

Interview with Bill Junker
Interviewer: Leslie Herrli
1975

Q: ...the jobs you did find, what was your homelife like?

A: Oh, ah, I wasn't married, but I was working at Inglehart's and got let off. Ah, and then, ah, you couldn't find a job anywhere. So, ah, the first year, I went back, and, ah, in order to keep from getting rusty, I went back and posted at the high school that I came from...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Old Central, and, ah, I spent the year there. And, by the way, off the record, that's where I met my wife! (Laugh) Of course, we didn't get married then...

Q: Too poor, probably.

A: Yeah, sure was. And, ah, so I got out of school in a June...

Q: You were in high school then? Err...

A: I posted, see?

Q: O.K.

A: That was five years after I had graduated.

Q: Hmm.

A: See, I posted then. I just went over, and well...refreshed some of the subjects that I would have liked to have done. Ans so, ah, after school let out in June, why that was when they had started the ah, the Civilian Conservation Corp. And, ah, being that my mother and father ah was in kind of ah poor circumstances, that made me eligible to join the CCC's. And, ah, I first had to go to ah Camp Knox for reconditioning, or conditioning, rather, and ah then we was assigned to companies, and I was fortunate enough to be assigned to a company at ah Tell City, Indiana.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And, ah, we left Camp Knox and the train pulled into Tell City and they took us out to a hill close by all full of weeds and ah we started cleaning off a place where to put up the tents and things.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And, ah, we was well fed and everything and ah it was quite an accomplishment, I think, and the officers in charge said so, too. But, uh, we soon found out our job in the CCC was to, ah, first, we had to plant, ah, we had to make a nursery of trees, and we planted over two million seeds, and the seeds came from the Black Forests of Germany and they was black locust ah trees because they grow fast and ah, and uh, rock, we was, our entire outfit, to do was erosion control. That's, we went, during the winter, we go through, ah, sides of the hills and where the water was washing the sides of the hills, why we dam them up, about every 100 feet or so and ah this held the water back and ah in time for soil that's being washed away to settle down at the bottom of these dams, that was all winter long. And these trees, the following spring, we'd dug up these ah trees that had been growing all winter and planted them in this soil that was building up on these dams and these trees would continue to grow and hold the soil in place. And that would stop erosion. That was our job. Well, we was there for nine

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months and then they moved the whole camp away to ah Elizabeth, West Virginia, and up there, we was in a different category up there, uh, they drove us out to the sides of a mountain and we would ah chip off the limestone there which was ah 100% limestone. And we would stack the stones on the side of the road and at night the state of West Virginia's, uh, crew, could crush this and make fertilizer out of it and give it to the farmers.

Q: Hmm.

A: And, ah, about that time, I was in the CCs for about an thirteen months and ah there was so many others trying to get in the CCs that ah they limited, they'd only let you stay in a year, and I'd already been in three...thirteen months and the following month I had to get out of it. I was discharged. And, ah, I came back home and that was the first of July. And. Ah, I couldn't find anything then until...no job of any kind but cutting grass...

Q: It didn't pay much, I guess.

A: Fifty cents, maybe less. But, uh, I, uh, along about December, that year, my old Sunday school teacher, ah, she was working for the Railway Express...why they needed some extra help for the Christmas rush down there and so she got me a job there.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: ...and that's where I spent the rest of my thirty-three and a half years. I'm retired from there now, so...

Q: What type of work did you do there?

A: Where at?

Q: Uh, where you worked for thirty-three years till you retired?

A: Oh, uh, at the Express company? Well, at first, I unloaded trains, as long as the train was around.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And the Express on the train. And, that, ah, took in every category of headless (?), and corpses, people, dead people. I had to help whenever they came off here. I had to ah unload them and load them into the hearses. And, uh, we'd also stack the little packages on trucks and then wheel them up to the house and then separate them in runs...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Up to the house and then, ah, the delivery man would deliver them around the city the next day. And, ah, also, that was just one part of it. But the next part of it was to pull each package...had either a lot sticker or a bill...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: A collect bill or a prepaid bill. And you had to get the lots together and if it was a collect bill you had to weigh it and then price the bill...

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Q: Uh-huh.

