

Oral History Interview with

LOUIS HACKER

Sept. 27, 1998

At Skyland Conference Hall
65th Reunion of the Shenandoah Chapter
of the
Civilian Conservation Corps

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Luray, VA

Original manuscript on deposit at
Shenandoah National Park Archives

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Transcription

JA: Seems like it's working. Ok, uh to set the stage here, we're recording this interview at the Conference Hall at Skyland and the date is September 27th, 1998, and it's the annual reunion of the Shenandoah Chapter of the Civilian Conservation Corps. And uh, I guess that covers the beginning part. I'm sitting here today with Louis Hacker who was a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Uh, Mr. Hacker can you uh, tell us the, first of all Mr. Hacker, where were you born?

LH: I was born in Copley, Pennsylvania.

JA: And uh, what year was that?

LH: 1920.

JA: And uh, how long did you uh, how long did you live in that area?

LH: All my life.

JA: All your life?

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: Ok. When did you uh, what did you do when you grew up? Well, you started, you started the Conservation Corps when you were what age?

LH: 17.

JA: And uh, did you uh, what was your family doing at that time?

LH: Well, my father was deceased, and we uh, had a large family. 10 of us you know. My sister's were older and they kept the family together. They all worked hard and kept the family together.

JA: How did you hear about the Civilian Conservation Corps?

LH: Well it, through the newspaper. And then uh, like I say, we had no father, and the jobs were, were very few, and so my mother suggested going to the CC camp.

JA: What year was this?

LH: '37.

JA: 1937.

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: Tell me, then uh, what happened when you joined the Conservation Corps? Did uh, were you recruited in your home town, or did you?

LH: Well, we had a gang of fellows you know. And uh, we went to Allentown, the Armory, and we enlisted you know. We heard about it you understand, and we enlisted. Well, a few of us got in and one of our buddies, he was uh, disgusted because they wouldn't accept him. His father had a fairly decent job and they didn't find him poverty-stricken. His father owned a shovel and a cement quarry, making pretty good bucks, so they wouldn't accept him. It was just for people that needed bucks, understand. But although there was a lot of Jewish boys. They had, they got into the service. And they, they owned junkyards and everything, but it's political, you understand? See I don't know how they did it.

JA: Right.

LH: They had Movolinski, we had Max, we had a few Jews in there.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And they were wealthy. Now how did that happen, you know. And this poor guy, he, they wasn't that wealthy, but they wouldn't, they refused him, so he got tee'd off and went across the street and signed up for the army.

JA: Is that right?

LH: He went directly into the army. That was in '37.

JA: Was he paid better in the army?

LH: Oh, I believe he was. When the war broke out, he had, he was a master Sargent.

JA: No kidding.

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: Interesting.

LH: He had 3 stripes up and down you know. He was stationed down in Panama City, and uh, he was a good athlete. The army wanted him down there, you know, and.

JA: When you, when you were recruited, they, they uh, you eventually came up here to the Shenandoah National Park area. How did they, they send you? Where did you go first?

LH: Well, we came directly from Allentown. Now uh, the camp that I got into, it was only half full. Understand, from local people to get, I don't know how they did it, but they got them right out of the hills there and put them in the camp, you know.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And uh, well we had, we had a gang from Frackville, Shenandoah, Schuylkill, up, up in the coal mines. And they had, well it was 50 of them they got from up in there. And we had a gang from Allentown that was 50 people there too, which. We had 2 carloads, and uh, they took us down in Allentown, and come on down and.

JA: On the train?

LH: On the train.

JA: Yeah, was it an open car?

LH: Oh no. Just as well be an open car. Because it was uh, you got off in the soot, you know with the steam there. And uh, like I said, every crossing, "Whoooo, whoooo." That's all you heard all the way down you know. We, we drove, we rode all night, you understand, from Allentown to Elkton. But you got down early in the morning, and they were all black you know and whatever. And that's how we got to Elkton.

JA: Yes.

LH: And we got on, trucks were waiting for us, you know. They had, had it all, they were waiting for us and took us up to the camp, and from there on, why uh.

JA: That was the beginning of your CCC career, huh?

LH: Right, right, right.

JA: And uh, what time did you get into, what time of year was this?

