

Oral History Interview with

RALPH SEERY

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

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Shenandoah National Park
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Transcription

CJ: Mr. Seery you've read the deed of gifts and that.

RS: Yes I did.

CJ: Ok, great, let's get started. When were you born and where?

RS: Boston, Massachusetts, July 13, 1914.

CJ: 1914. And what did your parents do?

RS: Well, my Mum, mother she was a housewife, and my father he was a expressman they call it, at that particular time they called them expressmen, which was primarily a delivery man.

CJ: Deliveryman? Do you remember the Great Depression hitting pretty hard?

RS: Oh yes.

CJ: And how did that affect your family?

RS: Well, uh, more or less during the Depression, my father, he was out of work. We went on I guess you call, dole system. And there we come up with uh, actually I moved to Virginia in 1929. And was working in a knitting mill, then I went to work for a candy factory. And then I was into the CCC.

CJ: And how did you find out about the CCC?

RS: It was advertised.

CJ: Uh huh.

RS: And of course I volunteers. I was taken and uh, sent to uh, I was accepted, sent to Fort Monroe. And we more or less indoctrinated at Fort Monroe. And we left Fort Monroe and was shipped to Elkton, Virginia in 1933, in May. And from uh there we were transported by trucks to, and all our equipment was transported from, transported to Big Meadows in May 15, 1933.

CJ: And when you got there, there was nothing there?

RS: When we were out at Big Meadows, there was nothing. Nothing, it was just black open space. And uh, we were informed I believe, for us, delivered all the equipment and everything, "Unroll the tent boys, there's your home." (laughing) And then uh, we immediately started pitching tents, because we had to have cover, and that's where you have to pitch the tents which were old 3 poled

hospital tents. We were told where the bunks were. We got our bunks, and they handed us a cloth, piece of cloth, which turned out to be a mattress cover. And they brought us bales of hay up and said "There's your mattress...and mattress cover."

CJ: Hmm.

RS: And uh, we used that as a mattress pad until...I really don't recall when we were more or less issued mattresses, but uh we were eventually uh, issued mattresses, and I don't think we issued mattresses until after they'd taken the tents, put the tents on wooden flooring, which was raised up by rock. And of course I have pictures of that also.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: And uh, then we more or less, prior to that time, in order to, if it rained or anything, why we had to put our bunk laid on rocks so it wouldn't sink in. (laughing). It was quite an experience.

CJ: It sounds like it. So your main jobs were constructing the buildings of the camp?

RS: Oh no, uh, no its uh, the barracks that were built were built by local contractors. 'Cause we still worked road gangs. I'm trying to think what the name of the berries were that uh, used to cause...

CJ: Gooseberries?

RS: Gooseberries. They had some crews doing gooseberries, some were doing uh, wood debark stations, and quite a few of us were on road gang. Blast the rock, pick the rock up. They uh, more or less the fencing that was, bordered the Skyline Drive now.

CJ: So that's what you did, helped with the roads?

RS: Uh huh. Helped build the roads, and blast out the sides and all. And, we had no equipment to lift with, so we loaded by hand.

CJ: Do you remember any problems with the army being in charge of the camps and the park service being in charge of the work? Were there ever any conflicts?

RS: If you want to cut it off for a second I'll tell you. I daren't repeat it.

CJ: I'll get you to talk again.

RS: The group I was working on the road, we were transported over to vehicles, dump trucks, to a camp to a site where we were working at on the side of the road between Skyland and the Tunnel. In the cold. The only protection we had riding back and forth were the old army raincoats. We worked until quitting time, and Mr. Garth who happened to be the supervisor at that particular time said "Ok boys, lets go home." And we told Mr. Garth, "I'm sorry Mr. Garth, but we're not going back you know, on the truck." He said "You sure." We said "Yes sir, we are." Meanwhile, we did stock up a little bit of jelly and crackers and all, in the toolboxes, just in case we did have to spend the night. We also had uh, firewood available in case we had to stay. Not really stacked, that we realized positively we would get back. And it was dark when the finally the tow trucks that belonged to the Department of Interior came and got us. And we arrived back to camp, we weren't fed anything, because the galley had already been closed. And the reason for it was, primarily was, that some of the boys being transported in the covered trucks which belonged to the Department of the Interior, about 2 miles from the camp. And here we were being transported in open vehicles, or trucks, dump trucks that uh, be as it may, between Skyline Drive and, I mean Skyland and the Tunnel. But uh, that was the only time we had any problems with the Army and the Department of the Interior.

