenter Corps that was building the CC camps at Skyland, Camp number 1.

JA: Excellent. And uh, when did you become part of that...?

EL: The camp was opened in September, and when I arrived at Skyland they had temporary tents up for the CC boys. I arrived the first of October to help with the carpenter work.

JA: And you stayed over during that period of time?

EL: Stayed from October the first, in 1933 until the last of February in 1934 when we had a snow waist deep and the captain told us to go home, and to come back when the snow melted and got warm enough because it was 15 degrees below zero up there. And I came home and got married on the 27th day of February, which we'd been planning on, getting married the last of March, and I didn't come back. But the other carpenters did, they went back and finished the camp.

JA: When you got there, there were no buildings up at all, was that correct?

EL: Uh, the dining hall was up, the dinin' hall was up, and the bathhouse was up. And the officer's tents, were on the right side of the camp, from here at Skyland as you go back toward Big Meadows, and all the barracks and tents were on the left hand side. And the dining hall was right along near the Skyline Drive, and the bathhouse was way down next to the last tent, and the CC boys slept in these,

these tents, army tents on the left hand side, there'd be about 20 to each tent. And uh, and we all ate in the dining hall. Before they built the dining hall, they just cooked out in the open and served. But the dining hall was open when got there the first of October, and the bathhouse was open. But in our tents, we had a bucket of water to wash our face. And you'd break the ice in morning, an' dip out ice cold water to wash your face in. And [??] came through, and at Halloween, somebody went out and got an old farmer's cow with a bell on in. And about midnight brought it right through the middle of our tent, 'cause it was all dirt floors. And uh, that ringing of the bell woke all of us up on Halloween, they playing a prank on us.

JA: When you, you stayed with the other carpenters at that time? And how many were there with you?

EL: Right. Well in that tent there was about 20.

JA: I mean ...?

EL: From Charlottesville, my father, uh Reverend [____] Leek, uh was uh called [____], he came up. And my Uncle John William Leek, uh was a superintendent of that group. And uh, uh..?

Female: Uncle Stephenson.

EL: Yeah, Stephenson McCauly was my father's brother-in-law. And Henry Garrison from Earlysville. And that the little group that I remember all the names. Course there were some others in that area, and uh, Phil Davis had a group, and he came from over here at Grottoes or Stanley or somewhere along in here, and he was the one that informed my uncle that the work was available, and told him to come on up with his group, 'cause they were friends.

JA: I see, and so you came up because you heard about the being available? Of course this was during the Depression time, it was hard to find work.

EL: Right, yes it was. Because just before that, I'd helped to build both the road bridges on 29 North, just goin' through north of 29.

JA: So there wasn't that much work available at that time?

EL: No, not at all. Well, I did that for 15 cents an hour.

JA: Is that right?

EL: And when I came up here, they were paying 45 cents an hour for first class carpenters.

JA: 45 cents an hour. Oh, plus your room and board.

EL: And uh, they paid you on Friday, they paid you every week. They had a table like this, an' the captain set there with a fist load of [??] right on the table. And when you'd come up to your, your name on the list, he'd hand you the money, and then put your name down as paid. And you'd just form a line, and then we'd go home. For the weekend, and come back. Sometimes, we'd work Saturdays too. Dependin' on what a rush they were in, but uh, usually 5 days a week.

JA: 5 days a week. And you started at what time in the morning?

EL: As I remember it was 10-hour days. I would say 7:30.

JA: 10-hour days. Mm hmm. And did you, after when work was over in the evening, did you have time to do the same things that the other guys did in camp, you went with the CCC boys?

EL: We'd sit around the big pot bellied stoves that we had in the building. And uh, they'd tell jokes and laugh and carry on 'til bedtime, and some of them would go down to Stanley, down at the foot of the mountain. Or they'd go back in the mountain somewhere and get some peach brandy. We stayed in the tents until Christmas, and we had enough buildings up just with the outside, just as soon you got the outside, you moved the boys in with uh cots and all, rowed all the way down. What shows in some of the pictures here. Now this is a picture of the officers' camp at number 1.

JA: Right, yes.

EL: And they had wooden floors. See, where we just had dirt floors.

JA: What we're referring to is page 31 in the new book on the CCC, Everything Was Wonderful, that's what we're referring to, when we talk about pictures. When you um, was there transportation that you could get out of camp and go down into Luray or other parts?