LH: I believe that this was October. See they had them October to March and March to October. 6 months, you had, you had to serve, you understand. And uh, that was in October.

JA: And they brought you up to which camp?

LH: Camp 3. The first one of Spotswood, er, Elkton, the lower one, right.

JA: And uh, you uh, it was a military run camp, is that correct?

LH: Oh, yes, we had army officers. We had a, a food tent and then we had a JGO, I think a second lieutenant you know, and then we had educational advisor, which uh was

a nice man, Mr. Kinney. He taught us everything that he knew, you know. Leather crafts, and whatever you were interested, photography you know. He knew a little bit about everything, enough to get you by, you know. Get you started.

JA: And uh, what was, what was camp life like? Did you get up early in the morning?

LH: Oh, 5:30. You got up, and uh, and uh, you couldn't horse around because, I know uh, old Custer was my leader, and I'd be one of the last ones, and it was cold in our barracks, you know. 'Cause a lot of times you looked down there's 40 guys laying there, you didn't see a head. They're all under the covers. It was cold. And you could see the snow blowing in the doors on some of them you know. And you'd holler down, "Hacker, Hacker," that was my name you know.

JA: Right.

LH: And uh, oh I'd let him holler you know, until, 'til the last minute, he'd come down and grab your bunk and raise you up.

JA: Dump you.

LH: Yeah, he'd dump you, he'd dump you over. You'd be wearing the bunk.

JA: Uh, was the, how did they heat the barracks?

LH: They had a wood-burning stove in each end of the barracks.

JA: And uh, it was probably pretty cold in the morning?

LH: Oh, we had an incident one time, that man had threw a log on the fire area, our end and he fell asleep, you know. The fires went out. Then you didn't see no head for awhile, you know.

JA: Right, you stayed under the covers.

LH: Everybody stayed under the covers, really extremely cold up there you know.

JA: Yeah. Then, then you had formation in the morning?

LH: Oh, yes. Reveille, what they would call it you know. You'd get out there in the morning. And uh, they'd maintain order, and you're walking to the, in the chow house you know. And sometimes it was incomparable, but they, that was the law, and the rules.

JA: Was the food pretty good?

LH: I, I thought it was alright. Some, some, some didn't as too well. They, I don't know, they had some kind of sausage that they called Vienna sausage, it was canned you know. And I don't know why, every time they had it, the garbage can was full, of everybody throwing it in. I don't know why they didn't get a, get a barrel a day, there were enough people aren't eating this, why are we giving it to them. Why didn't they stop? But they kept serving it. It was on the menu.

JA: Right. Well they have to follow their, their.

LH: They have to follow Washington, yeah.

JA: Well, did they, did they bring in fresh meat for dinner?

LH: Yes, we had, we had, I would say that the, the food was pretty good. Pretty good, yeah.

JA: Right.

LH: It was uh, it was I don't know, appetizing.

JA: Did they ever make uh, make the CCC guys work on KP, like they did in the army?

LH: No, I didn't, I don't believe I ever had that.

JA: No?

LH: But we had a man, what they had a, call a greasetrap you know. That catch all the grease coming out of the kitchen. And that was a terrible job. We had a man, they recruited him from the hills. His name was Clyde Roach, you know.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And he'd got a dipper and he'd dip the grease off the top you know, and oh. And he, he was loaded with it and he wouldn't take a bath you know. You'd set next to him, and oh, he was on the other end. So the guys thought they were gonna give him a G.I. bath. They put him in a copper [____], to haul him down to the, to the shower room you know.

JA: That's interesting. What type of work did you do?

LH: Well, I had various jobs. I had one, the main job was, you were cutting on all the dead chestnuts. Now, what we started off was 50 feet from the fire line. We didn't want them falling across the fire line. In case there was a fire get the trucks out to the fire. Alright, maybe later on they'd go back further, instead. They'd, they'd clean them all out. And uh, some of that lumber, well, it was all termite infested, you know. It had them black holes in it. But they had a camp, I guess they did all the lumber work. They,

they cut the lumber up into boards, you know. And some of the, people wanted, it was rustic, you know. It was, full of the termite holes, they wanted that. But it was a strong lumber.

JA: Right.

LH: Chestnut was strong.

