

Oral History Interview with

JAMES WEAKLEY
(Mary and James Gardner)

September 27, 1997

At Skyland Conference Hall

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Shenandoah National Park
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Transcription

KS: It's September 27th, 1997. I'm Ken Steeber, a volunteer at Shenandoah National Park Archives. I'm conducting an oral history interview with James Weakley, a former enrollee in the Civilian Conservation Corps. We are at Skyland Conference Center at Skyland Resort in Shenandoah National Park. Uh, with us is James' daughter, and your name please.

MG: Mary.

KS: Mary, Mary, and your last name please.

MG: Mary Gardner.

KS: And your husband?

WG: Wayne.

KS: Wayne. Ok, nice having you here. And I wanted to thank you for, James, granting us this interview. And at this time, I'd like to note that you have agreed to sign the gift and release agreement, of which we'll, you will receive a copy of, and a taped copy of this interview. Ok. Now, uh, first of all, where did you find out about the CCC? I want a little bit of personal background on, on you first. Uh, how'd you find out about the CCC?

JW: Oh, well, how much you want to know about?

KS: Well, I'll help you out a little bit. Don't worry about that. Most of the fellows found out either radio, or newspaper or from friends. Uh, you knew that the program was going on right? In other words.

JW: Yeah, when it started out, yeah, I went to Charlottesville, examinations.

KS: And where were you living when you joined the CCC?

JW: I was living in Shenandoah, Shenandoah, Virginia.

KS: Shenandoah, Virginia?

JW: Yeah.

KS: Ok, and what's your birth, what's your birthdate?

JW: Uh, James, uh James Layton.

KS: Ok, and, and your birth, when were you born?

JW: In Waynesboro.

KS: Ok. And what date?

JW: September 16, 1916.

KS: Ok. Um, were you living with your folks at that time?

JW: Oh, yeah.

KS: When you joined the CCC?

JW: Yeah.

KS: And uh, did you have a very large family?

JW: Well, it was, was 7 of us then.

KS: That's a large family.

JW: We was.

KS: Now did the uh, Depression at the time, did that affect your family very much?

JW: No. I couldn't say it did.

KS: No? And how old were you when you joined the CCC?

JW: Was uh, 16.

KS: You didn't lie about your age did you?

JW: No, wait a minute, I was, I was 17. So.

KS: Ok, well you cribbed a little bit then. You know it's funny, is uh, as I have done interviews, a lot of the fellows were very young. I had one fellow in here went in when he was 14.

MG: Oh my.

KS: Yeah. So that's not unusual. And uh, the people didn't turn them down either. Uh, how long did you serve in the CCC? Now if I remember correctly, there were, you could enlist for 6 months, and you could do it up to 2 years. So.

JW: Me and my brother-in-law, we both went 2 years.

KS: You, you did go for a long time? 2 years?

JW: More than that.

KS: More than that? Do you remember what year you went into the CCC?

JW: 19, 1940.

MG: No.

KS: No, no I think you're in the '30s now.

MG: Yeah, he was in the car, we talked about it, earlier.

JW: 193--?

KS: '33 I think was the earliest?

MG: I think he said '32.

KS: '32, was it that early? Well, you went in very early.

MG: Mm hmm.

KS: 'Cause I think Roosevelt was elected in '32, November of '32. And it must have been '33.

MG: Well I was reading in the paper that.

KS: Mm hmm.

WG: They started it in 1931.

MG: 1931. According to the paper I have in the car.

KS: That must have been under, then that must have been under Hoover's administration.

JW: No, I was up on the Drive, I was on the Drive, when Roosevelt went in there. He was up there.

KS: For the dedication?

JW: Big Meadows, Big Meadows.

KS: Oh, I got a lot of questions for you about Big Meadows. I think uh, while we're at it, is that the camp you served at, Big Meadows?

JW: No, no.

KS: Where did you, what camp were you in?

JW: I was in Number 12.

KS: Number 12? And that's uh.

JW: And I was one of them. I was transferred from Sperryville, to the Number 9 Camp, 1393rd Company. And uh, well I.

