

Oral History Interview with

EGBERT BECK

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

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Shenandoah National Park
Luray, VA

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INDEX

	<u>page</u>
Army	3
Camp 10 – Pinnacles	1
Carnegie, PA	1
CCC, finding out about	1
Training	1
Charleroi	3
Forest fires, fighting, ditch digging	2
Fort Washington, MD	1
Great Depression	5
Guam, Okinawa, Phillipines	5
Hawaii	5
Louisiana	5
Luray, VA	2
Mississippi	5
Mohave Desert, CA	4
Moonshine	5
New York	5
Pittsburgh, PA	2
Printing press job	1
Recreation	2
Tennessee	5
Tionesta, PA	1
Washington, D.C.	1

Transcription

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

EB: I'm Bert Beck from Carnegie, Pennsylvania.

JA: And where do you live, where's your address?

EB: Well, right now I live in Tionesta PA, which is 118 miles north of Pittsburgh.

JA: Mr. Beck, have you read the oral history release?

EB: Yes, I have.

JA: And have you signed it?

EB: Yes.

JA: Thank you so much. Now when did you enlist in the Civilian Conservation Corps?

EB: I was a latecomer, I enlisted in April of 1941.

JA: Where were you at the time.

EB: First I went to Fort Washington, Maryland. From there I came up here on the Skyline Drive. I believe it was Camp Pinnacles.

JA: Camp 10?

EB: 10.

JA: Yes, and that first place you went to, what did you go there for?

EB: Well, it uh, we just congregated there and they shipped us off to different camps.

JA: It was a meeting place?

EB: A meeting place, yeah. We didn't do any work there.

JA: Mm hmm. Did you have physical training and so forth and learn something about skills and so on?

EB: Well, they took us in, we went in to Washington D.C. into a wood shop and did woodworking at that time.

JA: At that time. So you learned a little bit about skills about doing woodwork?

EB: Yes.

JA: Well, that was 1941 you said.

EB: Right.

JA: The Depression was almost over with? Was it still hard times?

EB: Oh yes.

JA: And uh, what was your family doing at the time.

EB: Well, my sisters were working, and my people were, well separated, they weren't divorced, they were separated. Well I was working for a printing shop and I wanted to get away from that there. I made ten dollars a, a week and we worked more, probably 60 hours a week, we didn't care when we went home. We used to sleep in the printing, waste underneath the printin' press. And I signed up kind of to get away from him.

JA: How old were you at the time?

EB: 18.

JA: Mm hmm. And so you went, you heard of course about the Civilian Conservation Corps. You knew about that?

EB: Oh yes.

JA: Did you have any idea what it was about?

EB: Well I knew, in Pennsylvania they did a lot of tree planting. And all us folks from Pennsylvania that signed up to go to the CC camp, they said, "Where do you want to go," and all of us that said they wanted to go out west, they sent us south. And all the ones that wanted to go south they sent out west. So I ended up in Virginia.

JA: And how did you get here? Did they send you by truck or bus or train or what?

EB: I, its 58 years ago, and I believe it was by train.

JA: Mm hmm, ok.

EB: I'm not positive.

JA: And uh, so you enlisted to get away from the print shop, and what did you do when you got here?

EB: We uh, course uh, we, forest fires, we did a lot of forest fires, a lot of ditch digging.

JA: Is that right?

EB: Yeah.

JA: What was your primary job then? Initially, was ditch digging?

EB: Ditch digging. And when the fires got started, the mountain people burnt the fires, and...

JA: They burnt the, they set the thing on fire? Why'd they do that?

EB: Well, they claimed it made the berries and everything come back. That was a ritual that they did in the mountains.

JA: And you had to put the fires out?

EB: We had to fight the fires.

JA: Yeah, so. What else did you do beside digging ditches and fighting fires?

EB: KP once in awhile. And recreation trips down to, I believe it was Luray. And we'd go to a skating rink, but the Virginia girls, they wouldn't have anything to do with us CC boys.

JA: Is that right? So, uh in camps did they have a lot of recreation things for you to do in camp?

EB: Yes, it's uh, like I say, in leaving here and going to the army, I have more memories of the army, uh, World War II than I have of the CC.