JA: And they, what else did they use it for? They use it for just making lumber? Did they make fences out of some of the lumber? Or posts, or?

LH: Well, what we did, whatever was straight. We could use for lumber, you understand. We cut in maybe 30 foot whatever. They had these big trucks haul it out.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: But there was a little bit of that way you couldn't use. They cut it up to 5 foot sections, and split it. And a lot of that stuff you took in our, our barracks. We had big fireplaces to throw it, we'd burn it, use it for fuel you know.

JA: Right.

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: And what other types of work did you do, besides cutting wood, and.

LH: Well, then we went out and we built the dog gone fire lines, fire lane, whatever you want to call them. Switchbacks you know. We, we had these uh, bulldozers, and the guy, Boom! Fire in the hole! We'd knock these stumps out of the, out of the earth you know.

JA: Right.

LH: And we'd pick up rocks and relocate them. And you know what a switchback is, that?

JA: Yes.

LH: We had to, we had to build the walls, you know what I mean. We did that.

JA: Yeah, very good.

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: And did they, they bring your food out into the field, your lunches?

LH: Oh yes, we got a big bucket, a big kettle of soup you know. It was, was pretty good. It was still, when you're hungry you know, you're not choosy, you just, you just dig in.

JA: Right.

LH: The soup. Then we had peanut butter sandwiches you know. And whatever else you know. The sandwiches wasn't nothing, nothing too good, but when you're hungry.

JA: You eat anything.

LH: Right. Solved the problem you know. But the soup was alright. It was hot.

JA: Right. Tell me about camp life, when you came back. How long did you work during the day?

LH: Oh, I, we worked, we worked 8 hours.

JA: Did you?

LH: I read in the paper, a lot of the camps up in New England only worked 6 hours.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: I tell you, we got cheated.

JA: Did you get more pay for the extra?

LH: No way, no way. Then again, then again, when it was zero they wouldn't let you out, you know. They wouldn't let you out because they got, too many people got sick you know.

JA: Right.

LH: And uh, although we had the clothing, the clothing you know. But uh, they wouldn't let you out. And you'd make up the day on the Saturday.

JA: Oh, you had to make it up?

LH: Oh, you had to make it up. You had to make it up.

JA: Did they give you enough clothing to wear?

LH: The clothing was uh, it was a very good wool.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: It was uh, we were comfortable. We were comfortable.

JA: Right. And uh, did many of the men get sick, or get injured?

LH: No, we didn't have that problem, we didn't have that problem. Uh, uh the casualties in our camp was very low. We didn't have much, uh, we didn't have, no, we didn't have much. And uh, a dentist came in every once in awhile. He had that chair you pump you know?

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: You know you pumped that, uh, that what they called a drill you know. It pumped you up.

JA: Did a lot of guys go to see the dentist or did they avoid him?

LH: I didn't go to see him. I, my teeth were ok, but some guys went to see him, you know. They'd come in maybe once a week or maybe once every 2 weeks you know. They would, they had.

JA: Was there a doctor on, in the camp?

LH: No, we had no doctor?

JA: But there was one close enough by, to.

LH: Oh, yeah, you needed a doctor's service, it, it had, it's provided for you?

JA: Yeah. What about a barber? Did they ever bring a barber in to see you?

LH: No.

JA: Or you cut your own, each other's hair?

LH: Yeah. I don't remember that. We went into town I guess.

JA: Did you?

LH: I believe we did.

JA: Tell me, tell me about the, they had a lot of sports and other recreation things in the camp.

LH: Oh, we were active.

JA: Were you?

LH: I liked to play football, I liked to play baseball. I played ping pong. And I played pool. But every once in awhile. I was pretty active.

JA: Were you, were you part of a team?

LH: No, no. Amongst ourselves you know. To break the monotony, you know. You'd get out in the field, we'd play ball, and we spent the time that way you know.

JA: Yeah, well you'd also mentioned earlier about uh, having crafts and things like that they'd teach you.

LH: Oh yeah. Like I said, we had a man by the name of Mr., Mr. Kinney. K-I-N-N-E-Y. He was, had a little knowledge of uh, everything you know. Like leather craft, photography.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And they had a welding outfit, if you wanted to learn a little bit about welding you know. And that was pretty nice.