KS: Well you came, you went in at Sperryville?

JW: No. Uh, I went to Sperryville first.

KS: Uh huh.

JW: Now that was before they uh, surrounded it like a fort.

KS: Ok, now was that part of the state program in Sperryville? For example, Shenandoah National Park but the CCC was the national part. And I'm thinking they had the state. Was it.

JW: Yeah.

WG: He said something on the way up here about the state.

JW: Oh, it was a state park.

KS: You were working for the state then?

JW: No, no. I was working, I was in the CC camp already.

KS: Right. But the work that the CC was doing was for the state of Virginia at that time? 'Cause if I remember correctly.

JW: I don't remember what.

KS: Ok, what I remember, the, the building, the headquarter building up at Pinnacles, not Pinnacles, but uh, Piney River, where you wound up going, that was part of the state of Virginia forestry, and then you became part of the national park, which was NP-12, that was your camp number.

WG: Yeah it is.

MG: Yeah, that was the camp number.

JW: Was, Number 12, Number 12 Camp, Sperryville.

KS: That's the one. Yeah, that's from Sperryville, yeah.

JW: That's right.

KS: How long were you at Sperryville?

JW: Uh, I guess I was there, I guess at Sperryville, about a year, right.

KS: About a year? And then they moved the whole camp up to?

JW: All of us went up to uh, well, uh, it was down next to the road here. Well it had been open a little while.

KS: Mm hmm.

JW: And when we was up on the camp up there, it uh, I can't remember.

KS: Ok, well that'll fall into place as we answer them. Here's an important question that I have: What happened to the camp at Sperryville? Did they, did they physically take that down and rebuild it up there?

JW: They must have, they must have done something, I don't know what they done.

KS: Alright they didn't move the buildings then?

JW: Oh, no, they uh. [L____] up there.

KS: Ok, in other words when you left Sperryville, you went right into the barracks up there.

JW: Oh, we went right into the barracks in the 1393rd Company.

KS: Right. And that's at Pinnacles, at Piney River. Yeah, yeah.

JW: Maybe it was called Piney River.

KS: I think they called camp, Camp Red Bird, and then they called the camp Piney River, and then it was uh, Rattlesnake Point.

JW: Rattlesnake Knob is what we, we used to call that.

KS: Was it Rattlesnake Knob? Right, right exactly. Ok, um what was camp like, life like. Did you, you know, what was the daily routine that you had at camp.

JW: Well we had Reveille, and Retreat, and well several things that went on there. And.

KS: I, I take it that you had uh, much like the military? You.

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Went to chow.

JW: We had chow line they called it.

KS: Mm hmm.

JW: And they, they had about, they had a captain's watch. I remember the captain's watch.

KS: So he was the officer in charge at that time?

JW: He was the officer in charge, that's right. He was, and uh, had 2 lieutenants, 3 lieutenants. First one, second, 2 second lieutenants.

KS: Were there any problems in camp? Discipline problems among the men?

JW: No it wasn't, I can't say that we had any, any trouble whatsoever.

KS: Ok, any fighting or anything like that?

JW: Well, oh, well when we used to go to Luray, there used to a lot of scraps went on.

KS: In Luray?

JW: Luray.

KS: Well, yeah, Front Royal. Every time the guys went to town it was problems right?

JW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Some might have been beaten up.

KS: Who handled the discipline problems? Was it the military? The officers?

JW: Well, the, got too rough, well then it didn't last very long. We got too rough, they call the, call the town police, Luray.

KS: Ok. Ok, um, how was the weather, what was the weather like when you were here. Now you were, you were here a couple of years, so you must have spent at least 2 winters.

JW: Well I tell you, we walked, walked, when was that, to a, across the mountain. The truck had left us, you know. And walked across the mountain to uh, 15 miles to uh.

MG: You had mentioned Browntown.

JW: That was, that was uh.

KS: Yeah up in that area you would have gone to, Front Royal?

JW: Front Royal, yeah.

KS: That was your big town wasn't it?