CJ: Did you ever go down to Luray or any of the local towns on the weekends?

RS: Beg pardon?

CJ: Did you go to the local towns?

RS: Oh yes, uh huh. We used to go to Stanley. We'd walk to Stanley, back and forth. Which I think is about 9 miles.

CJ: And what would you do down there?

RS: Well, the only thing we could do was just loiter around and get away from camp, that was all really. And of course some of the boys had girlfriends. And uh, they would take and go down on a typical weekend, and spend the weekend down there, course we'd, and one of the experiences I did, we had one time was, matter of fact it was the first trip we made to Stanley. On the way back, we designated this one place, at that particular time we didn't know what it was, but we spent the night out on the ground, and when we woke up, we were in a graveyard.

CJ: Hmm.

RS: But that didn't bother us, because after all we were young and we were flexible. But uh, it was was pretty good shock where we was laid down. I guess it was about 7 or 8 of us. And uh, after we got up in the morning, why we got back to camp in time for lunch, for dinner, for breakfast rather. So really was an

experience we had. And uh, course I, one of the experiences we had also that, of course our boys, bathing facilities and all, which when we first got there was a spring, right below the camp there, and that was what we had for our bathing facilities. Course we had to bathe downstream away, because we used upstream for basic of needs of camp for water, to cook you know. The water was transported; we had no vehicles at that particular time to transport water, so we had a 5-gallon milk cans. That we got that from the spring, got the water from the spring, relayed, had relays from the spring up to the mess tent.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: And of course, we didn't know what dishes were. We had mess kits until the barracks, I mean the dining hall, or the mess hall was completed. And then of course, they start dishes and all. So.

CJ: Were all those buildings finished by the time you left?

RS: Oh yes. Uh huh.

CJ: How long did it take to put those up?

RS: Uh, I must, not be [_____]

CJ: Did you play any sports? Or...

RS: Oh yes, that was another experience we had. We had uh, boxing matches. In fact we went to uh, one boxing match we were transported to Fredricksburg. And we had a boxing match there. Fortunately we won that one. And then we had one at Sperryville, that's where I got my nose broke. (laughing) But uh, then we had a boxing match at uh, Sperryville, and we lost that one. So I was mad, it was [500 percent_____]

CJ: Did you play football or anything else.

RS: Oh, glad you mentioned that. Football experience was, we had a lieutenant who was a graduate of VMI, and he had a list of contacts to get us football uniforms, which consisted of pads primarily, and pants. And now of course, the football shoes were another question, so he was bright enough, innovative that he said "I'll take care of that." He says "I can't get your size 'cause I don't know what they are, but we can arrange for that to be done." We took all our extra pair of shoes we had, took them to a shoemaker in Luray, and had cleats put on.

CJ: Huh, neat. So you had cleats put on your old shoes?

RS: Really. Uh huh. And uh he said, well he said, "I'll just put that down on my report as shoe repair."

CJ: Pretty innovative.

RS: Really. So.

CJ: So what did you do after you left, the camp.

RS: Oh, lets see, what did I do, uh, uh. '33, '34...I think I worked for, the person I used to work with, making candy, hard candy.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: And then I got an opportunity in '35 to go work the forklift. 'Til '36. In '36 I contracted lead poisoning. Because they used a lead in body construction work, on the car. I got lead poisoning, and I worked there about 3 or 4 months, no unions, so they said, "We don't need you." So I was gone.

CJ: Did you end up in the service then?

RS: What?

CJ: Were you in the service?