EL: Well everybody had some cars. At least a group of 4 or 5 would have cars. I didn't go with them, I just came here. And my father, he'd usually go up to the Mess Hall where they had daily newspapers, so he could catch up on what news was going on, because President Roosevelt had just been elected, you know, nominated and elected.

JA: Right.

EL: And uh, this was one of the first things that he did, passed a Civilian Conservation Corps law, and put it into effect quickly.

JA: Right, the uh, your experience with the boys in the camp, did they all get along, did they have any problems during the time you were there?

EL: Most peaceful place I've ever been.

JA: Is that right?

EL: Everybody was just well behaved. Over on the officer's side, I do remember some of the engineers that were doing the engineering on the road. One was Buck Lewis from Crawford, who was in the Army Corps of Engineers, who was in charge of laying highway out, an' doing the elevations and all of that. Because uh, they would dynamite. When I first came in from 33 there wasn't anything but a little old dirt dug path road, not as good as the one that goes to Big Meadows down Hoover's camp now.

JA: Right.

EL: Not near as good as that.

JA: That's pretty bad.

EL: It was, you'd dodge rocks in the road and everything.

JA: Right. The time that you were, how again was the time you spent there in that camp?

EL: Well it would be October, November, December, January, and February, so it would be 5 months.

JA: 5 months, that's a long time, yes.

EL: Well we got a lot done. We got all the buildings under roof. And as soon as we'd get them under roof, we'd go inside and we'd put celotex walls and celotex ceiling, which act as insulation. And then later, we went back and built uh, footlockers over each bunk. Uh, not all the way to the floor, but up over so the bunk could go under, so the boys could hang their clothes and lock up their belongings.

JA: Right, yes.

EL: And we came with those all the way down, and that's what I was working on in February when that deep snow came. Workin' inside.

JA: You mentioned that uh, before that there's a lot of people you still remember. Carpenters that worked with you. Can you remember any of those names?

EL: The ones that I worked with I already told you the ones that came from Crawford. Yeah I remember those names, but...

JA: Okay, do you remember the names of the officers in camp.

EL: No I don't remember those at all, if I ever learned them.

JA: Right. Right.

EL: Because they had that fast, and we had housing. And we'd get up, we'd go to the dining hall in the morning, get our breakfast, and we were right out and right back to work. We came in at lunch and ate, right back to work. And then suppertime, we'd go and get our supper, and then we'd set around in the camp, with a stove, that we even had a stove in the tents.

JA: Right. You had a lot of wood available for you to use?

EL: The boys cut the dead chestnut, and brought it in, in stove lengths. And after we got it in the barracks, some of them had elongated stoves so you could poke the wood in them, and some of them had a big barrel stoves like that, an' had 2 of them to each barrack. But uh, it'd get cold up there now. My Uncle Peterson and I pushed our cots together in January when it got so cold. And it snowed for about 4 or 5 inches deep and they went out somewhere and some uh, uh moonshine or brandy, and he got tipsy.

JA: Is that right?

EL: An' he couldn't walk. And the other fellows dragged him through the snow back into the barracks, brought him in and put him in the bed with me, uh, [trade??] the covers 'cause we put 2 of them together, so we'd have extra blankets. An', an' after he got a bit up on the, moved a little bit and there was his cold overshoe. When they carried him through the snow, they didn't even undress him, but thank god he was ok.

JA: Pretty good brandy then, huh?

EL: But one time, some of the CC boys would go home on the weekends and some of them would stay.

JA: Mm hmm.

EL: Give them leave of absence. Some of the officers would go. In the dining hall, you'd come out on a little platform that steps down, went down both ways. It wasn't very high off the ground. But this one boy, said he always believed he could drink a pint of that corn whiskey without stopping. Well he did.

JA: Mm hmm.

EL: And when he came out of the dining hall, and stepped, turned to go down the steps, he went right out on his face, right out on that floor. And the officers had to get in, and put him in a straight jacket. We was having the heebie jeebies.

JA: Pretty strong stuff.

EL: Yeah.

JA: You must have had a lot of experiences there. And uh, in the camp, working every day, can you think of anything else that occurred? Um, did they, were there any problems in construction of the buildings? They had the plans?