JW: Front Royal was, I mean uh, Browntown, they called it.

KS: Yes, yes. How did people, I mean people who lived around the area, who did they receive the CCC guys? I mean were they happy to have them, were they, didn't like.

JW: Oh yeah. Mm hmm. We uh, we was taking wood, carrying wood rather, sometime to uh, some people that lived around there close you know.

KS: The mountain people?

JW: Mountain people, that's right.

KS: Now how did you, did you get along well with the mountain people?

JW: Well, had no, no trouble whatsoever.

KS: What did, what did you think, what did you think of them? They were, I imagine coming from?

JW: Well, elderly is all, elderly people, all of them.

KS: Mostly elderly?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: I see. And of course that's the northern district up there. And there's uh, Clatterbacks, and uh, some of the Crisers.

JW: Oh, I don't know, Clatterback.

KS: Yeah, Clout. [____], Crisers.

JW: He was one of the cooks, at Camp when I had KP?

KS: Oh really?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: When you were at camp what did you do, what was your job?

JW: Um, it was about anything at all as far as I know of, but.

KS: Did you do like, did you do any of the planting of the trees, and grading the road?

JW: Oh yeah. I was, I done later on. We planted, planted trees and everything, and everything else like that.

MG: Also some of the guard walls, so said.

KS: Did you work on some of the guard walls? I know the CCC boys did that.

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Did you do the guard walls?

JW: Well, part of it.

KS: Part of it? Yeah. Did you do any, I know they did a lot of erosion control, where the, the water had washed out the bank. Did you do any work with erosion control?

JW: What do you mean?

KS: Well, you grade, grade the banks, the road.

JW: Oh yeah, we, we done that.

KS: Did that?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Ok.

JW: Landscape.

KS: Did you, now who was, did you have somebody who set out the work for you? I guess you had a foreman?

JW: Uh, a gentleman, Elmer Batmen.

KS: Oh, one of the Batmens?

JW: Yeah.

KS: I think his son [Dick] was a, a ranger here in the park.

JW: Might be. Might have been.

KS: Yeah, yeah, he still lives here on the west slope of the mountain.

JW: Elmer Batmen, Elmer Batmen, he was my, one of my foreman.

KS: I'll be darned.

MG: You'd also mentioned, some other, uh, Isaac, Isaac somebody you'd mentioned. Some, I had that written down before. Remember you mentioned him, I don't know who he was.

JW: It wasn't Isaac, uh, he was an [____], Isaac Robins.

MG: Yeah. I think that's who it was.

KS: Yeah, a lot of the work foremen were civilians. And that was part I think, of the program, to hire in as many of the local tradespeople, to give them work because of the Depression. And they provided the uh, the uh, crafts, uh controlled that.

JW: He uh, also mentioned something about the CC camps around here uh, fighting fires, up in through the mountains.

MG: Yeah, he was mentioning.

KS: In the forest, did you fight a lot of fires?

JW: Old Rag, Old Rag Mountain, you could have, you could. Oh yeah, we was, we was called up several times, to fight fires.

KS: Now did, did you raise any of the plants that you uh, planted in the park, bushes, or trees? Did you grow them?

JW: Oh no.

KS: What'd you do, mostly transplant them? In other words, dig them up one place and plant them in another.

JW: Well, the whole crew, whatever it was, assigned to do some work, the whole crew would uh, we'd go on.

KS: Ok, would that be dig up trees, did you ever dig up trees?

JW: No.

KS: Then what'd they do? Did they have like seedlings on the truck and you took them out and planted them? Along the Drive? Especially like we see a lot of mountain laurel. Did you plant any mountain laurel? Or azaleas? Wild azaleas?

JW: No.

KS: I guess they're all natural then. Ok, let me see. Um, did you take advantage of any of the educational programs. Now they had schools here set up for, for the fellows. Did you take advantage of any of those? I think they had.

JW: I don't remember going to no schools.

KS: How about recreation? You took advantage of recreation? I mean, I would.

JW: Well, we, we had a little band, almost in the camp.