RS: Yes I was in the service. I volunteered for the, trying to think what they call it, that was [Maltese off-scan ??] school, and uh stationed out to Fort Riley, Kansas. And the program at that particular time was if you did, in other words if you didn't make the, or come up to it, then you'd be sent back. And of course I made it up until, I stayed there for 3 months and all of a sudden they said, "We have too many lieutenants. Really. So I had a choice of getting in or getting' out, so I went out, and uh, worked in the Post Office. And then I went in the Navy, stayed 'til the war, World War II ended and discharge you. It was February '46. And then I went back to work at the Post Office, retired at the Post Office. And uh, went to work at the School Board at Virginia Beach, then retired from that. End of story.

CJ: End of story. So what did you gain from the CCC?

RS: Uh, my good health really. I could of, a lot of my longevity, from being able to be outdoors and all as much as I did.

CJ: Would you do it all over again?

RS: What?

CJ: Would you do it all over again?

RS: Yeah. I would, I really would. I mean, as I said it's uh and experience that I think every young person should get outdoors. I don't believe you have opportunities there now that you had then as far as that goes, really. To be outdoors.

CJ: Right.

RS: Now maybe at some of the larger parks. Like maybe Yosemite, or have acres and acres of land a breed elk ought to be re-established on. But I mean, in a, like this area here, I don't think would do much.

CJ: Right.

RS: Because I think we did it all. I mean I don't mean, I'm talking about the CC's through its entirety. But uh, other than that why I would do it over, if the conditions were the same.

CJ: Right.

RS: But in today's environment, I don't think you, that it could be established here.

CJ: Are there any other stories or anything you could think of, that you'd like to share?

RS: Well I guess more or less as you say, [_____]

Female: You should tell the story of Mr. Locksley.

RS: Huh?

Female: You should tell them the story of Mr. Locksley, and the guy with his booze, locked up in the kitchen.

RS: Well, I didn't hear what you said, really.

CJ: Mr. Locksley?

Female: Casian [_____] group. Uh, one of the boys come in with a bottle of liquor to be bought.

RS: Oh yeah. OK. Uh, we got, we got snowed in one particular winter of '33, and uh, I'm trying to think, which birthday was it? Anyway, uh, with the name of Childress, uh he was out of town, a local imbiber. And that was at the time at the time you could buy a pint for a dollar. Moonshine. Well, being snowed in and all, unable to get out, that particular day, we were at the barracks, and uh, Pete, Pete

Childress, Pete pulled out a pint of whiskey, and uh it belonged to Casian, who was a very religious person. He looked at and said, "Pete, let me have it." Well he knew Pete personally. And Pete let him have it, next thing you know, Locksley open the window and poured it out.

Female: Locksley asked him what he paid for it.

RS: Huh?

Female: Once he asked him what he paid for it.

RS: Well, I said Locksley asked him what he paid for it. And Pete told him he paid a dollar. So Locksley turned around, opened the window and poured his whiskey out and handed Pete a dollar. Fortunately, Pete couldn't, Locksley was much, a little bit bigger than Pete was, so Pete didn't like to argue. But he didn't take it all.

CJ: So it [____]?

RS: That was wild. And uh, and uh, we had another boy there. We had a boxing match set up down to locals between us. Set up the Hoovers' camp. I guess if was for the Congressmen who happened to be visiting there, whoever it was, and uh, set up 3 different matches. We had one fellow, well the heavyweight, so we had one fellow, Lou Gritta, he uh, he was, we called him the Bull, and they had a heavyweight that they wanted to match up and the only one we could find would be Gritta Well we finally inveigled him into being able to go ahead and box. He said "Well I can't box." I told him to, oh use a few excesses to take him, force him into saying he would, so got him down there. And he had to get the poor guy's [____] He never boxed in his life.

CJ: Hmm.

RS: And uh.

CJ: Do you remember any of the mountain residents?

RS: The what?

CJ: Any of the mountain residents? Any of the people that lived here?

RS: Oh, yeah.

CJ: Oh you did?

RS: Uh huh. Oh yeah.Yeah, these are all, these are all local pictures. That bottom row.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: So here's a couple clowns in this one. But these are local residents here.

CJ: Were any of them Weakley's or Petits?

RS: What?

CJ: Weakley's or Petits?