JA: Right.

EB: I know a little Italian boy from Pittsburgh. Him and I, we hitchhiked home from the Drive here, all the way to Pittsburgh and back in a weekend.

JA: Is that right? That's quite a hitchhiking journey.

EB: Yeah, everybody would pick you up though. And the last part of the trip was on an in a urban streetcar from Charleroi to Pittsburgh.

JA: Mm hmm.

EB: The conductor, he didn't charge us anything. He thought we didn't have any money. It was a great experience.

JA: It was a good experience then?

EB: And my birthday was coming up. I think I got out on October 23. I still have my discharge certificate.

JA: Do you?

EB: I have my army, I mean uh, my CC mackinaw on now, I can still wear it.

JA: Hey great that's right.

EB: It's the same one. I can wear it just the same as I...

JA: Just the same weight and size as you were in those days?

EB: In fact I'm lighter than I was when I was when I, I never weighed more than 135 and I'm 120 right now.

JA: Uh, did you have any experiences then that you can relate to us about your work or uh, time off duty and so forth. Something that stands out in your mind.

EB: Well, I, I learned to work in the woods, and today I heat with wood with a fireplace and a woodstove and uh, I did a lot of tree removals for uh, side jobs. I worked in a boatyard building riverboats for 38 years in Pittsburgh. That uh. Like I say, they were starting to draft the older fellows out of our camps, and I realized that war was coming. That October 5th was my birthday, that huntin' season was coming. So I, I signed up. Well 1942 they dis-, the war started and they discontinued the camps. I would have been out anyway. So I only had maybe a few more months left, uh I could have been in.

JA: In the camp, the CCC's, yes. And you went in the army then?

EB: Yep.

JA: And you went into uh, the infantry?

EB: I had basic, uh training in artillery. I raced pigeons as a boy. I tried to get in the pigeon outfit when I signed up or was drafted. They wouldn't put me in it. So

when we went to the Mohave Desert in California for maneuvers, there was a pigeon outfit there. And so I put in a transfer and I got it. My artillery outfit went to Europe. And I went to Louisiana, went to Mississippi, Tennessee maneuvers. Then I went to Hawaii. I ended up in the 77th New York State Infantry Division.

JA: Is that right?

EB: And I, went to the Philippines, well I went to Guam and from Guam I went to the, fought in the invasion of Okinawa. And after that was finished, they sent us down to the Philippines to get ready for the invasion of Japan. And they dropped the A-bomb, and saved uh – well probably why I'm here today.

JA: That's quite an experience in the military. It is. You had good experience in the CCC too. I guess that they, uh taught you something that made it easier to work in the army? Gave you some of the ideas of what military life was like, when you were here in the camp?

EB: Well today I think they, everybody turns 18, ought to be put in the service. I think it'd be a lot better off for the youth today. I mean uh...

JA: Sounds like a reasonable thing to do. Listen Mr. Beck [I] really appreciate you stopping by to talk to me today and telling me about your experiences here in the Shenandoah National Park. It sounded like a good time for you.

EB: Yeah, but one thing I can remember, how we got to know about it, that we put a couple dollars under a rock by a stump, the next morning there'd be a bottle of moonshine there.

JA: Is that right? Was there a lot of moonshine available in those years?

EB: I imagine, yeah.

JA: Real good stuff?

EB: It was good stuff.

JA: Is that right?

EB: And it's hard to come by today.

JA: I wonder if that rock is still there?

EB: That's one thing I remember vividly. I mean uh, we drank, we passed it around. The gentleman out there that built the camps for the government, he was telling me about some of them that got really bombed, got drunk on it. I don't remember getting drunk. We just, we only got a pint. It wasn't really much.

I mean if you drank it all it would be effective, but we'd pass it around and everybody had a little nip, and...

JA: It was very nice, good times then wasn't it?

EB: Right, good times. And I remember the food, I mean uh. We had good food, plenty of it. Well I was fortunate during the Depression. My grandmother owned a little one family grocery store, butcher shop, and uh, I had enough to eat during the Depression.

JA: Right, right. Well uh, that was a, good years remembered. All your thoughts about the past. And your jacket looks real nice on you. I'll have to take a picture of you. Thank you.