A: So, the delivery man could collect. And that was the, well, ah, it was different category of jobs there. And if you was a price clerk, of course, you got more money.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: But, anyhow, I ah worked ah ana ah the midnight shift. And ah, out of my thirty-three-and a half years, I worked at night for twenty-seven years.

Q: Hmm.

A: And, ah, well it ah, I really enjoyed the work. And I, it didn't put me out as far as meals were concerned. I adjusted myself to it and ah, I could get my sleep just as well. And I really liked to work at night because ah well, you didn't have ah, too much interference from, you know...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Customers and things.

Q: It is a kinda quiet night at midnight.

A: Quiet, yes. And it wasn't bothered. You just had your work to do unload trains, separate them, and then work on the bills. And there wasn't no interruptions, you know, then.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And ah, that was one of the reasons I liked that shift. Of course, my wife didn't care much about it. But she got used to it.

Q: You mentioned that your father was a veteran of the Spanish-American War.

A: Right.

Q: Before you ah started working at the CCC, ah what type of money came into the home to help keep things going?

A: Well ah, my dad had been a furniture worker. He didn't make too much money, but in all my years, I never went without good clothes or, ah, never went hungry or anything. But, ah, he got plenty old, and seeing that he was a veteran of the Spanish-American War, he got, ah, was he, he got a pension. A war pension from the government. He was making sixty-five dollars a month. And when I was laid off at Inglehart's and couldn't find a job, why that was what we was living on is sixty-five dollars a month. The he was getting. And that was paying...we didn't own our own home or anything, and that included the rent and the food. And ah, paid insurances and all that and that took care of it. Of course, we didn't have anything extra for any fine things, but we got by. But then ah, things kept getting worse in the government. And so, ah, when President Roosevelt was elected, the first week he was in office, he cut my dad's pension from sixty-five dollars to fifteen dollars a month. And that's how come it made me eligible to get into the CC's. And ah, they paid us a dollar a day, or thirty dollars a month, and twenty-five dollars went home to my parents and I got five dollars. And that helped them get by and ah, also,

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raised my moral and ah them when things began to get better, why my dad's pension was restored...back to sixty-five. And everything got along all right from then on.

Q: What...did you live on a farm, in the city, when the depression hit? Or, how many fami...people in the family at the time?

A: Well, at that time, it was just ah, my dad, my mother, and myself. I had two sisters, but they were married and had families of their won. And they was getting by all right. We lived in the city, and ah, ah by the way, I had a little stock in ah General Foods. I was getting a dollar and thirty-eight cents every three months. Well, that's what I was living on. That was buying my tobacco! I had to buy ah big sacks of this old tobacco like ah, like ah, Boulder, and had to roll my own cigarettes. But I made it. And ah, aw, all in all, it was quite an experience. I wouldn't want to go through it again. But ah, well it was just one of those things.

Q: Uh-huh. Aw, observing all that went around you, ah like, did you see a lot of poor people in that time? What...how...did prices skyrocket a lot?

A: Oh, it, I saw lots of lots of people and I beheld a lot of cases which were in bad, bad shape. And ah, all the churches and ah different organizations tried to help all they could.

Q: Like furnishing meals, or clothes, or what?

A: Yeah, they was. The Salvation Army, I tell you, was great. I got many a meal there myself. Warm meal and suit. And things. And I couldn't...they was great, I tell you. The Salvation Army. And a whole lot of organizations did all they could. And ah, it was hard, but we weathered it all right.

Q: The prices before the Depression...what were the prices of bread before the Stock Market crashed and afterwards?

A: Well, ah, it ah was way down there. I know I used to get a loaf of bread for a nickel.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I used to go over and pay a nickel for a pork chop.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And my mom used to send me over after a quarter's worth of pork chops. And I'd get five. And I got five and five pork shops today cost us two dollars!

Q: Uh-huh!

A: Gooh-ley! But everything was like that. And ah, ah,...

Q: Did prices go up in clothes and utilities?

A: Well, no.

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Q: No?

A: No, it ah didn't go up. No, it ah, no it was just money was so dog-gone scarce. You could almost get double if you had any money at all. You could get double for it.

Q: So, prices were good but there was no money?

A: That's right. Money was hard. Money was hard. Gosh. You just couldn't get any. But prices were great. Why, you could go to go to a grocery store and for five dollars you could get enough groceries you couldn't carry home.

Q: Hmm!