KS: Did you play in the band?

JW: I played, played the guitar.

KS: Oh, Ok.

JW: Um, and uh, we supposed to allow 6 of us. And we'd get together. I couldn't play too good back then, but I.

KS: But enough to make some noise.

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Oh yeah, that's alright, nothing wrong with that. Uh, how about other recreation? I know they had baseball teams and football teams, did you take part of any of those?

JW: No, we were, no I never did take any, no.

KS: What do you remember most about.

JW: We were like in the mountain you see, but wasn't no place to.

KS: Well, how'd you occupy your time? I mean uh. Uh oh, I see somebody laughing over here. How did you occupy your time?

JW: Well.

KS: I'm sure you played. Well you had a recreation house?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Did you use that facility? I guess they had pool and I know they had boxing.

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: And they had uh.

JW: I was into boxing.

KS: Oh, you boxed? Oh, you say that. Ok tell us about that.

JW: Well, we'd go to different, different camps, like uh, Front Royal, Edinburg, and.

KS: Edinburg would have been Camp Roosevelt, right?

JW: Well.

KS: No there was another one.

JW: There was another one, there was another one.

KS: A wolf something, wolf pack.

JW: I don't know. Well, [____]

KS: No, I just interviewed a fellow who was at Camp Roosevelt, and he was saying that there was another camp that was near them. I forget the name of it now. But that's not that important. Uh. What other things, I mean were there, did you play cards and do things like that, and how'd you pass the time away?

JW: Oh yeah, we'd have cards, play cards, and.

KS: Did you date any local girls?

JW: Uh.

KS: You can tell us.

JW: Well, down in, down in Luray, and Front Royal.

KS: Girlfriends at your.

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: And you didn't have any problems, well you had a few fights in the towns when you went in there.

JW: Always had some trouble in Luray, that's one place.

KS: Was that with the local fellows or was that with yourselves?

JW: Well, sometimes, some of the camps, like, Big Meadows or whatever camp it might be, come down there, and some of the fellows would get in scraps.

KS: Wasn't there, maybe you can clear it up for me. Did you, or did anybody you know, work as like guides to tourists? Because there were tourists coming in while you were in camp.

JW: No, well, we never met any of them.

KS: We've heard that some of the fellows would actually work, would give out pamphlets and things like that. But I haven't met anybody, or I haven't been able to confirm that. That's good. Um, how would you rate the quality of work that you did? Do you think it was good work, quality work?

JW: Well, most of it.

KS: I'm sure you were proud of what you did?

JW: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

KS: So it must have been good work, I'm sure. Um, that's the question I asked you already. Um.

JW: I was thinking about awhile ago when I, I forget. I don't what, we talking.

MG: Sometimes it takes him awhile to make a.

KS: Well, I understand that. I mean I never have that problem. But uh, when you went out with girls, lets go back to girls. Uh, what was a date like when you went to town? Was there a movie house when you went to town?

JW: Oh, many of them. You went with one, one time, the next time you'd get another one.

KS: Alright. But like would you go out to a movie, or for a walk or what would you do?

JW: They didn't have but a couple theaters at the time.

KS: Did you go over to their house? Meet their parents?

JW: Yeah, they damn near I'd a run. They called him Comer.

KS: Comer?

JW: Old man Comer. Well he was, me and him, they claim he was a mean son of a gun, but. And the daughter Nancy, she invited me to go out, his daughter wanted to go out a little bit. Well, his wife told me, he didn't sound real good. That was in Comertown. That was about 5 miles from here.

KS: Uh huh.

JW: In Shenandoah, Virginia.

KS: Uh huh.

JW: And we was, had the lights off, and was sitting there talking. Just on a date you know. Old man Comer, he just come in and caught us you know. I didn't answer so, "What are you doing in here? What's the boy here," he says, "Who is he." So she told him. He was trying to scare the devil out of me. I didn't know what to think.

KS: Now how old are you about now? You're just a young boy aren't you?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: About 17, 18 I would guess.

JW: I guess I was about 17 I guess, I don't know.