JA: Did a lot of the guys then went and.

LH: Oh you were interested, you could, oh it was maybe 2 hours in the evening that they'd show, he'd teach you what he knew about it you know.

JA: And uh, did you go into town from time to time?

LH: We went in every Friday night they had a truck you know. And you'd go into town. And uh, and uh, drink a couple of NA's, in a. Non-Alcohol they had, that's all they had at that time. Non-alcohol beer that you used to drink.

JA: Yeah, you went to a regular tavern, or?

LH: We had one tavern down there that we used to go to in Elkton, yeah. Mm hmm.

JA: Yeah. And uh.

LH: We were just kids you know. You had to be 21 to get the real stuff.

JA: The real stuff.

LH: Yeah.

JA: Do the, were the townspeople nice to you?

LH: Well, uh, I can't say yes or no. I uh, I don't know. I, I would say they were ok.

JA: They didn't organize any events for you to go to?

LH: No, no, it wasn't like the USO in the service. You know this was all they. They, they didn't have anything for the CCC's. Only when they had a fire, then they [clapping] oh, boy, there comes the CC camp, you know.

JA: Did you, did you fought in fires.

LH: Yeah, we had fires. I was telling her, we had one, it's out on the table. Some guy was killed, it's downtown, you know. He had a patch, maybe 5 acres. And he put a match to it, to clear it for elevation you know, I mean uh, plowing. And it went up into the mountain you know.

JA: Really?

LH: Mm hmm.

JA: And that's only once or twice that you had to be involved in fire, fire brigades?

LH: Yeah. And we were talking about burning those pines. I was standing away from those tanks, a lot of those tanks are leakers you know. Those ones you pump. And you get the back end, it's all wet. And it's cold you know. Oh yeah. I, I don't, I used to jump for the rake all the time, and.

JA: You don't want near the tank. Yeah. Well in, in the summer time, uh, the weather was kind of warm. Did they take you some places to go swimming?

LH: No. Well, see I got out of it in March.

JA: Did you? How long were you in then?

LH: October to March. 6 months.

JA: 6 months?

LH: That was one hitch they call it.

JA: Yeah.

LH: Summertime I had a job offer at home. I worked up in Allentown.

JA: You went back down.

LH: I was also offered a leader's job too, you know. They wanted leaders you know. And I said, no, this was a good job. It's \$40 dollars a month, you know. I said, no I'll do better up there. At the knitting mill. I did, I did all right.

JA: What type of work did you do? What did you go back to?

LH: I worked at the knitting mill. I worked at Bethlehem Steel at Bethlehem before the War. I quite and I enlisted in the Navy.

JA: Did you?

LH: Yeah. I spent almost 5 years in the Navy. I was in the PBM outfit. Navy airforce. They had a big PBM outfit in Norfolk. I was an instructor for 4 years you know. And then they sent me to Bermuda.

JA: Did they? That was a good year.

LH: See, see I was staff. And the officers take care of those people, you understand. It's all politics.

JA: A lot of things are politics.

LH: Yeah. You know the right man, you get the right job.

JA: You get the right job. So you were in during throughout the?

LH: Oh yeah. After the War I had enough points to get out. So I get down to Philadelphia. Oh, a look, you're a pretty big man, we're gonna recruit you for uh, shore patrol. Holy cow, I'm gonna get out of here. And I had stay an extra 6 months because they put me on shore patrol, you know regular shore patrol.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And I was doing that. You know, getting all the drunks here and there.

JA: Yeah, that's kind of a tough job.

LH: Oh, one time we had a bunch of amputee marines in the 20th Century Club. A beautiful club in Philadelphia. And the manager said, "I want them out of here." They were too drunk. They were getting those crutches and sweeping all, those glasses off the bar. Well he wanted them out of there. And we had to go in there and get them out, retrieve them, get them out, we had to carry them. And the people booed us, you know. Because we didn't manhandle them. Because they were amputees, they should let them do what they want. You can't do that.

JA: No. They can't destroy property.

LH: They booed us. Yeah, yeah.

JA: So you were the bad guys huh?

LH: I was the bad guy. We put them, took them back to the house. You know.