EL: We had good supplies, because it was like in World War II, if you needed anything, I worked on a lot of the projects during in World War II, Woodrow Wilson hospital, and uh, Scottsville rubber plant making cord for the airplane tires. Course the hospital, you know what that is, in Fisherville. An' then I went over on Fisherman's Island right in the middle of Chesapeake Bay, an' building lookout towers, 120 feet in the air, and uh, mine case mate, uh, a concrete bubble like that, reinforced so they could run the mines in on a railroad track.

JA: Well you, you obviously you uh...

EL: I say, this experience up here helped me on that.

JA: That's yeah, one thing too that uh, a lot of the men that were in the CCC camps felt that it was such a good experience here, that it sort of turned their lives around a little bit.

EL: Oh yeah, they learned discipline and everything. Helped their families back home too.

JA: That's right. That's exactly right. Well, it was hard times in those years, and it would help, helped everybody out to have these projects to work on. But apparently after leaving here, you had many other construction jobs to work on as well.

EL: Well when I first married, in uh high school, poultry, boys club poultry was my project. It this may not have been mine, poultry feed and so forth, [Gary ____] Prophet, he was stationmaster and he got moved to Culpeper, elevated. And uh, this farm, New York Life Insurance Company owned it. And he'd lease it to them, and we went into the poultry business down there for the first 2 years after I was married. And uh, it didn't pay off, 'cause things were so cheap back then you

know. So we closed the business out, and I came back to Charlottesville, went to work in carpentry and I've been working at it ever since.

JA: Yeah, well uh, one of the important things to learn about again, is what happened during the Depression, and you expressed some of the problems, that everybody was out of work. And uh, but you seemed to find something to do because you had a trade.

EL: Right.

JA: And that was very important in those years. Um did you have a chance to see any other camps while you were up here working.

EL: Well, um we went by 2 at Skyland, and number 3 was on down between that and 30 [33], route 30. We'd go by them, but I never actually stopped. I don't know, about 10 or 15 years after that we came up on Skyline Drive for a picnic, and showing my wife's aunt um, the Skyline Drive and so forth. And we looked for Skyland Camp and it wasn't a splinter there, not a 2 by 4 or anything. And I was so surprised you know. Because Big Meadows was still there.

JA: Yes. So they must still be, those were still there at Big Meadows?

EL: Yeah.

JA: But the others had been gone at that point?

EL: Well they evolved into the lodge and all the buildings and so forth. I don't know how they did it, but the headquarters there and the business center and everything are right along where the camp used to be.

JA: Right, right. That's very interesting and ...

EL: And out in Big Meadows were all these dead chestnut trees standing up like ghosts. There wasn't a leaf on them, or bark either, it's all gone.

JA: We look at those pictures today and recognize them as a ghost forest of the park.

EL: That's right.

JA: But a lot of that wood was used.

EL: I did a video for Blue Ridge Journal some time ago. But at home, they found out through Mr. Engle that I had worked up here, and they wanted to find out first hand information. So they came over to Tracy, what is her name?

Female: Jewell?

EL: Tracy Jewell right. Interviewed me at home in Charlottesville. And then we met up here at Big Meadows, and uh, did a video all along there where the snow was falling, that was in November I think, of last year. Two years ago. And uh, it was on Blue Ridge Journal.

JA: Yes, yes, I saw that. I did see that one. Well this is very interesting, and I appreciate your stopping by.

EL: This is what we jumped in and started doing right away. That is not Camp number 1, but it's similar to that, see.

JA: Mm hmm.

EL: And they looked something like this. But ours were lined like that.

JA: Each camp was aligned a little bit different. They tried to keep it in a certain...

EL: Inside, here're these foot lockers on the wall I was telling you about. See over each bunk. And the stove sat down in here. Now this is one of those elongated stoves. And here they hadn't even built the bunks. See, the boys just hanging their clothes up on the wall.

JA: Certainly.

EL: And the shovel picks all up in there. Now this is the way it was when that deep snow was up here.

JA: I think there's more than one picture of that. Listen, we thank you so much for stopping by, and uh, speaking with us today.

EL: It's been a real pleasure.

JA: A pleasure, and uh

EL: Because when you get 87 years old, you begin to live in the past.

JA: Well this was a pretty good time. Thank you so much.