KS: Yeah. What an experience. Um, what did you do after you got out of the CCC? Did you go in the have any military service?

JW: No, went to Charlottesville to uh, almost passed the examination, but blood pressure and something else.

MG: Your arm.

JW: And this arm. Broke my arm.

MG: you fell out of the tree when you were younger and.

KS: Wow. I can see that. It, it still, it still, it didn't heal straight did it?

JW: No.

MG: The doctor, I think my dad used to tell me, the doctor set it perfect didn't he?

JW: On each side, yeah the doctor in Waynesboro, set it crooked.

KS: Oh gee whiz.

JW: Yeah. That's what I remember that name, Waynesboro.

KS: What did you do after the CCC's? Did you uh, go into any trade or anything?

JW: No. Oh uh, worked on different projects. Worked WPA, and W, W uh, it was about 3 uh, 3 different.

KS: Yeah, I don't remember them all now, but I remember the WPA, and that was.

JW: Like the army, see.

KS: And they had the National Recovery Act and they had some programs under that. Yeah, so. What do you think of your CCC experience?

JW: I was, I liked it alright.

KS: You enjoyed it?

JW: Oh yeah.

KS: Did it mean anything in your life or anything.

JW: Well, uh.

MG: From what my dad told me, you know, it taught discipline.

KS: Oh yeah. I think it's that.

MG: Because there was uh, um, well just like things he said, like on KP or something that. You know, things had to be, you know, or, you know.

KS: Right.

WG: Well I think he took a lot of pride in everything he did up here because, he's all the time talking about it. I mean.

KS: Yes.

MG: Yes. He says well, I remember when, you know.

KS: Well, that's great.

WG: I've know, I've known him for 5 years now, and you know he's, he's continuously remembered things that he's done here. And.

KS: It becomes that way. I interviewed my brother who was uh.

WG: Especially right now, I mean he'll get at home and start getting on this thing, and.

KS: Right that always happens.

WG: I mean he'll go.

KS: Right. But the best thing to do, is my advice to you guys, when you get him home, if you have a tape recorder and he gets into one of those speaking moods, let him talk, is the best thing to do. Well, look I want to thank you for coming here and sharing your experiences with us. And I will follow through on our promise to get you a copy of your agreement and a copy of this tape. I'll send it in the mail to you.

MG: Well you need our?

KS: Yeah, well, you'll sign it and I'll get your address from that.

WG: What he was trying to tell you a little while ago, was uh, I don't know if he means it or not, but they took Camp 12 and turned it over to Camp 9 up here.

KS: No, there was no 9.

WG: There was no 9?

KS: There was Sperryville, there was a Sperryville, and that camp closed down and they went up to 12.

JW: That's right.

KS: Then there was Camp 10, which was Pinnacles.

JW: I, I thought maybe Camp 10 was.

MG: So there wasn't a Camp 9?

KS: No, oh wait a minute.

JW: My, my camp was Number 9, Number 9 Camp. Wait, wait a minute. Yeah, it's Number 9, 'cause Sperryville's Number 12.

KS: Sperryville's just Sperryville.

JW: Sperryville.

KS: Piney River became Camp 12. Did you see the pictures out here?

MG: Not yet.

KS: Before you leave take a look at the pictures, you'll see a picture of Camp 12. And you'll see that. There were, there was a Remount Camp, that was up in Front Royal. And that was Remount, because it was uh, cavalry training for War, after World War I.

JW: World War I, yeah.

KS: And then that became part of the CCC program. And then there was Camp 10, which was Pinnacles, which is just north of here.

JW: Pinnacles.

KS: This is Camp, this was NP-1. Uh, Big Meadows was Camp 2.

JW: 2.

KS: Uh.

JW: And Number 3

KS: Uh, the Grottoes. 3 was down at Dundo, the picnic ground area.

JW: Yeah.

KS: And then from what I understand now, Camp 5 was Grottoes. And Grottoes came up into the park and then became 5. That's the way I understand it so. It's been interesting, and I enjoyed it very much. Thank you again.