A: Yeah, potatoes was about, ah, oh about, I guess...you could get 100 pounds for a quarter.

Q: Wow!

A: And, ah, coffee. I bout a many a bound of coffee for fifteen cents.

Q: You couldn't buy it for that now.

A: Oh, my gosh no, It's a dollar-fifteen now. But, ah but, things was awfully cheap. It just was that anybody didn't have any money. No jobs to get any money. And there wasn't anything like social security or anything that. No. And then, ah the poor people didn't have enough money to pay their taxes. And they didn't have any welfare!

Q: I bet a lot of people lost their homes during that time. Didn't have no money and lost their homes.

A: I tell you what was bad, that the banks closed. Anyhow, the ah banks closed, and you couldn't get your money. If you had any money in there you couldn't get it. My dad had five hundred dollars in the bank and lost it all. As a matter of fact, the last pension check he got, that was sixty-five dollars a month, He went to the bank, and the next day the man came by from the bank and wanted the money back from the check. He told him to go sit on a tack! But anyhow, that's how bad it was. And that bank, that's the bank my dad lost five hundred dollars from! He never got a penny back from it. But all banks was that bad. They closed their doors. You couldn't get anything. If you had big savings or nothing you couldn't even get a penny.

Q: I suppose they wanted to avoid the grand rush. The people wanted to get their money out.

A: Well, ah, I don't know what it was, but then, as I said before, the week after President Roosevelt got in, he not only cut them pensions, but the next week he opened the banks. He shore did.

Q: No one got their money back, though. It wasn't a good deal.

A: ...they didn't get it all back, but they got a certain percent. They made 'em.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Somehow or the other, they back them somehow, and they paid of their money back. They could get it out.

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Q: You...

A: All in all, a little thing like that, one after the other was what broke its back.

Q: You mentioned that the government was going downhill during this time. Ah, could you see the Depression coming?

A: Oh, yes. I could see it.

Q: But how...

A: You could see it coming, but ah, they didn't ah, well, it was too much out of their hands. What brought on the Depression mostly was these banks.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: These banks closed. And then they...people lost their entire savings you know. They couldn't do a darn thing but get an out and couldn't get money out to pay taxes and lose their homes.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: That started it. Yes, it did. That started it. It was in 1929. And ah, this stock I was talking about that I got a dollar-and-thirty-eight cents on and lived on... Well, uh, I bought two shares and they took it out of my wages.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Each week, and I paid ninety-five dollars a share. And ah, right before the crash, everything was way up. Booming. Everything was booming. But they ah sold ah they issued two -for-one.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: See, they issued...ah, ah, I got, ah, I doubled my stock. I got four shares for the two shares that I paid for. See? And then, after the crash, why I held onto that stock. You know (whistle) the bottom dropped out of it.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And you see, I paid a hundred and ah, let's see. Two-hundred-and-ninety-five dollars, then, eighteen, a hundred -and ninety dollars.

Q: Somewhere around there.

A: I paid a hundred-and -ninety dollars for it. And then, ah, I held onto them. But you can believe it or not, but that's the money I got married on. I sold my stock and I got a hundred-and-thirty-two dollars.

Q: Well, that's not bad...

A: (Laughing).

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Q: ...considering the Depression.

A: Nope. I bought my ah kitchen cabinet, paid cash for it. From that...from that...for that I sold my stock. Oh, that's the money got married on. It was all the money I had.

Q: Did a lot of people sell their stock when the Market crashed, did a lot keep it, or what did they do with their stock?

A: It was almost...they was some of them was worthless.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: They lost it.

Q: There was no way of ever getting it back?

A: Uh-huh. The thing went into bankruptcy and the stock was no good. And all those who knew anything about...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Bankruptcy...that stock wasn't any good. But the kind I had, General Foods, it went way down but they didn't lose receivership. And anyhow, with all the...it started going back up.

Q: Started to go back up (Said at the same time).

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, I suppose it would depend upon the stock, you know, if it would come up in value again.

A: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I don't know what it is today, but I'm still thankful I got what I did.

Q: You were lucky, I think.

A: I know, getting what I did...but ah, but ah, as long as I was a working at the Express co...at Inglehart's...ah had this stock, I was getting a bonus of five dollars.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: ...ah, every three months just for holding the stock. A share, five dollars a share.

Q: That helps. That helps.