JA: Yeah, so uh, but then you went home again and worked in various jobs?

LH: Oh yeah. I went home, and I went back to Bethlehem Steel. I said listen, you owe me a couple years of vacation and I'd like to have them. Due to the fact that I was in the Navy for 5 years and I worked here 2 years. And that's at least 2 weeks vacation, I want the bucks I said. Oh no, they said. You've got to come back to work for 2 weeks. And I said, "Oh I don't want to do that." Well, I wasn't doing anything so I said ok.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: I went down and got a physical you know.

JA: Mm hmm.

LH: And I went and put 2 weeks in there and I grabbed my money and run you know. And then I met an old man that was in charge of the locker room. And he gave me a bunch of lip you know. They had these locker you pull up. I said, I. And the guy couldn't even speak English too well you know. And I'd just come back from the service. Taking a lot of guff from a guy like that, you know? Uh, he, whatever you want to call, a displaced person you know. And then I got disgusted. I said, "Stick this job and shove it." And I never went back.

JA: Is that right?

LH: Yeah, I lost my vacation and uh, I felt, I felt bad. And it was a simple thing. That they gave me a locker. You know they got a lock and the chain came down, you pull it, you close it and pull it up. And I never went back. So now I drifted down to Pottstown. I worked for the Firestone people. They had a big plant. And the, yes I worked for Firestone for 35 years.

JA: Excellent.

LH: They paid better than the steel mills, they got better benefits, they sent all my kids through college you know. And uh, I did alright.

JA: That's real great. Listen, thank you so much Mr. Hacker for joining us today, and I hope that we'll be seeing you next year at the reunion too.

LH: I hope so. I just told Clyde I'm gonna get a busload of guys down from Allentown. They have a lot of CC campers up there.

JA: That is great. We need more, more participation.

LH: But I didn't tell you about how we used to count those dogwoods.

JA: Oh yes, tell me about that.

LH: Now like I said, our foreman was a, he had a degree in Forestry, he was a smart man, Mr. Miller. And like I said, you were chopping a green tree he'd get on you. And uh, we had uh, we were supposed to look for these dogwoods on top of the mountain. We'd go way back and we'd spread out and we'd each look for these dogwoods you know. And did them out and transplant them along. We had a place down here at Spotswood somewhere, they called Dogwood Terrace you know. Some spring you'd look back it was all, all white when they bloomed you know.

JA: Right.

LH: So we'd go back there and dig these things out. And, and you kind of make a quick job of it. Get the shovel down there and pry, and then if you broke the shovel it'd cost you 40 cents you know. They'd charge you 40 cents for the shovel handle. 40 cents, out of \$5, that's a pain.

JA: You're not making, no making. Uh, but uh, so what you're really saying is that a lot of the plants that are planted along the Drive, were actually dug out?

LH: They dug out from the mountain.

JA: Dug out from the mountain and brought in.

LH: They brought in, a lot of these, wherever was, where the ground would slide. That was the purpose, of keeping this ground from coming down.

JA: Erosion?

LH: Erosion, what they would call erosion, yes.

JA: And uh, they used a lot of chestnut, then and uh, old dead chestnut to also prevent erosion along the sides of the roads. They planted the dogwoods.

LH: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

JA: What other plants did you dig up besides the dogwoods to transplant? Do you recall any?

LH: No, that's, that's the only one.

JA: The only one. And a lot of that though.

LH: A lot of that, a lot of that.

JA: Yeah.

LH: Then again, let me tell you, excuse me. Uh, you dig a hole you know, in a clip like that. You take one shovel out, three of them come back in you know. Oh, that was disgusting. Some of the guys, they'd, they'd shinny off. They'd just put it into a bit, and then they had a little bit of a storm or a wind, Ploop. All of them blew over. You had to go back and redo them you know.

JA: Well, that's great, that's good information. And uh, besides planting the dogwoods and working on the uh.

LH: The roads?

JA: The roads and so forth, did you work on the roads to uh, the culverts on the roads.

LH: No, we were always back in the bush. Mm hmm.

JA: Very good. Well I think you've covered an awful lot today and I appreciate that.

LH: Thank you.

JA: And we'll be talking again in the future I hope.

LH: Yeah I, I mean I enjoyed this.