

Oral History Interview with

EDWARD MOKAN

Saturday, Sept. 25, 1999

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: Was that you? [Looking at photograph.]

EM: Yeah, 334, Camp 334.

CJ: What a great shot. Great. Today is Saturday, September 25, 1999. We're at Skyland Conference Hall at the CCC Reunion. My name is Carrie Janey and I'm interviewing Edward Mokan.

EM: Mokan.

CJ: Mokan. Um, to start off with, when were you born and where?

EM: I was born uh, Forest City, Pennsylvania, in the coal region. November the 24th, 1921.

CJ: And who were your parents?

EM: Leo and uh, Valentina Mokan.

CJ: And what did they do for a living?

EM: Well my dad was a uh, professional fighter, a boxer.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: And while he was doing the boxing here in Philadelphia, he made enough money, and brought us to Philadelphia, from the coal region.

CJ: Oh, so do you remember the Great Depression hitting pretty hard in that area?

EM: Yeah, I was just, I was well, that was the Depression all the time, whether it was Depression or not.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: But uh, I had 8 uncles besides my dad that worked in the coal mine. So I was heading there.

CJ: Mm hmm.

EM: Good thing he brought us to Philadelphia. I broke away from that, uh regime.

CJ: Now how did you hear about the CCC's?

EM: Two of my friends in Philadelphia came home on leave.

CJ: Mm hmm.

EM: They went to the CC camp.

CJ: And you signed up in Philadelphia then?

EM: Pardon.

CJ: You signed up in Philadelphia?

EM: Yeah, well, I didn't sign up, I had to go. I was 16 years old. You had to be 18 to be in the CC's. And I got caught stealing a car, and uh, I could either go in the CC's or go to jail.

CJ: Wow, they gave you that choice.

EM: That's what they were doing for everybody in the city, instead of filling the jails up.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: They were putting them in the CC camp, and that's how I got in there. It did me a world of good, because the 2 brothers that I was hanging around with, after I was in, I was here in this camp 6 months and I get a letter. He stole a car and he crashed into the out [pillar____] and got killed. So, evidently, I would have been them. So.

CJ: Oh, my goodness. So you came immediately to Skyland, NP-1?

EM: Right, I stayed 2 terms, 2 6-month terms.

CJ: And what did you do, what was your?

EM: I did demolition work here, with John Ash. Mr. John Ash from Luray, Virginia.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: And our job was to uh, set up the dynamite charges. They had a crew drilling the holes. We would tell them how deep.

CJ: Mm hmm.

EM: Then we'd set the dynamite charges, wire them up. And at 3:30 it'd blow, whistle, and holler, "Fire in the hole" 3 times.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: And we'd set the charge off and blow it up for the next day's work. So that when they come tomorrow morning. That was their job. They could pick out all the stones, like, see all the stones that's on the roadway.

CJ: On the wall?

EM: They were picking out the flat ones.

CJ: Oh.

EM: That one for that. And the little slate flat ones went into the gutters, for the gutters. That's what we did here.

CJ: And how long were you in?

EM: A year.

CJ: A year.

EM: But I drove the ambulance on the side, if something happened. We had one of the fellows at an overlook, he fell 180 feet. And uh, took them 12 to 14 hours on ropes to get him out of there. And uh, we had to bring him up on the ropes. Where he fell, he went through a couple of trees going down. And he was a heavy kid. And we had to bring him up, work his way up, take him to the hospital.

CJ: Did he survive?

EM: I don't know. I don't know. They had to take him to Walter Reed Hospital. And uh.

CJ: Were there a lot of accidents? Like that?

EM: Yeah, mostly with the axes, you know the axes cutting trees, that were hitting their legs. Not with dynamite though. That was uh, we scared a lot of people.

CJ: Did you? Do you have any good stories about that?

EM: Yeah, we would uh, when we got new guys in, every 6 months you got new people. And the replacements would come in and we'd have a fire. And maybe 20 of us would be sitting around. And you'd have a stick of dynamite in your hand you know. And you'd start telling them how much each charge would be. Didn't want to blow a hole through your foot. You'd cut one third of the stick and stuff like that. Like in the movies you see they throw, they light it, and throw it and it blows it's done. You can throw dynamite in a fire, it won't, it'll burn, it won't explode. It's got to be an electrical shock.

CJ: Oh. Oh really?

EM: It's got to be detonated. You've got to put a fuse in it, electrical wire and you put an electrical charge in it.

CJ: Mm hmm.

EM: So while we're talking you know, you've got this thing and you drop it in the fire. Well the new guys, boom, they go all over and we sit there laughing. So they did that to me, and that's how I got introduced to that. And then we'd do it to the new guys.

CJ: The last guy that I spoke to, Mr. Knapp, he said that he had to go help dynamite, with I forget the name of the fellow that he mentioned, but he said that they used 3 boxes of dynamite, and they blew up half the mountain.

EM: Guess they would. Well, you could use 3 boxes, but you'd have to place it all along. See? And you got, what you had to do, John Ash would do it. He could tell the way the grain of the stone was in that mountain.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: And he'd just spot, you know, where to put the charges and he'd tell us and we'd do it. In other words, we didn't do it on our own. We didn't know that much.