A: But when I was let out, that dropped. All I got was the dividend, whatever they paid, which was a dollar-thirty-eight cents every three months.

Q: If you had to live on it, you could.

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Of course, prices were pretty low back then. You could buy most anything.

A: Oh, gosh yes. That dollar-and-thirty-eight cents, you see, as I told you before, I went back to school and posted. I had enough to go back to school, buy my books, and ah, well, buy a little something to eat.

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Q: Uh-huh.

A: For three months, you had to watch yourself.

Q: Yeah. How old were you at the time of the Depression?

A: At the time? Let's see...thirty-three, seven, twenty-ah...I was twenty-five. Twenty-five years old when I went back, that was when I got in the CC's. Twenty-five years old.

Unknown: Good night, Bill.

A: Good night...ok.

Q: From a young man's point of view, what did you think of the Depression? Ah, did you think it could have been avoided?

A: Not at the time I don't think it could have been avoided. But I don't think it could happen now.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Not the way things are now, not with, ah, the people receiving social security and ah, pensions and ah, the banks being up to \$50,000 insured.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I don't think it would happen. Because I believe the whole business was the failure of the banks to close to lead to the Depression. And I don't think it could happen again.

Q: I hope not.

A: I don't really believe...

Q: We live by a lot of different laws now, your money is protected, they can't keep you from getting it. Back then, they could rob you.

A: Well, ah...

Q: You know, like you said, the Depression closed many of the banks.

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: The people couldn't get their money. Now they couldn't do that.

A: Uh-huh, now. That's the reason I don't think it could... I don't think it could happen today. Of course, we have recession, a lot of people out of work, but still, the banks, you know,

Q: Uh-huh.

A: The people that gets savings, they can draw it out, you know, if they want to. As long as that...as long as they can do that there won't be a Depression. And I believe it will last long enough to get things will be back together. O.K.

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Q: I read somewhere that a lot of people had mixed opinions on these federal projects. That some people felt they were busy-work. Other people felt, you know, that they were saving the people. What did you think of the Federal projects? Say, the CCC. Did it serve any good purpose, or did it just give you money?

A: Mighty right, mighty right. Because it, they...the people were beginning to get downhearted, they there wasn't any hopes for the future. And then by these different things that the government did, like the WPA, that took care of the older people, and ah...

Q: W-WPA?

A: Yeah, Works...that was WPA. They improved streets, and ah, why we improved parks...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And recreation facilities. And ah, and helped farmers, and fought off erosion, and ah, well, it just give a person something to do and helped all the way around. It...It built the country back up and ah, give people confidence. And ah...

Q: Uh-huh!

A: It finally broke it.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And, ah, well, I'm telling you, I think it was a great thing myself. I ah, that was the best time of my life. Hello (friends passed by). That was the best time in my life, the healthiest I ever was, and ah, I really enjoyed it myself.

Q: Hmm. You mean working outdoors...

A: Yeah.

Q: Helped you...

A: Living outdoors and everything, ah, and this camp I was in, was the healthiest camp in the state of Indiana.

Q: Hmm.

A: All the other camps had been, was closed down and couldn't...and nobody come in or leave for weeks at a time with epidemics like, ah, scarlet fever and ah, different diseases.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: But the camp I was in at Tell City was not a, we never lost a day. We...we was really, all of us was, the healthy.

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Q: What do you think ah, caused that to happen? Why was your think, your camp was one of the healthiest camps?

A: I don't know, but I, it was on a hill right outside of Tell City, and it was in the hottest of summer times; if you was too gone down into town, boy, you just sweat yourself to death.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: But up there, you could feel it as you walked up the hill, there was a level there, and you could feel it and when you hit that certain level, you could just feel the coolness. You know, as you went up that hill...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And it was up there and cool on top of that hill all the time. I liked it so well up there that ah, I didn't go to town. I wouldn't go to town for a picture show or something. I stayed up there because it was so nice.

Q: Built-in air conditioning.

A: Yeah, of course, we lived in tents...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: We had ah, a great big, what we called a hospital tent, and the whole squad, that's twenty-five men...

Q: Uh-huh.

A: In a tent.

Interview concluded. The noise in the background is due to the sound of saws, sanders, and polishers in the Lapidary room of the YWCA. The interview took place in an outer room outside the workshop.