RS: Oh yeah. Here's the Weakley's here. Yeah that's a Weakley, that's a Weakley there. Some of them I try to remember the names, it was a while back I lost contact with quite a few of them...Ok, I'll show you Pete. There's Pete right there. That's Pete.

CJ: Looks like you were the character.

RS: That's Pete.

CJ: Alright, well thank you so much.

RS: Uh huh, I made of copy of this.

CJ: You did? Tell me about that.

RS: Well, see that Mr. Garth had 2 children, 2 babies, 2 small children, and uh, we got talking to Mr. Garth one time. And he didn't have time, he said to milk the cow, and his wife didn't know how to milk the cow. So Pete said, "I know how to milk a cow." So, Mr. Garth told Pete, said "Alright," he said, "You want to, you go milk the cow, morning and night, and evening. And he had, drink all the milk you want. So uh, Pete asked me "Do you know how to milk a cow?" I said "No," "Well come on I'll show you how." And so we went up, and Mr. Garth only had this one cow, and uh, that's right in back of camp. He had a house right in back of the camp. And uh, Pete said well show me how to milk a cow. And we had all the milk we could drink. We'd milk the cow and put it in bottles and put it in the springhouse. And that's how they kept, that's how they kept the milk cold, in the springhouse.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: You know all about that:?

CJ: Mm hmm. I'm from Luray.

RS: Oh really? Oh heck, I didn't know that. Well then you know what I'm talking about.

CJ: Yep. I sure do.

RS: What was his, what's that boy's name that I came up here to see that drove that truck up here? And uh, he uh, lived in Luray.

CJ: Batman?

RS: Huh?

CJ: Batman?

RS: No, he's local, he's lived here all his life. He drove a truck. Lohr. L-O-H-R. Lohr. Yeah. Troy Lohr. I come up here a few times, and I really got embarrassed. I remember, where he lived and all, and I went up there and a woman, lady answered the door, and uh, I said does Troy Lohr live here? Said "No, say he did, but he just passed away." They just buried him. Now I tell you. I can tell you if you want this record, how this thing, how this reunion got started.

CJ: Sure, I'd love to hear.

RS: Well, I can't recall the exact date, but it had to be after '35, '36, might have been '37, and [A____] Casian and some of the boys that uh, lived in Richmond area, they go up, primarily most of the nucleus of the Camp number 2 at Big Meadows was from Richmond, the surrounding areas and up the Neck area. And uh, then uh, later on groups came from the Western part of the state, like Lynchburg, Danville, and Roanoke. And they were the nucleus of Camp number 2 at Big Meadows. And uh, Aaron Locksley was a pretty good organizer. Uh, so uh get in contact with me, and get in contact with some of the boys that was local, the Neck boys. And we made it uh, the Wagonwheel be the third place. We ...

CJ: You were telling me about the Wagonwheel earlier.

RS: Uh huh, and uh that's really when it got started, in the late '30s. And uh after a while, it really got to a point where, large enough, that we decided we were going to take this up, meeting in Luray at the Mimslyn Inn Hotel.

CJ: Mm hmm.

RS: And from of course, there on, why it just expanded itself. It got further and further away. But after it was organized or set up in uh, the Wagonwheel on Petersburg Pike.

CJ: So have you come for quite a few years?

RS: Well not the last 2 or 3 years. I lost contact and all until Mr. Engle, I got a letter from him that had this meeting up here. But uh, I uh, I have always enjoyed it. Now uh, were you here when they had a big fire on Main Street?

CJ: Nno, I don't think so.

RS: Well I was here, well I read about it. What happened was, you know the theater where Brown's is, the cafeteria, well there used to be movie theater right along side of it.

CJ: Ok.

RS: Somebody parked on the hill with a full tank of gas. And the gas seeped right on down to the creek. Somebody threw a match into it deliberately, but it caught fire, went right up the hill.

CJ: Gosh.

RS: Probably your parents know about it.

CJ: Probably. What year was that?

RS: I uh, thinking that I have quite a few good memories with all, with all that there.

CJ: Well thank you for coming back and sharing with us.