CJ: So did you use that skill when you got out?

EM: I did a little bit during the war. I was a sniper in the parachute troops. And uh, also we had dynamite, you know, set charges on the bridges and all. I did a little of that. It came in handy during the war.

CJ: What years were you in the CCC then? What year did you come in the CCC?

EM: In here?

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: 1938.

CJ: '38. And you were in for a whole year?

EM: Yeah.

CJ: So then, then you enlisted, after you?

EM: In '42 I went in the service, yeah in the paratroops. I made 3, 3 invasions. I made [??], I made the Battle of the Bulge. I ended up in Berlin.

CJ: Really?

EM: Selling toilet paper, \$80 dollars a roll. They had all the tobacco over there, but they had no paper.

CJ: No toilet paper?

EM: So, toilet paper was A1, it was the closest to cigarette paper.

CJ: Really?

EM: But that didn't last long. They, we, we only stayed in Berlin for a little while, then we started coming home.

CJ: So what was the, the lasting impact of the CCC's on you? Did you take a lot of.

EM: To be honest, I know I would have been either killed or in jail. Because during the Depression there was no work, there was no work at all. Plus the \$24 dollars they sent to my sister, it helped her.

CJ: So you got to keep \$6 dollars then?

EM: Five.

CJ: Five dollars.

EM: Yeah.

CJ: Ok was there anything else that you can think of that?

EM: Just that it did me a world good. And it straightened me out. Uh, I know I was heading for jail time easy. Because uh, the kids that I hung around with, you see I was from down the waterfront in Philadelphia. And even the best kid in the

world's gonna eventually go crooked. But uh, the year that I put here, served me well when I went in the paratroops. I flew right through that course. I was hardened, I was.

CJ: You already had the experience?

EM: Yeah. So uh, it did me good. Here's a guy I'm waiting to see.

CJ: And who is that?

EM: Mearl Moss.

CJ: Oh Mearl? Yeah he always comes.

EM: Yeah, we were together here

CJ: Oh!

EM: Yeah we were together here, that's me and him.

CJ: Oh what a wonderful picture.

EM: Yeah this is Don Rhodes.

CJ: And what was he, what was Don Rhodes?

EM: He was the leader, what they call THE leader. He's like a sergeant. These were the work crews. This guy became a big artist in Philadelphia. Graphics.

CJ: Have you talked to John Amberson about maybe letting us copy these pictures?

EM: No. This guy here was Junior. He's 6 foot 7.

CJ: Junior McCartney?

EM: He was 16 years old, do you believe it?

CJ: Wow.

EM: That's this guy here. He's on his knees, on his shoes. That was our barracks here, just tarpaper on. This here, this kid here, he came as a replacement. Eleven minutes he was alive. In, when we jumped in Normandy. He got shot in Normandy. He was hanging in a tree.

CJ: Mmm.

EM: That was me '42 when I first went in. That's from here. I was a sniper during World War.

CJ: Just for clarification, I should have asked you at the beginning, but just to get on tape that you did read the deed of gift, and ?

EM: Yes.

CJ: Thank you.

EM: I want to show you something. Do you know where that's at down below?

CJ: Mm hmm.

EM: Another true story, that you never hear about.

CJ: About the tunnel?

EM: Yeah.

CJ: What's that?

EM: Well, couldn't use demolition on it. The slate was past $\frac{3}{4}$ of a slant. If you use it the whole mountain would keep coming down. So they had to do it by hand, so they brought the Georgia chain gang up, and they did it by hand.

CJ: You mean prisoners?

EM: Ball and chain. And every night they'd, they'd bring them outside this tunnel, right along the road there, and stake them right to the ground so they couldn't get away.

CJ: Were they white men or black men?

EM: Mixed.

CJ: Mixed?

EM: Georgia chain gang.

CJ: Well I've never heard that story.

EM: Yeah, well they, they probably threw away the records on that. Well all the records are destroyed anyway.

CJ: These are wonderful pictures that you have.

EM: That's the cell, one of the cells in Alcatraz. I used to be a guard there.

CJ: Oh really, is that what you did after, the war?

EM: For awhile. Stunt work in Hollywood after I come out. And I got hurt. My buddy had 18 years. My buddy was a stunt man for 18 years. My army buddy. And he got me some work. What happened, I did an 80 foot twirl off a roof and the plastic bag broke on the corner. So I got into trucking, and I did 41 years uh, long haul trucker, 18-wheeler. This is our CC organization in Philadelphia. I'm the secretary.

CJ: Oh ok. How often do you meet?

EM: We have our meetings, our meetings are on the USS Olympia. The Admiral Billy's flagship.

CJ: Uh huh.

EM: And then alongside of it, here is this submarine, the Vicuna.

CJ: Uh huh?

EM: That submarine's the one that took McArthur and his family to Australia from Corregidor.

CJ: Oh really? How often do you group meet?

EM: We have our meetings. Who can I give these pictures to that I'll get them back?

CJ: Either myself or....